



Epistemologies of the archive: toward a critique of archival reason

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Abstract

This article explores epistemological bases for debates over the nature of archival research and practice, and argues that the lens of historical epistemology helps us best understand the critiques of the so-called “archival turn” as well as continued interest in archives among the public. Close reading of the rise of “scientific” history in the nineteenth century and modern archival practice, as articulated in early twentieth-century archival manuals, offers a new theorization of principles like provenance, respect des fonds, and custody, as well as historians’ “archive stories,” as part of an overarching though usually unspoken epistemology of archives rooted in intellectual project of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey to create an epistemological foundation of the human sciences. Following this line of inquiry, it suggests that we can reconceptualize the rise of archival research, the development of the modern archival profession, and the critiques of these trends through the so-called “archival turn” and the post-custodial era of archival practice as shifts that were not just methodological in character but also epistemological. Ultimately, approaching the history of archives through the framework of epistemology helps us make sense of new critiques and continued interest in archives. Despite a growing chorus of acknowledgement of archives’ constructed nature, the instinct that documents provide access to the past with some kind of evidentiary value leads toward the value imbued into archives by professionals and the public alike and their continual contestation.

Keywords Epistemology · Wilhelm Dilthey · Immanuel Kant · Archival turn · Post-custodial era · Respect des fonds · “Scientific” history · Archival research · Archival reason

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How do we know about the past with certainty? Such a question extends a core philosophical challenge of skepticism from Plato to Kant to the twenty-first century, heightened by our temporal displacement from the past. And postmodernism has only sharpened critiques of historical knowledge, leading Georg Iggers to conclude in 1997: “The assurance which professional historians after [Leopold von] Ranke had assumed that immersion in sources would assure a perception of the past that corresponded with reality has long been modified” (Iggers 1997, p. 144). But as he freely admitted, despite fresh critiques of sources and methods, historians have in practice anchored themselves in a belief that they study real events. Just the same, a changing intellectual climate has led many archivists to reassess professional assumptions. Still, probably few would claim that the people, institutions, and phenomena inscribed in documents were not real. For at the basis of both historical and archival practice is a conceit that even if history is written as narrative, the past itself is not a fantasy and archives present one potential avenue to access it, if only indirectly. It constitutes an unspoken assumption underpinning claims to knowledge of the past—that sources, especially but not exclusively those held in archives, present a means to encounter semi-reliably a past that otherwise would remain inaccessible—and even of the present. If the once-popular archival dictum “quod non est in actis, non est in mundo” (that which is not in the files does not exist in the world) indicated that without sources we would know nothing of the past, it also reflects the role of archives and documentation as arbiters of an otherwise plainly-evident present: A newborn baby’s very existence is verified through her birth certificate; deeds and titles certify land ownership; social security cards and passports prove citizenship or employment status. Altogether, one can identify an enduring logic of proof tied to documentation and the institutions that claim to preserve it, constituting a kind of archival reason at the foundational level of historical and archival practice as well as a popular perception of the value and utility of sources and archives.

This article explores the history of archives and the epistemological meaning invested in them, leading toward an excavation and critique of this archival reasoning. Building on the conceptual framework of Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, I argue that as archives and their sources became, respectively, settings and objects of research—what Rheinberger called “epistemic things”—they were attributed value in epistemological terms (Rheinberger 1997). By dubbing archives “laboratories of history,” romanticizing archival travel, and delineating professional archival practices to preserve the “authenticity” of historical materials, predominant nineteenth- and twentieth-century practices of historical research and archival management offered epistemological claims about an ability to encounter the past. Since the 1970s, scholars have challenged archives’ neutrality on several fronts, and few would today call history a “science” or archives its “laboratories.” Nevertheless, these epistemological stakes remain visible through archives’ continuing centrality to much historical research and their hold on the popular imagination. In this context, fully comprehending the changing position of archives in society and scholarship demands that we situate this history of archival and historical practice within the history of epistemology: A critical rereading of historians’ and archivists’ onetime assumptions reveals an implicit epistemological framework tied to the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and his attempt to articulate an epistemological

foundation of the human sciences. In particular, Dilthey's concept of the "objectification" of internal experience, being relatable to others through the existence of objects, provides a useful framework for the archival reasoning that underlay the professional claims of historians and archivists that we might possibly encounter the otherwise inaccessible past through its physical traces. And if one aligns such reasoning with a Diltheyan perspective, then the contemporary challenges to once-common aspirations to historical objectivity and neutrality can be rooted in a renewed Kantian approach that insists on our limited access to the noumenal world of the present and thus to the past, too, and our inability to escape the frames of our own making. The recent critiques of archives—with level-headed reassessments of historical sources, ever-increasing critical studies of archives not just as objects of research but as subjects of study in their own right, and repeated calls to search archives for their silences and read them against the grain—can thus be comprehended as one more epistemological framing of archives based in the idea that the objects of history are not found "in nature" but are actively cultivated and curated, as Rheinberger argued was the case of all "epistemic things."

Dilthey's "critique of historical reason" was not meant to tear down the historical discipline; his critique was not intended as a criticism, but instead he hoped to furnish a critical epistemological basis for the human sciences. This article, similarly, offers a critical history of archival reasoning within a particular historical and intellectual context, and explores the role of such reasoning as an underpinning of historical and archival theory and practice in modern times, and how scholars' changing viewpoints on archives reflect new epistemological outlooks. We thus begin by considering archives as "epistemic things" and the repercussions of this outlook before turning to a critical rereading of historical and archival practice. Instead of retreading the well-known story of "scientific" historical and "neutral" archives, we argue that norms and standards contained epistemological claims. This archival reasoning, we posit, can be comprehended as a product of its time alongside Wilhelm Dilthey's epistemological project. The rise of archival constructivism represents another more recent epistemic shift. In looking to Dilthey, we further destabilize Ranke's position in the history of archival research; if many scholars have looked to archival scholarship prior to Ranke, just the same does the turn of the twentieth century stand out as a key moment in the development of an epistemological approach to archives in the fields of historical and archival studies (Friedrich 2018, pp. 203–204). The article thereby simultaneously situates this archival reasoning within a particular moment, and considers how such logic continues to interact with methodological and epistemological trends: Understanding the epistemologies of archives allows us to comprehend how and why archives became of such significance for research and the continuing power of documentation as a social force. We argue, first, for a form of archival constructivism, but also suggest that there is an epistemological foundation to historical research and archival practice prior to postmodernism that, in some ways, persists and accounts for their unabated appeal as epistemic authorities by scholars and the public. If a certain ontological realism has persisted in the archival logic of the historical discipline, which even with new critical perspectives remains tied to the use of archival sources, then archival constructivism demands new archival reasonings that allow us to access the past through archives as well as

through their silences, to simultaneously have an epistemologically-sound basis for examining archives as well as to counteract the hegemony of archival reasoning over historical knowledge.

