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# Archives and Archivists without Borders<sup>1</sup>

Eric Ketelaar

We have come here, hundred years after the first international congress on archives, in 1910 in Brussels. In his speech at the closing of the congress, Samuel Muller (that great Dutch pioneer of archival methodology and practice) passionately urged his fellow archivists to take an active part in their local, regional and national communities: “Let us ensure that the whole world knows that we are alive..., we and the treasures that are entrusted into our custody...!”<sup>2</sup> It is, however, not only the 1910 congress that we remember. This congress echoes, through its title *Archives without Borders*, the 1991 congress *Archives and Europe without boundaries*, organized by the Dutch association of archivists to celebrate its centenary.<sup>3</sup> At that congress, the Dutch Minister of Culture Hedy d’Ancona emphasized in her opening speech that the archivist is a key figure in his or her community and “an indispensable link in the chain by which cultural values are transferred”.<sup>4</sup> And again, now at this congress, the central question as formulated by Hildo van Engen in his opening speech, was: what is, considering the globalizing world, the role of archival professionals. It was the explicit intention of the organizers, the Flemish association for archivists and librarians VVBAD and the Royal Association of Dutch archivists KVAN (as we heard from their presidents) to offer the opportunity to archive professionals from various countries and cultures to reflect together on the meaning of archives. Meaning of archives for what or for whom? The programme says “for the proper functioning of governments and other institutions.” I would, however, say: for society, for the people: archives of the people, by the people, for the people.<sup>5</sup>

Archival documents don’t speak of their own accord, but of course they have something to tell, they have a meaning. The meaning of a record, or of any other cultural artefact is twofold: the meaning of the record and the meaning for someone or for an occasion. The record is full of meanings, some may be read in the record, or inferred from the intertextuality that connects it to other documents, others have to be deduced from the context of archives’ creation and use. I deliberately use the plural of ‘meaning’, as a record does not have one meaning only. The meanings people are making from the archives can be beneficial or injurious, turning records into instruments of liberation or of oppression.<sup>6</sup> Archival documents have power, “a kind of communicative power that can effect change in our lives,” as Brien Brothman recently wrote. But he also warned that this power can operate as a force of negation.<sup>7</sup> Archives function, according to Brothman, as agents of political continuity



and social solidarity, but archives can also operate as forces of political negation, disruption, and discontinuity. That is to say, the agency of archives needs the agency of human beings. Man — be it the Grand Inquisitor or the Generalísimo or a democratic government — uses or abuses records for control, surveillance and discipline, and in too many cases for oppression too. Paradoxically, the same records can also become instruments of empowerment and liberation, salvation and freedom. The records of former ‘bureaucracies of destruction’<sup>8</sup> can have a ‘boomerang effect’ and be transfigured into instruments of atonement and reconciliation, as Antonio González Quintana and various other speakers have explained so compellingly.

A record means various things to different people, across time-space, and consequently the identities which are claimed from and based on a particular archival heritage will be different. Heritage (*patrimoine*) exists only through appropriation: a patrimony needs not only a testator and (usually) a will, but also an heir who accepts the conditions.<sup>9</sup> Archival documents are boundary objects, shared across the boundaries of different communities, while each community will probably seek to use them in different and often competing ways.<sup>10</sup> Different groups each claim their own ‘memory of suffering as a sacred asset’, to be framed in a space only trusted and accessible for members of the own group.<sup>11</sup> This ‘ethnization of memory’ may lead to ‘ghettoization of history’.<sup>12</sup> Archives, however, cannot be split up according to the ethnic or religious or political provenance of perpetrators, victims, witnesses. Archivists should be vigilant and ensure that appropriation of archives by a particular group or for a particular cause does not endanger the integrity of the archives and the rights of other users, now and in the future. Assigning meanings and values to archives is a political act, an act of memory politics. As Trudy Peterson said archives are information and symbol, these two aspects being twisted through contentious political issues. The archivist cannot pretend to be outside these politics of memory: he or she is one of the actors who, in the words of Jacques Derrida, “must practice a politics of memory and, simultaneously, in the same movement, a critique of the politics of memory.”<sup>13</sup>

## THE ROLE OF THE ARCHIVIST

What, then, is the role of the archivist, archivist taken in the broadest sense: any records professional involved in the continuum of record creation, maintenance and use. I like the expression of our Spanish colleagues who value the multifunctional *archivero integral*. The integral, or inclusive archivist, is “a trustee for all generations”,<sup>14</sup> “continual mediator between past, present, and future, between creators, records, and researchers”.<sup>15</sup> The role of the archivist was addressed by various speakers, today and yesterday. Not for the first time, surely. The 1910 Brussels congress was closed by Samuel Muller with a speech urging the archivists to go out and get engaged in society. “We want,” Muller exclaimed, “to live with all other people in that strong and rapid current which is the pulse of modern life.” He ended: “*Vivons, Messieurs!*” (“Let us live, Gentlemen!”).

