

A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We're Doing That's All That Important?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a new and provocative thesis has been presented to the archival profession, to wit: to be an ethical archivist, one must pursue “social justice” in all phases of archival practice. While a professional agenda of social justice encompasses the more familiar ideology of “activist archivist,” it stretches much farther and has much more profound consequences for our profession. This article challenges both the philosophy and utility of social justice as the end of archival effort and proposes an alternative goal for the profession.

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KEY WORDS

Archival Theory and Principles, Ethics, Public Policy, Writings about Archives

In recent years, a new and provocative thesis has been presented to the archival profession, to wit: to be an ethical archivist, one must pursue “social justice” in all phases of archival practice.¹ While a professional agenda of social justice encompasses the more familiar ideology of “activist archivist,” it stretches much farther and has much more profound consequences for our profession. An activist archivist is one who “embrace[s] diversity in order to represent all voices in society—not just the political, economic, social, and intellectual elites.”²

In 1975, F. Gerald Ham developed the concept and the term “*active archivist*” in his Presidential Address to the Society of American Archivists (SAA).³ The precise term “*activist archivist*”—and an even clearer and more highly charged definition—appeared in print two years later, from Patrick Quinn, David Horn, Howard Zinn, and Sam Warner. Zinn perhaps gave the concept of *activist archivist* its most rhetorically memorable incarnation and added to the concept by arguing for an archival imperative to work toward unfettered access to the records of government.⁴ The argument also elicited a strong critique from Gregory Stiverson.⁵ This idea of archival responsibility to diversity hardly merits justification in 2012, as both individual practitioners and the profession as a whole have widely accepted it for so long.

I believe it is accurate for me to identify as an activist archivist. Thus, social justice advocates and I stand together in recognizing archivists’ agency as the center of archival “power,”⁶ in working to strengthen the profession’s advocacy agenda,⁷ and in believing that archivists have a responsibility as a profession to diversify their holdings, the profile of their researchers, and the very composition of their working ranks.⁸ But, while for social justice proponents these are building blocks toward the conclusion that archivists have an obligation, both singly and as a profession, to pursue social justice in their daily work, I see these efforts as ends in themselves rather than means to a larger, social justice end.

But, while at times proponents of social justice write of it and activist archivy as if the former were simply an extension of the latter, I will argue that a social justice agenda represents both a difference in degree and a difference in kind from an activist agenda. I find the specific call to pursue a goal of social justice outside the bounds of my understanding of our professional purpose. More than that, indeed: I believe that pursuing “social justice,” as high minded and as universal an aspiration as it may sound, risks overly politicizing and ultimately damaging the archival profession. Though proponents believe strongly that social justice is not only a professional ethical imperative but a means of properly deploying and, in fact, contributing to the “power” of archivists, I fear such an alteration of archival goals risks weakening both our ethical standing and our power.

Advocates of social justice conceive of the archival mandate this way: archivists not only can but must “serve the interests of promoting a more just and

equitable society.” Or, put a slightly different way, archivists should add “social responsibility—including moral responses to the call for social justice—to their concept of professional ethics.”⁹ This is a timely and compelling thesis that cannot easily be brushed aside. So, while my disagreement with the social justice thesis is profound, that thesis has formulated an important challenge for the profession, which, as we respond to it, will make us stronger and more self-aware. The ultimate challenge for archivists of our era is to define an ultimate purpose and highest value for our profession.

Gas Chambers, Good Recordkeeping, and the Social Justice Imperative

The earliest and, outside the United States, best-known proponent of the social justice imperative is Verne Harris of South Africa.¹⁰ In his fullest exploration of and exhortation to social justice pursuits by archivists, Harris, following Jacques Derrida, stated “that politics is archival; that the archive is the very possibility of politics.”¹¹ More than that, to Harris, a “strong correlation between oppression and thorough recordkeeping” is axiomatic. Since, as he sees it, “the exercise of political power hinges on control of information,” he can also follow Foucault in accepting that “‘The archive is the first law of what can be said. . . .’ And *when* it can be said, *how*, and *by whom*.”¹² Therefore, he concluded, “In this reading all power, ultimately, is archontic. If the work of archives is to harness power for good, if it is to be a work of using power for good, then it must be a work of justice. More importantly, the work of archives, archontic work, is a condition for justice to come.”¹³

This led Harris to declare that “for archivists and other recordmakers, ‘the political’ is unavoidable. Those who believe they can separate the ‘professional’ from other spaces, who believe they can remain professionally impartial, fool themselves and condemn themselves to being pawns of those who hold power.” To drive the point home in the most visceral way, Harris then quoted controversial Australian archivist Christopher Hurley: “‘We cannot comfortably design a better system for documenting the number of heads being processed through the gas chambers as if good recordkeeping (in a technical sense) can be divorced from the uses to which it is put.’”¹⁴ The clear (to me) dichotomy implied here is that one is either a socially just archivist who resists or sabotages recordkeeping as a means of mitigating the injustice documented by the records, or one must accept complicity in any and all atrocities that might be committed by the sociopolitical structure of which one as an archivist is a part.

This black-and-white, cut-and-dried understanding of archival roles and responsibilities cannot go unchallenged. Michelle Caswell, for her part, gamely attempted to lay out a much more complex perspective on archival roles and

ethics for those employed by evil or corrupt institutions, even though she began her analysis by echoing Harris:

Archivists, like any other bureaucrats in a system, bear responsibility for, and complicity in, the overarching end goal of the system. . . . In this way, we are not “referees” but “contestants” in the game of history. As contestants, archivists must fully own up to their roles in knowledge production, and critically engage with the ultimate aims of such knowledge. Are we going to carry on with business as usual, even if that business involves facilitating injustice (including, in extreme cases, mass murder), as did the Stasi file clerks, or are we going to question our neutrality and resist?¹⁵

What would resistance by archivists look like? Presumably it would entail sabotaging the recordkeeping system and/or the records it produces to make it more difficult for Stasi agents to torture political prisoners and for Nazi bureaucrats to order mass executions.

Superficially, such resistance may seem morally attractive. But our world is more complicated than this, as Caswell seemed to recognize in an earlier examination of archivists and evil. How is it that after committing their atrocities, Nazi bureaucrats and Stasi agents could be prosecuted for their crimes? The legal proceedings rested solidly on the evidence in the very records that archivists should have resisted creating or even destroyed. As Caswell wrote:

As archivists, it is our duty not to be thoughtless “cogs” in a seemingly impartial machine, but rather to actively interrogate the function of record making and recordkeeping in our society *and actively document when such functions go horribly wrong*. . . . In this way, records created by the Khmer Rouge to more efficiently manage the business of torture and murder, when preserved, have an incomparable ability to hold former officials accountable. This link between archival preservation and accountability is seen across oppressive regimes in countries as diverse as South Africa under apartheid and Chile under Pinochet, as many “archives meant to serve the powerful may serve to indict them for their crimes, no matter how much they may attempt to practice national amnesia through the destruction of evidence. . . .”¹⁶

If archivists are responsible for documenting injustice, they cannot, it seems to me, simply refuse to participate in the recordkeeping system of unjust regimes. Caswell balanced, at least temporarily, the role supposedly evil records had in ensuring punishment for the evildoers with her admonition to archivists against conducting “business as usual” for suspect regimes. This tension, confusion, paradox, or flat-out contradiction in understanding both the role of records and the role of archivists is part and parcel of the call to a social justice agenda.

It seems obvious that it is not possible for archivists, on the one hand, to be morally bankrupt if they are actively involved in creating and maintaining recordkeeping systems and records for mass murderers *and*, on the other hand,

to be morally righteous when they ensure that those same records are extant for use in convicting those murderers. So, while I cannot agree with Harris and Hurley that the choice is unambiguous, neither am I entirely comfortable with Caswell's ambiguity. A difficult assessment must be made about whether it is more important to sabotage the records of injustice or to ensure that reliable records of injustice exist to be used by the just.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, archivists who study the use of bureaucratic records in bringing wrongdoers and evildoers to justice are more inclined to think that creating and preserving the documentation of mistakes and crimes are more important than resisting their creation:

The documents were repurposed after internment to reinterpret the meaning of that era and to seek redress for interned Japanese Americans. This secondary informational value of the records was made possible because the documents had been preserved at repositories such as the National Archives. The case of Japanese American internment documents illustrates one value of archives to society: to preserve documents that can aid in the reinterpretation of historical events and the recognition of past errors. *The use of records for social justice is a key illustration of the power of recordkeeping.* By relying on the documentary record created during Japanese American internment and preserved in archives, it was later possible to hold the American government accountable for the violation of people's rights.¹⁸

This appears to be a very different conception of social justice for archivists than Harris promulgated. Harris insisted that "Far from being an impartial custodian, the archivist is a memory activist *either for or against the oppression system.*" From this hardly nuanced starting point, he goes on to note that, using his deconstructionist¹⁹ lens,

to be human is to be an archivist, and there is no impartial custodian, period. Every act of custodianship is implicated in acts of constructing, representing, accessing, and disseminating what is held in custody. Every act of custodianship assumes an exercise of power; and every exercise of power is at once a temptation to injustice and a call to justice. Moreover, the structural pull in all custodianship is towards the replication of existing relations of power, with the attendant exclusions, privilegings, and marginalisations. Custodians—archivists—cannot avoid complicity. But we can work against the pull; and for deconstruction, it is a moral imperative to do so.²⁰

While it is flattering, in a way, to be told that "to be human is to be an archivist," it is also, in any concrete sense, nonsensical. Not nonsensical but troubling is the notion that a moral imperative exists for archivists to "work against" "existing relations of power" by deconstructing both the recordkeeping systems that sustain privilege (but that also hold the privileged accountable later) and the very power relationships that establish privilege as well.

