

SECRECY, ARCHIVES, AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST*

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Let me work my way in from the great circle of the world to us at the center by discussing, in turn, three things: the social role of the professional in modern times; the scholar in the United States today; and the archivist here and now.

I will start by quoting from a document—an insidious move to gain rapport with archivists, some might say, except that the document is a bit off the beaten track in archival work (a fact we might ponder later). It is the transcript of a trial that took place in Chicago in the fall of 1969, called affectionately “the Conspiracy Trial.” I refer to it because the transcript occasionally touches on the problem of the professional person—whether a lawyer, historian, or archivist—and the relation between professing one’s craft and professing one’s humanity. On October 15, 1969, the day of the national Moratorium to protest the war in Vietnam, defense attorney William Kunstler wore a black armband in court to signify his support of the Moratorium and his protest against the war. The government’s lawyer, Thomas Foran, called this to the attention of the judge, saying: “Your Honor, that’s outrageous. This man is a mouthpiece. Look at him, wearing a band like his clients, your Honor.”

The day before the Moratorium, Attorney Kunstler had asked the court to recess October 15 to observe the Moratorium. This dialogue between Kunstler and Judge Hoffman then followed:

Mr. Kunstler: . . . *And I think it is as important, your Honor, to protest more than some thirty thousand American deaths and Lord knows*

*An abridged version of this paper originally appeared in the Fall, 1971 issue of *The Boston University Journal*.

how many Vietnamese deaths that have occurred in that country as it is to mourn one man (Eisenhower) in the United States, and if courts can close for the death of one man who lived a full life, they ought to close for the deaths of thousands and millions of innocent people whose lives have been corrupted and rotted and perverted by this utter horror that goes on in your name and my name—

The Court: *Not in my name.*

Mr. Kunstler: *It is in your name, too, in the name of the people of the United States.*

The Court: *You just include yourself. Don't join me with you. Goodness. Don't you and I—*

Mr. Kunstler: *You are me, your Honor, because every citizen—you are a citizen and I am a citizen.*

The Court: *Only because you are a member of the bar of this court and I am obliged to hear you respectfully, as I have done.*

Mr. Kunstler: *No, your Honor, you are more than that. You are a citizen of the United States.*

The Court: *Yes, I am.*

Mr. Kunstler: *And I am a citizen of the United States, and it is done in our name, in Judge Hoffman's name and William Kunstler's name.*

The Court: *That will be all, sir. I shall hear you no further.*¹

Kunstler was trying to accomplish something very difficult, to get a judge to emerge from that comfortable corner which society had declared as his natural habitat, and to declare himself a citizen, even while on the bench, in his robes, plying his profession. Kunstler said a slaughter was taking place in Vietnam, and it was going on in the name of all citizens, and he wanted the Judge to recognize that fact not only in the evening at home after his robes were off, or at the country club on the weekend, but there, in his daily work, in his most vital hours, in the midst of his job of judging. Kunstler failed, but his attempt illustrates the tension all of us feel, if we have not been totally mesmerized by the grandeur of our position, the tension between our culture-decreed role as professionals and our existential needs as human beings.

Professionalism is a powerful form of social control. By professionalism I mean the almost total immersion in one's craft, being so absorbed in the day-to-day exercise of those skills, as to have little

time, energy, or will to consider what part those skills play in the total social scheme. I say *almost-total* immersion, because if it were total, we would be suspicious of it. Being not quite total, we are tolerant of it, or at least sufficiently confused by the mixture to do nothing. It is something like Yossarian's jaundice, in *Catch 22*, where Joseph Heller writes:

Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice. If it became jaundice they could treat it. If it didn't become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this just being short of jaundice all the time confused them.²

By social control I mean maintaining things as they are, preserving traditional arrangements, preventing any sharp change in how the society distributes wealth and power. Both in pre-modern and modern times, the basic combination for social control has remained the same: force and deception. Machiavelli, writing on the threshold of the modern era, drew upon the past to prescribe for the future that same combination: the power of the lion, the shrewdness of the fox. The modern era has magnified enormously both elements: it has concentrated force more efficiently than ever before and it has used more sophisticated techniques for deception. The printing press, heralding the spread of knowledge to large sections of the population, made large-scale deception both necessary and possible, and in the last four centuries we have progressed from the printing press to color television, from Machiavelli to Herman Kahn.

