

The Difference Best Postponed? Cultures and Comparative Archival Science¹

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"This, Mr. Boffin and Lady, is the first chapter of the first volume of the Decline and Fall of--" here he looked hard at the book, and stopped...

"I think you said Rooshan Empire, sir?"

"It is Rooshan; ain't it, Wegg?"

"No sir. Roman. Roman."

"What's the difference, Wegg?"

"The difference, sir?" Mr. Wegg was faltering and in danger of breaking down, when a bright thought flashed upon him. "The difference, sir? There you place me in a difficulty, Mr. Boffin. Suffice it to observe, that the difference is best postponed to some other occasion when Mrs. Boffin does not honour us with her company. In Mrs. Boffin's presence, sir, we had better drop it."

And so, by postponing the difference between the Roman and the Rooshan Empire, Mr. Wegg came out of his disadvantage, as Charles Dickens describes in *Our Mutual Friend*.²

Should we postpone and conceal the differences in our discourse on the nature and administration of records and archives? When an American talks about "records" and an Englishman about "archives," should the difference best be postponed? Or, alternatively, would we, to quote Sir Hilary Jenkinson, be "flirting (I hope not) with Dr. Schellenberg and his arbitrary distinction between *Records* and *Archives*?"³

This is a simple example, and concerns only the Tower of Babel of the archivists. How can we as a profession communicate with, for example, IT people, librarians, and museum curators, who understand the term "record" differently? Postpone the difference? Or try to achieve terminological uniformity? That was the fantasy of Herman Hardenberg, rapporteur to the second International Congress on Archives (1953). He was, however, restrained by the scepticism of Sir Hilary and Robert-Henri Bautier. Had Hardenberg been haunted by "the alarming fact that often the words used by the translators to express the equivalent of the Dutch professional vocabulary do neither appear

in the practice nor in the lexicography of the respective countries,”⁴ Jenkinson and Bautier felt that “peculiarities of form in these in any given country result from the peculiarities of institutions that do not exist elsewhere.”⁵ A simple translation would not suffice; terms must first be defined accurately and explained in the technical language of a country.

Maybe by “uniformity” Hardenberg meant something else: standardization. A way to postpone the difference between Rooshan and Roman is to talk about something else. The International Council on Archives’ (ICA) General International Standard Archival Description uses terms and definitions formulated specifically for the purposes of ISAD (G), leaving it to the users to find equivalents in their own institutional or national idiom. ISAD(G) defines “series” and “fonds” without suggesting that these are equivalent to the French *série*, the German *Serie*, the Russian *ФОНД*, the Dutch *fonds*, or the French *fonds*. There are many more terms in the professional archival terminology which are only understandable in another language when one knows and fully understands the professional, cultural, legal, historical, and sometimes political background of the term. “Evidential value,” “inventory,” “estray” – these are terms for which a simple translation in a dictionary is not enough. They can only be understood when their conceptual framework is explained – in an encyclopaedia rather than in a dictionary, as Jenkinson assumed⁶ – and comprehended. As Schellenberg wrote, foreign archival literature frequently is unintelligible unless the conditions under which the public records have been created and maintained are fully understood.⁷ This suggests a broader approach than that of Jenkinson and Bautier, who, as I indicated, primarily thought of the diversities in administrative structures. Indeed, I believe that these conditions are not primarily administrative or driven by technology, but to a large extent are socio-cultural. In this short paper I can only present the outline of a hypothesis, hoping that my propositions will provoke readers to engage in a discussion that may lead to developing a synthesis.

But before doing so, I want to point to the risks of archivists using a metaphor or borrowing a term from another domain and giving it a specific archival meaning, a meaning which, moreover, can change over time. An example is “life cycle.” I have never liked the term, because it implies that archives are at the dead end, to be buried in the graveyard. I do not know when this term was first used in North American archival literature. Let me quote Alf Erlandsson in his recent ICA review of the literature on electronic records⁸: “Since this paper was first drafted early in 1993, the concept of “life-cycle” – at least as the author of this paper has understood the concept – seems to have undergone a conceptual change...When this text was initially written, the author simply meant the cycle of records from the pre-creation to the final disposition stage (including the ‘archival’ or non current stage), and did not see the concept of life-cycle as an expression for the professional bifurcation between records management and archives, something it seems to have been considered a

synonym for by the writers cited below.” Erlandsson continues to explain that he uses the term “the whole life-cycle” as an equivalent to “records continuum.” But the term “records continuum” itself has different meanings, when one compares Jay Atherton’s first use of the term in Canada and the explanations by Australian colleagues.⁹

