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The Politics of Protest Collections:
Developing Social Action Archives

Sarah Cooper

In this article, the term politics is used in a broad sense to suggest that there are definite, though not always explicit, assumptions and values affecting the nature and extent of the documentary record preserved on social movements in this era. Though of main concern in this discussion is how values affect the collecting of materials on radical social change, the value systems under which archivists operate affect any kind of collecting endeavor.

The politics affecting what, or more accurately, from whom, documentation is collected, can be described as external or internal. External naturally refers to the world beyond the individual archivist's purview and outside archival institutions. External politics are largely those values that underlie the existing society and affect the way protest, dissent, and radical politics are viewed. Though this country's Constitution provides basic protection for the rights of political dissenters, the 1980s to date has not been a period of broad societal interest in political radicalism. The late 1960s and early 1970s were certainly more hospitable times in which to be collecting protest materials.

In this decade, there is Reaganism as a national ideology rather than the 1960s consciousness that propelled citizens toward a fundamental examination of American society. In this ideology, Americans and American policies are viewed as good, if not great, and national motivations, so scrutinized in the 1960s, are assumed to be high minded. This is the prevailing national ideology, challenged by many, but still predominant in the national consciousness.

In the context of that kind of ideology, short-lived as it may be, those people who challenge it at fundamental levels tend to be viewed as misguided, if not on the fringe. Reductionist political thinking at the national level, symbolized by the president of the United States's portrayal of third world upheavals as Communist exports rather than indigenous revolutions, has an effect on all this country's citizens, including archivists. Until the national ideology shifts and the growing protest movements, particularly around United States intervention in Central America, take center stage again, archivists are, if only subtly, less likely to extend themselves to document the groups most active in these movements.

For the last several years, little serious collecting has been undertaken to document the major movements of this time, such as Central American solidarity or the South Africa anti-apartheid movements that have engaged thousands of North Americans. Part of this passivity is the result of the dampening effect that a nationalistic, militaristic ideology has on collecting projects that seek to document groups challenging the political status quo.

At the same time, the nature of today's mass movements themselves affects the way they are viewed. Though movements of the eighties may number fewer participants than those involved at the height of the anti-Vietnam War years, there is no question that these are mass movements. They differ from the sixties movements in a number of ways, however. They tend to be involved almost exclusively in nonviolent protest and in many instances are longer-lasting than those of the sixties. Several of the Central American solidarity organizations have been around since 1979, so that they can hardly be considered fleeting youth organizations. Much of the organizing and protest of the 1980s has not been college based, nor has it involved nearly a whole generation of draft-age men, as the sixties did. For all these reasons and the lack of a contemporaneous cultural and sexual revolution, the 1980s is a period of quiet yet fervent political dissent. Perhaps these less flamboyant movements which capture less media attention are also of less personal interest to collecting archivists today.

Look at the archival profession itself when analyzing the currents in collecting on social action. It is helpful to first study the people who developed the major social protest and leftist collections that have survived. An informal 1980 survey of the institutions that hold the major collections revealed (perhaps not surprisingly) that those who developed them had been involved in the movements they were documenting. Tamiment Collection, now part of New York University, had its origin in the socialist-oriented Rand School; Swarthmore's peace collection and collectors naturally came out of the pacifist tradition of the Quakers; the Martin Luther King Center was developed by civil rights movement participants; and the developers of the Social Action Collection at Wisconsin in the 1960s were veterans of the southern civil rights and antiwar movements.

By 1980, all these collections were becoming "professionalized"; they were beginning to be cared for and administered by professional archivists. The materials received needed preservation and processing attention. At the same time, a retrenchment in collecting policies had certainly occurred and has continued. This is an overall trend and certainly not solely attributable to the professionalization of archival work. There is a connection, however.

How could the further development of the archival profession adversely affect collecting, especially of protest materials? It is certainly true that as the profession has matured, great advances in protecting the country's documentary heritage have been made. At the same time, the language--the terminology that is now so widely used--is a telling barometer of the profession's current priorities and values. Though in the past the term professional encompassed the meaning of service to the larger society, in recent years that concept has become nearly obsolete in professional discussions. Indeed, in journals and guidelines for grants, advancing the profession rather than any broad humanistic goals of society is the norm.

Today's inward-looking professions (archivists are not alone) are immersed in what they have defined as professional interests. Engagement in the outside world, in larger social issues, in the ongoing struggle to make democracy work for all citizens are outside the professional archivist's concern. Administrators spend virtually all their time on what one would consider management or technical problems, as perhaps they should. However, management is often expressed as an end in itself, rather than as a tool for carrying out a broader vision of archives in service to society. One reflection of archivists' current professional value system is that many of their models come from the business world, not academe or their own creation. Management school language is used to describe not just technical processes but what the profession and the people involved in it are about.

The negative effect of the business world model on librarianship (which can easily be extrapolated to archives) was well delineated by Joan M. Bechtel in an article in College and Research Libraries. 1 As she pointed out, the business world's end is its own survival, not the enhancement of the public good or the quality of life which should be the concerns of society's professions. When the business model is used to go much beyond designing a budget, and it is, archivists and librarians end up describing the highest value they hold as the "bottom line." Archival administration workshops begin with the question "What business are you in?" and then go on from there to describe collections as products and users as consumers. Bechtel's challenge to librarians to articulate a larger, transcendent vision of the social meaning and significance of libraries might be asked of archivists as well.