Archives as “epistemic things”

Hans-Jörg Rheinberger has written extensively about the useful conceptual framework of “epistemic things” as the fundamental building-block of science and scholarship (Rheinberger 1997, 2005a, 2010). As he has argued, the objects scholars study do not “exist” in nature but are cultivated and created in laboratories or research settings that produce things with epistemic value: proteins are synthesized in a test tube, elements are isolated in a centrifuge, specimens are gathered and identified. In a way, it is an extension of the Foucauldian notion of the “order of things,” that humans produce the ordering and organization of the world rather than the world having preexisting categories, or even Kant’s articulation that the world corresponds to the mind, not the other way around (Foucault 1989). More clearly, though, Rheinberger builds upon Gustav Bachelard’s notions of “phenomenotechnique,” that sciences construct technologies to mediate access to not just the noumenal world but also phenomena themselves, and the idea of an epistemic rupture, that there is a difference between pre-scientific thought and scientific processes (Rheinberger 2005b). Altogether, Rheinberger’s emphasis on the active creation of individual items under study is especially useful because it highlights how these objects do not exist in themselves but are produced by scholars, who are thereby implicated. It also foregrounds the settings and procedures by which scholars construct these objects and imbue them with epistemic value, as something that can be studied.

Though Rheinberger focused on the natural sciences, his framework deftly explains and reframes the nature of historical work in modern times and the shifts in scholarship and archival practices mostly associated with postmodernism. History, which once proudly dubbed itself a “science,” and archival science, which still does, were never engaging with the past directly but were constructing this past through the sources and archives and their preparation for study. Indeed, in the nineteenth century a series of major historical undertakings sought to produce critical editions of historical sources, transforming possibly error-ridden papers and manuscripts into “corrected” objects (Saxer 2012). Establishing national archives, too, was not simply “opening” preexisting repositories but constructing the nation itself and its history (Berger 2013; Milligan 2002). Likewise, archival appraisal and description does not merely describe that which exists but is a creative process (Fredriksson 2003; Yeo 2010). Moreover, Rheinberger’s framework highlights how archives are not just spaces but technologies of access to the past, highlighted both by varied preservation techniques and also the importance of mediation technologies from microfiche to digitization, all of which constitute a material basis for access to the past.

In sum, Rheinberger’s approach lends ammunition to a radical constructivism at the heart of the late twentieth-century “archival turn” (Ketelaar 2017; Manoff 2004; Moore et al. 2017, pp. 1–30). It also highlights how approaches to archives hinge upon elemental epistemological questions about the nature of sources and capability

to communicate the past. And it has clear stakes about the constructed nature of knowledge, and also lays out an invitation to think about projects that aimed to create things of epistemic value, whether individual objects or institutions and repositories. He simultaneously unveils the epistemological basis of the new scholarly and archival approaches, and also presents the history of epistemology as a useful field through which to consider older views as not just “naïve” but based on alternative epistemological outlooks. The projects of scholars and archivists to invest historical sources and archival institutions with epistemological meaning must be taken at their own terms. Embedded in the intellectual and professional frameworks of the turn of the twentieth century were claims about the possibility to access the past through these objects. Consequently, the notion of historical sources and archives as a useful example of epistemic things highlights the stakes of archival research and preservation, and the institutions where all this work takes place.

There are, of course, many people—and not just historians and archivists—who have looked to objects as bridges to the past and between individuals. The great interest in “things” represents almost a new materialism, and one can look to the “thingness” of history and its objects just as much as photography or any other field (Breitbach 2011; Brown 2001). The architect Juhani Pallasmaa writes how “the tactile sense connects us with time and tradition: through impressions of touch we shake hands with countless generations,” and the history of religious relics also presents an epistemic aim to “prove” past miracles (Cherry and Mayo 2016; Pallasmaa 2012, p. 62). Nevertheless, the development of historical scholarship and archival practice and their continuing interest in the things of history is invested with an existential epistemology. A critical rereading of historical and archival practices as they developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries indicates that professionals were creating “epistemic things” and spaces where they could be studied. As part of this process, practices like considering context and provenance were rooted in a set of truth-claims about the past and our connection to it with tremendous epistemological repercussions about the study of history, and the value of archives in a present context too. The value of archives, both for the study of the past and the present too, is inextricably linked to epistemological claims given voice by the crystallization of best practices in the nineteenth century—and if such views are now viewed as outdated, these developments are tied to new epistemological trends, not just methodological ones.

The history of epistemology allows for a fuller comprehension of the complex array of shifting intellectual and professional perspectives including a scholarly turn toward archives as primary sources, an assault upon archives as hegemonic gatekeepers to the past alongside a continued fetishization of archival sources, new approaches of archivists toward their own work, and the continuing public role of archives in the twenty-first-century information society. For even if scholars no longer view archives as repositories of unvarnished historical truth, they have not lost their epistemic value. Instead, they have gained new layers of meaning which must be peeled back to understand how and why archives remain important for historians, archivists, and the public. What one finds is a matrix of archival reasonings which, even with recent critiques, remain: a feeling that documents preserved in archives connect us to the past which imbues historical scholarship with a claim

to truth-telling, provides archival practice a *raison d'être* of protecting the past, and a public sensibility of the value and “authority” of these records and archives. Ultimately, archives constitute epistemic spaces or settings that make claims to authority because they preserve the past, and as epistemological frames change so too does how we view archives. For this reason, identifying and historicizing the underlying epistemologies of archives allows us to understand the continuing allure of archives for scholars and their power in society.

The emergence and endurance of archival reasoning in the historical profession

In the nineteenth century, the overarching aspiration of historical scholarship, particularly in German-speaking lands, was to ascend to the status of a “science,” endeavoring to explain how historians could produce something of intellectual rigor (Beiser 2011). Part of this story, though certainly not its entirety, was the emergence of archival research as a mark of the professional historian’s guild alongside a transformation of archives from “arsenals of state power” to “laboratories of history,” as Robert-Henri Bautier put it in his influential article (Bautier 1968). Bautier’s framework has been subject to calls for reappraisal, but nevertheless this trajectory gives voice to that era’s scholarly ideal, with archives serving as the “laboratories” for a new “scientific” history (Head 2016). And in spite of all critique, studying archival sources remains *de rigueur* among historians. Even the scholarly “archival turn” rests upon continued fascination with archives instead of their outright rejection. In a curious paradox, the critical study of the history of archives frequently results from intense use of archival sources. And so, since the nineteenth-century archives have been favored sites of research which carry an air of authenticity—if not of the sources themselves, which many today rightly consider as suspect, and certainly not telling history’s whole story, then by bestowing upon a scholar the claim to have waded through history itself. Such professional assumptions reflect an unmistakable, if not often explicitly pronounced, archival reasoning at the heart of historical scholarship, whose students simultaneously recognize the limitations of indirect access to the past and the possibilities of history’s objects to open the door to its study.