Harris then admitted but refused to address a significant weakness in the pursuit of social justice by archivists: "I would readily concede that the [social justice] argument . . . is a dangerous one. Give up the notion of the archivist as impartial custodian, as honest broker, and one opens the door to activist archivists pursuing any and every political agenda." He admitted, "I have offered no blueprint for avoiding the dangers, I don't know and I can't imagine, how the dangers can be avoided." But he was adamant that such dangers pale compared to those of archivists avoiding "the call of justice, the call for justice." Whose justice? Justice for whom? As he himself acknowledged, indeed celebrated, this is contested ground. Rather than seeking to resolve the contests, he, as a dedicated deconstructionist, celebrated ongoing contestation, though he recognized that "there are limits—there must be limits—to contestation." What those limits are, however, he left entirely unanswered and indeed unexplored.

Rather than exploring those limits, much less seeking to resolve the contests, Harris concluded by simply proclaiming that ignoring the call for justice, rather than exploring the tensions, paradoxes, even contradictions inherent in such a call, represents "the easy way out."²¹ This is, it seems to me, ultimately too facile a resolution, particularly given that Harris elsewhere articulated a very specific political agenda of his own, which complies fairly neatly with the tradition of discourse being relatively far left of center in Western democracies. I am personally sympathetic to much of his politics, but not to the idea that such politics constitutes the mandate of the archival profession and its individual practitioners.

Pursuing Social Justice as a Professional Ethical Imperative: The North American Model

Though Harris and Hurley represent the Southern Hemisphere, an equally strong argument for social justice as an ethical imperative for our profession has been mounted in our half of the world as well. In Canada, the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) formed a Special Interest Section on the theme of social justice,²² the objectives of which are to

1. Foster awareness of and greater access to archival holdings related to social justice movements across Canada;
2. Encourage active collection of records related to social justice movements in cooperation with the records creators;
3. Develop strong relationships between archivists and social justice activists;
4. Identify past and current social justice movements and gaps in archival holdings as they relate to said movements;

5. Educate archivists on the need for and importance of social justice movements and their documentation;
6. Encourage the ACA to speak on behalf of the archives profession on issues related to social justice in Canada;
7. Encourage archivists to engage in social justice movements in their professional capacities; and
8. Build international networks with archivists who are interested in social justice issues in other countries.²³

Well-known and well-respected U.S. archivist Randall Jimerson has promulgated the most widely disseminated and comprehensive formulation of social justice in archival practice. While Jimerson presents his conception of a social justice goal less normatively, less stridently, and, to my mind, much less insultingly to those with questions or reservations, nevertheless, it is the same fundamental argument with the same goal as that presented by Harris, Hurley, and others publishing overseas. Jimerson has presented his arguments for social justice as an archival imperative in at least three presentations, two articles, and a significant monograph.²⁴

Jimerson told U.K. archivists: "I believe that the archival profession should actively engage the political issues of our times. In supporting open government, public accountability, accurate remembrance of the past, and documentation of society's diversity, archivists should respond to what Nelson Mandela refers to as the call of justice." Assuming that Jimerson intends "public accountability" to apply primarily to public agencies and officials, and to private organizations and employees only to the degree the law requires, I could subscribe to the second sentence of this quotation, even agreeing to call support of such activities "justice." On the other hand, I interpret "actively engage in political issues of our time" to embrace far more than open government, public accountability, and the rest of his short list. Engaging broadly in politics as professionals makes no more sense to me when applied to archivists than it would if applied to accountants, computer programmers, or engineers.

It is important to understand that Jimerson's push for a social justice agenda for archives and archivists is grounded on the conviction, which I fully share, that what archivists do *matters profoundly* to the larger society. It matters because, Jimerson and I believe, archivists wield significant power, though power that archivists themselves have long denied. Jimerson wrote:

Elisabeth Kaplan found that although anthropologists and archivists claim to be "disinterested selectors," both serve as "intermediaries between a subject and its later interpreters, a function/role that is one of interpretation itself." Echoing George Orwell, Kaplan concluded that, "This power over the evidence of representation, and the power over access to it, endows us with some measure of power over history, memory, and the past." Such power in the archives

carries with it a significant measure of responsibility. If the adage that power corrupts is true, we must be on our guard.²⁵

Where Jimerson and I sharply divide is over the question of whence the threat of corruption: he insists that the threat stems from archival passivity as a neutral cog in a repressive regime; I contend that the threat arises from our becoming enmeshed in the very corrupt systems and (arguably) corrupt values often reflected on both sides of the social justice divide in the heat of passion.

Jimerson asserted that the danger to archival power comes from unthinking service bolstering unjust, segregated, unequal, and often repressive social, political, and economic systems:

Historical examples abound of societies in which the powerful ruled by controlling and manipulating information and records. From ancient times to the present, disquieting use has been made of archival records to establish, document, and perpetuate the influence of power elites.

Even in democratic societies, public officials often seek to control public discourse by manipulating access to information, as Tim Ericson clearly and eloquently reminded us in his 2004 Society of American Archivists presidential address: "Nothing has been able to slow the growth of secrecy in government. Many suspect it serves the interests of politics, malfeasance, misdeeds, and potential embarrassment more than our national security." Government secrecy is the enemy of truth, accountability, and social justice.²⁶

Leaving aside for the moment the broader truth Jimerson is working to establish, I must note two weaknesses with this portion of his argument. One is the short shrift he gives to the indispensability of the records from abhorrent regimes in ensuring that their leaders and functionaries were brought to justice.²⁷ The other is the curiously sweeping nature of his condemnation of government secrecy. We all know that secrecy is used at times for tactical purposes in the *aid* of socially *just* causes—even Ericson recognized "the nation's genuinely confidential records."²⁸

Jimerson, whom I have always considered an optimist at heart (a quality I admire and covet), is no less so when it comes to the difficult but (he avers) necessary goal of pointing the archival profession onto the path of social justice:

I remain optimistic that archivists can become agents of change in the interests of accountability, social justice, and diversity. . . . What gives me hope are recent events in which archives and records have contributed to the public interest in four ways:

1. by holding political and social leaders accountable for their actions,
2. by resisting political pressure in order to support open government,
3. by redressing social injustices, and
4. by documenting underrepresented social groups and fostering ethnic and community identities.²⁹

Jimerson goes on to posit that “In considering what archivists can do in their professional roles to strengthen the cause of social justice, we need to look first at archivists’ external relations with recordmakers, donors, researchers, and employers. Public advocacy is essential for the archival profession’s survival. It is also the most direct means by which it can contribute to the public interest.” More specifically, “archivists must sometimes be willing to take a public stand. . . .” This far I can only add “hear, hear!” But then he goes further than I feel is either necessary or wise: in addition, we need to reconsider our “own professional assumptions, methods, and practices in light of the desired outcomes of justice and diversity. There is no easy solution for the longstanding problems of social injustice, discrimination, and unchecked political power.”³⁰

One serious obstacle he espies that makes achieving his goal more difficult is a conflation within postmodern discourse of two terms. “A common fallacy is to equate objectivity with neutrality. One can maintain professional standards even while advocating a cause or defending a moral or ideological perspective.” He remarked that historian Thomas Haskell defended “the validity of the concept of objectivity, while attempting to rid it of ‘unwanted connotations’ such as neutrality, selflessness, and passivity.” Jimerson returned to Haskell’s argument that a historian’s “primary commitment” to truth sets limits to political advocacy but did not prohibit such pursuits. One cannot, Haskell is quoted as saying, claim “the privilege of lying or obscuring the truth for good causes.” Jimerson’s quotation of Haskell concluded with a demand that “‘members of the scholarly community . . . put intellectual values ahead of political ones,’” or else they “‘erase the only possible boundary between politically committed scholarship and propaganda and thereby rob the community of its principal justification for existence.’”³¹

While I take more extended issue below with Jimerson’s distinction between objectivity and neutrality, I must point out here that the risk of exchanging professional purpose for “propaganda” is a concern I believe derives, rather, from archivists *embracing* the highly political and politicized social justice agenda. Moreover, other social justice advocates are quite pointed in arguing that archivists should, if not *subordinate*, then at least *conflate*, their intellectual rigor and their sociopolitical pursuits. David Wallace, for example, wrote that “professional responsibilities require examination of the relationship between parochial and insular orientations with broader social justice concerns”—making clear that he believes the disunity of professional and personal values is “the source of many professional ethical infractions.”³²

Objectivity vs. Neutrality

Anchoring Jimerson's argument that archivists be social justice activists is his understanding of the concepts of neutrality and objectivity, and his strong belief that archivists should strive for the latter but must abandon the former. Though Jimerson certainly understands that objectivity, in any pure sense, is not possible, he is adamant that it be a goal. On the other hand, he insists that neutrality, even the attempt at it, is ultimately an evil that accedes to the power status quo. He quoted sociologist Harvey Kaye that "I would insist that even as we impress upon our students the imperative and value of objectivity and its limits, we must reject the spurious equation of objectivity with neutrality, . . . and encourage students to apply their newly acquired scholarly skills . . . both to analyzing and to speaking out on public issues." Jimerson added that "archivists should heed this call to activism. It is essential to seize the power of archives and to use it to hold institutional and governmental leaders accountable." Jimerson continued that "A common fallacy is to equate objectivity with neutrality. One can maintain professional standards even while advocating a cause or defending a moral or ideological perspective." He again quoted historian Haskell, stating that "there is widespread recognition within the [historical] profession that political commitment need not detract from the writing of history—not even from its objectivity—as long as honesty, detachment, and intelligence are at work."³³ Jimerson feels so strongly about the counterproductivity of neutrality that he took the step, unusual for him, of attacking it disdainfully: "Even if archivists were to accept the possibility of such neutrality and passivity, do we really want to be obsequious Uriaiah Heeps, handmaidens to history? We should have more self-respect than this."³⁴

I feel compelled to disagree both with Jimerson's sustaining some meaningful form of objectivity and his call to abandon any pretense of neutrality. My understanding of objectivity from a postmodern sensibility is that it is a chimera and that it is counterproductive to claim to pursue objectivity within "its limits" because there are so many limits that objectivity, normally so-called, is not feasible. Not even "respect for logical coherence, fidelity to evidence, detachment, candor, honesty, and the like"³⁵ can achieve a semblance of objectivity; or else how do equally logical, faithful, detached, and so on historians achieve radically opposite theses about the same facts? "Honesty, detachment, and intelligence" can produce good history, perhaps good archival work, but not "objective" history nor "objective" archival work.

