

Archives as instruments of power¹

Os arquivos como instrumentos de poder

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ABSTRACT

Considering archives as instruments of power, whatever that may be, with or without a question mark, is probably one of the most classic of all the facets of archives. Archives are associated with power and especially State power, even while power can take many forms, whether religious, economic, social, gender-based, etc., whether it is the power of one, the power of many, the power of all, whether it is sovereign, delegated or relative. We don't have to consider power in a univocal mode, where it is necessarily confused with domination, force and constraint. Power administers, informs, protects and serves, just as much as it represses, controls, threatens or enslaves. It is power, its nature and objectives, that influence the value of archives as an instrument, and not the other way round, although the liberating and illuminating function of the written word remains secondary and ambiguous. It is possible to adopt several

¹ Conference delivered at the seminar "Rethinking the Archive(s)/ Repensar o(s) Arquivo(s)", organized by the VINCULUM project, based at NOVA FCSH, and the Institute for Medieval Studies, NOVA FCSH. National Archive of Torre do Tombo, 4 October 2023. Comments by Pedro Cardim, FCSH NOVA; CHAM- FCSH NOVA. VINCULUM (2023, October 18). *1.ª Sessão do Ciclo de seminários: "Rethinking the Archive(s)/ Repensar o(s) Arquivo(s)"* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqM3Pa3XN8g>

positions when considering the relationship between power and archives, whether this relationship is fundamental, instrumental or antagonistic. It could be summed up in a few simple formulas: power through archives, power over archives, power of archives. In short, the relationship between archives and power has three dimensions: functional, symbolic and critical. The social responsibility that the archivist has recently discovered and taken upon himself does not preclude the instrumental dimension of archives, nor does it eliminate their functional, symbolic or critical dimensions, but it does allow us to see more clearly what archives do for power or — to put it another way — what their power is.

KEYWORDS: Archives; State; Domination; Administration; Accountability.

RESUMO

Considerar os arquivos como instrumentos de poder, seja qual for a natureza deste, com ou sem ponto de interrogação, é provavelmente a mais clássica de todas suas facetas. Os arquivos estão associados ao poder e, sobretudo, ao poder do Estado, ainda que o poder possa assumir diversas formas, sejam elas religiosas, económicas, sociais, de género, etc., seja ele exercido por um único indivíduo, por muitos, ou por todos, seja ele soberano, delegado ou relativo. Não é necessário considerar o poder de forma unívoca, mesmo quando é, por essência, confundido com dominação, força e constrangimento. O poder administra, informa, protege e serve, tanto quanto reprime, controla, ameaça ou escraviza. É o poder, a sua natureza e os seus objetivos, que influenciam o valor dos arquivos como instrumento, e não o contrário, embora a função libertadora e esclarecedora da palavra escrita continue a ser secundária e ambígua. A relação entre o poder e os arquivos pode ser interpretada de diversas formas, podendo ser vista como fundamental, instrumental ou antagónica. Ela pode ser sintetizada em algumas fórmulas simples: poder através dos arquivos, poder sobre os arquivos, poder dos arquivos. Em suma, a relação entre os arquivos e o poder possui três dimensões: funcional, simbólica e crítica. A responsabilidade social que o arquivista recentemente descobriu e assumiu não elimina a dimensão instrumental dos arquivos, nem apaga as suas dimensões funcional, simbólica e crítica; antes permite compreender com maior clareza o que os arquivos fazem pelo poder ou, por outras palavras, qual é o seu poder.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Arquivos; Estado; Dominação; Administração; Dever de responsabilidade.

Considering archives as instruments of power, whatever that may be, with or without a question mark, is probably one of the most classic of all the facets of archives, so much so that it touches on an almost ontological definition of the subject at hand. In some respects, it is a theme that introduces all the others, or at least one which can be linked to any of them.

Without wishing to enter into a heavy and complex debate on the definition of power as an introduction to this text, the direction taken here will aim to establish a form of equivalence with central and State power, as the examples cited move closer to contemporary times — even while power can take many forms, whether religious, economic, social, gender-based, etc., whether it is the power of one, the power of many, the power of all, whether it is sovereign, delegated or relative. In all these cases, archives are associated with power.