Historians, of course, were never quite so naïve as to argue that sources should be trusted just because they were held in archives. Figures like Johann Gustav Droysen argued that historical understanding depended on source criticism, and his method of “heuristic” only became sharper and more clearly defined in influential manuals like those of Ernst Bernheim, Langlois and Seignobos, and Fred Morrow Fling (Bernheim 1889; Droysen 1858; Fling 1899, 1920; Langlois and Seignobos 1903). Nineteenth-century historians stressed critical editing and analysis of sources in the pursuit of identifying errors or forgeries, many of which originated in archives. And while Leopold von Ranke (1796–1895) immortalized the image of the archival historian and called for history to be studied “as it really happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), his oft-caricatured passion for archives neither stemmed from any special epistemological utility, nor was it tied to a raw empiricism. In fact, Ranke penned his famous dictum years before his own turn to archival research, and state archives

were simply the best source for studying politics and court intrigue for one who proclaimed the “supremacy of foreign policy.” Further, Ranke’s interest in history “as it really happened” was not a demand for positivism but a plea for nonpartisanship (Eskildsen 2008, p. 46; von Ranke 1824, pp. 13–14, 1831; Telman 1993). The rise of archival research, then, can be best understood as a product of a series of contingent but coinciding factors rather than a particular epistemological framework: A renewed research imperative and an effort to delineate and professionalize history as a “science,” with both its scientific methods and spaces of research, alongside the spread of Ranke’s students and the opening of state archives to research.

Nevertheless, as historians increasingly turned to archives, they fetishized archives as truth-spaces and the “heroic” persona of those who used them (Paul 2013; Saxer 2013). On occasion, Ranke contrasted “false” reports with the “genuine” material held in archives, and he once reflected that one cannot acquire “fuller and closer historical insight” without recourse to archives, where “the most authentic information... written day by day in the course of events is deposited” (von Ranke 1848, p. I:VIII, 1875, p. I:V–VII). The French writers Charles Langlois and Charles Seignobos opened their manual for historians by declaring that documents are the core of history and, channeling Fustel de Coulanges, insisted that “there is no substitute for documents: no documents, no history” (Langlois and Seignobos 1903, p. 17). If they called for historians to suppress their tendency to believe that documents hold the truth, they noted offhandedly that “literary distortion does not much affect archives” (Langlois and Seignobos 1903, p. 171). And Marc Bloch, writing in the 1940s, noted that while historians were limited by indirect access to the past, they could use the physical objects of the past to provide a useful and reliable “externally dependent method of observation” (Bloch 1954, p. 54). Such scattered references hint at a rising archival logic: if not privileging archival institutions, which remained closed to many scholars, then a mania for the objects of history itself.

By the turn of the twentieth century, a terminological shift reflected an epistemological value invested in archives and research seminars, now dubbed “laboratories of history” as part of an effort to categorize history as a “science.” Herbert Baxton Adams, reporting on new methods of studying history in the United States, relayed how students might “get some of the benefits which students in the natural sciences acquire from work in laboratories,” discussing the seminar as a “laboratory of scientific truth” (Adams 1884, pp. 35, 64; Smith 1995). It is no coincidence that talk of history’s “laboratories” of history lined up with a “Ranke renaissance” in Germany and the adoption of Ranke by American historians; neither was it by chance that when John Stuart Mill called on the human sciences to mirror the natural sciences’ inductive methods, historians tried to appropriate the language of science to describe their work (Iggers 1962; Krill and Herzfeld 1962). Many might note correctly that American historians perhaps took too literally the German term “Wissenschaft” as “science” rather than the broader sense of a scholarly discipline. (Novick 1988, pp. 21–27) But it would be a mistake to dismiss out of hand scholars’ self-portrayal as “scientific” or the declaration of archives and seminars as “laboratories” as vestiges of an outmoded positivism. If we take aspirations to historical “science” as an earnest endeavor and not misdirected mimicry, we can comprehend the rise of archival research as part of a broader effort to, as Wilhelm Dilthey put it

in 1883, establish an epistemological foundation for the human sciences. Declaring archives and seminars “laboratories of history” coded them as sites of epistemological value, emulating the scientific laboratory’s ideal of reproducibility of research—enabled through archives’ supposed open door to research and the footnote’s capability to enable readers to reexamine cited sources—thereby allowing for a certain “objectivity” through emerging archival practices that safeguarded the remains of the past (Grafton 1997). Consequently, archival sources achieved the status of epistemic things, with these records and documents themselves becoming the objects of research instead of critically edited and published sources. Moreover, as Rheinberger noted, drawing on Heidegger, all modern sciences are based on establishing procedures and research settings, and it becomes clear that archives were elevated as a setting of “scientific” historical research (Rheinberger 1997, p. 252, 2005a). With this perspective, the familiar story of “scientific” history holds within it the kernel of not just a methodology but also an epistemology, rooted in a sense of sources’ ability to reliably communicate the past across the chasm of history.

The rise of archival research and reasoning, and their endurance a century since the last vestiges of the ideology of “scientific” history, can be attributed to a combination of practical advantages and romantic imagery which were ultimately underwritten by the professional claims of modern archival practice and an implicit epistemological framework that fortified a sense that these objects *were* history. One can see a professional utility in dramatizing history and the historian’s discoveries in newly-opened archives as a means of marking membership in the historian’s guild alongside a deep, tangible sensation of the archival encounter with the past. Ernst Renan gave voice to the draw of these physical objects when he reflected that to gain “a clear notion of history” one must be “in the habit of handling original documents” (Renan 1859, p. 36). Others, like Hubert Bancroft, detailed extensive archival travels as a way of showcasing their scholarly efforts (Bancroft 1891). If Bloch suggested that writers be obligated to write about “How can I know what I am about to say?,” then detailing archival research presented one means to underscore the purported accuracy and authenticity of a historical work (Bloch 1954, p. 71). Even in present-day scholarship, acknowledgements both offer well-deserved thanks to those who opened doors to sources and also showcases scholarly footwork, signaling that one had institutional support (or a small personal fortune) to underwrite an intellectual equivalent of the grand tour. The vast literature of “archive stories,” recounting the various experiences of working in archives, reflects the enduring romanticization of archival travel. As Antoinette Burton noted, she encountered an outpouring of such stories and especially how colleagues “wax[ed] rapturous about the capacity of archival discoveries to bring one into contact with the past” (Burton 2005, pp. 8–9). Such romanticism recalls Jules Michelet’s remarks: “As I blew on their dust [of the files],” the French historian wrote famously, “I could see them rise”—that is, the figures of the past; and he dramatically articulated in his history of France that the archives *were* the nation, and the documents constituted “the lives of men, provinces, peoples” who wanted “nothing better than to return to the light of day” (Michelet 1974, p. 614). Michelet’s depiction presents both a vision of the act of archival investigation and also its possibility to enable contact with the past. Altogether, the scattered remains of historians writing about their research reflect

a profound romanticism. The difficulties of travel to far-off repositories, ecstatic moments of discovery, and the tantalizing possibility that one can really access the past even if it is beyond one's personal apprehension could show a pathway to claims to professional knowledge.