It has long been my interpretation that objectivity must give way to transparency, wherein historians and archivists are responsible for understanding and making clear their agency in formulating the content and meaning of archives: "For archivists themselves, the postmodern shift requires moving

away from identifying themselves as passive guardians of an inherited legacy to celebrating their role in actively shaping societal memory.”³⁶ And while strict neutrality, like objectivity, is impossible, I believe that as a goal it is even more important. Why? The simple answer is that without the goal of neutrality, we will inevitably have archivists, as Harris said, “pursuing any and every political agenda.” In other words, archivists and their institutions will become completely politicized, the stalking horses or pawns of every stripe of partisan effort. The result will assuredly *not* be what Jimerson envisions and wishes for—the archival profession becoming a counterbalance to the existing power structure, affecting the entrance of the “other” into the historical record and empowering the powerless.

I happen to like very much the vision and definition provided by a reader of an early draft of this article:

I believe that a central tenet of archival management is that we be “honest brokers.” We don’t have to pretend to have no political sympathies, but we need to present our archives as neutral ground, in order to be able to reasonably collect records from all parts of the political spectrum. Advancing what the left calls “social justice” and the right calls no such thing, will not advance that neutral ground status. As an archivist I reserve the right to march in a gay rights parade one day, as a private person, and collect the records of an anti-gay organization the next day, and tell [the group] in all honesty that I highly value their records and appreciate their willingness to donate them to my archives to help complete the picture of life in today’s society.³⁷

Jimerson contended that “Archives, libraries, and museums have never been neutral. Throughout western history they have served the interests of the state and its elites. As library historian Matthew Battles declares, libraries have always been ‘a battleground for contesting ideologies.’”³⁸ But one can interpret Battles’s remark a different way—if archives (as with libraries) are “battlegrounds for contesting ideologies,” then should not that ground be neutral ground so that the terrain does not unduly influence the contest of ideologies one way or the other?

One of my proudest moments as an archivist was discovering that a prospective donor, a woman of decided liberal passions, shared with one of my colleagues that she liked me even though I was a conservative.³⁹ In point of fact, I am approximately as liberal in my politics as that donor, but I work hard to maintain, with both liberal and conservative donors, a polite distance from political conversations, leading individuals of both persuasions to assume I do not participate because I am of the other persuasion but too respectful to openly disagree.

As long as I managed to convince individuals of both the left and the right that I am either neutral or a respectful, polite, nonideological opposite, I

succeeded in winning donations from across the political spectrum. Jimerson contended that “The starting point for archivists responding to the call of justice is to recognize that neutrality is an illusion. However much they protest their impartiality and neutrality, archivists cannot avoid leaving their own imprint on these powerful sources of knowledge and identity.”⁴⁰ But I would respond that archivists’ agency and imprint is a matter of objectivity (or rather the absence thereof) rather than of rejecting neutrality.

Moreover, the very idea that there is an objectively defined and universally accepted power structure against which archivists must work is itself an ironic relic of modernist positivism. To use Terry Cook’s phrasing, it is exactly the kind of pseudo-objective metanarrative that postmodernism rejects. It may seem to many of Jimerson’s readers, at first blush, that in the United States (and most of Western society) “power structure” defined in terms of white, Christian, heterosexual males is simply an unarguable truth. But more analysis will undermine certainty. In the United States of 2013, there is *no* universal agreement about who or what constitutes the power structure; many white, Christian, heterosexual males feel keenly that they have been radically *disempowered*, a perception particularly strong among certain socio-economic groups of such males. Any archivist accepting their worldview (and I do not) would perforce be driven to document exactly those individuals and organizations that Jimerson claimed represent the power status quo, because, from their perspective (and there is some evidence to support this perception), the presumed *powerful* are actually *powerless*.⁴¹

Pragmatism: Private Archives in the Social Justice Universe

According to Jimerson, “The challenge facing archivists—and anyone else contending with the competing demands of morality, politics, professional standards, and funding imperatives—is to articulate a vision that balances these considerations. In doing so, archivists need to heed the call to honesty, fairness, accountability, justice, and transparency in their professional practice.”⁴² Except for the word “justice,” I could easily have penned that sentence. I do not understand why “justice” seems to Jimerson and others to fit in that list, because for me it represents an outlier. And, at a more practical level, the case for social justice as archival mandate seems to reinforce the pernicious argument that corporate (and, to a lesser extent, other private institutional) archives are themselves outliers from the true archival profession.

While one can argue that an institutional archives ultimately serves humanity and even justice simply by ensuring that records are preserved, whether or not there is any intention of releasing those records outside the institution (and regardless of the extent to which the institutional mission itself is clearly a social good), I find such an argument rather tortuous, leaving in doubt the

ethical status of such institutional archives. This question of the ethical status of institutional archives has been most acute, historically, when applied to corporate archives and archivists. Thus, critics have questioned whether business archivists can ever be ethical as long as they place institutional priorities above social good—a behavior of which critics find corporate archivists guilty for as basic an act as keeping business records private.

This excoriation of corporate archivists rests in part on the belief that archivists by definition serve the public, and this to me is a queer kind of assertion.⁴³ This not only puts corporate archivists in a professional bind, it suggests that any other archivists who maintain records that are inaccessible to the public—religious archivists, some private university archivists, some organizational archivists—are not fully (or true) professionals. Such a criticism obviously cannot be grounded on any assumption that the institution has an obligation to make its records public; like it or loathe it, private property enjoys substantial protection in our society, as any archivist at a public institution negotiating access restrictions on a private donation knows full well. It is surely not the institutional archivist's responsibility to overturn the system of private ownership in the United States.

Richard Cox took suspicion of the professionalism of corporate archivists to a logical conclusion in his letter to the editor of *The American Archivist* in the Fall/Winter 2003 issue. "What intrigues me," he wrote, "is how the individual functioning as an archivist or records manager can work in the corporate environment in any realistic way, adhering to any sense of professional ethics or mission."⁴⁴ His argument was that corporate archivists, instead of serving a broad societal mission, instead serve their institutions, and that their institutions are—in his opinion—inherently antithetical to the social good archivists are (he believes) required to pursue. How much more weight would Cox's argument have if we accepted not only that archivists were required to pursue social good but social justice as well?

Whence does this belief derive? After all, as a profession we continue to debate vigorously whether the archival mission is societal or institutional.⁴⁵ Please note that in the SAA *Code of Ethics*, no statement outlines an archivist's societal responsibilities or identifies certain employment venues as antithetical to ethical archival behavior. (On the other hand, there is in the ethics code a clear statement on "respecting each institution and its mission."). The Association of Canadian Archivists ethics code specifies only that archivists serve their users, implicitly defined as the patron set specified by the institution, internal or external.

Similarly, the American Library Association's code of ethics makes no presumption of public service, only service to one's users, however defined. Indeed, clause 5 states, "Librarians must distinguish clearly in their actions

and statements between their personal philosophies and attitudes and those of an institution or professional body,” suggesting that personal philosophies are subordinate to the attitudes and missions of their institutions.⁴⁶ Now, when personal beliefs about fundamental values conflict with institutional mission, an archivist, like any other employee, would be forced to choose between the two and either remain or resign.

Jimerson rejects such wholesale critique of archivists for private institutions, as he should, but he is ultimately unable, to my mind, to account satisfactorily for how such institutional archives are pursuing social justice—and thus implicitly leaves them at best in ethical limbo. He stated, for example, that “Corporate records possess primary importance and value for the organizations that create and maintain them, but they also form part of the societal heritage of the broader communities within which the corporations operate.” So far, so good, but he goes on to argue that, therefore, “citizens of the communities and nations affected by corporations should expect some level of access to historical records, pertaining to societal concerns.” Indeed, he viewed as an important if “distant goal,” “Legislation to ensure archival preservation of private records, in both public and private repositories, [to] guarantee citizens of a country access to their national heritage.”⁴⁷

Apparently, just as postmodernism has overturned Enlightenment positivism, so too has it (or should have) abolished such quaint notions as private property—otherwise legislation to mandate preservation of and public access to private records is a meaningless desire. And here we see one of the complications of a social justice ethos that Jimerson seems not to acknowledge: even some who might accept such a mandate in the abstract will not be willing to accept that socialization of property is a necessary component of “social justice.”

My position, instead, is that we can acknowledge that whether or not corporate records are made accessible is the prerogative of the corporation; at the same time, we can encourage them to open as many records as they deem reasonable to public access. This is what our profession currently does with private donors; the ultimate decision on access is theirs alone, but we encourage as much openness as they are comfortable with.⁴⁸ I fully agree with one of this article’s anonymous peer reviewers “that archivists should see access as a value and pursue it to the greatest, widest, and fairest extent possible within their local situations. If there is an internal corporate discussion on access to historical record, the archivist should be on the side of access, while living within and respecting the decision made by their organization.”

