# Why business historians need a constructive theory of the archive

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# WHAT IS AN ARCHIVE – AND WHERE IS IT?

# WHY BUSINESS HISTORIANS NEED A CONSTRUCTIVE THEORY OF THE ARCHIVE[*]

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## Using archives without being defensive about it

Archival records are a constitutive element of business historical research, and such research, in turn, is fundamental for a holistic understanding of the role of enterprise in modern capitalist societies. Since 1934, the Business Archives Council has promoted the preservation and wider use of archival records of business in Britain. Its journal, *Business Archives*, is an integral part of this endeavour. The journal presents itself to readers as follows: *Business Archives* '...covers various aspects of the principles and practice of managing business archives and modern records, and the use of business archives as source material for historians. … The editors invite submissions on all aspects of business, economic and social history, especially those that reflect on the relationship between historical research and corporate archives.' The latter point however, which calls for a fuller reflection of the uses and limitations of the archive in business historical research, does not receive enough attention, neither in *Business Archives* nor in the scholarly publications that are to be found in the various journals in the field, such as *Business History*, *Business History Review*, *Enterprise & Society*, *Labor History*, and *Management & Organizational History*.

Admittedly, there are signs of a healthy debate in business history circles about the need to theorize the past and the need to theorize the historian as author and creator of narratives.[1] Yet even

[*] Appeared in: *Business Archives*, No. 105 (November 2012), pp. 1-9.

these debates rarely engage with the question of whether the theorization of the archive might be a desideratum. Under such circumstances, the archive remains unexplored territory on the map of theoretical reflections that make up the craft of the business historian. Although virtually all readers of this issue will work in business archives, either as archivists or as researchers, few will have ever engaged in an open theoretical debate about the epistemological status of the archive in business history. The reasons for this rather remarkable lack of clarification regarding this status of the archive in research are manifold. One reason, I argue, is the extraordinary survival of the epistemological position of realism in business history at a time when all other historical disciplines have long left realism behind by way of various 'turns' (cultural, narrative, pictorial, spatial, etc.). Like all other epistemological positions, realism is a belief system that allows one to create and to vouch and account for social facts. Unlike rival epistemological positions, realism, especially in its blissful form, is not aware of the fact that it *actually is* an epistemological position. Put simply, the sentence 'I have found this in the archives' is not a contestable claim for uncritical realists. Both 'the archive' and what has been 'found' in that place are 'just there'.

While other epistemological positions invite and cherish contestation, realism more often than not leads to defensiveness. When Steve Toms and John Wilson reacted to a paper by Scott Taylor, Emma Bell and Bill Cooke in *Management & Organizational History*, they entitled it 'In Defence of Business History' despite the fact that Taylor, Bell and Cooke attempted to challenge, enrich and engage business history, and not annihilate it.[2] When the author of this article presented some preliminary thoughts on the theory of the archive at a recent business history conference, a company archivist present in the room felt obliged to defend her profession – as if asking for a better theory of the archive somehow meant one doubted the worth of the archivist as service provider. In a recent interview of the eminent historian of South America, Frank Safford, in a business historical newsletter, Safford explained his craft with a few pre-emptive strikes: 'I am a historian, period. ... I respond to what I find in the archives.'[3] How can one explain such defensiveness? One reason is of course historians' emotional engagement with the archive as locus of knowledge production.[4] Archival research is time-consuming, exhausting and quite often dirty (dusty) in the literal sense of the word. Archival search rooms, often enough, are dark and cold (air-conditioned) or located in areas where the last bus leaves at 4.37pm and warmth comes in the form of coffee vending machines. Oddly enough, most historians still prefer such work over cosy offices where one can run chi-squared tests all day long. Such defensiveness, however, is also indicative of a larger malaise that has gripped business history. While handbooks and compendia written by and for historians in general now include chapters with epistemological reflections about research styles, narratives, and theoretical approaches, business historians by and large seem to feel immune from such a need to reflect their craft.[5] The *Oxford Handbook of Business History*, for example, contains very little that would allow a young entrant into the field to gain a better understanding of the epistemological, ontological, and axiological ramifications of knowledge production in this field.[6]

