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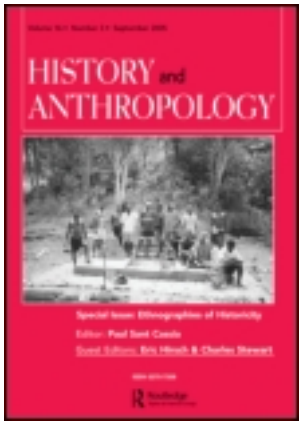

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Tracing the Political Lives of Archival Documents

Catherine Trundle & Chris Kaplonski

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This volume explores the ways in which archival documents shape political struggles and influence social change. With case studies from the Pacific, Australasia, Africa, Inner Asia and South America, the articles ethnographically trace the political genealogies of archival documents as they are transformed across space and time. The contributors of this volume engage with a current turn in anthropology towards the documentary process and the material, showing how the aesthetics, form and materiality of documentary work shape the means by which archives exert power. They thus demonstrate how the performance of documentary practices enable particular subject formations, modes of governmentality, new and ongoing expressions of sovereignty and agency, and the circulation of affect. By examining such practices as the conversations that occur in documents' margins, the composite layering of files, the strategies by which documents are extracted from the state, and the means by which documents are re-evaluated and redeployed, this volume offers a dynamic picture of contemporary archival work and an expanded frame for imagining the archival field.

Keywords: Archives; Politics; Documents; Aesthetics; Knowledge

As enduring as an archive may appear, the lives of archival documents are unpredictable. The ends to which these documents are put and the ends to which they come are diverse and often surprising. One example illustrates this point. Historian Henry Strakosch discovered that hundreds of the documents which he sought to obtain from the Austrian judicial archives had, during the Second World War, been put to rather unexpected use: "Bundles of documents were pushed under the tracks of tanks when the going was difficult in muddy terrain" (1967: 249). Such a future application could not have been written into the documents by their original authors and represented a novel, but potent effect.

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Many archival documents do not meet such dramatic and sticky ends, and are instead in a continual process of becoming. They may be amended, added to or renewed. They come to be refilled, misfiled or transformed into new technological formats, and they can be distributed or elevated to iconic status. Equally, they can be withdrawn, censored, or materially reduced. As a consequence of such reinterpretation and cooption, documents stored within archives are particularly potent as political tools. Often imbued with new, unintended meanings and uses over time, they can become testimonies, symbols of memory or legal evidence. Yet the archive can be equally a political space within which actors attempt to erase or suppress the workings of the past. As the historian Richard Cobb describes in France,

> Documents of the revolutionary period . . . tend rather to be disparaged by members of [the archival] profession who, often believing that the rot set in 1789, would perhaps be only too willing to erase from their national past all trace of the Great Revolution. Indeed one middle aged *archiviste adjointe* proceeding to do just this, by systematically and industriously cutting all the tops off all documents bearing the hated heading "République Française", a method which, by the time she was taken away, had made a fairly considerable hole in the overstocked *archives modernes* of that particular *dépôrt*. (Cobb 1969: 57)

As the two historical anecdotes above illustrate, the political meanings and uses of documents are unstable, linking and disjoining contested relations, ideologies and practices across space and time. In a range of contexts, the articles of this special issue will trace the political, material and relational genealogies of archival documents as they are manipulated and come to be agents in their own right across their lifespans. In this vein, the articles seek to explore how the transformative and often unpredictable lives of archival documents shape political struggles and social change.

Archives in the Production of Power/Knowledge

According to the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre), archival documents must be questioned in three ways. "First, is it genuine? Second, was the document written by someone who was in a position to know what they were writing about? Third, *why* does this document *exist*?" (Hughes & Scott 2008: 26, emphasis in original). Yet recent historiographic work on the archives reveals that such questions themselves need to be interrogated. What makes documents "genuine" and what makes a person authoritative to write them are not self-evident, pointing instead to cultures of authority and constellations of power and knowledge. Furthermore, archives can indeed be judged on why they exist, but just as importantly, we should question *how* they exist.