In a way, this link is similar to the one we attribute to the written word in terms of domination. Claude Lévi-Strauss even sees it as a kind of invariant of human written culture:

The only phenomenon that always and everywhere seems to be linked to the appearance of writing [...] is the creation of hierarchical societies, societies made up of masters and slaves, societies that use a certain part of their population to work for the benefit of the other part. And when we look at the first uses of writing, it seems that these uses were first and foremost those of power: inventories, catalogues, censuses, laws and decrees; in all cases, whether it be the control of material goods or that of human beings, the manifestation of the power of certain men over other men and over wealth. Control of power and means of control. [...] Writing [...] seems to us to be permanently associated, in its origins, only with societies founded on the exploitation of man by man. (Charbonnier, 1961, pp. 32-33)²

² Le seul phénomène qui semble toujours et partout lié à l'apparition de l'écriture [...] c'est la constitution de sociétés hiérarchisées, de sociétés qui se trouvent composées de maîtres et d'esclaves, de sociétés utilisant une certaine partie de leur population pour travailler au profit de l'autre partie. Et quand nous regardons quels ont été les premiers usages de l'écriture, il semble bien que ces usages aient été d'abord ceux du pouvoir : inventaires, catalogues, recensements, lois et mandements ; dans tous les cas, qu'il s'agisse du contrôle des biens matériels ou de celui des êtres humains, manifestation de puissance de certains hommes sur d'autres hommes et sur des richesses. Contrôle de la puissance et moyen de ce contrôle. [...] L'écriture [...] ne nous paraît associée de façon permanente, dans ses origines, qu'à des sociétés qui sont fondées sur l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme (Charbonnier, 1961, pp. 32-33).

As we know, however, writing and archives do not necessarily go hand in hand. We can write a lot and keep little, or, in rarer cases, vice versa. Although it is always a delicate and perilous task for historians to venture retrospectively down the path of quantitative assessments of *deperdita*³, even for our contemporary times when the abundance of numerical data sometimes masks the uncertainty of our exact knowledge, it is clear that the correlation is not systematic. Writing in the European Dark Ages, around the fifth to eighth centuries, must not have been very abundant: the medium was expensive, readers were few and writers even rarer. There is no doubt that we have preserved for this period, which was sparing with the written word, a rate of deeds that is perhaps higher than at other times in relation to the mass produced. Conversely, when the use of written documents took off around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the losses, which are better documented, were probably enormous, even though archiving was undergoing remarkable qualitative changes (Clanchy, 2012, pp. 59-64; Esch, 1985, pp. 532-534; Bertrand, 2015, pp. 26-27). Power selects what is useful to it, and selects all the more when there is something to choose. The first mark of the use made of archives by those in power is quite simply to make them exist or disappear, through practices that may be rational and effective or that, on the contrary, testify to their imperiousness and weakness. Jacques Derrida asserted that all selection is violence (quoted by Lemoine, 2015, p. 76)⁴: we will therefore agree with him, on condition that we consider that this violence is exerted as much on the holder of the archives as on those who would like to benefit from them.

By insisting from the outset on a form of lament to evoke the existential link that unites power and archives, I do not wish to give the impression that only absences count, as a certain historiography has liked to emphasise for several years⁵. A happy archival approach is possible, rather than one that is dolorous, denunciatory or aggressive. It is important to maintain an open and balanced appreciation of the use of archives by those in power, far from hasty

³ About projects on lost manuscripts based on digital tools: Camps, J.-B., & Randon-Furling, J. (2022, December 12-14).

⁴ "L'archive commence par la sélection et cette sélection est une violence. Il n'y a pas d'archive sans violence." (Lemoine, 2015, p. 76).

⁵ In France in particular, several meetings have been organised these last years around the issue of the lack or absence of archives: "Pas d'archives, pas d'histoire? L'historien face à l'absence de sources" (University of Amiens, 2022, March 31); "Archives fantômes, fantômes d'archives. L'histoire des villes entre disparitions, dispersions, reconstitutions et restitutions documentaires" (Archives nationales, 2022, November 17-18); etc.

value judgements, frightening fantasies or, on the contrary, exalted proclamations. In fact, power is more widely shared than is often claimed, and archives, like archivists, are not as submissive and instrumental as is sometimes claimed, then as now. Let us not forget, as Norbert Elias (2000, pp. 15-53) reminded us, that historical sociology defines power not as a property possessed by some and denied to others, but as a social relationship between individuals occupying unequal positions in the exercise of power.

