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Postmodern archival science and contemporary diplomatics
New approaches for archival knowledge organization

Abstract
New information technologies and new forms of documentary production have led archivists to rethink the role of archival science in the so-called “information age”. Since the late 1980s, the principles, methods and concepts stated by the well-known manuals of the 19th and the 20th centuries have been reconsidered along with their application to the organic sets of document in the 21st century. In this new scenario of reformulation and reinterpretation regarding the perspectives on archival knowledge organization, two trends with different approaches have emerged in North America and Europe: postmodern archival science and contemporary diplomatics, respectively. The first one was introduced by Terry Cook, who proposed a reformulation of the basic concepts and the functional analysis method focusing on the process and context of document creation. The second approach originated in Italy and incorporated all the theoretical and methodological models of classic diplomatics. The studies following this new trend were disseminated by Luciana Duranti and aimed to ensure the production, access and use of the documentation generated in the present times focusing on document typology, as opposed by the postmodern approach. The purpose of this study is to elucidate the connection points and distinct features between the two trends concerning the organization of archival knowledge.

1: Aim and scope of the study
In recent years, new forms of document production, new communication media and information technologies have challenged both practical and theoretical archival science to rethink its concepts and principles, as well as the role of the archivist in the information society. The object of archival science, previously considered as a set of records produced and received by an entity or an individual throughout an activity, came to be understood as a set of organic information recorded in virtual and dynamic environments.

In the late 1980s, the English archivist Hugh Taylor (1987) announced a change of paradigms in this area and characterized the end of the 20th century as a time of scientific revolution in archival science in the sense that it would not be restricted to documents generated in different and faster ways.

However, there must be an awareness of the emergence of a new paradigm brought about by the social, technological and professional changes that have occurred in the last years. Therefore, archivists must rethink the role of information in public and private institutions where “the right to information” has become a high priority principle.

A re-examination of the foundations of archival knowledge is key to understanding this new emergent paradigm so that the principles and methods stated in the earlier manual archives of the past two centuries may be reinterpreted and even questioned in the light of the paradigmatic changes that occurred by the end of the 1980s.

An attempt to understand this new production and organization process of archival knowledge has been made by archivists who have been working on what they call “provenance rediscovery”. The basic principle of archival science has then gained the status of a “savior” in which rediscovery and reinterpretation are fundamental to
understanding the processes of record creation and organization and the contexts in which documents were generated.

The purpose of archival science, which had been previously based on physical and static principles, was to protect the integrity of the fonds by keeping them physically together. However, more than keeping the union of the documents coming from the same creative source in a specific fond, this principle can be used for a functional analysis of the contexts and processes of document creation (MacNeil 1993, 142).

In this new scenario of reformularization and reinterpretation regarding the perspectives of archival knowledge organization, two trends with different approaches have emerged: postmodern archival science, and contemporary diplomatics. An analysis of the similarities and differences between them basing on the fundamental concepts of the area was carried out in order to elucidate the importance of both approaches in the epistemological construction of contemporary archival science.

**2: Postmodern archival science and contemporary diplomatics**

*Postmodern or functional archival science* was firstly proposed by Hugh Taylor in Canada by the end of the 1980s, but the development of its theoretical aspects only came with the studies done by Terry Cook, an archivist. According to him, postmodernism is the dominant intellectual trend in this age and as such a direct influence on all sciences and disciplines including archival science. It is totally opposed to the notions that shaped the documentary characteristics in the 20th century, namely neutrality and impartiality, and it still remains nowadays as a re-reading of Jenkinsonian assumptions. In contemporary archival science as well as in the society in general the principles and concepts are reconsidered (Cook 2001b, 23).

In this sense, all archival knowledge must also undergo postmodern influences, starting from the concept of archival document, since postmodernism, as opposed to modernism, does not regard it as a mere by-product of an innocent, neutral and impartial administrative action. Everything is shaped according to some purpose. Postmodernists believe it would be impossible to generate a document without any intent of power and manipulation. The discourse and form of the document are minutely elaborated, so as to build up power relationships between the dominator and the dominated (Cook 2001a, 7).

Documents are, therefore, entities socially created for some purpose, which is far from being impartial. Postmodern concepts aim to denaturalize what society assumes as natural and has been accepted as normal and rational for years. Everything is socially and culturally constructed. For postmodernists, deconstructing and reformulating are the best ways to reflect the diversity of contemporary times. It is precisely in this context of reinterpretations, deconstructions and reformularizations that Cook’s characterization of postmodern or functional archival science is inserted (Cook 2001b, 25).

The focus of a document’s context is given by studying provenance. The archivists’ work consists of finding out the relationships between document creators and their functions, which are reflected on the records, as well as the narrative conventions used in this process that in some way will reflect on documentary heritage.

