



Archiving, secrecy and off-site research 9-10 September 2019, Paris A workshop of the ERC Off-Site

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Invited participants: Cécile Boex, Lecturer at EHESS ; Leyla Dakhli, Research fellow at Centre Marc Bloch – Berlin ; Omar Dewachi, Professor of Anthropology at Rutgers University – New Jersey ; Carolina Kobelinsky, Research fellow at CNRS – LESC ; Shouri Molavi, Lecturer at American University – Cairo ; William Walters, Professor of Politics at Carleton University – Ottawa.

Archives are sites where power is actively negotiated, contested, and confirmed. More than sites, they are social and material practices, such as researching, collecting, classifying, and the ‘turning of real lives into writing’ (Foucault 1979). Archiving involves rationalities and classification, yet it goes back to a ‘fever’, a desire (Derrida 1995): a passion, be it a passion for order, rationality, control or simply for records. But these records are an addition of traces, not the reality, and not even its full representation. These paradoxes and impossibilities have not weakened our ‘taste for archive’, on the contrary, it seems that Derrida’s critique renewed the interest and creativity in the use of archives as a research practice, method and field of observation. The scientific fragility of archives – their subordination to affects and power – seems to have paradoxically propelled them as emancipatory tools for knowledge and political resistance. Several reasons come to mind to explain this. Archiving materializes the epistemic, material and social relations between power and knowledge. It thus offers a site of critical observation (Ann Stoler’s urge to “move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject”, 2010), which can be further used to build knowledge from outside the positions of power that have a monopoly on the production of archives themselves. Archiving can blur to the highest level the frontiers between knowledge production and political intervention, for instance at the crossroads of artistic, expert and critical knowledge productions, or through collaborative/inter-subjective forms of knowledge production. These blurring create viable zones of observation, writing and intervention but can also expose to many tensions and conflicts of loyalty.

In these contexts, the creation, subversion and critical readings of archives are often anchored in an attention to the missing, the absent or the hidden. This unfolds in different initiatives. Some are driven by the need for producing (grass-roots) archives when none existed before, which comes with a reflexion on the reasons for this absence. Others search for traces of violence and hidden histories in archives created for purpose of government and control. A central theme in these works is that of violence and the dialectics of the seen and the unseen: violence invisible and invisibilized, or the violence of invisibilization (of certain affects, people, ways of life, histories, places, etc. etc.) But then, are archives and counter-archives a matter of equal representation and visibility, or a challenge to the epistemic order that produces in/visibility? What are their relations to

the present: How do we handle the currentness of the past (that is precisely not 'archived')? (How) can we archive the present?

Gathering friends and colleagues across disciplines, the workshop wishes to create a space of dialogue on these questions, departing from one specific topic: working with/on archives, how do we come across and address the question of secrecy?

There is a passion for secrecy as much as there is one for the archive: for Marc Bloch, the two obstacles to historical knowledge — built on archives — were “carelessness that loses the documents, and, even more dangerous, the passion for secrecy” (1941). Beyond the question of access to records, the notion of secrecy refers to affects but also to social and political bounds and relations — relationality being a dimension of secrecy as a practice of power (Simmel, 1908; Taussig, 1999). This has to do with the practice of 'lying in politics' (and Hannah Arendt's analysis on the subject (1969) are based on the Pentagon papers leaked from the national security archives). But secrecy as a social practice has also to do with the protection of records and data, by professional secrets, ethical codes of conduct or 'regulations on personal data protection'. While touching very real ethical and political issues we encounter at different levels in our works, these regulations are also perversely used, not to protect anyone, but as obstacles to any initiatives that are not subordinated to the neoliberal administrative and managerial rationalities that produced them. Which is yet another side of the power-knowledge nexus.

This, as well as Arendt's reflection on the Pentagon papers, builds further on the idea suggested by Simmel and Taussig that understanding how secrecy works enlightens the understanding of power (Walters and Luscombe, 2017). But secrecy is highly polysemic. It refers to what exists and is kept hidden — then, the focus is on concealment, and the relation to data is closer to that of fact-finding and counter-investigation. It can also refer to what is unspoken, intimate, private — what has a hard time surfacing even for the producer/keeper of the record: a thread followed by Stoler when she looks at the private correspondence of colonial administrators to understand the intimate life of power. Here, unlike for the concealed/leaked administrative records, the relation to data is no more that of investigative rationality but requires different epistemologies and writings.

These reflections open several paths for further exchange. At a methodological level, we may have to clarify the relationships between archiving and the creation and uses of online databases: what are the different logics at play? What are the procedures of objectification and subjection encrypted in the technologies at use? Another central question is that of the relation between archives, bodies and the secret: readings of the archives can enlighten how (past or invisibilized) experiences are embodied; suppressed bodies can resurface through the archive, bodies can also become archives — archives of violence or of social and political practices for instance. These uses confront us, however, to the paradox of veracity and truth when it comes to violence: the standards of veracity that require to find more sources and establish their falsifiability can amount to demanding the impossible, and be another way to reconducting a violence that is at the roots of the lack of archives, their scarcity or their incompleteness.

The workshop wishes to be a space of open, informal discussion in order to explore these questions and raise many more in relation to our respective fields of research, writing and archival activism.

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