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ARE ARCHIVES HARMLESS HISTORICAL SOURCES?

Abstract

Purpose: *In this paper we outline the approach to the study of archival sources, also in comparison with other cultural assets such as museums, and identification of the particularities and specific difficulties of documentary sources.*

Method/approach: *It is necessary to deepen the characteristics of archival sources as a cultural asset, and to study them in an ethically correct way the historical events and societies of the past.*

Results: *respect for what the sources tell us ethically, commit us to research and compare different documentation produced by different subjects. From the comparison between the sources and with the help of the tools produced by the archivists, we will be able to bring out the testimonies that will allow us to have an objective overview of reality.*

Conclusions/findings: *the work of archivists and scholars intersect and support each other; the elaboration of correct and objective research tools is fundamental, as it is fundamental to follow the red thread that connects the documentary sources preserved in different conservative subjects and coming from different producers.*

Key words: *archives, history, archival sources, research, subjects.*

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1. PURPOSE

In the recent extraordinary general assembly of ICOM (International Council of museums) held in Prague this year, the new definition of museum was approved, the result of a long participatory process involving 126 Committees around the world. Thus, Art. 3 of the ICOM Statute

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.

How can this change affect and affect archives? Certainly, we are in a different cultural field, and we are talking about goods with very different characteristics and consequently of operators with professional training with different cuts. Therefore, the word *different* often recurs here, but we must also underline how much it brings us closer and unites us in this definition.

Therefore, the museum is a permanent non-profit institution at the service of society, which carries out research, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. This definition could well refer at least in part to the Archives which are certainly a permanent non-profit institution and at the service of the society, they carry out research, and here the differences begin: the Archive does not collect or exhibit, except temporarily and occasionally during documentary exhibitions and the preserved cultural heritage. Then we must ask ourselves if it interprets it and possibly in what way. We will come back to reflect on this point later.

Again: Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums promote diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically and professionally and with the participation of communities, offering diversified experiences for education, pleasure, reflection, and knowledge sharing. It seems to me that this second part of the definition of a museum can also be valid for the Archives, perhaps adding the fundamental offer to scholars of the possibility of directly accessing documentary sources without the intermediation of what has been elaborated and interpreted by others? I would rather say why shouldn't we? The closure of individual cultural assets towards others is certainly harmful, just as the closure towards other scientific fields and from the respectful encounter between different institutions can only result in enrichment, when approached without fear and in respect of each one's fields. So, what can we take from other cultural goods and what can we give to them?

2. METHOD/APPROACH

Here it is appropriate to take a step back and reflect on who we are and what characterizes us. What is the role of archives in a complex society such as ours and how can we immerse ourselves in a contaminated context by helping to make archival values known and disseminated? There seems to be a need for archival science and its public role in the maze of a society substantially unable to give depth to memory and to pass it on in ways that are understandable to the community. Archives preserve a complex heritage and archivists have the difficult task of making it shared. This is a very delicate step! Any work that seriously wants to deal with the study of the past in a serious way must necessarily pass from the investigation of documentary sources. What that said may seem obvious and easy, but it is not! We all know the difficulty of approaching sources: first of all, finding them, reading them, understanding their connection and links. The central point,

however, is another. In the archives we find the documentation that has been preserved which is not all the documentation produced. We also find the official documentation that the institutions have wanted to keep. Basically, we find a "point of view" and in the choice we make of sources we sometimes "force" them to our point of view and to what we want to demonstrate. Archives have always been regularly fiscal ones. A history of the economy that relies only on tax returns would inevitably be falsified. This requires a research effort that goes beyond, that investigates and interweaves other sources to arrive at the truth. The same case is that of the sources that we could define as "political". Those who on one side are considered terrorists and subverters of the established order could be heroes and patriots on the other. For this card game, the sources are not as harmless and impartial as one might think and lend themselves to different and biased readings.

3. RESULTS

Returning to the word *interpret* relating to the definition of museum, here we must strongly claim respect for what the sources tell us by ethically committing ourselves to researching and comparing different documentation produced by different subjects. From the comparison between the sources and with the help of the tools produced by the archivists, we will be able to bring out the testimonies that will allow us to have an objective overview of reality. Then we can only say that we have done a serious historical work, not only based on what is written by others, but not even based on sources chosen because they correspond to what we want to demonstrate without deepening what is the historical truth of the facts whether we like it or not.

4. CONCLUSIONS/FINDINGS

The work of archivists and scholars intersect and support each other; the development of correct and objective research tools is fundamental, just as it is fundamental to follow the red thread that connects the documentary sources preserved in different conservative subjects and coming from different producers. A frank comparison with historians who share with the archivists the sense of the civil value of concepts such as memory and cultural memory would be considered very opportune. What exists between archival science and historical disciplines is a particular relationship, of ancient origin. This relationship has not always been balanced and archival science has not always been respected as a science, in fact it has often been considered as an auxiliary science of history or even worse as a "handmaid" of history. The endless battle of historians between facts and interpretation collides with archival science as an expression of a dynamic expression between events and their graphic representation. On a different ground, it may be useful to share problems and solutions with the large family of information scholars, while maintaining a strong ethical approach. Culture is not a question of defending individual domains, but a sharing of knowledge in respect of everyone's skills and above all in the rigor of a job that is never conditioned by wanting to demonstrate how valid one's theories and one's political position are. A popular saying said "*carta sings*" in the sense that what is documented is true. This is not always the case. The document is sometimes misleading and only by comparing other sources does the truth emerge. Many years ago, as Federico Valacchi recalls in his beautiful volume *Archives between history, use and future*, Eugenio Casanova wrote that there are rare, in Italy and elsewhere, those who know what an archive is; very rare, those who discern what it really is for. But, although few in number, these elects constitute a force, who, with his generous reprimands, sometimes slows down

the havoc, which of the writings that compose it, would incessantly want to do the neglect and brutality of others. This destruction, however, is fatal, ineluctable through time and space, as it is fatal for all creation: what makes the struggle more exquisite, which, in other words, through the work of those few, civilization fights against barbarism. Words still valid even if ancient. The archivists have the task of keeping very rich contexts and contents at bay and the tools that guarantee access to them, of preserving the documentary heritage from discards that are sometimes anything but innocent and of maintaining absolute rigor and a strong ethical sense in dealing with sources; historians not to manipulate the sources for their own use and to commit themselves to maintaining a correct study approach even when uncomfortable.

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