Do we really have to live on such an alms-basket of words? Any discourse presupposes understanding and comprehension. Can one really comprehend a foreigner, be it a speaker from another discipline, or a speaker from another country, even if that speaker’s language is some form of standard English? A language is not only the expression of a culture. Language is conditioned by culture. When translating a word, an expression, a term into a foreign language, we try to convey the deeper cultural meaning, but the equivalent can only be an exact rendering of the original if the two cultures are congruent. But are there any congruent cultures?

Extensive research into national cultural differences has been carried out by the Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede. Hofstede’s research and his 1980 book *Culture’s Consequences* were presented to an archival audience as late as 1992 by that original archival genius David Bearman in one of his thought-provoking essays.¹⁰ More recently, Hofstede published *Cultures and Organizations*, which is available in many translations.¹¹ Hofstede has measured the different dimensions of cultures. One way to distinguish nations is the way they are accustomed to dealing with inequalities. Hofstede has calculated a *power distance index*. In countries with a *high* power distance index, people are afraid of disagreeing with their bosses, who they like to see as autocratic or paternalistic. Hierarchy in an organization reflects the existential inequality between higher-ups and lower ones. Centralization is popular. The powerful have privileges. Whoever holds the power is right and good. Countries like Mexico, Venezuela, Indonesia, and India have a high power distance index: they rank among the top ten of fifty-three countries (indexes in the range of 90 and 80). But France (number 15 out of 53, index 68), Spain (number 31, index 57), and Italy (number 34, index 54) also have a high score. Compare this with the United States, Canada, and The Netherlands (numbers 38, 39, 40, indexes 40, 30, and 38). At the lower end of the scale – and so with a small power distance – are numbers 46-48: Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Denmark is number 51 out of 53, with an index of 18. In *small* power distance countries, like the Scandinavian countries, there is a preference for consultation. Hierarchy in organizations means an inequality of roles, established for convenience, not as a principle. Decentralization is popular. All should have equal rights. The use of power should be legitimate and is subject to criteria of good and evil.

Hofstede has also measured national cultures to the degree of *individualism*. There is a correlation with power distance: high power distance countries like Mexico are also likely to be more collectivist. Small power distance countries with a culture of individualism are the United States, Australia, Great Britain,

Canada, and The Netherlands. There are exceptions to the correlation between power distance index and individualism index. France, Italy, Belgium, and other Latin European countries combine medium power distances with strong individualism. In these cultures, impersonal bureaucratic rules and centralization make it possible to reconcile an absolutist conception of authority and the elimination of most direct dependence relationships.

Another dimension which Hofstede measured is the *uncertainty avoidance*: the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. In countries with strong uncertainty avoidance there tend to be more – and more precise – laws than in those with weak uncertainty avoidance. People stick to the rulebook and the paperwork. In Germany, every detail has been codified in a law; in England there is no written constitution. Hofstede found high scores for Latin American, Latin European, and Mediterranean countries. In the ranking of fifty-three countries on the uncertainty avoidance index, Sweden and Denmark number 50 and 51, meaning their citizens do not feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. Great Britain is 47, Canada and the United States 43, The Netherlands 35. In other words, the Dutch try slightly harder to avoid uncertainty than the North Americans – therefore they built their dikes.

There is much more in Hofstede's *Cultures and Organizations*, but let me try to draw some conclusions. What makes understanding so difficult – within Europe and among non-Europeans – is not so much the differences in language, but the differences in culture. We archivists know that there are in Europe two archival cultural zones: the zone with a *Registratur* system – Germany, Scandinavia, The Netherlands – and the non-*Registratur* countries like France, Belgium, and Spain.¹² Somewhere across Italy lies the border, generally speaking. These archival zones are not restricted to national borders: even within one country, *Registratur* and non-*Registratur* systems may both have existed, e.g., in the north of Italy. Recently, a German colleague published a study of record-keeping in Germany during the French occupation in the Napoleonic time.¹³ It is interesting to see how in different prefectures (districts) record-keeping was influenced by the nationality of the prefect – Prussian or French – and his secretary-general. I have noticed the same in Dutch records created in the Napoleonic era. This impact of national record-keeping traditions could also be studied in today's records management, for example in international organizations like the United Nations, or European institutions, or multinational companies.