It goes without saying, then, that the analysis would be misguided if it were to consider power in a univocal mode, where it is necessarily confused with domination, force and constraint. Power administers, informs, protects and serves, just as much as it represses, controls, threatens or enslaves. It is power, its nature and objectives, that influence the value of archives as an instrument, and not the other way round, although the liberating and illuminating function of the written word remains secondary and ambiguous, as Lévi-Strauss points out:

This, in any case, is the typical evolution that we see, from Egypt to China, when writing makes its debut: it seems to favour the exploitation of men before their enlightenment. [...] If my hypothesis is correct, we must admit that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate enslavement. The use of writing for disinterested ends, to derive intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction, is a secondary result, if it is not more often than not reduced to a means of reinforcing, justifying or concealing the other. (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, pp. 352-353)⁶

There is obviously no question of painting a universal picture in space and time of the way in which archives have been the instrument of power. There is no such thing as a world history of archives. Let us simply point out that if we were to begin by climbing one side of this Himalaya of research, the subject of “archives as instruments of power” would no doubt be the easiest, since this is very often the approach that has prevailed in the various geo-cultural areas where the subject of archives has been the

⁶ Telle est, en tout cas, l'évolution typique à laquelle on assiste, depuis l'Égypte jusqu'à la Chine, au moment où l'écriture fait son début : elle paraît favoriser l'exploitation des hommes avant leur illumination. [...] Si mon hypothèse est exacte, il faut admettre que la fonction primaire de la communication écrite est de faciliter l'asservissement. L'emploi de l'écriture à des fins désintéressées, en vue d'en tirer des satisfactions intellectuelles et esthétiques, est un résultat secondaire, si même il ne se réduit pas le plus souvent à un moyen pour renforcer, justifier ou dissimuler l'autre. (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, pp. 352-353)

subject of somewhat in-depth work. Since the historian, whatever he may say and whatever his efforts, is only ever the product of his time and his culture, I am sometimes aware that I am simply poaching from cultural areas that are not my own, that I am not always able to resist the hold of the contemporary and that I have a certain tendency to place the centre of gravity of my thinking in the modern period, which I know better and which corresponds more or less to a modernity of archives and of the State — that is, of power *par excellence*.

It is possible to adopt a few positions when considering the relationship between power and archives, whether this relationship is fundamental, instrumental or antagonistic. It could be summed up in a few simple formulas: power through archives, power over archives, power of archives. In short, the relationship between archives and power has three dimensions: functional, symbolic and critical⁷. These different facets outline a history of archives and their relation to power, which we would be wrong to imagine as successive, but which gradually accrues — or rather, where the respective importance of each evolves over time.

1. The functional dimension

The primary function of archives is undoubtedly to help establish a form of domination over people, nature and property. However far back we go and however far away we travel, there are numerous examples of archiving, both textual and non-textual, which illustrate this — from the rock engravings of the Val Camonica to the Andean *quipus* and, of course, to the Mesopotamian tablets, the matrix of the ancient archival ideal. This memory of places, people and objects is often numbered, reminding us that owning and governing often means counting. It forms the basis of the closest relationship with power of any kind. Whether we are talking about titles of possession, privileges of use and rights, traces of completed or ongoing transactions, arbitration rulings, or even simple provisional memorandums, there is no power that has not established its claims to spaces and populations through archives, and inscribed them in a variety of temporalities. They

⁷ In another vein, Yann Potin (2015, pp. 5-21) sees “trois figures historiques d’incarnation successive du pouvoir à travers l’institution des archives : le trésor, comme prolongement et inscription du corps et du domaine du souverain, la matrice et le coffre des lois, comme instauration d’un nouveau régime juridique de légalité, et la nécropole ou le reliquaire national des documents historiques, comme fondement d’un imaginaire national”.

can be short, like the wax tablets of the suppliers to the king of France's household in the thirteenth century; medium, if we think of accounts of all kinds; long, like all those deeds that form the basis of a person's identity or rights; or even be tinged with ambitions of eternity when we confuse archives with some treasure deposited in a sacred space. From then on, the archiving movement spread to very different levels and knew no limits: while the "time of treasures" (Bertrand, 2015, p. 45) in the Middle Ages is clearly identified for sovereign princes or municipal and ecclesiastical powers, the first known or identified archiving by laymen, such as merchants or small lords, demonstrates the spread of the archiving function by capillary action.

The proof that we draw from these archived documents has to do with the notion of truth. In the first place, it is based on the probative force acquired by the document itself at the time it was drawn up, produced in a variety of ways that establish a form of authenticity, even if what is described is not exact, or is even totally forged (Vidal-Naquet, 1989). But the document is also presumed authentic because it comes from the archives of the person who holds it. This *jus archivi*, the most accomplished expression of which can be found in the Holy Roman Empire in the 17th century (Head, 2013, pp. 909-930), merges with the power of domination and is equivalent to what Robert-Henri Bautier has described as the martial figure of the "arsenal of authority" (Bautier, 1968, p. 140; Graf, 2001, pp. 65-81).