The practical and romantic aspects of archival research call to mind the suggestion of Frances Blouin and William Rosenberg that the development of nineteenth-century archive-based history held a profound paradox: It aspired to be “scientific,” pursued with a sober self-detachment, but it was rooted in a romanticizing of archives (Blouin and Rosenberg 2011, p. 26). This “paradox,” however, can be best understood as a framework for historical knowing. Even if history presents “indirect” knowledge, as many have noted (often disapprovingly), historians still claim to attain understanding of the past through its physical traces. As Marc Bloch noted, history's indirectness even presents advantages. It is not that a historian is like a scientist who can only receive details of his experiments through an assistant's reports, which would be disadvantageous, he explained; it is merely that the scholar arrived at the laboratory after the experiment had concluded. Continuing, Bloch suggested that “under certain circumstances the experiment leaves behind certain residue which he can see with his own eyes” (Bloch 1954, pp. 48, 54). Under what circumstances, exactly, remained unsaid, but he hinted that one might “pass from the authenticated object to the fact of which it is the proof” (Bloch 1954, p. 52). Practical advantages of centralized documentation thus contributed to a sensibility of access to history, furthered by archivists' claim to protect their sources and a sense these materials are not just all that remains of the past, but actually *is* the past, culminating in a pseudomystical experience of research as communing with history's physical remains—or as Eric Ketelaar put it, archives constitute “time machines” that transport us to the past (Ketelaar 2002, p. 233). This fundamental archival reason has somehow survived with modification through the fires of postmodern critiques, and was only fortified by a parallel archival reasoning of archival practice, which gains further form with the epistemological formulations of Wilhelm Dilthey, who saw the importance of physical objects as expressions of the human spirit which could allow us to interact with and even re-experience the past.

Epistemologies of modern archival practice: respect des fonds, provenance, and custody

If reappraising the development “scientific” history reveals an epistemological approach to the use of sources, and so too would explicating the subtext of modern archival practices expose an accompanying archival logic. Of the archival standards that emerged in the late nineteenth century, the most important—and the most contested—were the principles of provenance, *respect des fonds*, and later the notion of custody as codified in archival manuals like the so-called “Dutch Manual” of Muller et al. (1898) and Hilary Jenkinson's *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922). Together with the idea of a direct tie between administrative activity and documentation, these concepts contributed to a combined logic of archives' evidentiary value. In the first instance, the principle of original order tended to be understood

either as the need to maintain the overall collection (the French concept of respect of the *fonds* as a unit) or to maintain the specific original order of the documents (the Prussian *Provenienzprinzip*). In its varied formulations, the concept declared that archivists should be dedicated to preserving both historical materials and their context. The centrality of this principle is underscored by the fact that archivists in almost every western European country claimed to have invented it (Bartlett 1992; Posner 2006; Schellenberg 1996, pp. 168–193; Sweeney 2008). And even though recent examinations of the history and meaning of the provenance principle and *respect des fonds* have led archivists and historians to less naïve views about claims of archival neutrality, the notion that original order should be maintained is still mostly accepted, at least as a good idea in theory (Cook 1993; Duchein 1983; Millar 2002). Just the same, even if the “post-custodial” era is clearly a rejection of Jenkinson’s model, few would argue against the role of the archivist to faithfully preserve materials under his or her purview. Altogether, the claims of the archival profession to present historical materials of evidentiary value, constituted through this conceptual nexus, are part of a broader epistemological framework validating archives as sources of historical knowledge.

In one sense, *respect des fonds* was eminently practical. As Muller, Feith, and Fruin explained, it was perhaps the most utilitarian approach, and certainly less arduous than alphabetical or chronological rearrangement (Muller et al. 2003, pp. 49–50). Even in the 1950s, T.R. Schellenberg called the principle “a workable and economic guide” (Schellenberg 1996, p. 187). Still, the Dutch archivists were not proponents of keeping whatever state files arrived in as a matter of economy. They painstakingly delineated instances in which it would be acceptable or even preferable to alter files’ order to reconstruct the original *fonds*, illuminating their particular understanding of “original order” and what they hoped to achieve by it. Besides reducing processing work, they wanted to reconstitute the original relationship of documents to one another, what they termed their “natural relation” (Muller et al. 2003, p. 50). It should be noted that the Dutch archivists had a specific context for their interest in “recreating” this original order: Closest to their mind was the period of French control and occupation of the Netherlands from 1795 to 1813, when files were put into disarray through reorganization of administration or extraction to Paris for a planned “archives de l’empire” (Donato 2015; Muller et al. 2003, pp. 45, 83, 99). This context exposes most plainly their interest, to maintain historical context but also to establish, to the best of their capability, the arrangement as in the office of its creation.

The meaning of respect for original order becomes even clearer when read within the Dutch manual as a whole and not just as a particular statute. The famous declaration of *respect des fonds* articulates that “the system of arrangement must be based on the original organization of the archival collection, which in the main corresponds to the organization of the administrative body that produced it” (Muller et al. 2003, p. 52). Embedded in this terse prescription is an assumption that records emerge “organically” and as a direct result of administrative activity and the need to preserve the traces of the environment in which they were created as stored both in the contextual relationship between the documents. The authors had already argued that an archival *fonds* is an “organic whole” or “living organism,”

and now suggested files come together not arbitrarily but as “the logical consequence of the organization of the administrative body” and its functions (Muller et al. 2003, pp. 19–20; 57). In a separate note, they explained that family records lacked the “organic bond of an archival collection” because they were merely “a conglomeration of papers and documents” brought together due to familial relations (Muller et al. 2003, p. 20). This curious contrast illustrates their archival ideal, that collections would emerge out of the direct relationship between historical actors, their actions, and their offices. Altogether, it led toward their idea of the sanctity of a collection’s “unity” and the “natural relation of the documents” (Muller et al. 2003, pp. 50, 56). The gathering of the files and their order had already been determined by the historical figures who had used them day-to-day, and it was this unity and existing order which they insisted enabled them to be studied: “Only thus do those files,” they explained, “accomplish the usefulness for which they were intended—a *much greater usefulness* than if they are broken up” or otherwise rearranged (Muller et al. 2003, p. 56, original emphasis).

One finds here hints of an archival reasoning, that historical knowledge arises from reconstructing the historical setting in which files “organically” arose, and the consequent need for archivists to be custodians of this context. In a telling example, the Dutch archivists discussed how archivists at the *École des Chartes* discovered that a set of loose, undated files had originated in Louis XIV’s study. “Naturally,” they wrote, “haste was made to reassemble them and connect them together, which happened to be still possible from external marks” (Muller et al. 2003, pp. 50–51). Describing this kind of restoration, they argued that archivists could piece together loose papers using physical clues: “folds of the paper, water stains of same shape, little worm-holes that correspond, etc.” (Muller et al. 2003, p. 83). Left unstated was the underlying reason why the reconstitution of the original order was so useful, a possibility of historical reconstruction through access to files as they were. By piecing together the files of Louis XIV’s study, one might be able to transport herself to that setting, to leaf through the papers in the same way a secretary or minister might have. Consequently, one can read the Dutch Manual as articulating the fundamental evidentiary utility of documents through the maintenance of the original order, or the effort to reconstruct and then preserve it.

Hilary Jenkinson extended the theory of the value of original order when he argued that not only should it be reconstructed, but it also required constant “defense.” To maintain archives’ evidentiary value, he emphasized the “impartiality” of archivists and the “authenticity” of the documents (Jenkinson 1922, pp. 12, 41). The “unbroken custody” from original creator to present-day archivist, in Jenkinson’s telling, provided assurance against tampering (Jenkinson 1922, p. 14). Explaining that the documents’ creators were, in a way, the first custodians, he argued that documents must be taken over from this original creator or an official representative and from there be passed from one trustworthy custodian to the next. Resting the “moral defense” of archives upon the protection of files’ reputation through reliable transfer, he prescribed elements of archival evidentiary value: a principle that materials should relate to the activity of an organization and that documents should be produced by people directly involved in such activity, and a chain of principled custodians from their creators to the present. In this

way, he argued—as he would continually speak of it—that preserving context and custody helps preserve the utility of historical materials to tell us reliably about the past (Jenkinson 1984, p. 198).