The reflexive turn from the 1980s led scholars to question more explicitly the role of archives, just as they had been accustomed to questioning the contents of documents. They began to explore the implications of thinking of documents and the archives that held them as social artefacts. This should be seen as part of a larger move to study power/knowledge relationships as influenced by Foucault (1982) Archives, after all, are continually created and modified, and, despite common conceptions of them as a repository of the dead, are living things. What resides in the archive limits the stories that can be told and imagined. As Schwartz and Cook (2002) show, "Archives have

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always been about power, whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual. Archives have the power to privilege and marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance" (2002: 13).

Le Goff reminded scholars that "We have to inventory the archives of silence" (1992: 182); that is, scholarship must be based not only on what documents are present, but which are absent, and by implication, why. Le Goff also declared that "No document is innocent. It must be judged" (1992: 184). Michel-Rolph Trouillot thus notes:

> Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance). (Trouillot 1995: 26)

Yet despite the growing recognition that power resides in the archives and is reflected in its documents, documents were still examined largely for their content, as epistemological objects that contained, obscured or denied certain historical truths.

The historians and anthropologists of the subaltern movement (Guha & Spivak 1988) argued for reading documents against the grain to reveal the subaltern's voice, but this approach still was predicated on examining the content of the document. With a similar approach, social historians and the pioneers of microhistory (Ginzburg 1982; Ladurie 1978) deployed innovative readings of archival sources, but in doing so, remained focused on what could be extracted from the documents. Such scholars thus read with, across and against the grain, but remained largely within the documents themselves, seeking to uncover historical "facts".

Despite, or precisely because of, their role in shaping history, archives and the documents housed within them have long been neglected as shapers of social memory. Many works of social memory either exclude the archive and documents, or use the concepts in a larger, metaphorical sense. This neglect can be attributed in part to an emphasis on the physical or spatial aspects of memory in many studies (Boyarin 1994; Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1992) and the concern with commemoration (Gillis 1994). The overriding factor for this neglect, however, remains the emphasis on the "social" in social memory, and the work of Nora (1996), who explicitly contrasts memory with history. For Nora and those who followed him, archives were indications that we had lost our memory. "The indiscriminate filling of archives is a troublesome by-product of the new consciousness, the clearest expression yet of the 'terroristic' effect of historicized memory. Historicized memory comes to us from without" (Nora 1996: 10). In other words, the interest in, and filling of, archives are indicative of a loss of memory, not memory itself. Yet as some of the articles in this volume demonstrate (Murphy, Trundle, Lobley) social memory can indeed be inextricably linked to the archive.

As in anthropology and related disciplines more broadly, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have proved influential in rethinking the archive. Those following a Foucauldian or Derridean approach to the archives have provided cultural histories of the archive as a modern institution, demonstrating the archive's ability to foreclose and produce possible speech acts. Foucault suggests that the archives create a

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discursive field of that which can and cannot be enunciated (1982: 129). Derrida (1995) shows that the archival drive reflects a desire for origins and political control. The archive is associated with the emergence of the state, law and empire, with the will to knowledge and the enactment of modernist power.

Such approaches have proved fruitful in elucidating the archival process. Such scholars have examined "how such archives are made: at which traces survive and under what circumstances, as well as what is excised or excluded" (Hamilton *et al.* 2003: 16, see also Milligan 2005; Steedman 2001). Burton insists on exposing the "backstage of archives—how they are constructed, policed, experienced, and manipulated" (2005: 7). These scholars attend to the gaps in archives by exploring the logics and cultures of archivists and bureaucrats. Yet as Hamilton *et al.* show, the notion of a "gap" suggests an archive might be made complete, and in fact archives should be seen as "sliver rather than an incomplete whole" (2003: 10). Extending this approach, the articles of this collection seek to examine documentary practices and processes in order to understand the relationships between the materiality and aesthetics of the archives, the writing and deployment of history, and contests for power.

