

THE MESSY BUSINESS OF REMEMBERING: HISTORY, MEMORY, AND ARCHIVES

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ABSTRACT: While some archivists may question the relevance of the seemingly esoteric discussion of postmodernism to the practical work of our profession, this article argues for postmodern analysis being deeply relevant to archivists—to everything from our acquisition decisions to how we view and relate to our users. One way to frame the pertinence of postmodernism to archives is to take a close look at how the positivist/postmodernist perspectives affect the legitimacy of the uses to which the material in archives can be put. Specifically, this article looks at the still-vibrant argument that something called “history” is a legitimate end to which archives can be put, while something called “memory” (also referred to more broadly as “social memory,” the idea that societies—not just individuals—create, shape, interpret, and hold memory) is a much less legitimate purpose. Behind each of these end uses is a set of end users: professional historians on the one hand, and amateur researchers of all kinds on the other. And behind each of these purposes is also a distinct set of archival and other documentary material that is more or less legitimate or useful to the end users.

My sense is that many archivists are still a bit puzzled, at best, about the recent emergence in the profession in the United States—at conferences and in journals—of earnest conversation about postmodernism and its significance for our work. I think this is, in part, because in the preceding decades, as historians and others were engaged in heated arguments about this intellectual and philosophical trend, archivists were in general moving away from history and toward information science as our mother discipline. So we missed the tide of postmodernism as it moved through much of the rest of the humanities and social sciences, and by the time we began to engage with it—which in the United States was only about five years ago with an essay by Fran Blouin in *Archival Issues*, titled “Archivists, Mediation, and the Constructs of Social Memory”¹—it had been swallowed up, in part, by the even angrier and more threatening arguments about political correctness.

Postmodernism cannot be easily defined, but one scholar has provided this brief explanation: “Postmodernism calls into question enlightenment values such as rationality, truth, and progress, arguing that these merely serve to secure the monolithic structure

of modern ... society by concealing or excluding any forces that might challenge its cultural dominance. To counter this hegemony, ... the postmodern attitude tends to value heterogeneity over purity, diversity over unity, the local over the universal, and popular over elite culture or high art."² Contrary to popular conceptions, postmodernism does not seek or result in the annihilation of facts, though it suggests their meaning is more localized and contingent than universal and objective.

Postmodernism, seriously considered rather than caricatured by some of its opponents, is deeply relevant to archivists—to everything from our acquisition decisions to how we view and relate to our users. One way to frame the pertinence of postmodernism to archives is to take a close look at how the positivist/postmodernist perspectives can affect the legitimacy of the uses to which the material in archives can be put. Specifically, we can look at that still-vibrant argument that something called “history” is a legitimate end to which archives can be put, while something called “memory” (also referred to more broadly as “social memory,” the idea that societies—not just individuals—create, shape, interpret, and hold memory³) is an illegitimate—or at least much less legitimate—purpose. Behind each of these end uses is a set of end users, professional historians on the one hand, and amateur researchers of all kinds on the other. And behind each of these purposes is also a distinct set of archival and other documentary material that is more or less legitimate or useful to the end users. Hence, this philosophizing can matter a great deal to the practical work of archives.

The passage that follows, from an April 2002 article by a historian then at Amherst (now at Yale) in the on-line journal *Common-Place*, is a model of positivist thought regarding the ultimate rationality and authority of history compared to memory, which is viewed as emotional and untrustworthy. It does not represent, by any means, a monolithic view of history by historians, but it does quite clearly frame some of the real-world implications, for archivists, of the modernist-postmodernist debate, particularly in terms of social memory. It gives us one starting point to discuss and debate what a curator at The Henry Ford museum referred to as “the relationship between historical scholarship and local experience, or rather, the memory of local experience”⁴—and how archival sources enter this mix as well.

History is what trained historians do, a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research; it tends to be critical and skeptical of human motive and action, and therefore more secular than what people commonly call memory. History can be read by or belong to everyone; it is more relative, and contingent on place, chronology, and scale.