In the 1950s and 1960s, T. R. Schellenberg preached this “custodial” approach, too. His *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* opened with a sixth-century quote declaring the need to “choose someone to have custody over [archives] so that they may remain uncorrupted,” emphasizing (despite his chosen title) that the practices he advocated were rooted in antiquity. He also wrote of the import of documents’ original order, arguing that historical materials “derive their significance... from their relation to one another” and that records are “most intelligible” when kept together (Schellenberg 1996, pp. 23–27, 187). And he articulated with more clarity the concept that archival materials arise out of activity. Both Jenkinson and the Dutch archivists had argued documents were “archival” only if they related to official actions. This view might be chalked up to their interest in the state and other “official” bodies. Schellenberg evoked these sentiments, too, but tied archival arrangement to the actions themselves. It was not just that the only “worthwhile” kind of record derived from administration; moreover, there was a direct connection between activity and documents. As Schellenberg put it, provenance remained popular because files’ organization reflected “the origins and the processes by which they came into existence.” Government records, he continued, emerge directly from official actions and should be kept together (Schellenberg 1996, p. 187). The tie between actions and the records they resulted in was a constant theme; he wrote of records as “the byproducts of action” and “the result of function.” Reflecting on the expanding universe of records, he emphasized that records, being “produced mainly as a byproduct in the performance of work,” resulted from increased activity, not new technologies (Schellenberg 1996, pp. 35, 53, 62). The implication of Schellenberg’s framework is a claim that records reflect actual historical events or actions, and that they constitute direct evidence of this history.

All this might seem commonsensical, inasmuch as records result from specific actions—meeting notes detail meetings, photographs document events, and so on. Of course, healthy skepticism informs us that notes are often erroneous, photographs are posed, and any source can misrepresent events or ideas. Still, there is meaning to be uncovered from that which seems obvious, and in reframing the methodological developments of archival practice in terms of their epistemological stakes. Altogether, one finds an enduring logic as it developed over a half-century and more of archival practice, that historical documents reflect actual events and experiences, and the that defending the integrity of records and their context (in part through maintaining their original order) might allow us to re-experience a past otherwise beyond our own first-hand knowledge. The idea of archives’ “organic” origin can be read not just as that files emerge from an organizational structure but out of human experiences which are thereby preserved. If we consider documents as vessels of first-hand experience, then defending documents and archives is also defending the experience encapsulated within them, thereby made available to future scholars. Altogether, it is an archival reason, in parallel to the sense of historians who use archives, based the assumptions of the relationship of history, reality, and archives, and the claims of

professional archival practice: that documents are history, and that they allow us to gain access to this history if they are properly protected and preserved.

Just like the claims of “scientific” history, the ideas of archivists and archivists as dutiful custodians have come under sharp critique, and the primacy of original order has been rightly historicized as part of a self-recognition of the active agency of archivists to shape the historical record. However, older ideas about archives should not be dismissed out of hand. Similarly, once-dominant but now critiqued notions like permanence, preservation, fixity, and continuity might allow for further research and reflection into the epistemological stakes of archival practice. The underlying claims put forth by a range of archival theorists and writers that these principles constituted a basis for archives having particular evidential utility indicates the meaning of the debates and changing consensus about archives as part of shifting epistemological frameworks. It is not merely a question of the triumph of postmodernism over positivism; inasmuch as these are all debates over how we can know about and access the past, it is productive to consider the intersection between the development of professional methods and formal epistemological frameworks that fortify them, particularly the thought of the nineteenth-century philosopher of the human sciences, Wilhelm Dilthey.

Archives and Wilhelm Dilthey’s “critique of historical reason”

The conceptual framework of archival reasoning can be productively situated within the history of epistemology and especially that of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). A crucial but in this context overlooked figure, Dilthey sought an epistemological foundation for the human sciences, extending the similar attempts of Kant to articulate an epistemology for the natural sciences (Holborn 1950; Jensen 1978; Tool 2007). Dilthey’s epistemology of communicable and objectivated experience as the basis for the human sciences can help anchor ideas about archives as they developed at the turn of the twentieth century, the exact same moment that Dilthey was most active on this topic. At the same time, the epistemological shifts of the twentieth century, away from Dilthey’s realist and almost materialist approach and toward a return to Kantian skepticism, can help clarify the transformation of historical and archival philosophy over the past century as well as the remarkable endurance of the earlier archival reason.

Dilthey was one of the most significant philosophers of his time, making marked contributions to psychology, hermeneutics, history, and phenomenology. A participant in the broad development of neo-Kantianism and the fierce debates it engendered, he focused especially on the nature of and relationship between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Figures like John Stuart Mill and the Comtean positivists had argued that the human sciences were dependent upon the natural sciences; in fact, Mill insisted that the human sciences should mimic the natural sciences’ inductive method. In a different vein, Dilthey’s contemporaries Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915) and Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936) argued—in part in response to Dilthey’s early formulations on the topic—that a stark methodological chasm divided the natural and human

sciences: the former were directed at the search for universal laws (nomothetic) whereas the latter were ideographic, preoccupied with the unique course of events. Dilthey, by contrast, articulated a complex compatibility between them. While there were certainly methodological differences, he argued that the human and natural sciences could not be totally divorced, inasmuch as humans are part of nature. Further, he claimed that the human sciences could have an autonomous epistemological basis separate from the natural sciences' methods of induction or direct experience: that is to say, he tried to explain how one could study with sufficient epistemological security the products and history of the human spirit, the "Geist" in *Geisteswissenschaften* (in contrast to Windelband and Rickert's "Kulturwissenschaften," as they termed the human sciences). Dilthey thereby tried to place the human sciences, and especially history, on the same level as the natural sciences.

In seeking a "critique of historical reason," as Dilthey put it in his 1883 *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (Introduction to the Human Sciences), he looked in neo-Kantian fashion to extend the eighteenth-century philosopher's "critique of pure reason" (see esp. Dilthey 1989, pp. 165–169). Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781) had articulated an epistemology of the natural sciences with a focus on mathematics, and Dilthey hoped to present the possibility that the human sciences could study human experience and he thereby expounded a theory of experience beyond direct observation. By the time of Dilthey's 1910 drafts of *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (*Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, published posthumously), he developed a theory of the objectification of human experience and facts of consciousness as the only truly effective way to consider the past and present, even one's own life. In this context, Dilthey's utility for the emerging archival reasoning of the turn of the twentieth century should be clearly apparent: Dilthey's effort to present an epistemological basis for the human sciences and especially history paralleled the broader aspiration to lay out the "science" of history, and his consideration of the question of how to study experience through objects, whether in terms of the present-day or the past, or of others and of oneself, spoke directly to the fundamental philosophical challenge to historical knowledge, its indirectness. As he presented a theory of experience as objectified expression which could thereby be studied, he also spoke to the possibilities of archival preservation leading to the possibility to "re-experience" the past.