In the professional archival literature of recent years, history is scarcely mentioned, despite the continuing path of history graduates from that field into archives. In the archival profession's world view, it is almost as if there is no external world informing decisions--only, in the favorite cliche of this work, "the universe of archival documentation." Of course, archival work is rooted in the real world, but, in the cocoon of professional language, archivists seem to have lost words to describe it.

How does the combination of the profession's turning inward and using a business model to describe its work affect what it collects? It gives the archivist an ahistorical perspective, providing no substantive assistance for making informed judgments on the value of the materials accepted. Processing, preserving, and storing materials rather than documenting history becomes the archivist's life's work. How much more likely, then, that the records of officialdom, that is the records of government, rather than the disparate documents of social movements will be preserved? If archivists are not attuned to the general social and political milieu, they are not likely to find much room in their minds or on their shelves for the records of political dissent.

Where the society's and the profession's prevailing values have been discussed as external political factors influencing social action collecting, the operating values of collecting institutions and of the individual archivist may be examined under the rubric of "internal politics."

What impact do archival institutions have on the extent to which social movements are documented? Like the profession itself in this period, the institutions are not particularly outward directed. There is little evidence of any research institution undertaking a significant collecting project in the area of social action in the last several years. In a period when collecting policies in general have been narrowed, social action collecting is likely to be a large loser.

In some ways, it is surprising how much protest and alternative material has been collected up to now, considering the conservative nature of bureaucracies. Agency administrators do not necessarily have to be political conservatives to want to stem the flow of incoming collections. The politics of running any major archival institution means having to justify collecting to boards of directors and legislators who are not likely to be particularly interested in the documentary heritage of people who challenge the status quo.

Where have significant collections on social protest managed to prosper or at least survive? The answer is in institutions with widely varying histories. In large institutions, social protest collections are most likely to endure if some link can be made between an earlier collector or program that provides continuity for a contemporary collecting interest. The best example of this is the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Though there is not an ambitious social action collecting program there today, the Social Action Collection is secure. Its justification has usually been linked to the collecting of labor and social reform materials by Richard T. Ely and John R. Commons early in this century and to the Progressive movement in the state. Also, as a collection national in scope, it is given status from its association with other national collecting areas that the society has developed in labor and mass communications.

Few other social action archives created in the 1960s have endured so successfully. There were a number of protest collections started in university libraries in the 1960s. Many of these had little archival material, but at least attempted to collect the ephemera of the emerging student protest movements. In recent years, once the staff who started the collection left, holdings were often deaccessioned and sent to other archives.

In the early 1980s, Princeton University sent their social change collection to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Several years ago, after the death of collector's network developer Russell Benedict, the large special collection on Right and Left groups that he developed at the University of Nevada, Reno, was in jeopardy. An arrangement was finally made for it to be transferred to California

State University, Fullerton, to be part of the Freedom Center Collection. In recent years, the Freedom Center faced a challenge to its own existence when a new library administration questioned its value on a campus devoted to undergraduate teaching rather than research. At Berkeley's Bancroft Library, the Social Protest Collection, started in the 1960s to preserve the ephemera and literature of the Berkeley campus movements, became an administrative headache, as a succession of part-time staff and students who had worked on it departed for other callings. Never quite defined as a library or an archives collection, its orphan status was only recently resolved when it was finally processed and shelved as an archival collection, with no plans for continued collecting in the field of social action anticipated.

Social action collections with roots in the Old Left have yet another kind of history. On the one hand, the Tamiment Collection has ended up in the modern library of New York University, and the old Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan has successfully endured. The Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research located in Los Angeles reflects yet another kind of archival institution documenting radical movements for social change. It is an independent library unaffiliated with a university or a larger research institution. Its present board is committed to preserving its independence and its ability to document social movements, whether they are currently popular or not. Developed in the early 1960s by Emil Freed, a longtime radical political activist, the library in recent years has broadened its mission while still retaining an identity as a grassroots cultural institution. In the current era, it appears that only small institutions with heritages in political and labor movements of the past are actively seeking documentation on dissent and social change.

The internal politics of each of these different types of institutions determine the degree to which the parent group will cultivate and support its archival holdings on radical political movements.

The last element to consider in analyzing the factors that help or hinder the flourishing of protest collections is the most important: that is, the values of the individual archivist or collector. The internal politics or world view of the individual archivist has considerable impact on what is collected. For social movement collections to thrive, especially given the discouraging conditions outlined above, archivists who believe that it is important to document the struggles of those who challenge the assumptions of the national political ideology are quite crucial.

If archivists view their professional lives as ends in themselves, they are certainly not going to be expending much energy to document the universe that includes social activism. If grassroots movements for social change are viewed as fringe politics rather than as a central part of the ongoing debate about society's purposes and commitment to justice and equality, then archivists are not going to make a serious attempt to document those movements--significant as they have been and may be again in changing, and sometimes revolutionizing, the values held by North American society.

Since 1983, Sarah Cooper has been director of the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, a research library located in Los Angeles which specializes in documentation on social movements, labor history, civil liberties, and radicalism. Prior to that, she was an archivist for nine years at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin where she was primarily responsible for collection development of the Social Action Collection, a national archives on social protest movements, particularly from the 1960s.

NOTES

1 Joan M. Bechtel, "Conversation, a New Paradigm for Librarianship?" College and Research Libraries 47 (May 1986): 219.