However, it is important to remember that archives also have the role of pacifying society and ensuring the coexistence of citizens or subjects, whether the rights of the latter were deposited in the *tabularium* of republican and imperial Rome or whether they were kept by the notaries or judges of the royal power in modern France. By imposing the written norms of the city in the sense understood by Fustel de Coulanges (1862), the government assumes responsibility for preserving the social order through the archival responsibility of which it is at once the instigator, the guarantor and the beneficiary in a variety of ways, whether in terms of social discipline at the time of the modern State-family complex (Hanley, 1995, p. 47) (parish registers), the state taxation of the written word (stamped paper, control of deeds) or, more broadly, the political administration that it authorises.

After all, the arsenal of authority is only activated or called upon when the title of power is challenged. This may be subject to assessment by the judiciary in the course of trials in which a discourse based on diplomatics requirements is built up in fits and starts, sometimes on a case-by-case basis, to distinguish truth from falsehood, if necessary by adding the argument of archiving to the merits of the case. With the concept of administration, the

use of archives becomes more everyday. It is worth pausing here for a moment to consider questions of vocabulary. In the now classic French archival sense, archives exist from the moment a document is created and placed on a desk. Unlike Anglo-Saxon archival science, which distinguishes between records and archives, the life of archives is not subject to transmutation but only to ageing linked to the use value, especially administrative, of the documents, which distinguishes between current, intermediate and definitive archives.

For the administration, archives are a first-rate instrument of knowledge; they provide the State with “archival intelligence” (De Vivo, 2018, pp. 53-85). Reading and re-reading archives is an activity of great importance to all powers. Collections, summaries, tables, compilations, cartularies, chronicles, terriers, inventories, catalogues, databases, etc. all bear witness to the vast movement towards mastery of information associated with any self-respecting power. The documentary forms it takes are the hallmark of successive political and legal expressions, from the feudalism of the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment (feudists) and the modern State. The development of the *raison d’État* in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was closely linked to documentary material, which was alternately concealed and made public, the better to establish territorial and political domination (Catteeuw, 2013; Descendre, 2009). With the exception of specific national characteristics (France under the Valois and the first Bourbons), it went hand in hand with better preservation and controlled disclosure of the archives of negotiations, such as diplomatic correspondence and instructions. In the modern era and well into the nineteenth century, the imperial and colonial dominations and constructions of the European powers were first and foremost those of a history of knowledge and intellectual categories, at least as much as the reality of a territorial occupation (Brendecke, 2009; Stoler, 2009; Houlemare, 2014, pp. 7-31). In the modern era, the administration of archives in colonial territories is often one of the most effective instruments of power available to local political leaders. A governor’s archivist in French West Africa or French Indochina, often one of the few scientific staff in the colonial administration, was entrusted with tasks that went beyond his own sphere of work, leading him to set up restrictive formulas for managing administrative documentation (Chamelot, 2021, pp. 21-39).

Does this mean that we should speak of an *archivocracy* and raise the status of archives to the level of offices in a bureaucracy as envisaged by Max Weber? The question deserves to be asked, especially for areas that are not governed by the age-old rules of the *Registratur* that triumphed in Weber’s country. The Italian polities of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are said to have established a form of administration through archives that reflects the

importance of diplomatic negotiation and government through letters in these medium-sized powers, which were forced to share the same territory of influence (De Vivo, 2013, pp. 699-728; De Vivo et al., 2015). It is worth noting that the progress of bureaucracy and administrative efficiency, particularly fiscal efficiency, in eighteenth-century France was based on the potential, actual or supposed use of notaries' archives and insinuations in court registries. And good government, so dear to the Republic of Siena in the fourteenth century, was also nourished by good information management, as shown by the management of his *Scrittoio segreto* by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo I, for whom "the memory of ancient things is indispensable to the good prince, for his rule must correct the faults and reward the virtues of his subjects" (Rouchon, 2023, p. 385; Rouchon, 2011-2012, pp. 263-306).

There is only one step from administration to control, a step that is easily crossed by the powers that be using archives, as is all too clear for historians of contemporary totalitarian powers, where archives played a decisive role in the surveillance of populations and in the arrest of groups of opponents or targeted communities. As we know, police knowledge has accompanied all powers, whatever their nature, since the emergence of the modern concept of the police in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It even constitutes the *nec plus ultra* of a modern, organised and masterful state. From Paris to Naples, via London and Venice, there was no State power that did not have an administration with the capacity to record the minutest details of the residence, identity and actions of individuals placed, for various reasons, under the surveillance of their authorities. Whether they were then called *lieutenant général de police* or *inquisitori di Stato*, the effectiveness of these institutions depended on their ability to call up their archives at short notice (Jacquet & Kérién, 2023, pp. 68-93). Subsequently, advances in documentary organisation have seen their archival tools evolve, from files to dossiers and then to today's databases, which make the form, the central element of this knowledge, the emblem of police surveillance in the service of a public order that is as much about repression as protection (Berlière & Fournié, 2011). The functional ambivalence of archives is well established. It is also present in their symbolic dimension.

