

ARCHIVE AND THE POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES

Yared Akarapattananukul¹

Abstract

This study explores the meaning of archive in the theoretical perspectives of postmodernists, namely Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. The study found that both Foucault and Derrida perceive the meaning of archive in the sense of power and control. However, for Foucault, archive should be conceived as a unique event, where, for Derrida, the meaning of archive can be traced back to the idea of ‘commencement’ and ‘commandment’ of Greek antiquity, leading to the refutation of the idea of a space of memory. From this point, the support and critiques of their perspectives are also discussed for examining the concepts.

Keywords: Archive, Postmodern, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida

¹ PhD candidate, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham; this article reviews the meaning of archive in postmodern perspectives as a preliminary to further studies of archives both in theories and practices. I would like to say a big thank you to the anonymous reader for valuable comments that helped to improve this paper.

การจัดเก็บข้อมูลในมุมมองหลังสมัยใหม่

ญาเรศ อัครพัฒนานุกูล

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้สำรวจความหมายเบื้องต้นของคำว่า ‘การจัดเก็บข้อมูล’ (archive) ตามมุมมองเชิงทฤษฎีของนักคิดหลังสมัยใหม่ ได้แก่ มิเชลล์ 푸โก และ ฌาคส์ แดริดา ผลการศึกษาพบว่า นักคิดทั้งสองมีมุมมองเกี่ยวกับการจัดเก็บข้อมูล ในความหมายของอำนาจและการควบคุม โดยสำหรับฟูโกแล้ว ความหมายของการจัดเก็บข้อมูลผูกติดกับสถานการณ์เฉพาะในแต่ละเรื่อง ในขณะที่ความหมายของการจัดเก็บข้อมูลตามแนวคิดของแดริดาเชื่อมโยงกับแนวคิดเกี่ยวกับการริเริ่ม (commencement) และคำสั่ง (commandment) ตามความหมายของกรีกโบราณ ซึ่งสิ่งเหล่านี้นำไปสู่การปฏิเสธแนวคิดเกี่ยวกับพื้นที่ของความทรงจำ จากประเด็นต่างๆ เหล่านี้ ผู้ศึกษาได้นำเสนองานเขียนที่สนับสนุนและวิจารณ์แนวคิดหลังสมัยใหม่เพื่อตรวจสอบแนวคิดดังกล่าวด้วย

คำสำคัญ: การจัดเก็บข้อมูล, แนวคิดหลังสมัยใหม่, มิเชลล์ 푸โก, ฌาคส์ แดริดา

Introduction

The study of archive covers a wide spectrum of research areas, not only as a method in the process of data collection, but as a topic of research using a variety of methods. Archival research has become increasingly interdisciplinary, resulting in diversity in the meanings attached to the concept of the archive. As Derrida noted, “nothing is less clear today than the word ‘archive’”². Postmodernism in particular has understood the term with outstanding ideas. This paper analyses the meaning of archive in the theoretical perspectives of postmodernists, particularly Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, revealing their critique of archive today. It explores how archive has been considered differently over time (past, present and future), relating to the purposes for which it might be used by social scientists. Finally, it explains how the postmodernist perspective can be discussed from a wide range of writings.

Michel Foucault: archive as a discourse

Michel Foucault is one of the most studied authors in the theory of archive today. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*³ he distinguished the term ‘archive’ from its conventional definition of a collection of historical records or a place where these records are stored, rather tying it to the idea of ‘discourse’. For Foucault, archive is the character of a discourse that plays the role of “formal identities, thematic continuities, translations of concepts and polemical

² Jacques Derrida, *Archive fever: a Freudian impression*, Prenowitz, E. (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.90.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage books, 2002).

interchanges”, or in his words an ‘historical a priori’⁴. The term a priori does not take into account the truth; rather it is the a priori of a history that can transform, survive and disappear, constituting in particular periods, temporal structures and moving places without being controlled by external laws. From this point of view, Foucault dissociates history – a form of dispersion, a mode of succession or stability only in specific times – from the truth – the decisive matters over time and space – and confirms that archive must not be conceived as the collective of truths, but as the historical statements in specific times or unique events. This concept of unique events relates to the conception of ‘the system of discursivity’ or ‘discursive formation’⁵, which refers to the formation, reservation and transformation of the utterance of singular events. Foucault notes that this distinct discursive formation “no longer has that appearance of a monotonous, endless plain that I attributed to it at the outset when I spoke of ‘the surface of discourse’”⁶; it also excludes the appearance of the inert, smooth and neutral element of any ideas or knowledge.

Thus, archive is not the notion of the sum (collective) of records (i.e. ‘discourses’); rather, these records or discourses appear as a whole set of relations according to specific regularities that are peculiar figures from each event: “they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities”⁷.