If history is shared and secular, memory is often treated as a sacred set of absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community. Memory is often owned, history interpreted. Memory is passed down through generations; history is revised. Memory often coalesces in objects, sites, and monuments; history seeks to understand contexts in all their complexity. History asserts the authority of academic training and canons of evidence; memory carries the often more immediate authority of community membership and experience.

Bernard Bailyn has aptly stated memory's appeal: "[I]ts relation to the past is an embrace ... ultimately emotional, not intellectual."⁵

From my perspective, as someone trained to be a historian, these paragraphs are frustratingly condescending, an example of the unnecessary disconnect between academic historians and people outside the academy. For many archivists who work with both professional historians and amateurs—from genealogists to community chroniclers—these statements will elicit reactions ranging from incredulity to scorn. I would like to analyze some of these specific sentences, and in so doing, explore some of the difficult issues that considerations of social memory and history raise for archivists—and why all of us should accept the important, though difficult, task of wrestling consciously with the meaning and implications of postmodernism.

History, says this historian, is “a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research.” It surprises me that such a sentence can be written by anyone who as a graduate student has had to compile a historiographic essay about any topic in history. Certainly history is sometimes this. But it is just as often an ideological reconstruction rooted in a cursory examination of secondary sources. History *is* interpretation, and as such it is subject to exactly those same societal biases that are supposedly the weakness of “memory”—or at least so suggests the postmodern perspective. While we all know or know of genealogists who pretend they didn't find great-grandpa's court case convicting him of bigamy, we know that more often the family's historian is assiduous in his or her willingness to track down every relevant primary source and is honestly respectful of “the facts” as he or she sees them, even those that demolish family myths. Would that we could say the same for more historians.

The idea that only those with credentials as proper historians can get history right—that, to paraphrase a poet, truth is “the secret of the few”—is dangerous.⁶ Such superciliousness from some historians leads to an increasing mistrust of professional history and a greater willingness to rely on cable “infotainment” or Disney theme parks—or perhaps worst of all, random Internet sites—as sources of “knowledge.” Neither truth nor history nor even memory should be the secret of the few. If we do it right—and as archivists we have something to say about that because it depends in some part on how we solicit, welcome, and assist both historians and genealogists in our reading rooms—everyone can play a part.

This historian says, “Memory is passed down through generations; history is revised.” Historians, let there be no mistake, are frequently victims of their own willingness to accept received wisdom rather than looking at a problem anew—my institution got a grand lesson in this 12 months ago when two amateurs demolished 50 years of accepted historical scholarship concerning one Frank Hopkins. The Disney movie *Hidalgo*, as unbelievable as it was, was largely based on this scholarship, which was “passed down through generations” of respected historians rather than “revised” as history is supposed to be—passed down, that is, until it collided with the social memory of a group of avocational historians who “knew” the historical account could not be true and worked to uncover evidence to support their skepticism.

The historians had built their accounts from the first-person narratives of Hopkins himself, first published in a magazine in the 1940s. The trouble turned out to be that

Hopkins' narrative was a lie from start to finish. But publication lent it authenticity and once the first historian cited the writing, the minds of subsequent historians seemed closed to the possibility that it was not fact. The evidence of its falsehood had existed all along, but none of the historians had bothered to look for it. Yet the two amateurs, driven by the social memory of their equestrian club, a memory that said not only had the races Frank Hopkins told of never happened but that such races were impossible, were willing to look past the established history of the scholars.⁷

This historian says, "History can be read by or belong to everyone. ... [M]emory is often treated as a sacred set of absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community. ... Memory is often owned, history interpreted." These are unexpected statements, particularly from a professor of African American history. History *is* owned both literally and figuratively. As archivists, some of us have experience in dealing with what we euphemistically call "underdocumented" groups. These groups are "underdocumented" only because mainstream repositories don't "own" much if any of their documentation. And it is a largely shunned but critically important question to ask, Who has the right to own this documentation—the individuals and families, or repositories within the community (often underfunded or largely invisible to outsiders), or traditional repositories (most of which are located in historical societies and universities that are seen as "other" by these communities)?