In this context document creators are analyzed from top to bottom, from the whole to the part (top-down approach) thus allowing an archivist to have a better understanding of the function, process and action that generated the document taking into account the
social, organizational and functional contexts and recordkeeping. The focus then becomes external rather than internal and a document’s context and process are to be taken into account. Therefore, on studying an object, the focus is moved away from the actual record content towards its creation process and it is no longer static, nor unchangeable. Archival science should be understood as a dynamic science, one that can change and adapt itself to the most diverse documentary realities regardless of support, means, values and times while incorporating postmodern ideas, such as a new way of looking at this area and understanding the new contexts of document production.

In this scenario of reinterpretation, Terry Cook proposed some “new formularizations” for the most important concepts and principles aiming to change the focus of the discipline – from the record itself to the process or function that generated it. Cook’s principle of provenance is characterized by virtuality and elasticity, which reflect the functions and processes that enables the creator to generate a document in an institution or dynamic organization in constant evolution, with various people and cultures and distinct approaches and conventions. In the postmodern approach, provenance is virtual and related to the generating function and action.

The principle of original order is also discussed. Because of a shift in focus, it is no longer possible to keep physical documents in the same order in which they were produced or to use the same classification system. Software applications and interventions in the production of documents as well as how they are stored in the absence of a physical environment have to be considered. The order will reflect their multiple uses, not their physical arrangement. A document can be ordered in several ways according to various uses and situations. Furthermore, the concept of document (record) has also been reformulated: instead of being static, it becomes dynamic and its components – structure, content and context – are stored not only in a physical environment but also as data by using various software applications.

Archival fonds refer to this new documentary perspective, because they are conceived not as a reflection of a physical order but as a virtual reality based on the dynamic process of document creation and their authors, focusing on functions and activities to contextualize documents. Rather than simply being the place where scholars find documents for their research, the archive then becomes dynamic, an “archive without walls” as Cook says, one that can be found on the Internet, thus facilitating public access to both permanent as well as current documents through several recordkeeping systems.

By considering a document’s context more important than its content, Cook (2006, 101) proposes a macro-appraisal of the functions and activities of documents’ creators and the way citizens interact with them. Document selection and appraisal should be based on a narrative created from context rather than content, taking into account the documents representing the voices of the powerful people and the outcasts’ as well. In this sense, macro-appraisal application can guarantee that many stories will be told, thus following the postmodernists’ belief that there is not only one but many stories in a documental series which may be useful to different public at different times and places.

The meaning of a document is relative, for a text encompasses many others within itself, so an archivist’s task involves shaping the meaning of such document. Macro-appraisal is then an important tool that enables the archivist to narrate other stories besides the one made explicit in the document through the story of its creators, how and
why it was generated. Therefore, macro-appraisal is inserted in functional archival science, which will always give priority to the creator, the social function of a document’s contextual creation and the way it interacts with its users, a creator or a researcher alike.

In conclusion, functional archive science is characterized by a functional and social context of a document, with emphasis on the provenance and dynamic nature of an archival record as a virtual object constructed for a purpose and focusing on the creative process of these records.

The second approach, called contemporary diplomatics, originated in Europe, particularly in Italy, in the 1980s. It has incorporated the theoretical and methodological body of classic diplomatics aiming to ensure the creation, access and use of contemporary documents through documentary typology studies. In 1987 Paola Carucci, a pioneer in contemporary diplomatics, published Il documento contemporaneo: diplomatica e criteri di edizione, which deals with the application of the methods of this new approach to administrative public documents, making it possible a fusion between diplomatics and archival science, since both approaches deal with the same object, that is, the archival document. Carucci’s studies of contemporary documents led her to the conclusion that the same elements contained in medieval documents are also present in current administrative public documents (Carucci 1987, 28). Two years later, in 1989, Luciana Duranti, an Italian archivist from the British Columbia University in Canada, published a series of articles entitled Diplomatics: new uses for an old science, which extends the application of the method to any types of document, including the electronic ones (Duranti 1991; MacNeil 2000, 89).

Therefore, diplomatics has provided a tool for archivists to understand documentary sets. Such tool is the study of documentary typology, which is an application of the diplomatics methods proposed by Carucci and Duranti. Diplomatics can be perfectly applied to contemporary documents and the study of their creation process. Through typological analysis, the archivist can identify the function of documents and their production context, focusing his analysis on the evidence of its formal elements, regardless of other alternative sources, such as organization charts and regiments. The analysis is made from bottom to top, from the documentary part (bottom-up diplomatic analysis) of the document itself. This approach establishes a relationship between document creators and archivists by connecting the archival documents and the legal system in which they were created. The method proposed by contemporary diplomatics takes into account the facts and actions, the procedures that generated them, the people who worked on creating the document and the function contained in such document. Contrary to postmodernism, this approach proposes an internal analysis of the document in order to know the context in which records are created. In this sense, documentary typology becomes an indispensable method in the organization of archival knowledge.