There were few professionals in the old days. Now they are everywhere, and their skills, their knowledge, could be a threat to the status quo. But their will to challenge the going order is constantly weakened by rewards of money and position. And they are so divided, so preoccupied with their particular specialities, as to spend most of their time smoothing, tightening their tiny piece of linkage in the social machine. This leaves very little time or energy to worry about whether the machine is designed for war or peace, for social need or individual profits, to help us or to poison us.

This specialization of modern times is pernicious enough for waiters, auto mechanics, and doctors, and the bulk of the workers in society, who contribute to the status quo without even knowing it, simply by keeping the vast machinery going without a hitch. But certain

professionals serve the status quo in special ways. Weapons experts, or scientists in military research, may be enormously gifted in their own fields, yet so constricted in their role as citizens, as to turn over their frighteningly potent products without question or with very feeble questioning, to whatever uses the leaders of society decide. Remember the role of the humane genius, Robert Oppenheimer, in the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Oppenheimer was a member of the Scientific Advisory Panel which recommended the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, thinking it was necessary to save lives. But Oppenheimer later commented (his testimony is in the files of the AEC):

We didn't know beans about the military situation in Japan. We didn't know whether they could be caused to surrender by other means or whether the invasion was really inevitable.

Equally important for social control as the military scientists are those professionals who are connected with the dissemination of knowledge in society: the teachers, the historians, the political scientists, the journalists, and yes, the archivists. Here too, professionalization leads to impotence, as everyone is given a little corner of the playground. And it is considered unprofessional to organize everyone in the yard to see if the playground director is violating various of the Ten Commandments as we play. We have all heard the cries of "don't politicize our profession" when someone asks joint action on the war in Vietnam. This has the effect of leaving only our spare time for political checking-up while those who make the political decisions in society—this being their profession—work at it full time.

This neat separation, keeping your nose to the professional grindstone, and leaving politics to your left-over moments, assumes that your profession is not inherently political. It is neutral. Teachers are objective and unbiased. Textbooks are eclectic and fair. The historian is even-handed and factual. The archivist keeps records, a scrupulously neutral job. And so it goes, as Kurt Vonnegut says.

However, if any of these specialists in the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge were to walk over to another part of the playpen, the one marked political sociology, and read Karl Mannheim, who in *Ideology and Utopia*, points out (following Marx, of course, but it is more prudent to cite Mannheim) that knowledge has a social origin

and a social use. It comes out of a divided, embattled world, and is poured into such a world. It is not neutral either in origin or effect. It reflects the bias of a particular social order; more accurately, it reflects the diverse biases of a diverse social order, but with one important qualification: that those with the most power and wealth in society will dominate the field of knowledge, so that it serves their interests. The scholar may swear to his neutrality on the job, but whether he be physicist, historian, or archivist, his work will tend, in this theory, to maintain the existing social order by perpetuating its values, by legitimizing its priorities, by justifying its wars, perpetuating its prejudices, contributing to its xenophobia, and apologizing for its class order. Thus Aristotle, behind that enormous body of philosophical wisdom, justifies slavery, and Plato, underneath that dazzling set of dialogues, justifies obedience to the state, and Machiavelli, respected as one of the great intellectual figures of history, urges our concentration on means rather than ends.

Now maybe we have not been oblivious to this idea that the professional scholars in any society tend to buttress the existing social order and values of that society. But we have tended to attribute this to other societies, or other times or other professions. Not the United States. Not now. Not here. Not us. It was easy to detect the control of the German scholars or the Russian scholars—but much harder to recognize that the high school texts of our own country have fostered jingoism, war heroes, the Sambo approach to the black man, the vision of the Indian as savage, and the notion that white Western Civilization is the cultural, humanistic summit of man's time on earth.

We could see where scholars in Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia, by quietly doing their job, would be perpetuating an awful set of conditions; to keep *that* kind of social order intact was wrong and we hoped intellectuals would rebel. The U.S. however, was a different matter; what was wrong here was not the social order itself, but problems at the margins of it. It was all right for intellectuals to keep this basically decent order intact by doing our jobs; and we could attack the problems at the margins by signing petitions and joining political campaigns after hours.

Events of the past decade, I would now argue, have begun to challenge that complacency, that part-time commitment to political involvement which assumes a basically just society, needing only

marginal reforms. We have won those reforms. The U.S. is the great model in history of the reformist nation, and the past half-century has been labelled by one of our important historians as "The Age of Reform." We have had New Deal legislation to take care of our economic flaws, Civil Rights laws to take care of our racial problems, Supreme Court decisions to expand our rights in court, the Good Neighbor Policy, Marshall Plan, and Alliance for Progress to humanize our relations with other countries.

