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## Archivists Against the Current: For a Fair and Truly Representative Record of Our Times

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# THE ACTIVIST ARCHIVIST

For over twenty years, the archivist as activist has been a recurring theme in the archival profession. Ten years ago, GEORGIA ARCHIVE published a set of papers from the 1976 Society of American Archivists (SAA) annual meeting; the session was titled "The Activist Archivist: A Reevaluation." At the time, activism among archivists was recognized as a subject of heated debate that had its roots in the political turmoil of the sixties [GEORGIA ARCHIVE V,1 (winter 1977): 3].

With activism firmly established as a common thread in North American society in the eighties, another session on the topic was placed on the 1986 SAA annual meeting program. The editors of PROVENANCE believe the following set of papers from that session, "The Activist Archivist Revisited: Documenting Contemporary Social Reform," contributes to a better understanding of the concerns in contemporary documentation.

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## **Archivists Against the Current:**

For A Fair and Truly Representative Record of Our Times

Patrick M. Quinn

Concern with problems associated with documenting nontraditional and minority movements for cultural, economic, social, and political change has been expressed previously in the archival literature, but certainly not in proportion to the dimensions of such a problem.<sup>1</sup> If one admits that the prevailing values of a given society generally correspond to the values of the prevailing socio-economic strata of that society,<sup>2</sup> it is not at all surprising that archivists

should have been preoccupied with accumulating a documentary record of the lives of the members of the prevailing strata and of the activities and functions of the institutions that provide the collective infrastructure for that strata.<sup>3</sup> It was only with the social and political ferment of the 1960s and 1970s that some archivists began to address the need to document the lives of individuals and the roles of institutions identified with or involved in countervailing movements whose very raison d'etre compelled them to oppose predominant structures and ideological values.

Archivists' concern for such considerations, again not surprisingly, paralleled similar concerns in the historical profession and in the social sciences--concerns that were forged in the same crucible of social-political discontent that molded the thinking of many young archivists. The now widely accepted premise that one ought to view history "from the ground up" was championed by historians, social scientists, and archivists alike, as was the premise that academic disciplines concerned with the human condition ought to pay more attention to the roles of working people; of blacks; of Chicanos and other Hispanics; of native American Indians; of Asian-Americans; of gays and lesbians; of such activists for change as communists, socialists, pacifists, and radicals; and especially of the "nondominant" majority: women.<sup>4</sup> The comments that follow primarily address archival implications of these concerns.

Most archival repositories fall into one of two categories. The first is institutional or organizational archives whose primary mission is to select, preserve, and make available the records of enduring value of the host institution of which they are a component. The second, "general" archives, are more commonly known as manuscript repositories, and they collect, preserve, and make available "discretionary" documentation, for which there exists no formal, official, or structural mandate that it be preserved. The collecting scopes of general archives are determined by various thematic or geographic



parameters. However, exactly which records and papers should be specifically sought and acquired within those parameters is largely determined by the archivists in charge or their line supervisors. General archives are also essentially cultural institutions which serve a broad user constituency rather than a narrow utilitarian or administrative purpose. They collect and preserve documentation in order to make it available for a multitude of uses by contemporary and future users. In other words, they preserve documentation for documentation's sake.

It is precisely as cultural institutions that general archives tend to mirror prevailing ideological values. Moreover, their collecting scopes reflect the ebb and flow of prevailing ideology, although more often than not the impact of ideological change upon collecting scopes is mediated, nuanced, and distorted. In many instances, for example, changes in a general archives's collecting scope or in its appraisal standards occur only considerably later than significant shifts in prevailing societal values. Hence, in a period of nascent political or social ferment, documentation generated by individual or organizational agents of change tends to be ignored by general archives. When the movements for change reach a "threshold" and have sufficiently loosened the pervasive grip of prevailing ideology and forcefully called attention to the importance of previously scorned or neglected documentation, collecting often begins.

Thus, it was that the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, for example, began to collect the records of the civil rights movement only after this movement was well underway and had become "legitimized" in the minds of a significant portion of the general public.<sup>5</sup> The specific reason that the State Historical Society of Wisconsin had by the 1970s become the premier center for the study of radical political and social change in the United States is really quite straightforward: first, because the director of the society was a committed liberal with a personal interest in the struggle of black Americans for

economic, political, and social justice and, second, because the society's staff began to include a number of young activists in the various movements for progressive change, many of whom had been trained in the craft of history and most of whom, by virtue of their political persuasions, were historically conscious. To protect itself against challenges from unsympathetic state legislators, the society justified its new interest in acquiring the records of contemporary protest movements by pointing to its rich holdings documenting earlier socialist and labor movements that had been accumulated by the academic voyeurs and political pathologists John L. Commons and Richard T. Ely in the course of their autopsies of these movements.<sup>6</sup>

The "time lag" factor referred to above had an inverse corollary as well. Many general archives continued to acquire the records of the 1960s social protest movements long after the movements that had generated the records had declined or disappeared. Thus, it seemed throughout the 1970s that the new proclivity to collect the documentary record of what now are voguishly called "countertrends" was a permanent feature of the archival landscape. But, as Sarah Cooper points out in one of the articles to follow, a rightward-leaning ideology has once again asserted itself in the United States--although fortunately not on the same scale as it had during the dark years of the McCarthy era.