In 1991 the Dutch association of archivists organized an international congress to celebrate its centenary. As I mentioned earlier, the title of that congress *Archives and Europe without boundaries* has inspired the organizers of today’s congress.

Herman Tjeenk Willink, then chairman of the Dutch Upper House of Parliament, urged archivists to side with the citizen in his battle against the selective memory of government, even when that would entail the archivist to act against the administration.<sup>16</sup> Trudy Peterson (then Acting Archivist of the United States) called for a strong head of the archivist, who “must defend the cardinal choice for clarity in applying the concept of personal privacy to the information in our trust.”<sup>17</sup>

The archivist is both the guardian and the servant of the record.<sup>18</sup> I was struck by what Catherine Kennedy told yesterday about the Document Affinity Group: I thought she was talking about affinity with the document, a true archivist’s calling. But in fact it is one of the International Center for Transitional Justice’s ‘affinity groups’ she was presenting. Nevertheless, I like the idea of *affinity with the record*. Affinity, affection — the primary duty of the record professional is to maintain the integrity of the record. But more and more professionals advocate — as they forcefully did during this congress — that the social responsibility of the archivist embraces making society more knowledgeable, more tolerant, more diverse, and more just.<sup>19</sup> Recently Randall Jimerson has argued, in his book *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* for “a socially responsible re-conception of archival ethics”, “relating to social justice, accountability, and public responsibility”.<sup>20</sup> Going further on the way shown by Samuel Muller, Jimerson challenges archivists to engage with society, with its social pressures and assumptions, and “to consider the political context in which they carry their daily functions”.<sup>21</sup> Samuel Muller’s “Let us live” has become for Randall Jimerson “engage in public policy and even in the political debates”.<sup>22</sup> Archivists, he writes, have “to redefine their relationship to social and political systems of power, influence, and activism”.<sup>23</sup> A fine example are the ‘Archivists without Borders’ (*Archiveros sin Fronteras; Archivistes sans Frontières*), a Spanish initiative but now stretching to Latin America.<sup>24</sup> The main objective of Archivists without Borders — presented yesterday by the president Mariona Corominas — is cooperation in countries whose documentary heritage is in danger of disappearing or of suffering irreversible damage, with particular emphasis on the protection of human rights. Apart from Spain and France, there are no European or North-American, or Asian or Pacific chapters. An Archivists without Borders association in Norway and another in the United States are being created as we speak. I urge you, when you are home again, to consult your colleagues to create an Archivists without Borders association in your country or to consider any other form of collaboration with Archivists without Borders. You may also consider engaging with Archival Solidarity (a project of the International Council on Archives presented this afternoon on behalf of Nancy Marrelli) that aims to co-ordinate efforts in the international archives community to carry out foreign assistance projects to develop tools and expertise for developing communities and communities in transition.<sup>25</sup> However, keep in mind Catherine Kennedy’s warning of the risk of archival solidarity being entrapped in benevolence or development aid. Archival solidarity should be a form of archival activism and idealism. Didn’t Hildo van Engen, in his opening speech, say that idealism is intrinsic to this congress?

As an individual archivist you do not need to wait until your institution joins Archival Solidarity: as an individual you can carry out solidarity projects too. As Nancy Marrelli stressed: one of the lessons learned, is that a committed individual or group



is frequently the prime mover for a project or program. As an individual you can make a difference: act locally, think globally — and *vice versa*.

This afternoon, in the session on Cross-border archives, Huub Sanders from the International Institute of Social History referred to the ideas of the Dutch born sociologist Saskia Sassen about the dynamics of globalization. Sassen points to “a movement from centripetal nation-state articulation to a centrifugal multiplication of specialized assemblages”. “One type of assemblage is the ‘global civil society’”. I quote Sassen: “Global civil society is enabled by global digital networks but this does not preclude that localized actors, organizations, and causes are key building blocks of global civil society as it is shaping up today. The localized involvements of activists are critical no matter how universal and planetary the aims of the various struggles — in their aggregate these localized involvements are constitutive.”<sup>26</sup> We can follow her advice, as local actors being building blocks of a global civil society.

