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The Inflation of the Archive

Archives are no longer associated solely with the image of the philological and dust-shrouded. This particular image is fading from view and is—so long as it has not yet congealed into sediment (the case with the Stasi files in Germany)—being dispersed by fresh breezes of attention. Never has the concept of the archive as research space or object of cultural theory been so salient as today. There was, in the past, a tendency to promote the idea of the archive as either a kind of technological-cultural metaphorical universal or as a conceptual coin of the realm whose meaning was worn down through overuse. Archival studies have also been marked by the tendency to dismiss the philosophical discourse that relies on the term *archive*: such "a transformation of the archive into the purely metaphorical has not always been helpful."[1] The wisdom of the philosopher and the imagination of the poet diverge considerably from the insights of the jurist or the historian when it comes to blindness of metaphors of memory toward power's enmeshment in the archive. Contrary to popular belief, the archive is not the main component of *cultural* memory: to regard the archive thus is to misread it. Which the archivist contrasts with memory—not only do archives emerge from policy, but even more that a politics of archives exists: in this way the judicial authorities throughout Germany before 1806 and the Kingdom of Prussia could shroud their archives, as potentially political repositories, in mystery.[2] Contemporary archival theory emphasizes, quite deliberately, the connection between court-oriented registrars and the contents of historical archives where the files serve an administrative rather than an historiographical purpose: this constitutes a misuse (in its most neutral sense)—a misreading of the archive. The Geheime Staatsarchiv in Berlin-Dahlem was to a certain extent recodified as a sort of *historical archive* by the Allies in 1947, and rightly so: if the connection between documents

and power is absent, an archival barrier is erected, and the historian's work is retroacting.

Here is where the *difference* between German-Prussian archival science and the metaphorical conceptualization of the archive in Parisian philosophical circles is amply contoured. The present text attempts to reconcile these two evaluations via an invocation of French figures such as Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, François Furet, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Arlette Farge, on the one hand, and, on the other, via an examination thereof from the perspective of media archaeology, a school in which the cybernetics of memory brings a more actual and institutionally and medially more tangible archive to light (the current move toward the virtual notwithstanding). Is what we have an inventory of memory rather than a history? If a conceptualization of history that can encompass the two is conceivable or worth conceiving, the relationship between the past and the present can be thought of in quite different ways. Pierre Nora's monumental, multivolume *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984–), a pinnacle of the *nouvelle histoire* in France, represents a convergence of both history and alternate memory—that is, a statement on the end of the hegemony of history. The historiography of state and nation can no longer represent collective memory. The inventory-shaping *mémoire collectif* has come to replace the collective singular, thereby repluralizing not only history itself but also the ways in which history is understood and grasped. Rather than a national historiography, the nation itself is the archive: the disappearance of a national consciousness elicits a corresponding inventory of *lieux de mémoire* in which this consciousness was once embodied: festivals, emblems, monuments, and memorial rites, along with archives, dictionaries, and museums. Absent the nation that once produced a totalizing union of individual agents of memory, and which in so doing came to represent nothing more than a heuristic fiction, nothing can remain, save the archi(ve)—tech/textual network—the configurations and techniques for memorization of a past that can no longer coagulate into an *emphatic* history.

NOTES

1. Botho Brachmann, "'Tua res agitur!' Aussensichten auf Archive und archivarisches Selbstverständnis," in *Archiv und Geschichte. Festschrift für Friedrich P. Kahlenberg*, ed. Klaus Oldenhage, Hermann Schreyet, and Wolfram Werner (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2000), 18.

2. Wolfgang Hans Stein, "Archive als Object von Kulturimperialismen: Französische Archive in Deutschland—deutsche Archive in Frankreich," *Archiv und Gedächtnis. Studien zur interkulturellen Überlieferung*, ed. Michel Espagne, Katharina Middell, and Matthias Middell (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2000), 89.