Ironically, the adherence to methodological and epistemological realism that seems to prevail among many business historians puts the field squarely within the realm of pre-1960s, orthodox Marxist-Communist philosophy of science. In Marxist dialectical materialism, knowledge is produced by way of reflecting or mirroring an extant reality. According to this theory, human consciousness and its production of theories and ideas allow a mirror-reflection of reality, ie of something objectively 'out there'. This mirror image might be warped, stretched and erroneous at times, but constant effort in scientific research can bring it closer to objective reality.[7] It is of course very questionable whether archives can ever be such physical locations that merely store documents for later data retrieval by historians, who then objectively put together what they have found. Such a position would, as argued above, form a most peculiar fusion of Marxist dialectical materialism and nineteenth-century Rankean positivism, which imagined the historian as a heroic discoverer of how events ‘really unfolded’ (‘Wie es eigentlich gewesen’).[8] Archives are, strictly epistemologically speaking, more like folding screens of the type that could once be found in the harems of the Ottoman Empire: they titillate, allowing certain things to be seen, always at an angle, while most parts are blocked off to the gaze of commoners.

**Archives as organisations**

Archives are organisations, too. They are organised by human beings with an interest in making certain things visible, while others might be taken out of sight.[9] Hence, historians who use archives can only study what an organisation chooses to remember and to reveal. The historiography of the relationship between German business and the Nazi dictatorship is full of examples of firms deliberately choosing and selecting either the archival material that goes into their published company histories or choosing the historians that would write such a history. When the Deutsche Bank, Germany’s largest banking and financial services institute, finally gave in to the pressure to reveal its connections to the Nazi leadership and its part in confiscating Jewish property during the 1930s and 1940s, the bank ‘appointed’ an official historian, Harold James, and gave him unlimited but exclusive access to the files pertaining to the Nazi era.[10] This does of course not mean that one should not trust appointed company historians, especially those of the calibre and standing of Harold James. But it is also a fact that companies of the size and influence of the Deutsche Bank can pick and choose ‘approved’ historians and therefore limit the extent to which other historians might come up with competing narratives and conflicting interpretations of the same material. Thus, one does not need to distrust the *outcome* of James’ business historical research. But the *process* through which he and other appointed historians are chosen must give rise to serious questions about what archives actually are, and about who chooses whom to discover precisely what.

Because archives are organisations, they require institutional support. This in turn means that archives have embedded within them a metropolitan, European bias because it is only within the global north and the west that this institutional support is so widely available that local and national authorities and firms themselves can afford to preserve company records. In areas such as the global south, where European and American entrepreneurs and firms have been very active since at least the eighteenth century, this picture looks of course very different.[11] Such organisational and geographical biases have now become institutionally and professionally embedded in job roles ('the archivist') and in organisational structures ('the company archive' as department). This institutionalisation of archives – or the lack thereof in large parts of the world – can shape both our memory and the past itself. The first level, that of a collectively shared memory, is relatively easy to inspect. To choose but one example, historians of British advertising and marketing are often shocked to realise how much material the advertising industry decided not to preserve before the setting up of the History of Advertising Trust (HAT) in 1976. One of Britain's largest and most creative advertising agency, W S Crawford's, got almost completely wiped off the map of what Britain is able to remember about its own emergence as a consumer society because company managers threw out the entire set of agency files and client documentation in one dark night in the late 1960s when the agency merged with an American company. Ashley Havinden, who had worked at Crawford's as Creative Director, managed to recover his own sketches and roughs, and therefore preserved at least a part of the Crawford legacy. Had HAT existed at that time, our memory of what British advertising and marketing during 1920s and 1930s was like would now be profoundly different.