In the wake of this change in the political climate, some general archives such as the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, have de-emphasized acquisition of the very sorts of documentation that contributed so substantially to developing their reputations as centers for research on alternative movements. This is to be expected, given the factors discussed at the beginning of this essay. Despite the efforts of activist-oriented archivists to the contrary, a generalized disinterest in the records of movements for change will probably endure until such movements once again begin to flourish, much as they did during the last quarter of the nineteenth century,



during the decade preceding World War I, during the entire decade of the 1930s and, most recently, during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It is, thus, in the broader context of the complex relationship between prevailing ideology and the societal role of cultural institutions such as general archives that the three articles that follow must be situated. Each represents in its own right an important contribution to archival literature and each eloquently argues the case for archivists to be concerned with assembling a fair and representative record of our society, despite the formidable obstacles that such an endeavor necessarily encounters. Each calls for preserving a collective record that can transcend the static and one-dimensional portrait or snapshot of prevailing ideologies and institutions produced by traditional collecting policies.

Sarah Cooper's article explores in some detail the difficulties archives face in acquiring the records of protest movements and the papers of individuals involved in such movements, especially during a period marked by the decline of the movements themselves.

In a remarkably courageous and pathbreaking contribution, Elizabeth Knowlton urges archivists to take a much more active role in collecting and making more widely available the records of gay people and gay institutions and organizations.

Finally, Sarah Sherman provides a case study of the development of a particularly significant nontraditional collection--the Women's Collection of the Northwestern University Library.

It is hoped that these three articles will stimulate further discussion within the archival profession about what kinds of active roles archivists must play if they are effectively to acquire, preserve, and make available for future generations a documentary record that is fair and truly representative of our times.

Patrick M. Quinn has been an archivist for over two decades. Currently University Archivist at Northwestern University, he formerly served on the archival staffs of the University of Wisconsin and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. A Fellow of the Society of American Archivists, Quinn is a former chair of the SAA's College and University Archives Section and of the society's regional archival activities committee. He is a past president of the Midwest Archives Conference and is presently a member of the editorial board of The Midwestern Archivist. He wishes to acknowledge the contributions of Kevin B. Leonard and Mary E. Janzen in helping to cast this essay in its present form.

## NOTES

1 See especially Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," The Midwestern Archivist 2,2 (1977): 14; Patrick M. Quinn, "Archivists and Historians: The Times They Are a Changing," Ibid: 5; Patrick M. Quinn, "The Archivist as Activist," Georgia Archive 5,1 (Winter 1977): 25; Archie Motley, "Out of the Hollinger Box: The Archivist as Advocate," The Midwestern Archivist 9,2 (1984): 65.

2 Space does not permit an extended discussion of the concept of ideological hegemony. For the classic argument on this subject, see Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971). For more recent treatments of the relationship between ideology and culture, see Raymond Williams, Culture and Society (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) and Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London: Verso, 1976).



3 What is surprising is that only one American archivist, Michael Lutzker, has made a serious effort to situate appraisal theory within the framework of institutional systems by drawing upon the work of a social theorist, in this instance Max Weber. See Michael A. Lutzker, "Max Weber and the Analysis of Modern Bureaucratic Organization: Notes Toward a Theory of Appraisal," The American Archivist 45 (1982): 119.

4 See, among others, Howard Zinn, The Politics of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970) and Sam Bass Warner, Jr., "The New Demand for Relevance in History," an address before the Conference on the National Archives and Urban Research in Jerome Finster, ed., The National Conference on Urban Research (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1974).

5 For a history of the Social Action Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, see Sarah Cooper, "Introduction," Social Action Collections at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin: A Guide, comp. Menzi L. Bernd-Klodt and Carolyn J. Mattern (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1983).

6 As Sarah Cooper makes clear, the boards of directors of the major archival and cultural institutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not about to endorse the collection of the documentary record of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or other radical socialist and labor organizations dedicated to transforming the existing social order. Considerable documentation on these sorts of organizations, however, was acquired and preserved, albeit serendipitously, by idiosyncratic, private individuals, by the organizations themselves, and by various coercive agencies of the state such as local police departments and the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its predecessor agencies. It was only after many radical organizations declined that their records became sufficiently sanitized to be accepted by an archival repository.