Yet, it is exactly at the crest of these reforms that the United States has found itself in a turbulent internal crisis in which a significant part of the younger generation has begun to question the legitimacy of the government, the values of the culture. How is it that after a barrage of Supreme Court decisions, Civil Rights laws, the confrontation between black and white in this country is at its most intense? How is it that after the New Freedom, the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society, the distribution of the immense resources of this society is at its most irrational, its most wasteful?

The problems of the United States are not peripheral and have not been met by our genius at reform. They are not the problems of excess, but of normalcy. Our racial problem is not the Ku Klux Klan or the South, but our fundamental liberal assumption that paternalism solves all. Our economic problem is not a depression but the normal functioning of the economy, dominated by corporate power and profit. Our problem with justice is not a corrupt judge or bribed jury but the ordinary day-to-day functioning of the police, the law, the courts, where property rights come before human rights. Our problem in foreign policy is not a particular mad adventure: the Spanish American War or the Vietnam War, but a continuous set of suppositions about our role in the world, involving missionary imperialism, and a belief in America's ability to solve complex social problems.

If all this is so, then the *normal* functioning of the scholar, the intellectual, the researcher, helps maintain those corrupt norms in the United States, just as the intellectual in Germany, Soviet Russia, or South Africa, by simply doing his small job, maintains what is normal in those societies. And if so, then what we always asked of scholars in those terrible places is required of us in the United States today: rebellion against the *norm*.

In the United States, however, the contribution of scholars to the

status quo is more subtle and more complex than in more blatantly oppressive societies. Only a small number of scholars give direct service to the war. Most simply go about their scholarly business, their acts of commission subtle, their acts of omission gross. For instance, the historians' emphasis on presidents and laws only subtly perpetuates an elitist approach to politics; missing completely in Morison's *Oxford History of the American People* is the Ludlow Massacre of 1914. The political scientists' emphasis on electoral politics only subtly *suggests* that voting is the central problem in democratic control: you look in vain for extensive work on the politics of protest. The scholar's emphasis on Supreme Court decisions only subtly distorts the fact of constitutional rights; constitutional histories omit the reality of police power in determining how much free expression there really is on the streets.

The archivist, even more than the historian and the political scientist, tends to be scrupulous about his neutrality, and to see his job as a technical job, free from the nasty world of political interest: a job of collecting, sorting, preserving, making available, the records of the society. But I will stick by what I have said about other scholars, and argue that the archivist, in subtle ways, tends to perpetuate the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business. His supposed neutrality is, in other words, a fake. If so, the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role is not, as so many scholars fear, the politicizing of a neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitably political craft. Scholarship in society is inescapably political. Our choice is not between being political or not. Our choice is to follow the politics of the going order, that is, to do our job within the priorities and directions set by the dominant forces of society, or else to promote those human values of peace, equality, and justice, which our present society denies.

I would guess from my small experience—and I leave it up to you to carry on the discussion from there—that the following points are true:

- (1) That the existence, preservation, and availability of archives, documents, records in our society are very much determined by the distribution of wealth and power. That is, the most powerful, the richest elements in society have the greatest capacity to find documents, preserve them, and decide what is or is not available to the public. This means government, business, and the military are dominant.

(2) That one of the ways in which information is controlled and democracy denied, is by the government withholding important documents from the public, or keeping secret their existence altogether, or censoring them (how we must struggle to get data about the Gulf of Tonkin, the Bay of Pigs, the bombing of Laos, CIA operations in Guatemala). And that while the ostensible purpose of such secrecy is the physical security of the nation, the actual purpose is almost always the political security of those who run the nation. Ernest May writes in "A Case for Court Historians:"

The materials needed by historians would also contain much information which, on other than security grounds, government officials would prefer not to see released. . . . Secy of State Rusk could conceivably have been embarrassed by revelations about advice he gave when Asst. Secy of State in the Truman Administration. . . .³

(3) That the collection of records, papers, and memoirs, as well as oral history, is biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure: we learn most about the rich, not the poor; the successful, not the failures; the old, not the young; the politically active, not the politically alienated; men, not women; white, not black; free people rather than prisoners; civilians rather than soldiers; officers rather than enlisted men. Someone writing about Strom Thurmond will have no problem with material. But what if someone wants to write about the blind black jazz pianist, Art Tatum?

(4) That, despite the recent development of oral history, the written word still dominates, and this tends to emphasize the top layers, the most literate elements in the population.