Pragmatism: Social Justice and Collection Development

So far my disagreement with Harris, Jimerson, and the rest has been largely philosophical or theoretical. But my concern has pragmatic bases as well. I would like to focus on just one set of issues: collection development (or records management) and appraisal. Unfortunately, in his public works on social justice to date, Jimerson devotes minimal space to matters of acquisition and selection. When he does address the topic, it is to focus on archivists' responsibility to diversify the "voices" in their collections. He identifies documentation strategy as a valuable approach to succeeding in this goal and makes a point of promoting oral history as an essential documentary tool.

He also reiterates his call for archivists to be more and more transparent in their decision making, including taking care to record and make accessible their documentation plans and appraisal decisions. "Archives serve to exclude some documentation and to legitimate others," he reminded us. "The challenge is to make such choices openly, deliberately, and mindfully—listening for the marginalized voices, opening the door to the stranger whose concerns enable us to understand the diversity of society."⁴⁹ But diversity is only one facet of his social justice ethos, and he is effectively silent on how we are supposed to achieve the other components of the agenda through selection of records. Others, David Wallace for example, are a bit more concrete: "Archival content is rich in potential and actuality to challenge dominant narratives from the past, narratives that often maligned contemporaneous struggles for social justice. In light of these dynamics of the politics of the past, efforts should be directed to harnessing archival content to engage controversial contemporary social issues with an eye towards illuminating the politics of the present."⁵⁰

Yet, even then, an important line exists between documenting controversial social issues and actively participating in them. It is a line, however, considerably blurred by the archival social justice admonition. For example, a study of historians and archivists working to document better the resistance to school desegregation in Virginia, the Desegregation of Virginia Education project (DOVE), noted that the participants, "By inventorying and preserving material related to school desegregation, . . . seek to ensure that the subject will not be erased from our collective memories." This is no different, I would suggest, than most postcustodial archival acquisition efforts. The authors go on, however:

For DOVE to be successful, both historians and archivists *will need to become social activists* who network with a broad spectrum of community organizations and community power brokers. Becoming activists, however, can come with a cost. DOVE participants speaking out about racism in education lessens the likelihood that segregationists will allow volunteers to survey or collect their records.⁵¹

It is completely unclear to me, after years spent pursuing documentation on both sides of controversial social, political, religious, and other issues, just why it is necessary to become a social activist on either side, thereby indeed jeopardizing the archivist's ability to acquire materials from the other side. It is, in fact, hard enough to gain trust from both sides of a polarizing issue simply by having succeeded in bringing one or more collections in from side A, because side B may well assume the archivist or his or her institution IS an activist for side A.

So, if it is not requisite for documenting a social justice cause to be an activist in that cause, what would the pursuit of social justice as the end of all archival effort more broadly mean for how and why we make decisions concerning what we accession? It can mean confusion for some. In a blog describing the session "In Pursuit of the Moral Imperative: Exploring Social Justice and Archives" at the 2012 SAA conference, there is this:

[Session chair] Terry Cook followed up this question by asking the panelists whether we should document the lives of neo-Nazis, homophobes, murderers, and the like. [Session panelist Jasmine] Jones concluded that we should focus on documenting all voices, refraining from telling people what to think, and give people the tools to make their own choices. I'm not perfectly happy with this answer. I have no problem, in select circumstances, with archivists asserting that they document some governments, organizations, or individuals precisely because these governments, organizations, or individuals were, in an explicit and sustained manner, actively committed to engaging in the processes of oppression. However, this is an argument that should be deployed with great care and restraint; for example, it's an appropriate approach for documenting Pinochet-era Chile but not for, whatever its failings, the present-day Chilean government.⁵²

Why the blogger draws this distinction is unclear and conflicts with social justice proponents like Harris and Jimerson who see all governments as unjust oppressors to one degree or another.

One short answer to the question of how the social justice imperative will influence collection development is that such pursuit would almost certainly result in the acquisition and preservation *only* of records with a clear social justice purpose. Why? There are two reasons, I think. One is the DOVE archivists' supposition that becoming true social activists on one side of an issue will almost certainly destroy any chance of acquiring documentation from the other side. The other is that as a profession, and as individual repositories, we do not have sufficient resources to do more.

We must presume, based on Jimerson's and others' rhetorical emphasis on not simply pursuing social justice but also redressing past neglect of social justice, that records supporting a social justice mission would fall into what, to use the familiar terminology of library collecting policies, would be either

“exhaustive” or “comprehensive” collecting initiatives.⁵³ The reality is that few repositories can attempt to collect comprehensively any topic, much less do *more* than comprehensively collect a topic as broad and deep as “social justice.” Keep in mind that the social justice imperative is presented as an ethical mandate, rather than as an acquisition choice.

For an institutional archives, this would seem to imply shifting records management emphasis from traditional top-down organizational pursuits or even from traditional functional analysis approaches, because neither framework recognizes social justice concerns within an organization. By focusing on traditional power structures or organizational activities, both approaches would tend to pull archivists away from social justice documentation.

Indeed, the mandate might include pressure to deaccession or destroy records that are somehow antithetical to social justice pursuits. To follow Harris’s implication that archivists who participate in documenting immoral acts (e.g., the Holocaust) are themselves immoral, commits us to the same direction as the recent government of Hungary. According to a Canadian scholar,

In December 2010, Hungary’s parliamentary secretary for justice announced that his government believes that a democratic state cannot “preserve the immoral documents of an immoral regime.” By November 2011, the Government of Hungary plans to introduce legislation that will permit the removal and destruction of Hungarian communist secret police, interior ministry and state security files currently held at the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security in Budapest, and available to researchers, as well as to survivors and effected [*sic*] communities.

The new law will allow survivors to remove original and irreplaceable files from the archives and do as they wish with them, including selling them or destroying them at home. As copies will not be kept of these original documents, researchers and future generations will no longer have access to tens of thousands of files.⁵⁴

Now, let me be clear. There is nothing in Jimerson’s writings to suggest he would condone such action.⁵⁵ But the overarching logic of social justice as the core archival value leaves open such considerations.

Returning, however, to accessioning rather than deaccessioning, Theodore Schellenberg stated in the conclusion of his classic work on appraisal that “archivists of different archival institutions may also use different criteria in evaluating similar types of records, for what is valuable to one archival institution may be valueless, to another.”⁵⁶ Thus, if offered records documenting the lives of a family in New Hampshire, my repository in Wyoming would decline them, not because they have no historical value, but because they have no historical value to us. Or, as Tim Ericson put it more sharply,

The final decision regarding whether to acquire an individual fonds must be made with an eye on the larger universe that is defined by broader acquisition development policies. Stated another way, the principles of appraisal help us to answer the question, "Why am I saving this?"—while acquisition policies force us to answer the equally important question, "Why am I saving this?"⁵⁷

But this important proviso begins to lose weight if all of our collecting mandates focus on social justice ends.

It is not simply that all repositories in a given geographic region would seek the same materials, though that is likely to happen. Because social justice is an ethical imperative, it becomes difficult to turn down any relevant materials regardless of topical or geographic boundaries. How can my repository turn its back on records that document marginalized voices in New Hampshire, unless I am certain that those records will be accepted and made just as easily accessible by a New England repository? Every repository would, I fear, become the repository of last resort for anything and everything having social justice consequences. Ultimately, the ethics of social justice would tend to undercut the individuality of repository missions. Today (as for the past thirty years at least), our profession remains divided between those who see repositories as having society-wide obligations and those who see repositories having solely institutional missions; the social justice agenda forecloses that debate, assuming a repository wishes the profession to consider it ethical.

Paradox and/or Irony

Jimerson himself recognizes that archives have dual powers, but he does not seem to appreciate the true dimension of the paradox. He wrote, accurately of course, that

Archives can serve the interests of entrenched power, but they can also empower the marginalized groups in society. Since ancient times archives have been used to bolster the prestige and influence of the powerful elites in societies. Archivists have a moral professional responsibility to balance the support given to the status quo by giving equal voice to those groups that too often have been marginalized and silenced.⁵⁸

This paradox is profound because the same set of records often serves at once to maintain a repressive regime and to hold that regime accountable. If this is true, and I believe it is incontrovertible, then what does this say about the ethics of archivists working to ensure that the records of immoral regimes are properly created, authentically maintained, and preserved for the long term? What, to be more specific, of the archivists in Chris Hurley's provocative example? "We cannot comfortably design a better system for documenting

the number of heads being processed through the gas chambers as if good recordkeeping (in a technical sense) can be divorced from the uses to which it is put.”⁵⁹ It seems to me, based on evidence presented by Eric Ketelaar and others, that such a divorce is both possible and necessary because the records of evil deeds do not sustain evil perpetually.

Jimerson seems to fall prey to the fallacy that some records support social justice and other records support authoritarian repression. Jimerson quoted Nelson Mandela in 2004, saying that “In our view the work of archives in the South Africa of today is potentially one of the most critical contributions to restoration and reconciliation. All of us have a powerful moral obligation to the many voices and stories either marginalised or suppressed during the apartheid era.” Jimerson goes on, seeming to draw a distinction between records of restoration and records of oppression: “However, if archival records can symbolize healing and reconciliation, they also can support and perpetuate oppression.” Again he quoted Mandela: “Under the apartheid regime it was a common practice for the authorities to take documents from those they regarded as enemies. Sometimes they used these documents as evidence in court cases. Sometimes they used them in various forms of intimidation. Sometimes they simply destroyed them.” These latter documents, Jimerson concluded, “became tools of control.”⁶⁰

But this nice, neat bifurcation of records does not describe reality. Records, like the power that undergirds them, can have two directly antithetical sets of values and meaning. As Ketelaar reminded us:

Societal power is a double-edged phenomenon: power is used for restraint and for liberation, for repression and for redemption, power is productive and destructive. Records too are both “instruments of oppression and domination” and “enablers of democratic empowerment,” as Adrian Cunningham advances. Michael Piggott and Sue McKemmish forcefully demonstrate, in their review of the nexus between recordkeeping and reconciliation, that records have a two-fold power: being evidence of oppression and evidence required to gain freedom, evidence of wrong-doing and evidence for undoing the wrong.⁶¹

In fact the paradox is more complex still. “Records can sometimes have the power of sanctuary,” Ketelaar reminded us, when the recordkeeping regime of oppressors is intentionally sabotaged. Nazi Nuremberg laws declared anyone with four Jewish grandparents to be a full-blooded Jew; Dutch archivists were involved in forging marriage certificates to prove individuals were one-quarter Christian to protect them from deportation. When the war ended, the forgeries were replaced with the original marriage records that had been preserved.