Fred van Kan, the president of the Dutch association, urged in his speech this morning archivists to “think outside the box”. And he said something about an association without borders. I would like to paraphrase his words in saying that an archivist without borders “is not afraid to cross borders in order to achieve real freedom of information and real openness of archives, with guarantees for the personal privacy.” Look at the picture on your program: the archivist — she or he — has found a ladder to climb out of the maze of institutions and inhibitions, looking towards the Peace Palace. Behind the Peace Palace, on the horizon, are the symbols of Dutch government and Dutch business: from left to right the Pier at Scheveningen, the ministry of Culture and Parliament. The Peace Palace takes precedence: that (and for what it stands for) is where the archivist is heading for. But do not forget the ladder: it gives the archivist a firm grip, symbolizing the steadfast configuration of our professionalism, which dictates that even an *activist archivist* cannot allow people outside the profession to interfere in his or her practice and professional and moral obligations.

Hundred years ago Samuel Muller, in closing the Brussels congress, clamoured: Let us live! Today I call upon you: climb out of the safety of your institution, take your responsibility towards society at large, be true to your profession, become an activist archivist, an archivist without borders.

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- 1 Closing speech at the conference Archives without Borders. The summaries of the sessions have been omitted.
  - 2 J. Cuvelier and L. Stainier (eds.), *Congrès de Bruxelles 1910. Actes* (Brussels 1912), p. 786.
  - 3 See for the proceedings of Archives and Europe without boundaries: *Janus. Revue archivistique* (1992-2).
  - 4 H. d’Ancona, ‘The citizen and administration’, *Janus. Revue archivistique*, (1992-2), pp. 25-28, p. 27.
  - 5 E. Ketelaar, ‘Archives of the people, by the people, for the people’, *S.A. Argiefblad / S.A. Archives Journal*, vol. 34 (1992), pp. 5-16; reprinted in E. Ketelaar, *The Archival Image. Collected essays* (Hilversum 1997), pp. 15-26.

- 6 E. Ketelaar, 'Recordkeeping and Societal Power', in: S. McKemmish et al. (eds.), *Archives: recordkeeping in society* (Wagga-Wagga 2005), pp. 277-298; Spanish translation: "Gestión de registros y poder social", in: S. McKemmish et al. (eds.): *Archivos: gestión de registros en sociedad* (Cartagena 2007), pp. 379-404.
- 7 B. Brothman, 'Perfect present, perfect gift: finding a place for archival consciousness in social theory', *Archival Science*, vol. 10 (2010), pp. 141-189.
- 8 P.R. Bartrop, 'The Holocaust, the Aborigines, and the bureaucracy of destruction: an Australian dimension of genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 3 (2001), pp. 75-87.
- 9 J.-M. Leniaud, *Les archipels du passé. Le patrimoine et son histoire* (Paris 2002).
- 10 G. Yeo, "'Nothing is the same as something else': significant properties and notions of identity and originality", *Archival Science*, vol. 10 (2010), pp. 85-116, pp. 98-99.
- 11 B.A. Misztal, 'The sacralization of memory', *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 7 (2004), pp. 67-84.
- 12 D. Corkalo et al., 'Neighbors again? Intercommunity relations after ethnic cleansing', in: E. Stover and H.M. Weinstein (eds.), *My neighbor, my enemy: justice and community in the aftermath of atrocity* (Cambridge 2004) pp. 143-161, p. 157; P. Williams, *Memorial museums: the global rush to commemorate atrocities* (Oxford and New York 2007), p. 168.
- 13 J. Derrida and B. Stiegler, *Echographies of television. Filmed interviews* (Cambridge 2002), p. 63.
- 14 G. Martin, 'The role of the archive administration as guardian of the past or servant of the future in a national authority', *Janus. Revue archivistique*, (1992-2), pp. 123-131, p. 131.
- 15 Nancy Bartlett, quoted by T. Cook, 'Archives, evidence, and memory: thoughts on a divided tradition', *Archival issues*, vol. 22 (1997), pp. 177-182, p. 179.
- 16 H. Tjeenk Willink, 'Citoyen et administration', *Janus. Revue archivistique*, (1992-2), pp. 29-35.
- 17 T. Huskamp Peterson, 'Privacy and freedom of information', (1992-2), pp. 36-40, p. 40.
- 18 Martin, 'The role of the archive administration', p. 131.
- 19 R. Jimerson, *Archives power. Memory, accountability, and social justice* (Chicago 2009), p. 185.
- 20 Jimerson, *Archives power*, pp. 290-291. See also E.S. Danielson, *The ethical archivist* (Chicago 2010).
- 21 Jimerson, *Archives power*, pp. 353 and 295.
- 22 Jimerson, *Archives power*, p. 353.
- 23 Jimerson, *Archives power*, p. 296.
- 24 <http://www.arxiv.org/en/index.php>.
- 25 <http://archives3.concordia.ca/Solidarity/default.html>.
- 26 S. Sassen, 'A Public Sociology for a Global Age: Recovering the Political', in: V. Jeffries (ed.), *Handbook of public sociology* (Lanham 2009), p. 402.