2. The symbolic dimension

Like institutions (Lordon, 2013), archives cannot be reduced to a materiality and to administrative or judicial uses: they possess a symbolic charge and an imaginary, which can go as far as the emotions, sometimes passionate,

that govern their relationship to power. Their organisation and possession, in particular, reflect an eminently political discourse. Jacques Derrida used and abused the etymological openness of the term to argue that archives are at the very heart of the notion of order:

Arkhé, it should be remembered, names both the beginning and the command. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, where things begin — the physical, historical or ontological principle — but also the principle according to law, where men and gods command, where authority is exercised, the social order, in this place from which order is given — the nomological principle. (Derrida, 1995, p. 5)⁸

The question of location, both spatial and institutional, is the first symbolic perception of the archives of power. Historians frequently ask questions about the nature of archives and the very exercise of power. The spatial location and choice of buildings reserved for the archives over the centuries and millennia says a lot about the intentions of the powers that be, whether to magnify them with palaces or *ad hoc* temples, to keep them close to the exercise of deliberation or worship, like the treasures of cities or churches, or, conversely, to relegate them to some out-of-the-way place in ordinary or even mediocre premises. No less interesting is the observation of the institutional positioning of the archives, whether it is a single or multiple service, a service integrated into the producer's operations (the most frequent case) or a separate, autonomous service. No organisational formula is in itself unequivocal and definitive. The creation of a separate department is not necessarily a sign of modernity (the *Trésor des chartes* of the Kings of France) or greater transparency: recourse to the notion of archivality proposed by Randolph Head (2018, pp. 29-52), which aims to better integrate archival reasoning from outside Europe, is a good antidote to hasty and anachronistic conclusions. As Filippo De Vivo (2013, pp. 716 et seq.) reminds us, archives are an issue of power within power itself: whether it is a question of appropriating them or of asserting one's objectives and institutional supremacy, archives are an object of internal debate, which can be seen, for example,

⁸ Arkhé, rappelons-nous, nomme à la fois le commencement et le commandement. Ce nom coordonné apparemment deux principes en un : le principe selon la nature ou l'histoire, là où les choses commencent – principe physique, historique ou ontologique –, mais aussi le principe selon la loi, là où des hommes et des dieux commandent, là où s'exercent l'autorité, l'ordre social, en ce lieu depuis lequel l'ordre est donné – principe nomologique. (Derrida, 1995, p. 5)

in their attachment to a particular ministerial authority, which situates them sometimes at the heart of power and sometimes at its margins, depending on the point of view adopted.

It may happen that the government does not necessarily have direct control over the archives that result from its activities, without its authority being permanently affected. This is how the progressive affirmation of the modernity of State archives in the modern era, at the very time when the concept of sovereignty was being forged to accompany the advent of new political regimes, went through a phase of dispossession in favour of those involved in political and governmental life, whether it was the secretaries of Tudor England (Hunt, 2018, p. 108) or Valois France (Poncet, 2019b, pp. 42-45) who took their working papers with them, or the administrators of Tokugawa Japan whose power was based on private institutions assimilated by this regime to its professional bureaucracy (Cullen, 2013, pp. 33-65). Conversely, the attention paid to archives can constitute the birth certificate of a new power: the most emblematic example of all is that of the *Archives Nationales* organised in France at the beginning of the French Revolution. The deputy chosen by the National Assembly to head them was appointed Archivist of the Nation, and the first law organising them (1790, September 12) established their founding and symbolic role in the new regime: "The National Archives are the repository of all acts establishing the constitution of the kingdom, its public law, its laws and its distribution into departments."⁹

The seizure of archival documents is one of the early and constant signs of the assertion of power over a territory, a people, a movement, etc. (Sumpf & Laniol, 2012). Territorial conquests following military campaigns are therefore increasingly accompanied in treaties by specific clauses relating to the transfer of archives, *i.e.* proof of newly acquired rights to the victor. Even if they are not always implemented, because the transfer of archives is easier to postpone than the transfer of the territories concerned, these provisions are increasingly taken into account in modern and contemporary times. The removal of specific archives, such as police files or political and diplomatic archives, represents another right of the victor or occupier in contemporary conflicts (Cœuré, 2007; Fonck et al., 2019). These warlike, violent and political spoliations are not the only manifestations of archival conflicts that can be observed over a long period of time (Péquignot