⁴ Ibid., p.143.

⁵ Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 4-1 (2004), p. 18.

⁶ Michel Foucault, (2002), op. cit., p.145.

⁷ Ibid., p.146.

Foucault criticises the existence of archive in society throughout history by asserting that archive cannot be explained exhaustively. For him, it is impossible to describe our own archive when archive is in the mode of both appearance and disappearance – some are selected to appear, but some are left to disappear. This mode occurs when archive plays its privileged role, by not establishing our own identity, but indicating the identity in its otherness that differs from our presence, and determining archive from such an otherness⁸. When archive separates us from things that are outside our discursive practice, beginning with our own language, Foucault criticises that this notion of archive, which finally delimits ourselves and ceases to be ‘us’. The critiques of archive from the pre-modern to modern period are discussed later in this paper.

Jacque Derrida: archive as the law

Derrida presents his concept of archive in *Archive Fever*⁹, referring to the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (his critique of these scholars is beyond the scope of this paper). In searching the meaning of archive, Derrida starts his writing by tracing its etymology to *arkhē*, which connotes the archive principles of ‘commencement’ and ‘commandment’; the former refers to things that rely on nature or history, whereas the latter is tied to the realm wherein social order or authority is exercised. Derrida notes that the original meaning of *arkhē* was the term ‘commencement’, where archive in the sense ‘commandment’ was from the Latin word *archivum* or *archium* which relates to the Greek term *arkheion*

⁸ Ibid., p.147.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, op. cit.

in the sense of “initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded”¹⁰. For Derrida, the second meaning of archive shows that only the citizen who could hold political power has an opportunity to impose or call on the law (of archive). He notes that documents that are stored and classified under the name of the archive are a ‘privileged topology’, wherein “law and singularity intersect in privilege”¹¹. In regard to this, Craven¹² observed that both Derrida and Foucault viewed the meaning of archive from the perspective of perceptions of power and control. For Foucault, the archive represents the power to determine people’s deeds and identities, whereas for Derrida it is the idea of law that shows the power of authority (or *archon*).

The notion of ‘commandment’ in Greek antiquity also relates to a house – a private house, a family house or an employee’s house – as a place where archives are filed. The idea of house is the idea of the private sphere¹³. The power of publicly recognised authority shows the passage of the archive from private to public, from a secret area to a non-secret (e.g. transferring from a house to a museum). This is accompanied by the principle of consignment (the principle of gathering together) as the power of *archon* to unify, identify and

¹⁰ Ibid., p.2; see also Robert Vosloo, “Archiving Otherwise: some remarks on memory and historical responsibility,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 31-2 (2005) at, <<http://umkn-dsp01.unisa.ac.za/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10500/4357/Vosloo.pdf?sequence=1>> (searched date: 19 June 2014).

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, op. cit., p.3.

¹² Louise Craven, “From the Archivist’s Cardigan to the Very Dead Sheep: What are Archives? What are Archivists? What do They Do?,” in Louise Craven, ed., *What Are Archives?: Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives: A Reader* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2008), p.14.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, op. cit., pp.2-3.

classify the scattered private documents. As Derrida points out, “There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority”¹⁴.

In this point, Derrida suggests that the meaning of archive must not be conceived as memory or anamnesis¹⁵. Memorisation, repetition, reproduction, reimpression, or compulsion in his viewpoint remain driven by the idea of ‘the death drive’ (a Freudian concept), which ultimately destroys archive itself due to the silent vocation, forgetfulness, amnesia and the annihilation of memory. Instead of the death drive, Derrida suggests the idea of ‘mystic pad’ as a technology (e.g. email) that helps to memorise memory. Such technology is the external apparatus that connects private inscription to public, integrates the borders between insides and outsides in term of ‘internal substrate, surface or space’, and distinguishes from memory. Derrida called such technology as the ‘archival drive’, representing outside memory as internal archivisation¹⁶.

From Past to Future: the purposes of archive in the different aspects between Foucault and Derrida

In *Discipline and Punish*¹⁷ Foucault clarifies his critique of archive by tracing its origins through the pre-modern and modern ages. In pre-modern society, the privileged showed their power to manage, select or neglect archives both in family and official records. That is, in this period of time, privileged life had become documented,

¹⁴ Ibid., p.11.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.11.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

and this documentation was stored and transferred to descendants in subsequent ages (i.e. the future) in a relic-like fashion of public and private heritage. However, this kind of character completely changes in modernity.