(5) That the emphasis in the collection of records is towards individuals rather than movements, towards static interviews, rather than the dynamics of social interaction in demonstrations. For instance, where is the raw material—that *very* raw material—on the experience of demonstrators in Chicago at the hands of the police at the 1968 convention, which was used by the Walker Commission? I wonder, for instance, if Boston University, proud that it holds the papers of Martin Luther King, has recorded the experience of students who were clubbed by police at the Student Union last year?

(6) That the emphasis is on the past over the present, on the antiquarian over the contemporary; on the non-controversial over the

controversial; the cold over the hot. What about the transcripts of trials? Shouldn't these be made easily available to the public? Not just important trials like the Chicago Conspiracy Trial I referred to, but the ordinary trials of ordinary persons, an important part of the record of our society. Even the extraordinary trials of extraordinary persons are not available, but perhaps they do not show our society at its best. The trial of the Catonsville 9 would be lost to us if Father Daniel Berrigan had not gone through the transcript and written a play based on it.

(7) That far more resources are devoted to the collection and preservation of what already exists as records, than to *recording* fresh data: I would guess that more energy and money is going for the collection and publication of the Papers of John Adams than for recording the experiences of soldiers on the battlefield in Vietnam. Where are the interviews of Seymour Hersh with those involved in the My Lai Massacre, or Fred Gardner's interviews with those involved in the Presidio Mutiny Trial in California, or Wallace Terry's interviews with black GI's in Vietnam? Where are the recorded experiences of the young Americans in Southeast Asia who quit the International Volunteer Service in protest against American policy there, or of the Foreign Service officers who have quietly left?

Let me point to some random pieces of evidence to illustrate these points I have made about the going bias in archival work. Recently, I came across a list of letterpress publications sponsored, assisted, or endorsed by the National Historical Publications Commission of the General Services Administration. The papers of thirty-three Americans are being published. There is one black person on the list, and that is Booker T. Washington. What about Mother Jones, the labor organizer, or Bob Moses, the SNCC leader, or the papers of the man who lives down the street? I know that the very stress on collected papers is severely limiting, but there *are* papers of the leaders of protest movements. Of course there are problems: the papers of Big Bill Haywood were destroyed by the United States Government. But what of Eugene Debs or Clarence Darrow? I suppose it could be claimed that there is one important leader of a protest movement on the list: that is Jefferson Davis.

Another item of evidence: In an article by Amelia Fry and Willa Baum, oral historians at the University of California at Berkeley, the authors cite the lack of money as causing some oral history projects

to erase important tapes. They note the feeling among some persons involved in oral history that "since preserving tapes is expensive and required special conditions, the decision should hinge on the affluence of the project and the relative importance of the person interviewed."⁴

The Oral History Collection at Columbia University seems almost a caricature of the biases I have noted. It has long ignored the poor, the obscure, the radicals, the outcasts—it has ignored movements and living events. When I wrote from the South, in the midst of the civil rights movement, to the Columbia Oral History Collection to try to get them to tape what was happening at the time in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, I got a bureaucratic response which muttered about money and priorities and allocations, the upshot of which was: no. But the latest report of the Oral History Project gives doting attention to its Air Force Project, Navy Project, Marine Project. It is happy to have the reminiscences of General O'Donnell: how about the reminiscences of the various Yossarians in the Air Force? It has the Allan Nevins project which consists of interviewing the friends of Allan Nevins (wouldn't it be more interesting to interview the enemies of Allan Nevins?) It will spend much time interviewing members of the Eisenhower Administration, based on a \$120,000 grant from the National Archives. Has the Project interviewed Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville, Mississippi, or Eldridge Cleaver or Dave Dellinger? Did it go to the Poor Peoples' March and interview the people camped out there in the mud? Has it interviewed Vietnam veterans in the rehabilitation hospitals? Does it go into the ghetto around Columbia University? Or is that job only for Kenneth Clark? For important contemporary interviews, one might do better to consult *Playboy Magazine* than the Columbia Oral History Project.