⁹ "Les Archives nationales sont le dépôt de tous les actes qui établissent la constitution du royaume, son droit public, ses lois et sa distribution en départements." Loi relative aux Archives nationales, article premier (1790). <https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/revlawall0922v2/navigate/3/21>

& Potin, 2022). The destruction of documents, whether selective and rational or, on the contrary, total and symbolic, is also part of a rationale for asserting power or contesting it, which is sometimes expressed publicly, as in the case of ancient *damnatio memoriae*, but also in medieval and modern times. Subjugating a city, suppressing a dynasty and its power over a territory, opposing a faith, changing a political regime, making people forget a revolt (Poncet, 2022, pp. 259-276; Van Gelder & De Vivo, 2023, pp. 44-78) — these are all good ways of using the effective symbolism of archives (Gosset, 2017).

Despite these various appetites for the archives of the Other, it is important to nuance the value of these archives that are appropriated in this way, as many of them were hardly exploited by their new owner, either because he did not have the time to do so, or because he did not understand them, or because their usefulness had been exceeded, or because it was enough for him to possess them. The performative aspect of archives is an element that has rarely been emphasised in historiography, yet it is extremely powerful. The accumulation of documents, the presumption of total preservation of the memory of a State, a territory, a town, etc., is sometimes enough to ensure the respect and domination of those in power, who do not need to produce the titles and papers thus preserved. For example, there was no rule requiring medieval and modern *chambres des comptes* in France to keep audited accounts and verified supporting documents beyond the audit period. And yet, as we know, these are some of the most important documentary resources that have been handed down to us, even though their value for immediate or deferred use was practically null.

In the same way, the finding aids (inventories, summaries, etc.) produced in abundance in the archives of certain Italian states in the sixteenth century did not really play the political role that their authors had promised themselves, but had more of a psychological function, comparable to a tool to combat the fear of decline. They were undoubtedly more nostalgic monuments to the past than active tools of an archival intelligence — one which would have presupposed a more visible awareness and rationality (De Vivo, 2018). The same is true of family archives, the accumulation of which Maria de Lurdes Rosa (2022, p. 258) has shown to be a symbolic capital, desired and feared at the same time, an object of inheritance envy as much as of patrimonial serenity for its holders. Written documents have an unsuspected radiation, which is sometimes counter-intuitive when we think of totalitarian powers whose main concern might seem to be to eradicate “evidence of their crimes”. Many cases show that only a political and military collapse that has occurred or is imminent will

lead certain officials, usually subordinates close to the action and its archives, to destroy the documents in their possession. But the higher up one goes in the political and institutional hierarchies, the more likely one is to keep records of decisions with far-reaching consequences (consider for instance Stalin's order for the execution of Polish prisoners in Katyń) (Zaslavsky, 2007, pp. 163-168).

One of the most symbolic aspects of the relationship between archives and power lies in access or, more often still, denial of access to them, whether normative, real or exaggerated (Combe, 1994). For the jurist Pierre Legendre, the prototype of the State is the living written word, defined in a phrase borrowed from Roman times (emperor Justinian) by the twelfth-century papacy: "[h]e has all the writings of the law in the archive of his chest" (*Omnia jura habet in scrinio pectoris sui*) (Legendre, 1986-1987, pp. 427-428; see also Gillmann, 1912, pp. 3-17). As we know, the *arcana imperii* were one of the privileged modes of expression and government that accompanied the birth of the modern State in the modern era (André et al., 2019). The communication and communicability of archive documents and their inventories are elements that are usually present in almost every legal text relating to this field. These aspects can sometimes take on a sacred aspect, as evidenced by the ban on consulting papal archives without authorisation in the seventeenth century, on pain of excommunication. In our democratic societies, waiting periods and reserved typologies are the focus of much of the attention of the various players involved, and are the source of most of the publicity – sometimes conflicting – given to government archives.

In the symbolic dimension of archives, it is important not to overlook their effects on the various populations that are affected, directly or indirectly, by what is contained, or could be contained, in the archives of power. This vision, which could be described as coming from below, or rather from outside, is that of the citizen, the subject, the user, the dominated, or even the administrator, depending on how you look at it. This very varied public, especially when it comes to ordinary people, who may not be acculturated to the written word, illiterate or illiterate, has a perception of archives that is sometimes based on a powerful imagination and sensibility that confers virtues on archives that are not always recognised by those who have custody of them or who are at the origin of them (Bercé, 1999, pp. 750-759), except precisely by playing with them as Michelet (1974, p. 726) did with his "ghosts" that emerged from the shelves of the *Archives Nationales*¹⁰.