Ketelaar also pointed out that “Sometimes quite intentionally, archives may be safe havens” when the recordkeeping of villains is maintained inviolate. “Vitaly Shentalinsky revealed how the KGB archives yielded literary treasures,

which had been confiscated from their authors and kept in files as evidence of the writer's alleged treason."⁶² On the one hand, Dutch archivists intentionally subverted the recordkeeping system of their occupiers; on the other hand, however, the very records of the KGB preserved irreplaceable literary works for future generations. Had the latter recordkeeping regime been sabotaged or intentionally abandoned or neglected by archivists pursuing social justice, what would have become of them?

Whether it is paradox or irony,

the power of archives of repression and the "fetishism of the detail" inflating the archives (of Stasi and FBI alike) make them into invaluable empowering sources of collective and individual memories. In totalitarian, dictatorial or repressive regimes there is a lack of any legal means of reflecting a plurality of ideas and behaviour. It is only the archives, particularly those of the police and intelligence services which controlled the population, which can reflect the latent social confrontations inherent in these regimes. In contrast to the public image which such regimes have tried to present, their real nature can be discovered in the files and indices of the security services.⁶³

Again, we must realize that the recordkeeping of immoral regimes—or, if you will, immoral recordkeeping—is often transmogrified over time to recordkeeping of social justice (and other purposes).

This is, really, merely the very basic appreciation of postmodern archivy, and, as such, it seems strange that Jimerson and Harris cannot more clearly confront the paradox. To return to Ketelaar:

Every activation also changes the significance of earlier activations. Let me give an example. The records created and used by German and Dutch agencies during the Second World War to account for the looting of Jewish assets continued to be used, after the war, by German and Dutch agencies in the processes of restitution and reparation. The same record was activated by different societal powers, for different purposes and for different audiences again and again, as it is today activated in the search for looted and lost works of art and other Holocaust assets. The looting and the registration of the looted property were, of course, an appalling event, but it was through the subsequent uses of the record that the primary registration became really a record of a traumatic experience. This is an application of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*; *events that occur later may change not just the significance, but the nature of prior events*. By extension one may say that current use of records affects retrospectively all earlier meanings, or to put it differently, we can no longer read the record as our predecessors have read that record.⁶⁴

To repeat, "*events that occur later may change not just the significance, but the nature of prior events.*" Not even the original events themselves continue to reflect the same purely evil or repressive nature they once possessed, now that we read the record (hence the events the records document) differently.

This is not the only way social justice advocates seem to conceive of the subject and their goal in overly narrow terms. Jimerson stated, for instance,

This control by archivists reflects the power of the political state in controlling archival resources. Peter Fritzsche connects this archival power to institutions of social control. He contends that “the archive is widely recognized as one of an array of disciplinary institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and asylums that manage the technologies of power that are indispensable to the maintenance of social collectives and the enforcement of social norms.”⁶⁵

But power is not simply a matter of state control; power is far more complex, paradoxical, and, yes, sometimes, ironic than that. As Ketelaar reminded us,

Power, control and information are not only used by the nation-state. Power is “an integral and primary aspect of social life,” Anthony Giddens posits, while Michel Foucault asserts, “Power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social.” Power and control are exercised whenever an individual organization, public or private, wants something to be done.⁶⁶

Which exercises of power should archivists guard against? Only those by the state? Also those by corporations? What about sociocultural organizations, such as religious orders or issue-organizations? How can we complacently believe that the records of Occupy Wall Street, with its attendant destruction of private property, internecine violence, and almost entirely Caucasian leadership, did not represent, to some degree, the exercise of power for oppression?⁶⁷

There is no black and white when it comes to records of oppression and records of social justice. Records are what we make of them, and sometimes the recordkeeping of the most hated regime will become the most important tool of social justice. To quote Emiko Hastings:

Recognizing the uses of documents for social control and social justice can lead to more nuanced understandings of the role that archives play in societies. The archival documents of Japanese American internment have had many different meanings over the years. In preserving them, archivists have enabled the documents to be revisited and reinterpreted as each era of history reshapes the collective memory of internment. What once was a shameful secret has now become a powerful force for social justice and advocacy in Japanese American communities. This journey highlights the ethical issues of archives and power of achieving redress from past injustices.⁶⁸

How, then, does an archivist wishing to pursue a social justice agenda know what to do? Repudiate participation in the recordkeeping of immoral regimes, thus undermining creation of the very records that will be essential to pursuing justice after the regime’s end? Collaborate with the oppressors, hoping that by ensuring a sound and complex recordkeeping system the wrongdoers will someday be brought to justice (or at least the victims given restitution)? Which

is the right path toward social justice? Without clear resolution of this paradox, how can we confidently accept a social justice mandate?

There is yet another paradox, or irony, to be considered. Granted, I believe "Jimerson presents his conception of a social justice goal less normatively, less stridently, and, to my mind, much less insultingly to those with questions or reservations" than does Verne Harris. For example, Jimerson stated, "there should be no stigma or criticism for archivists who do not accept these recommendations as personal or professional goals."⁶⁹ Quite straightforward and laudable, certainly. Yet, it is difficult for me to accept the *implications* for tolerance of Jimerson's entire argument, *not* his sincerity in his "tolerance" (his term) of archivists who reject the social justice agenda.

Ultimately, Jimerson is staking out moral and ethical boundaries for the profession.⁷⁰ And, while it is well and good to urge tolerance of those whose ethics one abjures, I suggest it is difficult indeed to do more than tolerate; how does one, say, manage to respect or admire professionals one has deemed immoral or unethical? The mere fact that Jimerson himself compares those who disagree with his perspective to Uriah Heep and that he quotes Gerald Ham to suggest those who do not take up the social justice agenda are pursuing unimportant work, provides evidence that he himself finds it difficult to view those who disagree with true equanimity.⁷¹

Should we actually go so far as to dissuade our colleagues actively from a social justice course? Yes, I'm afraid so,⁷² except to the extent that a given individual can inculcate social justice as an end while still serving his or her institutional mission. But as long as one person's social justice is another's injustice; as long as nothing in our ethics demands serving society as a whole (unless such service is within one's institutional mandate) or playing the role of an internal whistle-blower; as long as we wish both the political left and the right to view at least some of our repositories as neutral ground, where one set of records (and ideas) is not consciously privileged over others; and as long as such perceived neutrality is essential to earning the voluntary commitment of private donors to make their records publicly accessible; then for just as long must we reject social justice as the end of all archival effort.

Whistle-blowing perhaps warrants some extended commentary. Becoming a whistle-blower, I would maintain, is no more inherently a part of an archivist's identity than it is of the identity of an administrative assistant, an information technology professional, or a librarian. In the face of knowledge about immoral or illegal acts by our employing institution, to blow a whistle is a decision with which every individual, regardless of profession, must wrestle. As an anonymous peer reviewer of this article noted, "Archivists have rare access to documentation that can expose malfeasance and potentially derail more through that exposure." As we know from the Enron affair and other instances,

archivists, records managers, CPAs, vice presidents, and others in corporate and institutional settings have privileged and wide access to records. While archivists are no more or less obligated to blow the whistle, I can agree with the reviewer that the profession should “celebrate that courageous behavior when it’s displayed effectively.”

To return to whether archivists should or should not pursue social justice as the profession’s ultimate goal: as long as the social justice capacity of a set of records transforms from one context to another and as long as it remains unclear at best and confusing at worst whether archivists are supporting social justice ends if or when they participate in recordkeeping systems that begin as part of oppressive regimes and end as part of truth and reconciliation commissions, we can hardly draw clear distinctions between social justice pursuits and pursuing injustice.

Conclusion

Jimerson believes that archivists may have reached a turning point in their realization that their only truly significant role in society is a social justice role. He relates in great detail an August 2005 colloquium by the Mandela Foundation exploring the theme of “Memory for Justice.” Fewer than a hundred individuals representing more than thirty institutions “attended sessions focusing on memory as a powerful catalyst for social change, the social power exercised by archivists, systemic shortcomings in archival user service, the role of archivists in striving for historical and contemporary justice, and South African experiences of memory construction in the wake of the apartheid era.”

The colloquium produced key propositions and questions for archival institutions, for practitioners, and for society as a whole, including:

- Those who work with archives should be guided primarily by a concept of and commitment to justice.
- Prevailing relations of power and influence in societies (even in democracies) tend to disadvantage certain voices. The call of justice sounds two imperatives: 1) to proactively enable participation and access; and 2) to construct the archive beyond the normative assumptions circumscribed by power and the status quo.
- The archive . . . is best understood as a contested terrain for memory construction shaping contemporary understandings of society.
- Injustice is routinely documented by those who perpetrate it.
- The archive provides a powerful resource for restorative justice.
- Disclosing what was hidden (and what remains secret) is but a first step. . . . What is the next step beyond creating a more accurate version of the past?

- And how does that—can that—shape and connect to contemporary struggles for justice?

