



Rescuing the Archives from Foucault

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ARCHIVISTS WITH AN ATTITUDE

RESCUING THE ARCHIVES

FROM FOUCAULT

Linda Ferreira-Buckley

Historians of rhetoric need to return to the archives. In calling for this return, and for a tempering of our recent preoccupation with historiographic theory, I join other historians, including some of the Octolog II panelists at CCCC 1997 (“Octolog”). I am somewhat reluctant to push the point: I like theory and have learned a great deal from those in our field who have advanced it, I believe fully the truism that even historians who deny theory operate nonetheless from a theory, *and* I don’t want to be labelled conservative.

There are past traditions worth preserving—foremost among them many nineteenth- and twentieth-century research methodologies. Most rhetoric and composition graduate programs require students to be conversant with histories of rhetoric and even theories about historical writing, but few require that students be expert at standard research methodologies. Literature students are often schooled in such methods, which has contributed to ever-richer histories. Of course, some graduate students in rhetoric also take those literary research methods courses, and are better for having taken them. But that training leaves out much that is necessary to the rhetorical projects our discipline most needs to undertake. I would argue that it is this neglect of methodological training that more than anything else prevents us from writing “better” histories of rhetoric. What we need is the kind of archival training graduate students in departments of history undergo, training tailored to recovering the history of rhetorical practice and instruction. Katherine Arens argues persuasively that requisite research skills vary according to the humanities discipline under study.

Conceptions of archives predating Foucault differ very little from those held by contemporary historians, and the theories of early historians and philosophers—including Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Thomas Macaulay, and Thomas Arnold—

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serve as an invisible foundation for current historians. My use of the term “archive” differs radically from Foucault’s “first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (*Archeology* 129). We can agree with much of what Foucault concludes about discursive practices but insist upon concomitant methodologies; the joining of the two is tricky but tenable.

Archives have long been understood as providing the stuff from which histories are constructed. Archives were maintained in the ancient world. But modern conceptions of archives and archival administration originated in revolutionary France: the National Archives were founded in 1789, the Archives Department in 1796, thus bringing together the management of all public repositories and agencies. The English Public Record Act followed in 1838 and systematized archives in England. Many private agencies and citizens emulated these record-keeping practices. True, restrictions did and do apply. Yet these changes are no small matter, for they institutionalized citizens’ right to governmental records. Historical materials were open to competing interpretations as never before. Access to archives thus democratized, historical writing was irrevocably altered. (Thomas Arnold insisted upon the centrality of history to a democracy and urged that histories be revised to be more inclusive.)

Late-twentieth-century historians have rejected much of the past’s exclusivity as they expand archives and reconsider what merits preservation. On the other hand, the bulk of materials from which recent progressive histories have been constituted had lain unexamined in private and public collections in America and in Britain. What was required was a radical shift in attitudes toward who counts and who was worth writing about—which is no small matter, of course.

The point I want to make concerns past historians’ attitudes toward archives: that is, what historians thought ought to be done with materials and what they believed archives might reveal. We sometimes write as though only we (and the Sophists) recognize the contingencies of historical composition. To the contrary, historical scholarship has *always* been viewed with suspicion. In *Greek Skepticism: A Study in Epistemology*, Charlotte Stough points out that the word “skeptical” signified *inquiry* (3–4) and thus was often associated with historical invention. Of course, there were (and are) grades of skepticism, ranging from the radical assertion that no historical knowledge is possible to a recognition that our historical knowledge is necessarily limited in some way. Concerns may be merely about the reliability and availability of evidence—or about the limits inherent in the human mind and social being. The full range of positions is well represented through the centuries. The Greeks were appropriately skeptical of history; after all, their historical accounts were constructed largely from human memory and oral tradition, scarcely at all from written records. The so-called father of history, Herodotus, was deemed a liar (Momigliano 127). Cicero would later honor him as history’s “*primus inventor*,” even as he cautioned against many of his elder’s claims and practices (*De Divinatione*

II: 116, qtd. in Momigliano 127–28). To be sure, many Renaissance historians professed a healthy skepticism. Recall that history was a division of rhetoric, and as such, its primary office was *to persuade*. (In this, humanists did not look to Aristotle but to Cicero and the Sophists.) The historian, in Sir Philip Sidney's words, is "loden with old Mouse-eaten records, authorising himselfe (for the most part) upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundation of Heeresay, having much a-doe to accord differing Writers, and to pick truth out of partiality" (15). In the century that followed, Descartes demoted history to the rank of "fiction" or "gossip," a reasonable attitude given his requirement that "knowledge" be mathematically certain.