The second level, that of the past itself, might sound more sinister and Orwellian, but is beginning to affect scholarly practice nevertheless. In as much as business-related activities (reports, emails, memos, etc.) are increasingly becoming not only digitised but digital-only, owners and producers of them can change the past itself. As Marlene Manoff has shown, publishers at Elsevier are known to go back to their journal databases and excise articles they deem false, erroneous, or plagiarised.[12] At a time of a completely paper-based publication industry, such changes of the record would not have been possible. But since a lot of the journals that Elsevier publishes are now digital-only, a change of the past itself is merely a mouse-click away. Given the possibility of such practices, what will stop governments and corporations employing twenty-first century Winston Smiths to deal with their own digital records in the same way? Although the example of Elsevier might at the moment sound – and be – an exception, the case should nevertheless raise questions about the relationship between the present ('now', changeable, in flux) and the past (not changeable anymore, recorded, fixed, archived). It is very likely that historians will have to change their attitudes towards archives because we are living in a type of constant present where the boundary between things that have happened (fixed) and those that are happening is becoming more and more blurred.[13]

If archives are organisations, and if the objects and materials in them have been preserved for a variety of reasons, including vanity, fear, and sheer luck, how can the archive be a place of the objective representation of the past? And where will that leave the 'search for truth' which most business historians perhaps still quietly believe in? One does not have to be a hard-core postmodernist historian to ask these questions.[14] In conclusion, we also need to understand in which ways archives become epistemological spaces, that is spaces of knowledge production.

**Archives as epistemological spaces**

The nineteenth-century legalistic origin of archives as organisations biases them towards the written and printed word of individual organisations and their members.[15] That means in turn that most archive-based business historical accounts necessarily put firms at the centre of their analysis. Firms as self-contained social, legal and economic units *can* have archives. This creates problems, amongst others for those working on the history of markets, marketing and market behaviour. Markets have a history, but they cannot have 'an archive' because they are socially distributed entities.[16] As a consequence, a lot of marketing historical work is firm-oriented but ignores questions about the emergence of markets *per se* and about changes in consumer behaviour. But can one reconstruct a history of markets merely through the histories of separate firms as market actors? By the same token, business history scholarship in the positivist tradition limits what it is able and willing to talk about to those aspects and entities that have an archive. If there is no archive that for example allows us to study the involvement of a specific company in arming Nazi Germany, or in exploiting slave labour in the Caribbean, then it has no space in academic discourse. Thus, business historians are in danger of adopting unknowingly and virtually without any reflection Ludwig Wittgenstein's last sentence in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophico*: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' ('Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen').[17]

Archives reinforce survivorship bias. Large and dominant companies often have 'better' archives, which create expectations among editors, reviewers and readers for what is often termed 'robust evidence', and for what the editors of *Business History Review* call 'rigorous primary research'.[18] Take as example the well-organised and well-funded archive of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency (JWT), for a while the world's largest ad agency, at Duke University's Hartman Centre for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History. Almost all parts of the collections there are searchable to file level, many items have been digitised, and the archive gives generous bursaries to international scholars. The archive is conveniently located on a beautiful university campus in North Carolina, where people play golf ten months of the year. The sheer availability and convenience afforded by the JWT collection feeds into a discourse and a set of historical narratives which privilege American marketing and advertising expertise over that found elsewhere in the world. Put simply, if one only studies existing archival sources which are provided, cared for, sponsored and promoted by American organisations, then the course of global marketing history indeed appears to be dominated by American organisations.[19] While JWT was growing globally during the 1930s and 1950s, a British competitor – the London Press Exchange Ltd – was a very busy rival to JWT. In the British market, the LPE was a pioneer in media research and panel-based consumer surveys. It opened up 19 overseas offices during the 1950s and 1960s and stole global accounts from JWT, such as Ford Motor Company in 1960. Yet, few marketing and advertising historians ever mention this firm. The reason for this is clear: the firm's legacy has been reduced to some leaflets and staff magazines which today barely fill four shoe-boxes at an archive somewhere in the Norfolk countryside. Thus, the convenient contention that unlike social science researchers historians do not 'make' their data is, strictly speaking, not true. Historians are in some sense in an even worse position than social scientists. While the latter admittedly *make* their data, the former have their data *made* by people in organisations, not always archivists, who decide which bits and pieces of the past are worth preserving.