The differences in archival systems have to be seen against the background of cultural differences, differences with respect to power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance. The Germans stick to the rules on *Aktenführung*. Like the Italians, they use their ordinances and classification schemes as bureaucratic means to avoid uncertainty. David Bearman was astonished to find that German-speaking Europeans “generally believe that employees can

be instructed to classify the business function of electronic records as they have done for paper-based information.”¹⁴ But, according to Bearman, “Americans are seeking technological solutions because in our context we have reason to doubt the ability of organizational policy to constrain new technologies.”¹⁵ I concur with Bearman as far as an individualist country like The Netherlands is concerned. Every Dutchman seems to know the truth for himself. Leave him alone – it explains our tolerance, but also the difficulty of imposing strict rules on records management. Because, like North Americans, the Dutch and Scandinavians prefer consultation and participation to authority, they regard access to public documents as a citizen’s right and as a means to control his or her government. Trying to exercise and to “export” these rights in other European countries leads to a “culture clash” with people from countries with a high power distance index.¹⁶

“Europe is united by its differences,” a Dutch archivist correctly remarked.¹⁷ That makes it difficult and dangerous to refer to *the* European concept or theory. Any archivist from Europe feels flattered and exasperated when asked by a non-European audience to present *the* European position. Roman law, the Church, Napoleonic occupation, the Habsburg Empire – they provided European nations and states with a supranational framework having a great impact on national norms and systems, but they did not replace national, regional, or local archival cultures. The differences were postponed, not flattened out. This actually holds true for the European Union. A great deal of the cross-border flow of information has been harmonized to further the free flow of people and commerce, and the monetary union will soon even lead to a single European currency. But just as the European coins will be minted to show on the reverse a different head in every nation, so are the creation, maintenance, and use of archives within national boundaries still coined by national culture.

I strongly believe that we should not postpone the differences, but instead bring them to light, and describe, investigate, and test them. Suggesting uniformity where there are differences would be counterproductive. A clear understanding of what Hofstede calls “the software of the mind” is a prerequisite for any attempt to construct and test all archival theories and methodologies, not only those which are internationally relevant. Hofstede’s research gives a better understanding of organizational cultural differences, both cross-national and within one national culture.¹⁸ In business process reengineering as in information resources management (and here archivists have a role to play), a clear understanding of cultural biases, restrictions, and possibilities is essential.

Before we can decide on “sameness,” before we can codify global theories and principles, and before we can afford to build and implement universally applicable models, we have to study the differences. This is precisely what Schellenberg did in his *Modern Archives*. In his preface he calls the book “a study of contrasts.”¹⁹ He explained that he did not believe American methods

of handling modern public records to be necessarily better than those of other countries; they are merely different. Differences in method, according to Schellenberg, should be understood for purely professional reasons: to promote a general understanding of archival principles and techniques. I agree: do not postpone the differences, but *search* for the differences, in the quest for common elements in theory and practice.

This is what lawyers, educators, and librarians have been doing for a long time in comparative law, comparative education, and comparative library science.²⁰ It is more than mere juxtaposition of two or more different national systems, as is frequently done. Comparative archival science goes one step further in trying to explain or at least to discuss observed similarities and differences,²¹ including cultural differences. The main question is: Why does a particular archival system or strategy or methodology work well in a particular social and cultural and economic environment, and not well in others? This does not imply any moral verdict. For example, the United States National Archives and Records Administration is charged with the responsibility of preserving “readily accessible evidence,” while the mandate of the National Archives of Canada is “to preserve archival and historical records of national significance.” Each mandate has its socio-cultural foundation and leads to a different approach to, among others, the appraisal of government records. Neither is better than the other; neither is “culture-independent.”