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Documenting Practice

More recently, anthropology has shifted towards tracing the political and relational genealogies of documentary practices (Feldman 2008; Harper 1998; Riles 2001, 2006; Stoler 2002, 2009; Tarlo 2003). Such scholars address the ways in which the aesthetics, form and materiality of documentary work shape the means by which archives exert power, and the ways in which the performance of documentary practices themselves enable particular subject formations, modes of governmentality, new and ongoing expressions of sovereignty and agency, and the circulation of affect. This approach is thus one that focuses on "archiving as process rather than archiving as things" (Stoler 2009: 20). As Stoler (2009) argues in her recent anthropological work on archives, the aim is to explicate the rituals and habits—both formal and mundane—through which archival documents are constituted and through which they circulate, as well as the aesthetic, affective and relational practices that they engender. She thus advocates identifying:

> the conditions of possibility that shaped what warranted repetition, what competencies were rewarded in archival writing, what stories could or could not be told and what could not be said. Such queries have invited a turn back to documentation itself. . .to what and who is being educated in the bureaucratic shuffle of rote formulas, generic plots, and prescriptive asides. (Stoler 2009: 34–35)

Such a focus extends the interpretive approach discussed earlier. It does so in multiple ways. First, such scholarship points out that the representational value of archival documents is not just created through the work of symbols and discourse. Rather, their power to signify cultural ideals and relational networks is often enabled through the subtlety and durability of documentary practices over time (Reed 2006; Riles 2006: 12). Secondly, and somewhat conversely, the work of locating meaning, the creation of social categories within and from the records does indeed occur, but can be a separate process from the consuming work of compilation, surveillance and accumulation within documentary

work (Feldman 2008: 47). This is because, as Riles demonstrates, "documentation implies a particular set of aesthetic commitments" (2006: 19) that are a realm of action in their own right and which can become both the method and the goal of archiving. Third, the content and form of documents can converge. Riles' study of Fijian NGOs illustrates that the aesthetics of the networks she investigates, in the form of paper trails and documentary practices, became self-reinforcing and self-replicating, the primary aim of action. This demonstrates the importance of patterns, iteration and repetition in the logic of organizational and bureaucratic process and their claims to authority (see also Feldman 2008). The effective replication of an artefact's pattern can thus be the mark of success (Riles 2001: 79). Feldman also demonstrates, in a Palestinian context, that "By providing grounds for determining documentary equivalency, the enforcement of uniformity in written style contributes to the consolidation of a largely self referential authoritative field. That is, a document could be judged accurate and authoritative by virtue of its equivalence to other documents" (2008: 38).

Attention to documentary practices has helped reveal the agentive quality of documents, and how they operate within complex networks of action. By following a document's "career", as Harper (1998) suggests, we might see how archival documents prompt, demand and shape other agents' acts (Feldman 2008: 45; Reed 2006; Riles 2006: 21). By taking seriously "documents with itineraries of their own" (Stoler 2009: 1), we examine how the material and aesthetic properties of documents enable them to affect power relations and the political sphere, however such a sphere may be ethnographically defined.

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The Articles

The articles in this volume challenge the range of social actors and networks currently considered when scholars examine archival practice ethnographically. Questions of the archives and power have typically configured archival power as a hegemonic product of the state and focuses on the role of bureaucrats and archivists (Bayly 1996; Dirks 1992, 2001, 2002; Jimerson 2009; Richards 1993; Stoler 2002, 2009; Tarlo 2003). Yet this downplays the diversity of archival practices that exist, especially engendered by those groups who are the subject of the archival gaze and record, and who often appropriate the archive's logic, its forms of memory and its documents for new uses. That such documents' future effects and interpretations are never fully known by their creators make them unstable actors in struggles for power and key sites of concern for those seeking influence or social change.