**Business historians, 'archive fever' and suspicion**

All of these considerations add up to the inconvenient yet also liberating insight that archives are not neutral spaces. In the words of the historian Patrick Joyce: 'If the historian is a site of memory so too is the archive, in which historians encounter the 'sources' or 'traces' from which they write histories. As sites of *public* memory, both are implicated in power. Archives themselves are a means by which societies organised their past. So-called postmodernism brought this once again to the attention of historians.'[20] Historians who side with Joyce's view will necessarily develop an understanding of archives that fully appreciates their value but also encompasses a more critical perspective on sociology of knowledge-production in and through the archive. Jacques Derrida, in his 1995 essay on the ‘archive fever’, expressed this connection as follows: ‘Normally, the archive is self-effacing – we discuss the contents but not the structures which have resulted in those contents being there and surviving. A sociology (anthropology) of the archive changes that frame’.[21] Business historians therefore have to come to a better understanding for themselves of what they are doing in the archives, and what the archive is doing to them and their writing. In this search for a theoretical foundation, Michel Foucault provides one, but surely not the only, way to understand the role of the archive in a more critical fashion. According to Foucault, archives are not just sites for the passive collection of records from the past. Rather, archives are very active in *both* enabling *and* limiting what we see, know, understand, and accept as real. This very simple insight is at times wrapped in the somewhat labyrinthine conclusion that archives are ‘sites of discourse formation’.[22]

Historians can and should challenge these limitations by reflecting and rejecting their own assumptions of the passivity of archives. Historians of science, for example, are far ahead in this respect as they have long given up the idea of the laboratory as the passive space in which data appear to the objective researcher in a neutral way.[23] Business history as a subject area has yet a long way to go to reach the level of reflexivity which colleagues in science history departments have achieved. In contrast, historians and anthropologist such as Patrick Joyce and Leela Fernandes in their writings on factory workers show how such limitations of archives can be practically overcome.[24] Both Joyce and Fernandes use, but also challenge, written material from the company and public archives they visited. Instead, both authors use the entire factory system, workers' bodies, their homes, etc., as their ‘archive’. Joyce's and Fernandes' work, and in fact that of many other business historians, proves that what Derrida somewhat derogatorily termed ‘archive fever’[25], the obsession of positivist historians with theory-less ‘fact-mongering’[26], can be overcome without having to succumb to postmodernist suspicions of archives *per se* and of historical research based on archival records in particular.

**Notes**

[1] E. Ponzoni and K. Boersma, 'Writing history for business: the development of business history between "old" and "new" production of knowledge', *Management & Organizational History*, 6:2 (2011), 123-143; T. G. Weatherbee et al, 'Theorizing the past: critical engagements', *Management & Organizational History*, 7:3 (2012), 193-202.

[2] S. Toms and J. F. Wilson, 'In defence of business history: a reply to Taylor, Bell and Cooke', *Management & Organizational History*, 5:1 (2010), 109-120; S. Taylor, E. Bell and Bill Cooke, 'Business history and the historiographical operation', *Management & Organizational History*, 4:2 (2009), 151-166.

[3] Interview with Frank Safford, in *History, Business and Entrepreneurship Newsletter*. Biannual Newsletter published by the History, Business and Entrepreneurship Research Group, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia, No. 3 (October 2012), 2-3.

[4] C. Steedman, 'The space of memory: in an archive', in C. Steedman, *Dust: the archive and cultural history* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), pp. 66-88; A. Jansson, 'Emotions and archival research', *History and Emotions Blog*, posted 2 July 2012, www.qmul.ac.uk/emotions (accessed 13 September 2012).