Dilthey's central investigation in pursuit of his "critique of historical reason" was the nexus between the external observable world and that of inner experience (*Innewerden*). If humans experienced the external world as "facts of consciousness" (*Tatsachen des Bewusstseins*), that is as facts of our own consciousness alone, it raised the problem of how one could study the world at large, what (if anything) connects our experience with others', and also how others' inner experiences could be communicated and thus examined. In an early draft of his "Introduction," penned while at Breslau, where Dilthey taught from 1871 to 1882, he presented a tremendous statement that laid out his overall approach to this problem: "When I examine my earliest memories," he reflected, "I find that objects, much like those that surround me today, have always been there for me. My life stands within this relation to an external world that is independent of me" (Dilthey 1989, p. 245). This remarkable pronouncement was not meant as a crude materialism, but instead expressed his

interest in objects and objectification as the fundamental character and medium of elemental communication between human beings and even as a requisite foundation for one's self-understanding. It underlay his argument for the reality of the external world; if Kant had argued there existed an unbridgeable chasm between the noumenal world and phenomenal experience, i.e., to use Dilthey's terminology reality is expressed purely in one's own "facts of consciousness" via the reception of sensory experience, Dilthey justified the outside world by the resistance we find from objects and other beings (Dilthey 2010, pp. 8–57). All this prefigured his later development of the theory of objectification as an epistemological basis for the human sciences, and thus of historical study.

When Dilthey returned to the project of his "critique of historical reason" in the first decade of the twentieth century, he faced once again the challenge of how one studies the human spirit. His answer was a theory of objectification, based first on the supposition that "for practical purposes, physical objects are posited as underlying our impressions as a constructive device," and then the argument that *Geist* only exists inasmuch as it is expressed in these objects (Dilthey 2002, p. 102). Ultimately, he argued that the spirit, as the basic object of study of the human sciences and especially history, can be experienced through their objectifications: through linguistic expressions (writing), actions, or gestures and movements. Inasmuch as the spirit is the object of study for the human sciences, he defined its realm as "everything in which the human spirit has objectified itself" (Dilthey 2002, p. 170). In a reconfiguration of Hegel's notion of "objective spirit," Dilthey redefined the term to mean the elemental knowledge and social milieu resulting from the commonality of psychic activity expressed in objectifications, leading to the possibility of intersubjectivity: "the manifold forms," he wrote in 1910, "in which the communality among individuals objectifies itself in the sensible world" (Dilthey 2002, p. 208). His hermeneutic triad of life–expression–understanding marked out a trajectory from individual lived experience to the objects that make them communicable and thus comprehensible to others and even to ourselves. "We experience what we once were, how we developed, and became what we are," he suggested, "from what life-plans we fashioned, from our professional activities, from old forgotten letters, from judgments about us that were uttered a long time ago" (Dilthey 2002, p. 108). In all, it was a recognition that one can only study the spirit inasmuch as it is expressed and thus objectified, and that the process of concept-formation relies fundamentally upon that which is "stable and lasting from the flux of events" (Dilthey 2002, p. 168). These objectifications of life allow one to move past the subjectivity of lived experience and beyond the limitations of our own powers of observation.

Dilthey's epistemology of the human sciences, based on the externalization of expression, was aimed first at explicating how we interact in the present day. The logical extension of this framework is that not only can one examine the present via objectifications, but also the past, inasmuch as through the objective spirit "the past is a continually enduring present for us," as Dilthey put it (Dilthey 2002, p. 229). All this led toward Dilthey's more radical proposition of re-experiencing or re-creating the past, what he termed the "highest form of understanding." Dilthey had argued that historical understanding (*Verstehen*) required a basic comprehension of the social and political milieu; the further one receded from that subject, higher

forms of understanding were required, ultimately necessitating one to transpose or transport oneself into the historical world, made possible through the objectifications of history (Dilthey 2002, p. 235). It was this project that he referred to when he argued that historical research must “interiorize” the historical world (that is, re-experience it) and then “exteriorize” it, representing it through historical narrative, and that human beings, normally “limited by the reality of life,” can be “liberated” by historical re-experience (Dilthey 2002, pp. 237, 290). Dilthey considered the possibility of re-experiencing history through reading a historical account or watching a play, but on the whole it can be comprehended as the possibility to re-experience the past via the objectifications themselves—the historical objects which are the fundamental traces of the past and which are passed down to us.

Dilthey’s theory of objectivation as an attempt to conceptualize access to the noumenal world through the objectification of direct lived experience allowing for its re-experiencing was not just a repackaging of Hegel’s notion of objectification, inasmuch as perception of objects is not a process on the way toward self-knowledge but rather understanding of others. Neither was it an extension of Marx’s framework of alienation and objectification, that individuals invest themselves and their labor in objects and outputs (Dilthey 2002, pp. 171–174; Arthur 1982; Rae 2012). Further, it was not a reworking of Schleiermacher’s sense of our self-insertion into the past, as one might read it given Dilthey’s early affinity for him and lifelong project to write his biography (Ermarth 1978, pp. 21–22, 45–46; Rae 2012). While Dilthey’s project itself derived from Kant’s search for an epistemological framework for understanding the world outside oneself, his objectification sidestepped the problem of a priori knowledge inasmuch as he argued it was not just transcendental logic but actual objects that bridge the gap between our own inner experience and the outer world.

Consequently, Dilthey articulated a radical epistemology presenting a possibility of access to the past, providing an apt language to think through the claims of manuals of archival practice and the experience of archival research, what it means to encounter and re-experience the past through the objects held in archives. In this manner, paradoxically, Dilthey’s emphasis on the mediated—and thus subjective—nature of historical knowledge actually underlines historians’ and archivists’ feeling that one can grasp the past. It was this sense that inhabited Michelet’s expression of archival study, or Langlois and Sangnobos’ call for historians to “revive [history] in imagination,” or Ranke’s declaration that documents allow us to reconstruct the day-to-day life of historical actors (Langlois and Seignobos 1903, p. 66; Michelet 1974, p. IV:613–614; von Ranke 1848, p. I:VIII). It is a sense of history’s accessibility that animates Arlette Farge’s *Allure of the Archives*. “You can tell at a glance,” she writes, “whether a bundle has been opened even once since it was first stored”—with the layer of dust and lack of the distinct marks of researchers’ destructive handling indicative of the fact that the bundle of papers had lain undisturbed for tens if not hundreds of years, channeling Michelet’s sense that the files themselves are history itself and the power of the dust as the accumulation of the past (Farge 2013, p. 2). Such views lead toward a sense of the loss of this objective nature of history with the shift toward digitization; leading Natalie Zemon Davis to reflect in her introduction to the 2013 translation of Farge’s *Allure*: “There is the loss of the object itself, of the marginal notations missed by the camera, the signatures cut off,

the paper not available to the touch, the bindings unseen” (Farge 2013, pp. xv–xvi). Here, Zemon Davis reflected upon what is lost in the process of digitization but left unsaid is the loss of the sense of communion with the past, the visceral encounter through the documents. For Dilthey and many of these scholars, their focus was on textual sources and paper documents, but the sentiment is only magnified when one looks to other material objects or even to audio-visual materials which, despite the fact that they provide only a glance of the past, still allows us to see or hear with our own senses what someone in the past perceived.