One archivist noted a decade ago that "this is a question that has been tiptoed around far too long,"⁸ and it still is. It is a question we will have to squarely confront eventually, just as ethnographers and museum curators have already had to do, at least with the subquestion of who has the right to own Native American bones and funerary remains. The reason this question of literal ownership is so important is that it strongly affects figurative ownership of history as well.

Are we really so far removed from the 1960s and 1970s as to have forgotten the difference it made when women and African Americans demanded ownership of their historical accounts and argued that "their" history could not be interpreted correctly nor given proper weight by the white males who dominated the historical profession? History was revised as a result, and some long-standing myths accepted by mainstream historians were destroyed or undermined. The issue is as relevant today.

In 1997, the curator of the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles noted that ethnic history institutions such as his allow "the community to explore its own history and meaning-making process on its own terms and allows the Museum to control the presentation of that history and meaning to larger audiences through exhibitions, programs, and educational services." Is this merely giving the community license to peddle myth as history or, as a small but increasing number of archivists and curators would argue, simply the platform for a new and equally legitimate historical interpretation? The curator argues that "we would do well to reflect on the ethical implications of the cultural imperialism implicit in our archival methodologies and in our desire to document the natives in our midst."⁹

My institution is working with a white anthropologist whose Native American graduate student is recording the telling of children's stories on the Wind River Reservation in western Wyoming. The graduate student—but we're not sure yet about the interviewees—would like to make the recordings available at the American Heritage

Center. But there is some question whether, as renditions of traditional stories, the recordings can be successfully protected by copyright, and the graduate student is adamant that neither he nor his narrators want the stories commercially exploited. Trying to prevent commercial publication by having researchers sign a promise not to do so seems a weak protection to the graduate student, and his professor has asked if we can restrict who gets to use the collection—limiting it, perhaps, to students and members of the tribe.

Traditionally, archivists have refused to countenance unequal access, but don't the original owners of these stories have a right to determine how they will be used? And even by whom? Does our possible role of preserver of social memory for the tribe take a back seat to our traditional posture of preserving things for historical study? I have not formed my own answer to that question yet, but I think we all need to consider it with a better appreciation of the context in which our tradition formed (a context that largely, if not entirely, excluded considerations of minority culture) and the concrete effect that our tradition has on our present and future role in a pluralistic society.

“Memory often coalesces in objects, sites, and monuments; history seeks to understand contexts in all their complexity.” Such a statement is unsupportable, both because it ignores the central role that documents, photos, and other archival materials often play in the creation of social memory (think of the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation, of Matthew Brady's staged photos and the equally staged photo of marines raising the flag on Mount Suribachi), but also because it implies that historians have always treated all potential sources equally. But it is only in the last decade or so that historical scholars have begun to give serious attention to the “objects, sites, and monuments” subtly mocked in this sentence.

Interestingly, historians began to understand the potential of the built environment as legitimate and sometimes-powerful sources at about the same time that archivists, fixated on electronic “records,” were pulled strongly in the direction of dismissing buildings and even many forms of traditional documentation as nonrecords and thus not authentic or valid sources. I think the pendulum is swinging back in our profession, but we have yet to truly embrace the historical (as opposed to the memorial) aspect of buildings and statues.

We cannot bring these items into our holdings, but we can consider documentation about them to be possibly valuable sources, and we can collaborate with our colleagues in museums, historic sites, and material culture to highlight the intersections of the built environment with more conventional archival documentation. This would serve both history and memory. Yet our potential role as reintegrator, or at least as providers of places and sources through which reintegration can take place, is one that we have often overlooked or actively shunned as not being “objective” enough.

Standing outside of our profession looking in, one observer took us to task not long ago for failing to see that

your job is not about storing and sorting information. It is about appraising and keeping records of history-making events and the acts spoken by history makers, and doing that in a way that allows you to

be effective partners for those history makers in their re-remembering of the past. ... Santayana did not say that those who could not retrieve the information were condemned to be unhappy. ... He said that those who could not remember—i.e., assemble an effective interpretation of the past—would repeat that past.¹⁰

Our work is about providing the building blocks and tools for assembling and interpreting the past—history and/or memory.