In the new power regime of modernism, ordinary rather than privileged individuals – children, patients, madmen and prisoners – became the object and the primary targets of archiving for surveillance, examination and control¹⁸. Foucault points out that what is archived is no longer a monument for future memory; rather it is a document “for possible use”¹⁹. The body-related events of individuals within the contexts of schools, hospitals and prisons are observed, recorded and reported in terms of abnormality. In this point, archive is not dedicated to the service of the future; rather it enforces the power of the state to categorise and divide identities from otherness in everyday life. These identities are the character in the sense of normality that are separated from abnormality (illness, healthiness and madness), not in the sense of nation, culture or religion. Given the foregoing, social scientists can use archives as an object of knowledge in any relevant researches (e.g. the study of marginal people) for the purpose of excavating the power behind the discourse that isolates abnormal people from the normal.

While Foucault attempts to criticise actual archives by relating to their character in the present that serves for manipulating every life, Derrida suggests the proper way to perceive archive is by linking

¹⁸ Ibid.; Rudi Laermans & Pascal Gielen, “The Archive of the Digital An-Archive,” *Image & Narrative*, 17-1 (2007), at <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/digital_archive/laermans_gielen.htm> (searched date: 19 June 2014).

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, (1991), op. cit., p.191.

to the future. For Derrida, archive is not only a place for stocking and conserving the content of the past; it also serves the future. That is, archival documents contain the thoughts about the future in previous times. In this point, Derrida exemplifies the writing of Yerushalmi that reflects the thought about Freud by alluding to a future work²⁰. Moreover, Derrida asserts that the question of archive is not the question of the past; rather it is the question of a responsibility and a promise for tomorrow – the question that will be conveyed to the future²¹. Archive also plays a role to produce an event in the present and future that was recorded in the past²². Derrida adds that the new technology today can help us to achieve this objective of future. The purpose of archive is then to bridge the past and future in Derrida's thought. Social scientists can rely on archive as a law that gathers documents and records together for conveying the knowledge of the past to the future.

Support and Critiques of Postmodernism

This part presents the selected works that support and criticise the ideas of Derrida and Foucault. All of them involve the debate about the relationship between archive and memory. To begin with the supporting works, the study of Millar²³ supports the idea of Derrida that archives and records are not the same as memories. For Millar, archive is not the 'vehicles of memory' because of the bias that may

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p.37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.36.

²² *Ibid.*, p.17.

²³ Laura Millar, "Touchstones: Considering the Relationship between Memory and Archives," *Archivaria*, 61-1 (2006), at <<http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12537/13679>> (searched date: 19 June 2014).

happen during an archival process both from persons who select memories and from the process of collection. In other words, the politics of archive defines what memories are selected and what are destroyed; for example, the devastation of an archive during wartime, or the selection of archive for peaceful divergence in Canada²⁴. In this point, archive can only be a touchstone of memory, and not a repository of it.

However, by tracing a number of historians working in archives, Steedman²⁵ argues that archive can be a space of memory – a place of imagination and dream – of the cultural activity of history. In this point, Steedman raises the idea of Raphael Samuel concerning historical explanation with the notion of causes themselves rather than yielding a fixed linear model of time²⁶. According to Steedman, Gaston Bachelard follows the idea of Samuel by suggesting archive as memory of a dream in the practice of history²⁷. Steedman affirms that although archive is not produced of *everything* (some archives are selected, indexed and catalogued while some are excluded and lost), in the realms of the modern imagination of historians the place of archive can be limitless and boundless²⁸. That is, in the archival method, it has only a process whereby archives are read, used and narrativised, not a process of the politics of archive. This is the space where imagination and dream can be placed. Similarly, Nora²⁹ explains

²⁴ Ibid., pp.122-124.

²⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

²⁶ Ibid., p.78.

²⁷ Ibid., p.80.

²⁸ Ibid., p.68.

²⁹ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, 26-1 (1989), at <http://www.timeandspace.lviv.ua/files/session/Nora_105.pdf> (searched date: 19 June 2014)

that memory comprises two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary (in the sense of records and documents). Nora confirms that the boundary between these two forms always blurs. This means that archive is a form of memory, associated with the idea of history.

Conclusion

In searching the meaning of archive, this study unveiled some similarities and differences between Foucault and Derrida. Foucault³⁰ shows the idea of discourse by suggesting that archive should be conceived as a unique event, or in his words ‘the system of discursivity’, whereas Derrida³¹ refuses the idea of archive as a space of memory by relating it to the idea of ‘commencement’ and ‘commandment’. Their perspectives of archive rely on the perceptions of power and control. The works support and stand against these two postmodernists rely on the thinking about the relationship between archive and memory. Millar³² alluded to the politics of archive that make the impossible of memory in any archives, whereas Steedman³³ and Nora³⁴ suggest the possibility of memory in archives by explaining the idea of imagination of historians and the blurred boundary respectively.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, (2002), op. cit.

³¹ Jacques Derrida, op. cit.

³² Laura Millar, op. cit.

³³ Carolyn Steedman, op. cit.

³⁴ Pierre Nora, op. cit.

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