In 1883, Dilthey wrote of the “lifeless abstractions which are usually drawn from the archives,” but this was mostly an indication of his view of the kinds of histories typically written on the basis of archival research, not of archives themselves (Dilthey 1989, p. 85). By the time he drafted his 1910 *Aufbau*, Dilthey had reoriented himself to recognize that “reliable knowledge of political history only began with the methodical and critical collection of documents and free access to archives for historians.” Continuing, he explained that “this knowledge can, as far as the facts are concerned, stand up to historical skepticism” (Dilthey 2002, p. 183). Ultimately, then, we find that although Dilthey never articulated in explicit terms how his theories related to archival practice, his notion of objectification and the resulting “objective spirit” can be read as a theory of objectivity via access to *historical* experience and facts of consciousness made into physical objects and communicable across the chasm between past and present. Such an objective spirit, as Dilthey put it, transformed the past into “a continuously enduring present” (Dilthey 2002, p. 229). It constitutes, in a way, a more formal framework for the visceral experience of the historian who visits an archive and is able to touch the objects of historical actors, what turns into for some people an intense feeling of re-experiencing the past.

Toward a critique of archival reason

We have endeavored to demonstrate how the “scientific” tendencies of history in the nineteenth century, the enduring visions of archival research as a process of communing with history, and the claims of archival practice to preserve historical context and thus the ability to re-experience history, one all given voice in Wilhelm Dilthey’s epistemology of objectification. Just as much, it is possible to comprehend recent developments in the field of archival practice and new historical critiques of archives as manifestations of a pendulum’s swing in epistemological terms: a resurgence of a certain Kantian skepticism of our ability to perceive reality. Dilthey, for all of his reliance on Kant, presented a distinct realism that we can discover the psychic contents of the spirit—both in the present and from the past—through objectification, meaning that these objects conform to reality in some fashion. In contrast, Kant’s self-pronounced “Copernican revolution” was precisely that objects conform to the mind. We can consequently conceptualize the “archival turn” in the contemporary humanities and social sciences, and the “post-custodial era” of archival practice as a reframing of archives as human constructions rather than direct representations of reality.

If at one time archivists saw their “custodial” role as a mark of their reliability, or historians naïvely talked of writing history “as it really was,” such claims are increasingly (and correctly) challenged. Indeed, if respect des fonds and custodianship underlie an ideology of archival reliability, developments in both archival practice and historical scholarship all tilt toward the position of those who, siding with Kant, argue that we cannot access the noumenal world—and all the more so in the case of the past. If archives constitute “laboratories,” they represent the fact that scholars must peer through man-made instruments (or man-made institutions) to examine the past. We return, then, to the fundamental challenge that we cannot access the *Ding-an-sich* without the aid of our built-in perspective, or rather the perspectives of those who have collected, created, and maintained archives. The silences in the sources, too, limit our ability to access the past or even leave us with the challenge of “unthinkable histories” (Trouillot 2015). The thrust of scholarship in the history of archives has been toward a recognition that these institutions and actors are not neutral. Archivists *create* just as much of the context of the historical materials as they preserve. Starting in the 1970s, archivists began to recognize that the fundamental concept of the record group or *fonds*—the fundamental concept of the archival grouping of files according to their institutional or individual creator—was itself a construct that codified hierarchical administrative structures and did not allow for more flexible notions of organizational management (Fenyo 1966; Cook 1993). Further, the “post-custodial” approach highlights archivists’ work to collect files in which community-based archives, as antidotes to the statist perspective traditionally supported by archives affiliated with the state, present one form of active (and activist) archive-making that further unsettles the claim that archives present direct access to the past through unmediated context (Cook 2007; Gilliland 2014; Ham 1975).

It is here that Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s concept of epistemic things resurfaces as a most useful structure for archival thinking. If archival records became “epistemic things” in the nineteenth century, then they were being *created* by scholars and archivists. Rheinberger’s challenge is that the objects of research do not “exist” in nature but are constructed by scholars in the process of creating epistemic things, experimental systems, and spaces of research. It is useful to consider archives in this mode: even if scholars succumb to the basic logic that historical objects and documents represent real people in the past, they increasingly recognize that the archives are constructed framing devices which bring together certain files and leave others out. This perspective frames the shift away from the somewhat staid perspective of archival neutrality toward one of archival activism, recognizing the active role of the archivist in constructing historical context instead of just preserving it, undermining once-accepted epistemological frameworks. For if scholars once spoke of source criticism as a method of verifying what was told in the sources in search of positive knowledge, the new mode is to uncover and highlight that which has been left out.

If the archival turn has been closely identified with “postmodernism” and especially with Derrida, it is perhaps a misnomer. In addition to a methodological revolution, this “turn” consists of two key epistemological developments: First, a radical return to the unknowability of the universe, tied to the crisis of knowledge across all fields of research from quantum physics and relativity to models of electoral

probability; and secondly, our re-recognition of our inability to truly know the noumenal world, inasmuch as everything is mediated through the tools of research—whether a microscope or an archive—and we depend on history’s inexorable framing through archives that collect and preserve documents. From a historiographical perspective, it represents the acknowledgement that that archives do contain history, but are not all that history has to give us. The fundamental challenge and paradox of scholarship of the “archival turn” is that it still centered archives but called on scholars to study them differently, in ways that account for those historical experiences that cannot find expression in objects or the people whose perspectives are inherently written out through the process of producing documents themselves, to identify how the stories they tell are shaped by the person who wrote them down as opposed to the historical actor him or herself, the imprint born of the process of creating the record (Trouillot 2015, p. 29; Zemon Davis 1987, pp. 1–7). Any claims of connection between action and archive have been broken down as we rightly recognize the break between the “event” and its documentation, which requires refined research practices that account for these and other epistemological challenges. None of this, though, is to call for a complete despair of historical knowledge. Indeed, already in the 1940s Bloch reflected challenges to historical knowledge were not insurmountable. The natural sciences, he reflected, had shifted away from truth claims to notions of probability, and it would not be the death of historians to acknowledge that they could not always know the past with certainty (Bloch 1954). The same is true of archives: a measured understanding of archives as sources of knowledge leads not to their abnegation as potential doors to access of the past, but a critical acknowledgement of both their possibilities and pitfalls.

The shifting approaches to archives and archival research in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries parallel movement along a range of epistemic perspectives, from ontological realism to a surging skepticism. Still, Dilthey’s conception of “expression” as encapsulating experience and thought (that is, of *Geist*) perhaps remains useful in considering the ongoing appeal of archives to scholars and society at large, and the developments in the sphere of archival management as we look to the question of digitization. Dilthey’s joint interest in expression and objectification meant that it was not just the texts themselves but also their writing platforms and physical form that provide epistemological meaning. As we turn to the future, the material realm remains of great importance. Accessing objects that historical figures used or produced might in some cases be immaterial to their contents, or even dangerous—to the research objects and even to researchers (Steedman 2001). But tactile things tell stories beyond just words or images, and we should not forget the material foundation of all research and knowledge. Gaston Bachelard’s “phenomenotechnique,” positing that sciences create technologies to mediate access to the phenomenal world, applies just the same to the past. But recognizing—and critiquing—the constructed nature of archives and sources does not necessitate entirely negating their potential value. Indeed, it may be possible to achieve a synthesis between radical constructivism and naïve empiricism, to see the potential epistemological value of archives especially given the fact that despite all scholarly critiques of archives and archive-based documentation, they maintain a persistent hold on public consciousness and political reality as storehouses of truth.