Memory is “ultimately emotional, not intellectual.” In purely scientific terms this may be true, at least in part, but its implication that history is therefore intellectual and *not* emotional is fundamentally unsound. Psychiatrist W. Walter Menninger told a Midwest Archives Conference audience a decade ago, “[A]s a result of any number of processes, an individual’s perceptions and memories can be distorted. Usually, the distortion is a function of an emotional need to preserve one’s self-esteem. ...”¹¹ Yet, because this very same process affects “first-hand” accounts in letters and diaries, as well as in reminiscences and oral histories, Menninger goes on to say that “history is a record of present beliefs and wishes, not a replica of the past. Remembering”—and here I would suggest this applies equally to historians as well as to individuals and societies—“is a reconstruction using bits of past experience to describe a present state.”¹²

Menninger quotes historian Arthur Schlesinger taking these notions even further, when he states that “the historian’s compulsion is the passion for pattern. Reconstructing the events in the quiet of his study, he likes to tidy things up, to find interconnections and unities.”¹³ If the historian does this “intellectually” rather than “emotionally,” it does little to alter the conclusion that history does not have a privileged place over social memory as somehow being more accurate and thoughtful.

None of this is to say that there is no difference between fact and fiction or that any society’s memory is by definition as legitimate as any scholar’s history. Facts do matter and an account, whether memory or history, built on fiction is still false. Historians as well as individuals and societies do mistake fiction for fact sometimes. But mostly what is at stake is the *interpretation* of facts, and this is not apt to be conclusive. As one museum curator put it, “These are not concerns about historical fact or accuracy, they are issues of historical meaning and importance. They are neither obvious nor readily answered.”¹⁴

From this perspective, neither history nor social memory is inherently more “rational,” “flexible,” “secular,” or anything else. Indeed, social memory can be built from scholarly history, and sometimes scholarly history can be corrected or made more complete by social memory. Many historians have recognized this. As far back as 1931, in his presidential address for the American Historical Association, titled “Everyman His Own Historian,” Carl Becker asked, “[W]hat is most essential to knowledge[?] Well, memory, I should think (and I mean memory in the broad sense, the memory of events inferred as well as the memory of events observed); other things are necessary too, but memory is fundamental: without memory no knowledge.”¹⁵ He went further, and stated that his definition of “[h]istory is the memory of things said and done.” He chastised his colleagues for presuming to assert that “Mr. Everyman” was not a historian, when all

they really meant was “that he failed to pass the examinations set for a higher degree ... or ha[s] never read Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.”

Becker’s view of the relationship between history and memory, between historians and amateurs, turns the passage at the beginning of this essay on its head:

Each of us is subject to the limitations of time and place; and for each of us, no less than for the Browns and Smiths of the world, the pattern of remembered things said and done will be woven, safeguard the process how we may, at the behest of circumstance and purpose. In the history of history a myth is a once valid but now discarded version of the human story, as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the category of discarded myths. With our predecessors, the bards and story-tellers and priests, we have therefore this in common: that it is our function, as it was theirs, not to create, but to preserve and perpetuate the social tradition; to harmonize, as well as ignorance and prejudice permit, the actual and the remembered series of events; to enlarge and enrich the specious present common to us all to the end that “society” (the tribe, the nation, or all mankind) may judge of what it is doing in the light of what it has done and what it hopes to do.

There is no more uniformity among historians today than between the one scholar in 2002 and the other in 1931. It is an ongoing debate that should be of importance to us.

As archivists, we frequently straddle the divide—if there truly is one—between history and memory, and we have comforted ourselves with the notion that we are guardians or purveyors of the neutral informational objects that are used or misused by both historians and community members. It is only very recently that archivists have begun to acknowledge that, as Elizabeth Kaplan has written, “[T]he archival record doesn’t just happen; it is created by individuals and organizations, and used, in turn, to support their values and missions, all of which comprises a process that is certainly not politically and culturally neutral.”¹⁶ Both the creation and the selection of archival material are tainted, if you will, by the values, missions, and even resources of the creators and the archivists. But if the archivists are tainted, so are the historians, as well as the creators of a society’s memory.