¹⁰ "Je ne tardai pas à m'apercevoir dans le silence apparent de ces galeries, qu'il y avait un mouvement, un murmure, qui n'était pas de la mort" (Michelet, 1974, p. 726).

Ignorance or lack of knowledge can, depending on the case, give rise to a respect that is sometimes strong enough to encourage the preservation of documents that are supposed to guarantee a new social order, as was the case with certain tax documents in medieval communes (Herlihy & Klapisch-Zuber, 1978), or on the contrary inspire a fear that can sometimes lead to popular movements that pursue their destruction, as was the case, for example, with the burning of charters during the revolutionary period in France (Bercé, 1999). In the highly sensitive cases of requests to consult maternity records or anonymous childbirths, the relationship with the archives of power is coupled with a wounded, anxious or worried intimacy, which is as much the responsibility of the archives of power as of power itself. The issues surrounding archives can lead to the unleashing of scholarly or judicial passions, as was the case in seventeenth-century France, where scholars, judges, theologians, nobles and the king turned archives into a dramaturgy and an arena for their confrontations and ambitions to prove and tell the truth (Poncet, 2022).

3. The critical dimension

Archives are an offensive and defensive weapon for those in power. However, their orientation and use are not unequivocal. A power that yields to an opponent who takes its place can suddenly find itself at the mercy of its own archives, which are turned, as it were, against itself (Taschereau, 1848; *Papiers et correspondance de la famille impériale*, 1875). The power of archives to subvert other powers is powerful, and there are hardly any limits to the critical use of archives, whether as a loudhailer for the power that holds and produces them or to use them to influence, qualify or even combat that same power, to the point of operating a form of counter-power through archives.

The critical use of archives is not antagonistic to those in power, who are often the first to seize upon them to divulge a discourse constructed *ad hoc* to serve their policy. In fact, this propaganda through archives is one of the major objectives of the latter in ensuring the magnificent memory of power, and has been since the earliest times when archives were considered as tools that glorify the history of the State that gave them form. R. Head's study of the *Leitura Nova* of Manuel I in Portugal has amply demonstrated the constructive and constitutive function of recollection for a power wishing to establish not only the antiquity of its domination but also the innovation

introduced by its current holders (Head, 2018). Similar analyses can be carried out, for identical or even longer periods, on the Korean Annals of the Joseon dynasty. The creation of the first major modern repositories in the West in the sixteenth century more or less met the same objectives, even if these were not obvious, as Arndt Brendecke (2018, pp. 131-150) pointed out in relation to the Simancas archives, where he highlighted the “ambiguous agenda”, between an arsenal of authority in which to seek out historical and political elements, and at the same time a prison for the papers of state power, according to Philip II’s regulations of 1588. Napoleon I demonstrated this when he had the sovereign papers of the various territories subject to his imperial authority seized in order to concentrate them in the capital of Paris, where a palace was to house them magnificently while his archivist, Pierre-Claude-François Daunou, was charged with exploiting them to provide a political discourse on the destiny of Napoleonic France (Donato, 2019).

Without going as far as these extreme solutions, most governments supported the nascent desire of scholars of all origins — ecclesiastical, judicial and administrative — to rely on original documents to write history. Commissions to historiographers, editorial support from both sides and institutional creations (academies, schools) were the clearest signs of what the authorities asked of historians through archives and for archives. The *École des Chartes* in Paris (1821) was first and foremost a Napoleonic project, which the Restoration that succeeded it took on board in order to inscribe its political power in the long history of the Middle Ages, where charters were synonymous with regained freedom (Bercé, 1997, p. 23). And all the political regimes that France has subsequently known have facilitated the use of archives in the service of a history designed to support their political ambitions, whether it be the July Monarchy (Potin, 2018, pp. 175-233), the Second Empire or the Third Republic (Hildesheimer, 1997, 1998, 2000; Poncet, 2021).