Archival science is challenged to describe each “local domain” carefully, and in the appropriate idiom, before strategies or methodologies can be separated from pure archival theory and then compared with what is found elsewhere. Such a comparative analysis can be carried out in the present, across cultures and across societies, and also in the past. Only as an *outcome* of such an analysis might one reveal universally guiding or controlling principles.²² Too often these principles are taken as the starting point of the discourse, rather than as the result: a universal archival theory (or, more likely, theories). From there archival science has to try to build universally applicable models of archival structures and functions. But models are not rules; they describe a situation which is free of bias and culture-independent. When, on the basis of the model, decisions are taken about methods and techniques, then organizational, cultural, political, and technical factors will lead to a choice for implementation models which will differ according to the organization, the culture, the political environment, and the technical possibilities in a particular case. But, however important such a practical outcome may be, the main benefit of studies of comparative archival science is the enhancement of the profession and the fostering of international understanding.

Notes

1 Earlier and different versions of this paper were presented at a conference, “Svenska friheten,”

- celebrating the Swedish *Freedom of the Press Act* (Stockholm, 2 December 1996), at the 1997 Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists (Ottawa, 6 June 1997), at the Society of American Archivists Conference (Chicago, 28 August 1997), and at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science of the University of Texas at Austin (7 July 1997).
- 2 Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Stephen Gill, ed.) (London 1971), p. 103.
 - 3 Hilary Jenkinson, "The Problems of Nomenclature in Archives," in Roger H. Ellis and Peter Walne, eds., *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* (Gloucester, 1980), p. 352 (first published in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists* I [1958], pp. 233–39).
 - 4 Second International Congress on Archives, *Reports* (The Hague, 1953), p. 50; *Archivum* 3 (1953), p. 13.
 - 5 Jenkinson, "Nomenclature," p. 350; *Archivum* 3 (1953), p. 14.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, p. 351.
 - 7 Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives. Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956), p. 27.
 - 8 Alf Erlandsson, *Electronic Records Management. A Literature Review in ICA Studies* 10 (Paris, 1997), pp. 13–14.
 - 9 Jay Atherton, "From Life Cycle to Continuum. Some Thoughts on the Records Management-Archives Relationship," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985–86), pp. 43–51, reprinted in Tom Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, 1993), pp. 391–402; Sue McKemish and Michael Piggott, *The Records Continuum. Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* (Clayton, 1994).
 - 10 David Bearman, "Diplomatics, Weberian Bureaucracy, and the Management of Electronic Records in Europe and America," *American Archivist* 55, no. 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 178–79.
 - 11 Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the Mind. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival* (London, 1991).
 - 12 Michel Duchein, "The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe," *American Archivist* 55, no.1 (Winter 1992), pp. 18–19.
 - 13 Wolfgang H. Stein, *Französisches Verwaltungsschriftgut in Deutschland. Die Departementalverwaltungen in der Zeit der Französischen Revolution und des Empire* (Marburg, 1996).
 - 14 Bearman, "Diplomatics," p. 173.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 174–75.
 - 16 On the struggle for freedom of information in the European Union see: www.jmk.su.se/dig/jour-vs-eu/euindex.html.
 - 17 J. Peter Sigmond, "Divergences and Convergences of Archives: A European Looks at North America," *Second European Conference on Archives. Proceedings* (Ann Arbor, 1989), p. 5.
 - 18 G. H. Hofstede, J.A. Neuijen, D. Ohayv, and G.J.E.M. Sanders, "Measuring Organizational Cultures: A Qualitative and Quantative Study Across Twenty Cases," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 35 (1990), pp. 286–316; J.A. Neuijen, *Diagnosing Organizational Cultures. Patterns of Continuance and Change* (Groningen, 1992).
 - 19 Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, p. X.
 - 20 Michael K. Buckland and John N. Gathegi, "International Aspects of LIS Research," in Charles R. McClure and Peter Hemon, eds., *Library and Information Science Research: Perspectives and Strategies for Improvement* (Norwood, 1991), pp. 63–71.
 - 21 J. Periam Danton, "Definitions of Comparative and International Library Science," in John F. Harvey, ed., *Comparative & International Library Science* (Metuchen, 1977), pp. 3–14.
 - 22 J. Periam Danton, *The Dimensions of Comparative Librarianship* (Chicago, 1973), p. 75.