Jimerson goes on to relate that “The challenges raised in these statements amounted to a manifesto for a new conception of archival ethics.” Archives and archivists would be reimagined as passionate advocates and actors in the “struggles to achieve social justice and personal freedom for all peoples.” He concluded by stating confidently that “What the Johannesburg conference proposed amounted to a redefinition of archives and of the role of archivists in society.”⁷³

Jimerson drives the point home, in another venue, by again turning uncharacteristically to disdain: “I remain optimistic that archivists can become agents of change in the interests of accountability, social justice, and diversity. If we do not seize this opportunity, in the words of Jerry Ham a generation ago, ‘. . . then I do not know what it is we are doing that is all that important.’”⁷⁴ Thus, he throws down a gauntlet of sorts, to anyone who objects to his call to social justice, to be picked up only by someone brave or foolhardy enough to suggest an alternative “important” purpose for archives in modern society. He is well within his rhetorical rights to do this, for it is far too easy to reject his vision when not obligated to suggest an equally compelling vision of one’s own. So let me see what I can do.

What value do archivists bring without pursuing social justice? Whether we work for public or private institutions, our mandates come to the same thing, in the end: service to our users, however our institutions define them. As Jeannette Bastian noted, “Archivists need to determine how to best meet the needs of users whether the users are the parent organization or researchers from the outside.”⁷⁵

The final version of the “social responsibility” paragraph in the draft *Core Values of Archivists* by SAA includes, to me, the unarguable statement that “Archivists with a clearly defined societal mission strive to meet these broader social responsibilities in their policies and procedures for selection, preservation, access, and use of the archival record. Archivists with a narrower mandate still contribute to individual and community memory for their specific constituencies, and in so doing improve the overall knowledge and appreciation of the past within society.”⁷⁶ We serve our institutions, and some of our institutions serve the public. And what is that service we provide?

We serve those institutions and their users as memory repositories. Memory includes accountability in some settings; but it can have a much more amorphous cultural meaning and so can, and often does, muddy the distinctions between library, museum, and archives as cultural institutions. Are we not part of a larger alliance providing something of distinct value—sometimes ineffable, sometimes as tangible as supporting a land claim—to our institutions

and often to society? That “something of value” is, as I have argued elsewhere, the provision not simply of memory repositories, but of meaning. That meaning may be as narrow as connecting a current corporate advertising campaign to the company’s century-old product line, or it may be as broad as contributing to the identity of an entire ethnic group. These “meanings” exist independent of any conception of social justice although, of course, social justice is not precluded by these meanings.

I credit the staff of the Bentley Historical Library, where I received my formal archival education and hands-on training, my history professors in college and graduate school, and my first professional position as a lone arranger in a small college archives for my decision early on that archivists matter—that they, in fact, hold significant power—because they control what records are saved, whether and how those saved records are made visible to potential researchers,⁷⁷ and the entire researcher experience whether on-site or long distance.⁷⁸ Only much later did I understand that such power had a name, “agency,” and that recognizing such agency is one of the building blocks of the postmodern perspective on the archival enterprise.

My education as a historian also taught me that researchers themselves exercise a great deal of agency in deciding which of the saved records to acknowledge and how those records are interpreted for a wider audience. I learned that “documented history,” and indeed even the documents themselves, are no less likely than “memory” to be inaccurate, self-serving, and, at best, evolving. In this, my understanding differs from Jimerson’s, who wrote that “Archives help us clarify the ‘murky marshes of memory’ and substitute documentation for guesswork. . . . Collectively these records of the past provide a corrective for human memory, a surrogate that remains unchanged while memory constantly shifts and refocuses its vision of the past.”⁷⁹

I, on the other hand, find less to distinguish between memory and history: history is “often an ideological reconstruction rooted in a cursory examination of secondary sources. History is interpretation, and as such it is subject to exactly those same societal biases that are supposedly the weakness of ‘memory.’ . . . Historians, let there be no mistake, are frequently victims of their own willingness to accept received wisdom rather than looking at a problem anew. . . .”⁸⁰ Moreover, “The [postmodern] archival paradigm rejects this increasingly untenable belief in the objectivity and truthfulness of any form of documentation, including transactional records. The archival paradigm accepts, rather, that a ‘good’—reliable, valid, authentic and so on—record can tell a lie, a ‘poor’ record a truth. . . .”⁸¹

Does diversity play a role in the provision of meaning in this context? Certainly. The more diverse meanings we supply, the more relevant and powerful we are as a profession and as individual practitioners. And this is true

whether we consider diversity as the subsets of employees within a private organization or as the groups who comprise a nation.

Does our goal of providing meaning to our constituents also encompass pursuing, as a profession, goals of accountability in both the public and private sectors? Yes, though it also accedes to the reality that accountability in the private sector is largely a matter of suasion rather than mandate. All of us—corporate archivists and public records archivists—can agree that the records of private individuals and organizations are part of the overarching components of meaning-making for society while also agreeing that private citizens and companies have neither a legal nor a moral obligation to make their private records accessible to the public.⁸² It still behooves us to encourage preservation of such materials, even while in private hands, as well as to encourage donation of such materials to publicly accessible repositories.

But what we seek and what we demand are two different things. I do not think we can demand or even expect a social justice ethos of archival practitioners any more than we can demand or even expect donation of private *fonds* to public repositories. Should we take the opportunity to encourage such donations? Of course, where such materials fit the mission of our repositories. But, if our mandate, and part of our power, lie in pursuing the diversity of the archival record, they do so because diversity is part of the overall meaning of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Western, at least, hermeneutics. Should we wrestle with the incongruities between Western conceptions of archival ethics and practice and non-Western conceptions? Certainly. This, too, is part of diversity, part of the complex web of meaning supported by archival records and collections.

I suppose one could argue that a role in meaning-making and in individual, organizational, and social memory is not “all that important” compared to the goal of serving social justice, but I would disagree. It is not only that memory is part of what makes us human (perhaps not uniquely so; other animals exhibit individual and group memory), not only that creating meaning for our lives and institutions is part of what gives us purpose and motivation, but also that those “mystic chords of memory” and of meaning give our families, organizations, and societies cohesion.

It is at least a fact that some individuals outside our profession see such purpose as important:

We tell stories and report events and facts about who we are, where we have been, and where we are going and as we do that—or immediately after—we inscribe the speaking. Modern societies are built on top of such practices for making inscriptions. We do not have the capacity to build adaptive, trusting communities of action without inscriptions. . . . Your job is not about storing and sorting information. It is about appraising and keeping records of history-making events and the acts spoken by history makers, and doing that in a way that allows you to be effective partners for those history makers in their

remembering of the past. . . . [I]nformation technology cannot listen. It can record noises, but it cannot re-member the past or produce interpretations about its implications for the future. This is what you have been working to accomplish, and you are necessary.⁸³

Must we be crusaders for justice as well? As highly as I value my profession, I am yet inclined to let others lead that crusade and to be well satisfied that our purpose, our importance, is sufficient.

It isn't the job of the archivist to lead the social justice crusade.⁸⁴ But it is his or her job to pursue, acquire, and make available the records that will, among other things, allow social justice crusaders to show that injustice has occurred. Without the work of the archivist, it would be impossible to present proof. If we believe in the goal of something called social justice, we can be proud that our profession ensures that relevant documentation survives. If we don't believe in social justice so-called, we can still be proud that our archives preserve memory and meaning for all facets of society.

NOTES

¹ As will become quickly evident as this article progresses, I believe that the social justice argument has received its strongest and most eloquent explications by two individuals: Verne Harris of South Africa and Randall (Rand) Jimerson in the United States. If I were asked to draw up a list of the ten living archivists for whom I have the most respect and affection, Rand Jimerson would be on that list. He is one of the most thoughtful, rigorous, compassionate, articulate, and diplomatic figures in the profession, and has been for many decades. It is thus with great care, more than a little trepidation, and some regret that I take issue with him over what has become his most comprehensive and forceful professional thesis. My decision to address Jimerson specifically is based on his being the most forceful, reasoned, and comprehensive proponent in North America and thus probably most familiar to readers of this journal.

² Randall C. Jimerson, "From the Pacific Northwest to the Global Information Society: The Changing Nature of Archival Education," *Journal of Western Archives* 1, no. 1 (2010): 19, <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=westernarchives>.

³ F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *The American Archivist* 38, no. 4 (1975): 9.

⁴ Patrick M. Quinn, "The Archivist as Activist," *Georgia Archive* 5 (Winter 1977): 25–35; David E. Horn, "Today's Activist Archivists: A Moderate View," *Georgia Archive* 5 (Winter 1977): 15–24; Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 14–25; Sam Bass Warner Jr., "The Shame of the Cities: Public Records of the Metropolis," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 27–34.

⁵ Gregory Stiverson, "The Activist Archivist: A Conservative View," *Georgia Archive* 5 (Winter 1977): 9–14.

⁶ I have been an outspoken advocate for practitioners to recognize and, ideally, wield archival power. While, to quote Jimerson, "I hope that archivists will embrace the power of archives and use it for the good of mankind," I do not perceive it as an ethical imperative that they do so. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 3. Rather, I view archival power as much more situational, legitimately and ethically used in service to, for example, one's institutional mission, regardless of whether that mission would be recognized by most observers as benefiting humankind in any truly meaningful manner.