[5] Take as one example U. Rublack, 'The status of historical knowledge', in: U. Rublack (ed), *A concise companion to history* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 57-80.

[6] In the OUP Handbook, Patrick Fridenson makes some attempts at discussing these issues. See P. Fridenson, 'Business history and history', in G. Jones and J. Zeitlin (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Business History* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 9-36.

[7] J. Rees, 'Engels' Marxism', *International Socialism*, 65 (1995), 47-82.

[8] L. V. Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* (Berlin, 1824), p. vi.

[9] H. W. Samuels, 'Who controls the past', *American Archivist*, 49:2 (1986), 109-124.

[10] H. James, 'Die Deutsche Bank und die Diktatur, 1933-1945', in L. Gall et al (eds), *Die Deutsche Bank, 1870-1995* (München, 1995), pp. 315-408.

[11] See S. Decker, 'The silence of the archives: business history, postcolonialism and archival ethnography: post-colonialism and the practice of historical reconstruction from archival evidence', *Management & Organizational History*, 8 (2013), forthcoming.

[12] M. Manoff, 'Theories of the archive from across the disciplines', *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 4:1 (2004), 9-25.

[13] This problem is not bound up with the fact that we are entering a digital future. Attempts to change the past by inserting forged 'historical' documents into existing archival collections are a known problem for archivists all over the world. At the National Archives in London, numerous such forged documents, often relating to Britain's involvement in the Second World War, turn up each year. See P. Lewis, 'The 29 fakes behind a rewriting of history', *The Guardian*, 5 May 2008, p. 11, and P. B. Hirtle, 'Archival authenticity in a digital age', in Council on Library and Information Resources (ed), *Authenticity in a digital environment* (Washington, DC, 2000), pp. 8-23.

[14] See for example D. LaCapra, *History & Criticism* (Ithaca, NY, 1985); P. Joyce, 'More secondary modern than postmodern', *Rethinking History*, 5:3 (2001), 367-382, C. Steedman, 'In the archon's house', in Steedman, *Dust*, pp. 1-37, and P. Hansen, 'Business history: a cultural and narrative approach', *Business History Review* 86:4 (2012), forthcoming.

[15] For these origins see M. Featherstone, 'Archive', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23:2-3 (2006), 591-596.

[16] For the difficulties of creating a history of a (collective) market out of (individual) sources see A. Odlyzko, 'The collapse of the Railway Mania, the development of capital markets and the forgotten role of Robert Nash', *Accounting History Review*, 21:3 (2011), 309-345, and M. Casson and J. Lee, 'The origin and development of markets: a business history perspective', *Business History Review*, 85:1 (2011), 9-37.

[17] L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (New York, 2009), p. 108

[18] Editorial statement on aims and scope of *Business History Review* (http://www.hbs.edu/businesshistory/publications-business-history-review.html; accessed August 25 2012).

[19] V. de Grazia, *Irresistible empire: America's advance through twentieth-century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

[20] Joyce, 'More secondary modern than postmodern', p. 367 (emphasis in original).

[21] Quoted in D. Zeitlyn, 'Anthropology in and of the archives: possible futures and contingent pasts. Archives as anthropological surrogates', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41 (2012), 461-480, quote on p. 467.

[22] M. Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge* (London, 2002).

[23] A good overview of this complex and long-running debate is in J. Golinski, *Making natural knowledge: constructivism and the history of science* (Chicago, 2005).

[24] P. Joyce, *Work, society and politics: the culture of the factory in later Victorian England* (London, 1980); L. Fernandes, *Producing workers: the politics of gender, class and culture in Calcutta jute mills* (Philadelphia, 1997).

[25] J. Derrida, 'Archive fever: a Freudian impression', *diacritics*, 25:2 (1995), 9-63.

[26] C. Harvey and J. F. Wilson, 'Redefining business history: an editorial statement', *Business History* 49:1 (2007), 1-7, quote p. 3.