Conclusion: archival reason between scholarship and society

If archives have been posited as useful repositories of knowledge of the past, even more so do they serve as practical arbiters of knowledge of the present. The true pitfall of Robert-Henri Bautier's historical narrative of the shift of archives from "arsenals of state power" to "laboratories of history" is that archives never ceased to be arsenals of power. Even the process of opening state archives to research was never fully benign: they were still institutions controlled by the state, with access sometimes severely limited, and histories written on their basis were frequently *national* in nature (Berger 2013; Brown and Davis-Brown 1998; Müller 2013). Consequently, it may be useful to see lines of continuity between the development of archives over the centuries, modern archive-based scholarship, and the continued power of archives in society. Archives' function as "arsenals of state power" in medieval and early modern Europe was rooted in how paper or parchment provided proof of ownership of land, relationships of fealty, and the power of the bureaucratic centralized state. In a way, maintaining archives offered proof of the state's existence and power. As archives opened to the public in modern times, they remained sites of proof, if of a different kind: opening state archives was, of course, a catalyst for historical scholarship and for the possibility of greater knowledge of the past on the basis of newly-available documentation, and it also was about the transfer of the private papers of nobles and the aristocracy to a public role. The symbolic role of founding documents and public archival spaces, then, was just as much about proving the state's legitimacy and the nation's authenticity on the basis of history (cf. O'Toole 1993).

When one views archives through the lens of claims to truth, their history gains a new clarity. Archives are not repositories of power out of some inalienable nature, as the ever-popular etymology of *archon* or the magistrate's abode gestures. Instead, power vested in archives results from truth-claims associated with them, a process of accruing trust in records and institutions that itself has a history (MacNeil 2000). Further, reframing archives as such allows us to see them as shifting, not as unchanging or essential. The twin developments of the opening of archives to the public and the discourse of "science" are crucial for understanding modern epistemologies of the archive: historical records and the state institutions that housed them shifted from proof of the sovereign's rule to proof of the nation's existence and history. Ultimately, as this article has argued, archives have become sites of proof: proof of history, just as they had been proof of the state; and in the case of community-based archives, affirmation of the existence and validity of communities and groups whose stories have been left out of the official record. All this gives records and archives value as objects and institutions that have been looted, coveted, and enshrined due to the "authenticity" and validation they claim to offer to the existence of an ethnic group, a nation, a trauma, a history (e.g., Ash 1997; Kretzschmar et al. 2007, pp. 166–273; Lustig 2017; Weld 2014).

This history of archival reason and its intellectual and political underpinnings leads toward the continuing archival culture of the twenty-first century. Indeed,

alongside the archival reason of our ability to relate to the past is a documentary regime of the present. The dictum of Roman law, “quod non est in actis non est in mundo,” that which is not in the files does not exist in the world, can perhaps be best translated into the vernacular with the language of the internet: “Pictures”—or any other kind of documentation—“or it didn’t happen.”¹ In a Derridian mode, one might say that just as there is no outside-text, there is no outside-archive. In the absence of documentation, something might as well not exist. Such logic is plainly problematic, as people do exist even if they are undocumented, some events by their nature can have no witness or are actively erased from the documentary record (Hartman 2007; Wieviorka 2006). But it is this hegemonic archival reasoning that leads to the real-world importance of documentation as proof, ranging from the most monumental, like personal or political status, to the banal, like an event or experience—even that as ephemeral as a meal—which is photographically captured. New storage and capture technologies, too, allow for the persistence of archival reason beyond the historical and archival professions to indicate the vital importance for an understanding how the truth-claims of archives and documentation play out in public and political spheres.

The importance of archives and documentation as mediating forces in the present-day presents us the capability, and the challenge, of considering everyday intersubjectivity, making the matter of the epistemologies of archives more than a merely intellectual enterprise. Because even if the Diltheyan epistemology of archives has been challenged, one cannot deny its endurance: the idea that documents and other items represent “objectifications” of reality can be seen in the way in which vital records and other documentation is taken as manifestations of “truth” with tremendous consequences (Robertson 2009, 2014). Are people more than what is written down? In many cases, one’s documented name, gender, or other status does not match their true sense of self, but the documentation marks out their official persona. One can thereby see the critical role of documentation in the twenty-first political state—the passport, identity card, and other state-sanctioned vital records—as a manifestation of the enduring hegemony of the state over the nature of reality, how archives never quite stopped being “arsenals of state power.” In this direction, we can perhaps see paths toward a fruitful continued investigation into the intellectual underpinnings of archival reason and its ramifications. Marx’s notion of alienation, in which individuals invest themselves in objects, can be illuminating. Instead of the alienation of oneself in the products of labor, one finds the alienation of personal identity in paper, being today totally dependent upon documents and objects outside the self, provided by the state. Further, the idea that archives reflect all reality has been inverted by new archival technologies, with the ability of surveillance to create a monstrous archive of the present. Whether one looks to governments or businesses ranging from credit agencies to internet titans, there is profit and power in profiling and defining individuals through documentation, especially when many are more

¹ The phrase “Quod non est in actis...” is attributed to Cicero, *Epistulae ad familiares* 2, 15, 5. However, it has taken on an important character in the law of evidence. (Kreutz 2008, p. 172, n. 174; Lenhoff 1954; Vismann 2008).

than willing to trade privacy and personal information for security and convenience, and thus actively contribute to the archives that define themselves out of a sense that if they don't document it, it didn't happen. In all, the archival logic of history and archival practice, which served as one epistemological basis for knowledge of the past and has shifted under the pressures of new critiques and continuing debates over the nature of archives, history, and knowledge at large, can also be seen to have a great political power. A critique of archival reason, then, simultaneously calls for measured perspective on the power of documentation's claims to allow for understanding of the past, and even perhaps a resistance to the archival reason of identity documentation and surveillance.

Examining the epistemologies of archives illustrates the varied ways in which archives have always had power, to claim something "authentic," whether about the past or the present. For just as much as archives are seen as windows into the past by historians and archivists, such a sense is perhaps even more powerful among the public. It is this which gives them the power that they hold, and the value invested in them. An inherent feeling that archives provide access to the past, and an implicit if unexpressed epistemology for which most people simply do not have the words, leads to their valuation and ultimately intense struggle over their ownership. Such a sense of access to the past—whether exhibited by historians, archivists, or the public—thereby underlies the symbolic power of archives in society, when holding the papers of the past can serve as an important symbol not just of political power or the ability to study the past, but of cultural legitimacy and "authenticity" inasmuch as these objects are invested with a sense that they represent and constitute relics of the past.

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