- ⁷ I completely agree with Jimerson that "Public advocacy is essential for the archival profession's survival." More than that, I accept his argument that "both individually and collectively, archivists must speak out in defense of archival values, including open access to public records, standards of accountability and authenticity, and protection of the rights of all citizens." He goes on to note, "There are hopeful signs that archivists are becoming more assertive on this issue. SAA has taken a collective stance in several recent public controversies: opposing the executive order claiming presidential control over public records; criticizing Mayor Rudy Giuliani's refusal to turn over his mayoral records to a public repository; joining a lawsuit (unsuccessful) to force Vice President Dick Cheney to disclose the names of participants in a secret energy policy meeting; and supporting the right of 'Unabomber' Ted Kaczynski to place his papers at a public university repository." Jimerson, "Archives for All: Professional Responsibility and Social Justice," *The American Archivist* 70, no. 2 (2007): 270, 275. As a member of Council and vice president and president of SAA, I took the lead in most of the specific advocacy efforts he enumerates, as a matter of fact. As a profession, though not necessarily as individual practitioners, archivists in democratic nations do have a mission to advocate on behalf of democratic accountability.
- ⁸ My credentials as an activist archivist are found in my record both as a working archivist and as a servant of the profession. My efforts to diversify archives began at Carleton College and continue to this day. At Carleton I spent considerable time researching, processing, and making visible (through exhibits, newspaper articles, and suggestions to students and faculty for research topics) the multicultural aspects of the college's history, undermining its seeming façade of Anglo, particularly Yankee, students and faculty. As the acquisition and appraisal archivist at the Minnesota Historical Society for eleven years, I launched and pursued successful collecting initiatives in the African American, Hispanic, and LGBT communities; established a tradition of MHS staff renting booths at ethnic community festivals to reach out to potential researchers and donors; and cowrote a successful grant to survey records of Minnesota's urban Native American population. See Mark A. Greene, "Expanding the Community Connection in Minnesota," *Provenance* 17 (1999): 53-66; Mark A. Greene, "Into the Deep End: One Archivist's Struggles with Diversity, Community, Collaboration and Their Implications for Our Profession," in *Archivists' Diversity Reader*, ed. Mary Caldera and Kathryn Neal (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, forthcoming).
- ⁹ Jimerson, "The Changing Nature of Archival Education," 19.
- ¹⁰ Harris, whose personal experiences as an archivist and anti-apartheid activist in South Africa indelibly shaped his perspective of our profession, is generally accepted as the progenitor of the full-blown social justice imperative for archivists, certainly in the English-speaking world.
- ¹¹ Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007), 248. At the very least, Rand Jimerson, the foremost proponent of the social justice imperative in the United States, cites Harris more than any other single archival author, particularly in "Archives for All" and *Archives Power*.
- ¹² This and all previous quotations in this paragraph are from Harris, *Archives and Justice*, 245.
- ¹³ Though rather a far stretch from its nominal meaning, Derrida, whom Harris is channeling here, uses "archon" as a complicated synonym for "archive." Verne Harris, "Jacques Derrida Meets Nelson Mandela: Archival Ethics at the Endgame," *Archival Science* 1, nos. 1-2 (2011): 120, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10502-010-9111-4>.
- ¹⁴ This and immediately preceding quotation are from Harris, *Archives and Justice*, 243.
- ¹⁵ Michelle Caswell, "Hannah Arendt's World: Bureaucracy, Documentation, and Banal Evil," *Archivaria* 70 (Fall 2010): 25-26, 23-24.
- ¹⁶ Michelle Caswell, "Khmer Rouge Archives: Accountability, Truth, and Memory in Cambodia," *Archival Science* 10, no. 1 (2010): 31, emphasis added.
- ¹⁷ Nor am I entirely comfortable with the admonition to conduct further study, as David Wallace urged: "Deeper analyses are needed that explicitly address, across time and space, the duality of recordkeeping as a technology of control and oppression and as a technology of resistance and liberation. With this knowledge archivists can begin to better understand how recordkeeping and archiving has both denied and facilitated social justice. It is critical that such processes are examined in historical and contemporary contexts." David Wallace, "Locating Agency: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Professional Ethics and Archival Morality," 2008, <http://www.ibiblio.org/saawiki/2008/images/c/c0/Wallace-locating-agency-aug2008.pdf>, 2.

¹⁸ Emiko Hastings, "'No Longer a Silent Victim of History': Repurposing the Documents of Japanese American Internment," *Archival Science* 11, nos. 1–2 (2011): 27–28, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10502-010-9113-2>, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Harris prefers the term "deconstructionist" to the term "postmodernist" because he believes the latter connotes the complete bankruptcy of meaning.

²⁰ Harris, "Jacques Derrida Meets Nelson Mandela," 9, emphasis added. Oddly, to me, on the same page he stated, "For deconstruction, a fundamental opening to the knocking of the stranger is the beginning, *and the end*, of justice" (emphasis added). What he has in mind, apparently, is activist archivy.

This fundamental opening is a value, an energy, which gives the experience of belonging to the stranger. It reaches to every stranger. And it demands that the stranger not simply be tolerated as a guest, but rather that the stranger be given the power of the host. It forestalls any determination of who is the host and who is the guest. This conundrum plays out every time we hear a knock on our door—whether the door be the boundary of a discourse, the immigration office of a country, an entrance to a suburban home, or the boxes containing the documents of a new archival acquisition.

Were this in fact as far as he pushed the notion of "justice," I would have no quarrel with him.

²¹ Harris, *Archives and Justice*, 247–48.

²² Association of Canadian Archivists, "Special Interest Sections," <http://archivists.ca/content/special-interest-sections>.

²³ Jim, "Activist-Archivists (Social Justice Special Interest Section of the Association of Canadian Archivists)," *Activism in the Archives* (blog), March 1, 2011, <http://archivalactivism.wordpress.com/2011/03/01/new-site>.

²⁴ See his professional web page at Western Washington University, "Randall Jimerson," <http://faculty.wvu.edu/jimerson>. Given that he has explicated this thesis across four-hundred-plus pages of a book, it is not possible for me to do it full justice in a portion of a journal article. So even if I am able to present a précis of his convictions with complete objectivity (and try as I might, I doubt I will succeed), I urge anyone interested in these crucial matters to read, at a minimum, Jimerson's own summary in his *American Archivist* article, if not his complete book.

²⁵ Randall Jimerson, "Embracing the Power of Archives," *The American Archivist* 69, no. 1 (2006): 23–24. The quote from Elisabeth Kaplan, "'Many Paths to Partial Truths': Archives, Anthropology, and the Power of Representation," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 215. For my parallel thoughts, see Mark A. Greene, "The Power of Archives: Archivists' Values and Value in the Post-Modern Age," *The American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (2009): 20, 25–26, 29.

²⁶ Jimerson, "Archives for All," 254–55.

²⁷ To reiterate the point, see Caswell, "Hannah Arendt's World," 16: "As many archivists have noted, records can be used for both enslavement and justice; they are both 'instruments of oppression and domination,' and 'enablers of democratic empowerment.' Indeed, the same records that enabled Nazis to efficiently move 'undesirables' through the system to their deaths also served to incriminate the perpetrators and are still being used in legal cases regarding the seizure of Jewish-owned property."

²⁸ Timothy L. Ericson, "Building Our Own 'Iron Curtain': The Emergence of Secrecy in American Government," *The American Archivist* 68 (Spring/Summer 2005): 48. What might "genuinely confidential records" encompass for someone with a strong commitment to civil liberties? For the sake of example: FBI case files investigating white supremacists and their organizations; military plans to destroy Iran's and/or North Korea's capacity to create and deliver nuclear weapons; CIA operations to support democratic forces in Belarus.

²⁹ Jimerson, "Archives for All," 55–56.

³⁰ Jimerson, "Archives for All," 270.

³¹ Jimerson, "Archives for All," 271–72.

³² Wallace, "Locating Agency," 10, 7.

³³ This paragraph and previous paragraph are from Jimerson, "Archives for All," 270, 272.

³⁴ Randall Jimerson, "Archivists and the Call of Justice" (paper presented at Society of Archivists conference, Bristol, England, September 1, 2009), <http://faculty.wvu.edu/jimerson/ArchivistsandJustice.htm>.

- ³⁵ Jimerson, quoting Haskell, "Archives for All," 271–72.
- ³⁶ Terry Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (2001): 29. Or, to take a particular aspect of archival work, one that might seem least affected by the postmodern critique of objectivity, "Wendy Duff . . . told the 2000 metadata forum that descriptive or metadata schemes vary, and can do so legitimately, in serving the differing needs of their creators. She comments: 'Metadata, the new miracle solution to our digital woes, seem objective and universal at first glance. But this sense of objectivity is an illusion.'" Tom Nesmith, "Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice," *Archivaria* 60 (2005): 268.
- ³⁷ Kathy Marquis, email to author, October 10, 2010.
- ³⁸ Jimerson, "Archivists and the Call of Justice."
- ³⁹ This was during my eleven years as manuscripts acquisition curator at the Minnesota Historical Society, during which time I succeeded, as an example, in acquiring the papers of arch-conservative and close friend of Newt Gingrich, U.S. representative Vin Weber and moderate Republican U.S. senator Dave Durenberger on the one hand, and ultraliberal U.S. senator Paul Wellstone and "blue-dog" Democrat U.S. representative Tim Penny on the other hand.
- ⁴⁰ Jimerson, "Archivists and the Call of Justice."
- ⁴¹ Personally, I do not happen to find the evidence or arguments persuasive, but surely that is beside the point. For two examples of analysis of the real and perceived dethroning of white males from the U.S. power structure, see David Savran, "The Sodomasochist in the Closet: White Masculinity and the Culture of Victimization," *Differences* 8, no. 2 (1996): 127–47; Hua Hsu, "The End of White America?," *Atlantic Magazine* (January/February 2009), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/01/the-end-of-white-america/7208>.
- ⁴² Jimerson, "Archives for All," 273.
- ⁴³ In her SAA Presidential Address in 1995, Maygene Daniels stated definitively that "archivists serve some higher, broader public good." Maygene Daniels, "On Being an Archivist," Society of American Archivists, <http://www.archivists.org/governance/presidential/daniels.asp>.
- ⁴⁴ Richard J. Cox, "Letter to the Editor," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 1 (2005): 10.
- ⁴⁵ One proponent of societal mission is F. Gerald Ham, for example in "The Archival Edge," *The American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 5–13; on the other side, see, for instance, Frank Boles, "Mix Two Parts Interest to One Part Information and Appraise Until Done: Understanding Contemporary Record Selection Processes," *The American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 356–68.
- ⁴⁶ For an interesting critique and analysis of the ALA ethics code, see Guy A. Marco, "Ethics for Librarians: A Narrow View," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 28, no. 1 (1996): 33–38.
- ⁴⁷ Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 285–86. To the contrary, the International Council of Archives (ICA) in its recently published *Principles on Access to Archives* (June 14, 2012), states: "Institutions, whether public or private, holding private archives do not have a legal obligation to open the private archives to external users unless specific legislation, legal requirement or regulation imposes this responsibility on them. However, many private archives hold institutional records and personal papers that have significant value for understanding social, economic, religious, community and personal history as well as for generating ideas and supporting development. Archivists working in private institutions and managing the institution's archives encourage their institution to provide public access to its archives, especially if the holdings will help protect rights or will benefit public interests. Archivists stress that opening institutional archives helps maintain institutional transparency and credibility, improves public understanding of the institution's unique history and its contributions to society, helps the institution fulfill its social responsibility to share information for the public good, and enhances the institution's image" (emphasis added), 15.
- ⁴⁸ My thanks to Kathy Marquis for reminding me of this parallel. She notes further "that archival ethics require that we conduct this encouragement—there is even a relevant admonition in the Judeo-Christian tradition ('You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.' *Pirkei Avot* ['Chapters of the Fathers'] 2, no. 21)."
- ⁴⁹ Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 309.
- ⁵⁰ Wallace, "Locating Agency," 2.