We owe these skeptics gratitude. Not only have such challenges sharpened historians' insights into history-making, they have prodded historians to forge methods that somewhat mitigate criticisms. These skeptics thus prompted the rise of history as a discipline in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

True, nineteenth-century historians, deeming history a science, had too much faith in their methods. What's more, even if the nineteenth century is marked by its conservative intellectual and historiographical practices, many nineteenth-century historians recoiled from the narrow rationality of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and developed more sophisticated theoretical positions. German intellectuals like Baron Wilhelm von Humboldt and Leopold von Ranke took the lead, but Karl Marx, who had faith that history might be an objective science, was not a leader among progressive historians. Railing against reigning historiographical orthodoxy, Nietzsche, whose *The Use and Abuse of History* was first published in 1874 with the title "Of the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life," asked

Might not an illusion lurk in the highest interpretation of the word objectivity? We understand by it a certain standpoint in the historian who sees the procession of motive and consequence too clearly for it to have an effect on his own personality. We think of the aesthetic phenomenon of the detachment from all the personal concern with which the painter sees the picture and forgets himself, in a stormy landscape, amid thunder and lightning, or on a rough sea; and we require the same artistic vision and absorption in his object from the historian. But it is only superstition to say that the picture given to such a man by the object really shows the truth of things. . . .

But this would be a myth, and a bad one at that. One forgets that this moment is actually the powerful and spontaneous moment of creation in the artist, of "composition" in its highest form, of which the highest result will be an artistically, but not a historically, true picture. (44–45)

Nietzsche, despite his belief that humans needed knowledge of the past, adjudged history "mythic," a judgment that would profoundly influence Anglo-American theorists like Hayden White. To be sure, Nietzsche foreshadows poststructuralist critiques:

How difficult it is to find a real historical talent, if we exclude all the disguised egoists and the partisans who pretend to take up an impartial attitude for the sake of their

own unholy game! And we also exclude the thoughtless folk who write history in the naive faith that justice resides in the popular view of their time, and that to write in the spirit of the time is to be just. . . . The measurement of the opinions and deeds of the past by the universal opinions of the present is called “objectivity” by these simple people. They find the canon of all truth here: their work is to adapt the past to the present triviality. And they call all historical writing “subjective” that does not regard these popular opinions as canonical. (44)

British, American, and Continental intellectuals took note, and a few active historians like Karl Popper insisted that histories could not be disinterested.

Early twentieth-century historians reacted against the dogmatism that nonetheless prevailed among late nineteenth-century historians who believed their discipline an objective science. The first half our own century was marked by historical relativism as scholars acknowledged that new evidence might well require revising or even overturning standard historical accounts. According to Harry Ritter, by the middle of the twentieth century, “A measure of ‘bias’ in historical accounts was . . . accepted as inevitable, and it was conceded that scholarship could not produce ‘certain’ knowledge; in this sense, a mild form of skepticism is integral to the present orthodoxy” (405). All this before Foucault and White.

For every skeptic I can summon from the past, there were many naïve traditionalists (objectivists). But is that not also the case in the last thirty years? I have been talking to historians at my school, where I am a member of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center’s British Fellows seminar. This is an interdisciplinary group of two dozen faculty from History, Asian Studies, Women’s Studies, Economics, Art History, Theatre, Comparative Literature, and English, among others. The study group was founded three years ago out of the concern of historian Roger Lewis (himself a member of the British Academy and Editor of Cambridge University Press’s multivolume history of British Imperialism) that the faculty who had been attending the weekly lectures tended to be traditionalists out of touch with, and disapproving of, recent critical trends. Participants are actively, insistently redrawing the boundaries of historical studies—and as a consequence they are just as insistently refiguring what had been *within* the boundaries. What has most surprised me in talking to these colleagues is their sophisticated and extensive use of primary sources and their considerable training in how to work in archives. Their skepticism is informed by this expertise.