Another item of evidence: In the American Historical Association newsletter of April 1970, there is a report of the "Thirteenth Meeting of the Advisory Committee on *Foreign Relations of the United States*,"⁵ a series of State Department documents issued by the year. The Advisory Committee has representatives of the American Historical Association, the American Political Science Association, and the Society of International Law. One clause in the report reads: "in 1962 the Secretary of State officially set the time lapse at 20 years—the committee cannot have access to these Foreign Relations documents until twenty years have elapsed. By what right, in a democracy requiring the enlightenment of the public, does any bureaucrat make such decisions

for us all? Yet this advisory committee of scholars is painfully obsequious before the might of government: they complain that it takes as much as two years for the volumes of Foreign Relations to get clearance from Department of State, but instead of challenging the whole concept of clearance, the committee only asks humbly for the clearance procedure to move faster.⁶

Note also that while the Foreign Relations staff must wait 20 years, the public at large must wait 30 years, and indeed the committee of scholars say they are "highly disturbed by the narrowing gap" between the scholars' wait and the public's wait, and by the possibility of "outside, ad hoc publication"—that is publication outside the official aegis of the State Department and the committee of scholars. Such publication, they warn, may beat the Foreign Relations series to the punch, and "provide inaccurate or partial accounts" which "may achieve a popular impact." This could be offset, however, by quicker publication of the Foreign Relations series, with the cooperation of the State Department.⁷ We find in it another paragraph of outstanding timidity, in which the committee expresses its concern that the open period may move back beyond 30 years. Such a move, the committee says with measured sycophancy, would be "violative of the commendable record the Department of State has maintained over the decades in making the foreign relations documentation of the United States publicly and systematically available." In that paragraph the committee notes that other countries such as England are moving in the opposite direction, decreasing the years of closed records, and then it concludes: "The committee is not herewith advocating advancing the open period for full public access to diplomatic documentation, but it believes that everything should be done to prevent it from being set back in excess of 30 years."

Thus, the committee falls all over itself in gratitude that the public only has to wait 30 years. It doesn't want to rock the boat (which all hands aboard know is sinking) by asking for a shorter wait. Where is the bold, inquiring spirit of the scholar in a democratic state, demanding to see government documents as a right, not a privilege? No wonder, with such a government, and with such scholars, we do desperately need I. F. Stone.

What is the net effect of the kind of archival biases I have just described? To protect governmental authorities from close scrutiny, and therefore from the indignation, the anger that might result from a

closer look at government policies. To glorify important people, powerful people, military, political, and business leaders, to keep obscure the lives of ordinary people in the society. To maintain such archival biases requires no malfeasance on the part of archivists, only passivity, only falling into the lines already set by the dominant trends of the profession.

I say *dominant* trends, because I know there are some good things being done in archival work, some pioneering efforts in recording events, in oral history with ordinary people, in black history, in labor history. But let's resist the characteristically American trick of passing off fundamental criticism by pointing to a few reforms. The Saigon regime reformed itself for twenty years before it finally fell. We are still passing civil rights laws, and poverty bills. Let us not once again be happy because like Yossarian, we don't quite have jaundice. We also are not quite cured. Like Yossarian, we are still in the hospital. Like him, we are in danger. And we will remain in danger until, like him, we rebel.

I have argued that the crisis of present-day America is not one of aberration, but of normalcy, that at issue are not marginal characteristics, but our central operating values: the profit system, racial paternalism, violence towards those outside our narrow pale. If this is so, then scholarly passivity, far from being neutral and disinterested, serves those operating values. What is required then is to wrench ourselves out of our passivity, to try to integrate our professional lives with our humanity.

I have only two proposals for archivists: One, that they engage in a campaign to open all government documents to the public. If there are rare exceptions, let the burden of proof be on those who claim them, not as now on the citizen who wants information. And two, that they take the trouble to compile a whole new world of documentary material, about the lives, desires, needs, of ordinary people. Both of these proposals are in keeping with the spirit of democracy, which demands that the population know what the government is doing, and that the condition, the grievances, the will of the underclasses become a force in the nation.

To refuse to be instruments of social control in an essentially undemocratic society, to begin to play some small part in the creation of a real democracy: these are worthy jobs for historians, for archivists, for us all.

FOOTNOTES

1. U.S. v Dellinger, et al. 69 CR 180; Judy Clavin and John Spitzer, *The Conspiracy Trial* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1970), pp. 88-9.
2. Robert M. Scotto (ed.), *Joseph Heller's Catch-22* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973), p.7.
3. Charles Warren Cambridge (ed.), *Perspectives in American History*, 1969, Vol. III (Cambridge: Harvard Univ.) pp. 421-2.
4. Amelia Fry and Willa Baum, "A Janus Look at Oral History," *The American Archivist* 32 (October, 1969) 325.
5. American Historical Association, *Newsletter*, 8 (April, 1970) 2-10.
6. *Ibid.* p.4.
7. *Ibid.* p. 6.