The writing of history through archives does not depend solely on the will of archivists: we know the extent to which the supply, availability and writing of finding aids considerably influence the way in which archives are used. Michel Foucault insisted on the fact that archives are the product and source of epistemic power through the classificatory, and therefore hierarchical and dominant, knowledge that they possess, sometimes without the knowledge of those who use them (Ogilvie, 2017, pp. 121-134). It has taken a long time to deconstruct or better understand the discourse instituted by archives, for example those of the judiciary, where the word of the institution blurs and modifies the voice of the litigants (Ginzburg, 1976; Cerutti, 2009). This work of distancing historians from the instituted power of archives

actually began as soon as modern rules of criticism were being developed. When Mabillon published his *De re diplomatica* in 1681, even though it was part of a process of voluntary submission to power (the book was dedicated to Louis XIV's minister, Colbert), he provided historians with the critical weapons they needed to free themselves from the heavy domination of the *jus archivi* and authorise them to use all existing sources to develop their account of the past (Poncet, 2022, pp. 274-275). By placing the value of use on the document and not on the place where it was kept, Mabillon opened up an immense field of archival possibilities, in which archives were questioned a priori, but could serve any purpose. From then on, it was accepted by all those in power that, "to paraphrase Clausewitz, archival research was nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means" (Poncet, 2022, p. 276).

In this now permanent battle for power over (and through) archives, the position of archivists has evolved. Initially closely, if not exclusively, in the hands of those in power, their position gradually changed. The temptation to divulge information, for reasons of varying degrees of honesty, combined with an enthusiasm for the historical use of archived documents, led some archivists in the modern era to cross the red line and find themselves accused of conspiring against the power whose archives they kept — as in the case of Michele Lonigo, the first archivist of the *Archivio Segreto Vaticano* in the early seventeenth century (Filippini, 2007, pp. 705-736). The professionalisation of the function from the nineteenth century onwards led archivists to become relatively independent of the authorities. This relative independence with regard to action, sometimes more than that of mind, has been achieved through, among other things, the joint development of administrative rules, the adoption of increasingly scientific methods shared with university users, the emergence of professional associations that are increasingly open to archivists from all powers and counter-powers (Hamard, 2020), the extension of collecting archives to other than those of the authorities (private archives, business archives, etc.), the destruction requirements that are much more onerous than in the past and accompanied by recommendations that are imposed increasingly upstream of archiving, and so on. So much so that the archivist has become aware of his decisive value and — let us say it — his own power.

This critical awakening to the way in which archives can be considered as the site of a tension that it is possible to reverse is also connected — more so, perhaps, than historians admit or understand — with the archival turn that emerged in international research some twenty years ago, and whose

vitality and full maturity are reflected in the VINCULUM project at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Poncet, 2019a, pp. 713-743; the VINCULUM site <https://www.vinculum.fcsh.unl.pt/>). Since Howard Zinn's objurgations in 1977 in the wake of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal (Zinn, 1997, pp. 14-36) and Helen Samuels's famous "Who controls the past?" echoing Orwellian intuitions in 1986 (Samuels, 1986, pp. 109-124), archivists have resolutely embarked on a new path designed to bring about a fundamental change in the relationship between power and its archives. Without even the help of post-modern theory, which has admittedly played its part in the intellectual reversal of the way in which archives are viewed (Schwartz & Cook, 2002, pp. 1-19), archivists have extended their autonomy in an attempt to take the archives of power away from their instrumental condition and restore a form of neutrality to them, and even, for some, to establish them as counter-powers. Without any illusions about the supposed neutrality of archives (Jimerson, 2006, pp. 19-32) — a neutrality that some communities reject to the point of not entrusting their archives to the public authorities for fear of an imposed invisibility — archivists aim to change the univocal meaning of archives in order to restore a critical space that is more open and more accessible in its initial data. The contribution of archivists and archives to the defence of human rights (Boel et al., 2021), and more specifically to the delicate modalities of political transition in certain countries that have achieved democracy after periods of totalitarian and/or enslaving power (countries of the former Eastern European bloc, South Africa, etc.) has thus been decisive (Harris, 2002, 1996; Arzoumanian-Rumin, 2010, pp. 88-97). And even when the creature escapes the creator, as in the extreme case of Wikileaks, undoubtedly facilitated by the digital medium of the archives, the lessons that the archivist can and must draw from it inevitably refer back to his position as a political player, in the service of a power, certainly, but more broadly in the service of a society (Findlay, 2013, pp. 7-22).

This social responsibility that the archivist has discovered and taken upon himself does not preclude the instrumental dimension of archives, nor does it eliminate their functional, symbolic or critical dimensions, but it does allow us to see more clearly what archives do for power or — to put it another way — what their power is. Accountability has thus probably become the primary imperative of archives as instruments of power, not only for the producer-custodian, but also for the archivist, whose multiple actions (collecting, sorting, describing, communicating) are increasingly subject to transparency, and even for users, who are more and more frequently asked to explain the reasons for their use and their research methods.

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