Noel Lobley's article traces the development and non-use of a South African music archive, and explores current possibilities for an engagement with the source communities, as originally envisioned by the archive's founder. Here, rather than the archives being stretched to further uses than first imagined, the problem is the opposite: disengagement. This is not the case with many of the other archives considered in this collection. Both Fiona Murphy and Catherine Trundle explore the new uses to which documents are put by those who have been the subject of the archival record, and how such enactments contest the original meanings and uses attributed to the documents. Murphy traces the emergence and use of archival records in Australia, as many

attempt to come to terms with the historic legacy of the "Stolen Generations": the forceful removal of aboriginal children from their families by the State across most of the twentieth century. Trundle examines a group of veterans who were exposed to a British nuclear bomb testing programme in the Pacific in the mid-twentieth century, and their current attempts to prove that radiation exposure has caused ill health. In both Murphy and Trundle's papers, documents designed for bureaucratic circulation are brought to light for entirely new and opposing purposes decades later.

In a Mongolian state archive, Chris Kaplonski's article examines the reinterpretation of documents by the bureaucratic descendants of those who created them. By examining how previously convicted citizens are "rehabilitated" by the state, Kaplonski demonstrates how the bureaucratic process and its material effects create the possibilities for both knowing the past and revising it.

Mark Turin's contribution represents perhaps the most explicit case of the awareness of the archiving process and its political potential, as Thangmi speakers in Nepal seek to expand Turin's slim dictionary into a weightier tome, where the very weight and length—the amount archived—is seen as representing legitimacy.

The articles of this volume broaden the timeframes and the social and material fields that are usually examined when scholars explore the social lives of archival documents. The articles trace documents as they spill out beyond the bounds of archives, and circulate into a diverse range of settings. A potent aspect of the power of documents, we show, lies in their communicative ability over time, as their authority and authorship is seldom singular. Modern governance structures require conversations through paper trails and sign offs that link a wide range of actors across space and time, and which utilize a variety of affective registers. In the process, documents come to contain and express a multiplicity of meanings, as they become layered and markings are added to their margins. These tiers of meaning and the processes of authoring and interpreting archival documents are, we demonstrate, a significant aspect of their political power, and require a dynamic methodological approach to capture.

Greg Rawlings' article explores the negotiation of British colonial rule in the New Hebrides during a global era of decolonization. He illustrates that the annotated notes added to the margins of bureaucratic documents over time were a crucial factor enabling imperial power to be both debated and enacted. He demonstrates how this "aesthetic of the subtle" can be used to understand the anxieties and telos of a decolonizing era.

Similarly, Murphy illustrates how such registers can come back to shatter expectations and understandings, as memories of loving parents and their pleas for child custody forcefully confront disparaging and cold evaluations by bureaucrats, recorded within documents' margins. Turin's article shows how such processes can be turned back upon themselves in the documentation of languages. In such a setting, people are increasingly aware of the political uses of documents as material artefacts, describing what he terms "activists in search of a linguist", while the researchers creating such documents are ever more self-reflexive themselves.

The test veterans of whom Trundle writes are also aware of the processes of documents, but rather than seek their support (as in Turin's case) they actively contest not just the

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documents themselves, but the processes by which documents are made. In contrast, the final recipients of the rehabilitation documents discussed in Kaplonski's article are excluded from a process that serves to reaffirm the strength of the archived documents. In rejecting alternate readings, bureaucrats elide the process that called such documents into being in the first instance. Rawlings demonstrates the wider histories of violent rule that can underpin the emancipatory and legalist discourses of the archives.

Together the articles of this volume offer a dynamic picture of contemporary archival work and an expanded frame for imagining the archival field. Informing the volume is a serious consideration of Stoler's call to treat archives as "condensed sites of epistemological and political anxieties rather than as skewed and biased sources" (2009: 20). Stoler encourages scholars to shift away from attempting to reveal the buried and often subaltern "truth" that the inherently partial archive obscures. In writing "along the grain" of archival common sense, as Stoler suggests, we can better understand the broader political arenas within which documentation practices are embedded and the logics that make their effects both enduring and fragile. By ethnographically tracing the relational, material, spatial and temporal journeys along which archival documents travel, this volume demonstrates the dynamic ways that archival documents shape political struggles and political subjectivities, and how they are themselves transformed en route.

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