The concept of an internal logic, claimed by this approach, can also be considered an extension of Sir Hilary Jenkinson’s views, which have been revisited in the last decades by theoreticians like Duranti. Jenkinson considered a document as an impartial, neutral and natural product of an activity, the evidence of an activity or fact. In some ways, this notion finds support in the documentary studies carried out by Suzanne Briet in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, in which a document was conceived as evidence. Documents are considered impartial because they are “inherently true” or, as Jenkinson believed,
“free from the suspicion of prejudice in regard to the interests in which we now use them” (Duranti 1994, 02). The conception proposed by Duranti (1997, 215) and contemporary diplomatics concerning the study of the creation processes of a document takes into account the internal logic of documentary sets.

The concepts and fundamental principles of archival science, such as document concept, the principle of provenance, the principle of original order, the concepts of fond, appraisal and archival science proposed by Duranti’s approach also reflect a standpoint “free” from political, social and cultural influences, and therefore more descriptive and positivist than the postmodern and functional approach. Duranti considers archival science neutral, impartial and based on universally valid principles and concepts.

“Archival science is the body of knowledge about the nature and characteristics of archives and archival work systematically organized into theory, methodology and practice.” (Duranti 1995a, 01).

According to contemporary diplomatics, internal logic is much more important than the historical, legal and cultural contexts of document creation, which leads to the conclusion that by definition archival science using this approach also represents an antithesis of postmodern thinking, since the discipline is considered a natural science.

By viewing its principles as “universally valid”, contemporary diplomatics does not propose reinterpretations and much less reformulations as postmodern archival science has done, thus basing on the main archival manuals to construct its principles, such as the Manual for the arrangement and description of Archives by three Dutch archivists, the Manual of archival administration by Jenkinson, Casanova’s Archivistica, Archivkunde by Brenneke, and Schellenberg’s Modern archives.

The proposal made by Duranti and, consequently, by contemporary diplomatics is to maintain the principles and the archival concepts stated in the earlier manuals, and to renew the method and the object of the discipline, in order to enable archivists to identify and to reestablish the creation context of contemporary documents in the most diverse means and frameworks, which will contribute to guarantee the survival of archival science in the 21st century.

Nevertheless, an exception should be pointed out: “provenance rediscovery” is also claimed by contemporary diplomatics, since the study of a document’s creator and its functions are of utmost importance for knowledge of organizations. However, contrary to the postmodern approach, the document and its typology, not its creation process should be analyzed.

Moreover, the archivist’s role in this new context is similarly conceived in both approaches: he should not be a mere guardian of memory, but an active participant in the document’s creation process from the very beginning to guarantee optimization and rationalization in documentary production and a better understanding of the production context of documents as well as his role and function in the institution.

In the postmodern society, archival science goes beyond the preservation of the documents resulting from administrative activities. It must also make archives available to users and encourage their access to documents.

The present analysis has shown that the two approaches are mutually related and even complement one another. For this reason, their connection points and distinct features should be brought out as a contribution to the organization of archival knowledge, particularly after the 1980s, due to the emergency of establishing a new
paradigm in the area for dealing with new forms of documentary production and information technologies.

The following chart shows a comparison between both approaches: postmodern archival science and contemporary diplomatics and their main principles and concepts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles and concepts</th>
<th>Postmodern archival science</th>
<th>Contemporary diplomatics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archival science</td>
<td>Dynamic science that adapts itself to a great variety of documental realities, regardless of environment, support, values and times</td>
<td>Neutral and unbiased science that has universally valid and unchangeable principles and concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of the discipline</td>
<td>Context and process of record creation</td>
<td>Record itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle of provenance</td>
<td>Related to the generating function and activity of a document and reflecting its functions and creation processes</td>
<td>Related to the generating function and activity of a document and reflecting its functions and creation processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record (concept and characteristics)</td>
<td>Socially and culturally constructed conceptual data. Active agent in human, social and organizational life</td>
<td>Impartial product, naturally created from an activity performed by an individual or institution throughout their functions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method for archival knowledge organization</td>
<td>Top-down analysis</td>
<td>Bottom-up diplomatic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The archivist role in contemporary society</td>
<td>Active participation in the creation process of documents rather than being a mere custodian of memory</td>
<td>Active participation in the creation process of documents rather than being a mere custodian of memory.</td>
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</table>

**3: Conclusion**

It is true that in the last years functional archival science has developed a new theoretical corpus in the field (such as a reinterpretation of the fundamental principles and concepts) which is much more consistent with the current archival science reality. On the other hand, however, contemporary diplomatics has proposed a method that allows retrieving any document through the analysis of its internal and external elements regardless of its nature. As administrations become more flexible, and develop horizontal functions and competences, the structure of the institutions becomes more fragmented. Analyzing records as documentary pieces, which in some way traces back
to this fragmented structure, is a safe path for the development of methods in archival science.

It was observed that although the means used by postmodern archival science and contemporary diplomatics are different, both approaches have similar ends: to guarantee the organization of archival knowledge and to provide the discipline with support at a time of paradigmatic shifts and technological innovations. As Cook (1997, 37) pointed out, “both approaches have important insights to offer to a contextualized understanding of the record, and thus both should be used as interrelated tools by the archivist”.

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