- ⁵¹ Sonia Yaco and Beatriz Betancourt Hardy, "Historians, Archivists, and Social Activism: Benefits and Costs," *Archival Science* 13, nos. 2–3 (2013): 254 (emphasis added), <http://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs10502-012-9187-0.pdf>.
- ⁵² Bonnie Weddel, "SAA 2012: Archives and Social Justice," *L'Archivista* (blog), August 13, 2012, <http://larchivista.blogspot.com/2012/08/saa-2012-archives-and-social-justice.html>.
- ⁵³ See, as but one example, the South Carolina State University Historical Collection's mission statement, <http://library.scsu.edu/Archives/Collpolicy.htm>: "exhaustive—to collect all of the documentation relating to a field; comprehensive—to collect much of the documentation relating to a field. . . ."
- ⁵⁴ Posting to Arcan-I (Canadian archivists' listserv) by Loryl MacDonald on behalf of Christopher Adam, "Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security," February 11, 2011.
- ⁵⁵ In a very different context Jimerson has, in fact, clearly condemned government archivists who "comply with improper requests [by their administration] to approve document destruction." The specific incident at issue was the so-called Heiner affair in Australia, in which the state archivist of Queensland complied with the demand of the cabinet to destroy evidence in public records that public institutions had permitted widespread physical and sexual abuse of teenagers and children during the 1980s. Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 250.
- ⁵⁶ T. R. Schellenberg, *The Appraisal of Modern Public Records*, in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice*, ed. Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1984), 68.
- ⁵⁷ Timothy L. Ericson, "At the 'Rim of Creative Dissatisfaction': Archivists and Acquisition Development," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–1992): 68.
- ⁵⁸ Jimerson, "Archivists and the Call of Justice."
- ⁵⁹ Verne Harris quoting Chris Hurley, Harris, *Archives and Justice*, 243.
- ⁶⁰ All the quotes in this paragraph are from Jimerson, "Archivists and the Call of Justice."
- ⁶¹ Eric Ketelaar, "Recordkeeping and Societal Power," in *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*, ed. Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed, and Frank Upward (New South Wales: Centre for Information Studies: 2005), 290.
- ⁶² Ketelaar, "Recordkeeping and Societal Power," 287.
- ⁶³ Ketelaar, "Recordkeeping and Societal Power," 292.
- ⁶⁴ Ketelaar, "Recordkeeping and Societal Power," 296 (emphasis added). See also Caswell, "Khmer Rouge Archives," 14: "Once records have been archived, it is possible for them to be rediscovered by historians and other researchers, who draw upon the materials in ways other than their original purposes. In the second life of the documents, they may be used as evidence to reevaluate the historical processes they document, leading to new understandings."
- ⁶⁵ Jimerson, "Archivists and the Call of Justice."
- ⁶⁶ Ketelaar, "Recordkeeping and Societal Power," 278.
- ⁶⁷ While some of this criticism of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) came, predictably, from the far right, a good deal came from the liberal left, infuriating OWS supporters. But even those supporters identified physical battles within the movement and its largely homogenous leadership. There are too many such reports to cite: see results of a search for "'Occupy Wall Street' internecine" in Google. (I searched July 8, 2013, and retrieved 32,000,000 hits).
- ⁶⁸ Hastings, "'No Longer a Silent Victim of History,'" 44.
- ⁶⁹ Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 283.
- ⁷⁰ He stated this very explicitly. See, for example, his reference to "the broader conceptions of archival ethics presented in this volume." Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 285.
- ⁷¹ I cite his reference to Ham below. He does attempt to address this difficulty, somewhat in passing: "The archival profession needs to acknowledge that there is a broad range of acceptable ethical choices, and to welcome and support those who act upon their own personal system of values and morality." But as he goes on to say, "this does not mean that there are no criteria for measuring and evaluating ethical conduct." Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 290.

⁷² Those who seek social justice should not, certainly, be criticized wholesale, much less ostracized. The instinct is a humane and laudable one. Pursuing social justice as individuals (as opposed to archivists) is a difficult creed to criticize.

⁷³ All quotations from the beginning of this section are from Jimerson, "Archivists and the Call of Justice."

⁷⁴ Jimerson, "Archives for All," 255.

⁷⁵ Jeannette A. Bastian, "Taking Custody, Giving Access: A Postcustodial Role for a New Century," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 92.

⁷⁶ The final version, accepted by SAA Council, is at Society of American Archivists, "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," May 2011 and January 2012, <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>. However, the social responsibility paragraph in the "Draft for Member Comment, *Core Values of Archivists*," August 9, 2010, <http://www2.archivists.org/news/2010/comment-on-draft-values>, reads in full:

Underlying all of the responsibilities of archivists is their responsibility to a variety of groups in society and to the public good. Most immediately, archivists serve the needs and interests of their employers and institutions. Yet the archival record is part of the cultural heritage of all members of society. Even within a potentially narrowly defined institutional mission, archivists thereby contribute to the public interest. Archivists strive to meet these broader social responsibilities in their policies and procedures for selection, preservation, access, and use of the archival record. In doing so, archivists provide essential services to society.

I believe the end version is considerably better, not surprisingly, because the draft implied that all archivists in all repositories have an obligation to serve directly a broad societal mission. Indeed, when I presented my own thoughts about core archival values, "social responsibility" was not included, though it is a component of the American Library Association, "Core Values of Librarianship," <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues>. See Greene, "The Power of Archives," 21.

⁷⁷ I was the first professional archivist at Carleton College. The first archivist was a superannuated executive secretary who did a noteworthy job of soliciting and finding significant records documenting the school's history but who passively resisted providing access to those records—not only were they neither cataloged nor processed, they were not even accessioned, and no attempt was made to promote the existence of the records to any segment of the campus population. This taught me quite forcefully the significance of the archivist's agency in providing access and was probably the foundation of what much later came to be my more formal campaign against backlogs.

⁷⁸ My understanding of archival agency was considerably deepened and broadened during my work as a full-time acquisition and appraisal archivist for the Minnesota Historical Society (1989–2000), where I also performed regular reference work. However, my understanding of archival agency in reference was dramatically clarified by administering a reference operation at The Henry Ford (2000–2002). And, of course, my understanding of agency in description was influenced by my work with Dennis Meissner on "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208–63.

⁷⁹ Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 6.

⁸⁰ Greene, "The Messy Business of Remembering," 97.

⁸¹ Greene, "The Power of Meaning," 52. To be fair, Jimerson recognizes that "Although the documents and images in archival records do not visibly change, however, the postmodernists remind us that our understanding and interpretation of them do repeatedly shift and refocus," though just how this lines up with records clarifying the murky marshes of memory is not entirely clear to me. Jimerson, "Embracing the Power of Archives," *The American Archivist* 69, no. 1 (2006): 26.

⁸² With the obvious exception of legal mandates in the face of accusations of malfeasance.

⁸³ Chauncey Bell, "Re-membering the Past: Organizational Change, Technology, and the Role of the Archivist," *Archival Issues* 25, nos. 1–2 (2000): 14, 15. Bell was at the time senior vice president of Business Design Associates.

⁸⁴ This closing paragraph is based on a suggestion from Kathy Marquis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark A. Greene began his archival career in 1985 as a lone arranger at Carleton College. He served as curator of manuscripts acquisitions at the Minnesota Historical Society (1989–2000), head of research center programs for the Henry Ford Museum (2000–2002), and since 2002 as director of the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming. Over the years, Greene has focused his attention on university archives as teaching sources for undergraduates, modern business records, modern congressional collections, web archiving, collection development, appraisal, privacy, potential application of archival practices to museum cataloging, copyright, reappraisal-deaccessioning, management and leadership, fund-raising, collaboration, mass digitization, and archival values. He has published two dozen articles in seven nations and presented papers regularly at the annual meetings of the Society of American Archivists (SAA). Within the Midwest Archives Conference (MAC), he has served as president, editor of *Archival Issues*, and creator and instructor of appraisal workshops. Greene is a Fellow and past president of SAA, where he also has served as chair of the Committee on Education and Professional Development, Congressional Papers Roundtable, Manuscripts Repository Section, and Program Committee, as a member of the working groups on Intellectual Property and Government Affairs, and as developer and instructor of SAA's appraisal workshops.