Looking through professional journals, I surmise that such is also true of historians at large. While theory figures in these journals, historical construction using rather traditional methodologies thrives. Never before has such work been held to such rigorous standards, and well it should be, because never before has the historian had the tools and the resources now available. In addition to older methodologies, we have electronic databases, dating devices, archeological finds, and anthropological methods; these enable a more complex understanding of the past.

Indeed, attacks on historians continue to give rise to more rigorous standards and refined methodologies.

All this has me thinking that although one's theory and one's guiding approach are linked, they are not coterminous and that methodological approaches per se do not indicate a political position—at least not in any simple way.

Let us turn briefly to historians of rhetoric, taking Thomas Miller's excellent 1997 book, *The Formation of College English Studies*, as a case in point. Subtitled *Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces*, it explores the emergence of the study of the vernacular in the eighteenth century. The introduction lays out Miller's theoretical frame, invoking such theorists as Foucault, Habermas, and especially Gramsci. This frame helps to determine what is included in the book and what is not. But when we look at subsequent chapters, the book seems rather traditional in its use of primary archival materials. What's more, the author draws upon scores of books whose authors drew upon primary materials and rendered them in rather conventional ways: E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1964), Robert Morell Schmitz's *Hugh Blair* (1948), Richard Sher's *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1985), and even Garry Wills's *Explaining America* (1981) and *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (1978). Indeed, much of the work we admire by historians of rhetoric and writing proceeds in much the same way.

Miller's commitments to civic rhetoric and his belief that history has something to teach us—evident from his book's dedication to its conclusion—follow from the tradition of Arnold, Collingwood, and Macaulay. Like Macaulay, he sees history as a narrative spun from rhetorical practices; like Collingwood, he is evolving views on the relationship of history and philosophy; and like Arnold, he sees history as a means of fostering civic humanism. Arnold wished to construct histories that were marked not only by factual accuracy but by astute narrative political analysis. He saw a period's oratory as key to historical understanding. I note this to make the point that our histories—including those published recently by scholars of rhetoric—are shaped by the practices and philosophies of British historians of the past century, even when our histories bear the imprimatur of continental theory. These historians have much to teach us, even as we reject many of their assumptions and conclusions. Of course, my comparisons elide significant epistemological differences among theorists whose work often turns on fine points. But I would argue nonetheless that studying such "traditional" accounts (accounts whose diversity and richness we tend to overlook) offers substantive opportunity for studying history-making.

Revisionist historians depend upon traditional archival practices. Elizabeth McHenry, for example, has reconsidered the literacy practices of nineteenth-century African Americans after a half-dozen years of working with the archival materials of literary societies. Jacqueline Jones Royster has edited the work of Ida B. Wells, a

woman whose writing must be considered central to nineteenth-century rhetoric. And John Brereton's *Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875–1925: A Documentary History* won the 1997 CCCC Outstanding Book Award. To be sure, some stimulating historical works operate from theoretical frames that are clearly antifoundational—Susan Jarratt's influential *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*, for instance, and Jasper P. Neel's *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*. Yet such books are few.

I want to insist that traditional methodology, far from being incompatible with a progressive politics, is in fact the best agent of change. There is a wealth of materials available to historians—materials that demand the attention of any historian who wants to understand the past. What is most required to look at these materials and to recover others is scholarly training. Of course, our perspective on what constitutes history and what materials are worthy of study has changed radically, and I do not underestimate the monumental nature of that shift. As we acknowledge the deep centrality of the lives of people of color, of women, and of members of the working classes, we cannot but look back with regret on historical works published in the past. As historians of rhetoric interested in rhetorical theory and practice, we know much work remains to be done, work that challenges and in some cases explodes old definitions of what counts as a worthy historical record. Archives were construed too narrowly, and we now know better. But our students—and some of us—are underprepared in the specialized research techniques necessary to revisionist histories. Theoretical sophistication does not obviate the need for practical training. We lack the tools of the historians' trade; familiar with only the most obvious granting agencies, we cannot secure the money needed to carry out research agendas that are both deep and broad. There are exceptions, of course, but they are too few. I urge all progressive historians to master traditional and emerging research methodologies—tools crucial to revising traditional accounts of history.

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