As one high school history teacher has put it, “Thinking seriously about how history is created means accepting the view that valid, sometimes contradictory, multiple perspectives are unavoidable.”¹⁷ In this sense, archivists are a bit ahead of the game, because we should know something about contradictory primary sources. Still, this is messy, complicated stuff that begs for humility and courage on our part, because even if we come to accept that the documents in our archives are not neutral conveyors of truth, many other people, including many historians, still have a “naïve faith in documentation.”¹⁸

We cannot simplify what is profoundly complex, but we can, I think, accept as part of our role that of self-aware, visible, and active actors in the struggles to form both history and social memory. This may seem like higher stakes and weightier burdens

than many of us signed up for when we became archivists. It may require us to re-examine long-held assumptions about the role of archives as “owners” of history and even one of our most cherished roles, that of impartial provider of access. But the “mystic chords of memory” of which Abraham Lincoln spoke, as well as the muse of history, are vital and perhaps not so different aspects of individual and collective identity, and we owe it to ourselves, as well as to our users—amateurs and professionals alike—to be fully engaged in the messy business of remembering.

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NOTES

- Francis X. Blouin, “Archivists, Mediation, and the Constructs of Social Memory,” *Archival Issues* 24:2 (1999): 101–112. The earliest grappleings with postmodernism in an archival context of which I am aware are Peter A. Russell, “The Manx Peril: Archival Theory in Light of Recent American Historiography,” *Archivaria* 32 (1991): 124–137, and Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 32 (1991): 78–100. This Canadian journal contained a steady stream of articles reflecting on the intersection of archives and postmodernism from that year forward.
- Michael Fegan, 10 February 1998 posting to the Sociological Discussion Board, University of Arizona, <http://w3.arizona.edu/~soc/wwwboard/messages/33.html> (31 April 2005). See also William Grassie, “Postmodernism: What One Needs to Know,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* (March 1997) <http://www.voicenet.com/~grassie/Fldr.Articles/Postmodernism.html> (31 April 2005).
- In 1925, in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (The social frameworks of memory), sociologist Maurice Halbwachs wrote: “I do not need to seek out where the memories are ... in my brain, ... because they are recalled to me from outside, and because the groups to which I belong continuously offer me the means to reconstruct them.” Quoted by Laurent Mucchielli, “Studying Collective Memory in the Works of the French Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945),” French National Center for Scientific Research, n.d., <http://www.cnrs.fr/cw/en/pres/compress/memoire/mucchielli.htm> (31 April 2005).
- William Pretzer, “Historic Sites and Outdoor Museums: A High Performance Act,” in *Public History: Essays from the Field*, ed. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1999): 271.
- David W. Blight, professor of history and black studies at Amherst College, in “Historians and ‘Memory,’” *Common-Place* 2:3 (2002) www.common-place.org (31 April 2005).
- The poet is Lawrence Ferlinghetti, cited in Pretzer, 271.
- One good summary of the controversy is Bobbie Lieberman, “Long Trail of Lies,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 February 2004, <http://www.latimes.com/features/outdoors/la-os-hidalgo17feb17,1,2236558.story?coll=la-headlines-outdoors> (31 April 2005).

8. Joel Wurl, "Recovering the American Mosaic: Some Reflections on Ethnic Archives—Past, Present, and Future," *Westwords* (May 1993): 8.
9. Luke Gilliland-Swetland, untitled (paper presented at the Midwest Archives Conference, St. Louis, Missouri, October 1997): 2, 7.
10. Chauncey Bell, "Re-membering the Future: Organizational Change, Technology, and the Role of the Archivist," *Archival Issues* 25:1, 2 (2000): 14.
11. W. Walter Menninger, M.D., "Memory and History: What Can You Believe?" *Archival Issues* 21:2 (1996): 98.
12. Menninger, 101.
13. Menninger, 105.
14. Pretzer, 265.
15. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," presidential address to the American Historical Association, 1931, http://www.historians.org/info/AHA_History/clbecker.htm (29 October 2005).
16. Elizabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," *American Archivist* 63:1 (2000): 147.
17. David Kobrin, *Beyond the Textbook: Teaching History Using Documents and Primary Sources* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996): 8.
18. Kobrin, 151.

