

Archives in the History of Political Thought and Beyond

Introduction: The Archival Turn in Political Theory

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After its rise to prominence in the 1960s through 1980s, with its heyday in the “archive fever” (Derrida 1996) of the 1990s, the discourse of the archive has again reached fever pitch. As Daston (2017, 1) observed, we find ourselves “in the midst of an archival moment, simultaneously overwhelmed by the sheer amount of available information (‘drowning in data’) and obsessed with its fragility (‘the page you are looking for no longer exists’).” Whereas archives across the natural and human sciences function as “the repository of what a discipline considers worth knowing and preserving,” their identification with historical research is so tight that “any other kind of archival research is assumed to be ipso facto historical in nature, and any archive to be of the sort prototypically [sic] investigated by historians” (Daston 2017, 2). Thus, archival practices outside of the discipline of history and beyond a concern with historical inquiry have largely been overlooked and undertheorized. No more.

Across the disciplines, an explosion of archival research has led to methodological reflection on archives that unsettles traditional understandings of the archive as a repository of documents (Callahan 2022; Friedrich 2018; Hartman 2019; Holsinger 2023; Kirsch et al. 2023; Moore et al. 2016b). A new “archival sensibility” (Moore et al. 2016a, 19) has produced new conceptions of the archive; new practices of archival research; new perspectives on the evidentiary power of archives; new forms of historicity and orientations to past, present, and future; new ideas about the ends of archival work; and new challenges for practices of archiving and archival research in a digital age (Blouin and Rosenberg 2011).

This also is on display in political theory, where archival work no longer is—and arguably never was—the domain of historians of political thought but rather is increasingly taken up across historical, normative, critical, comparative, and other areas of political theory.

To begin to sketch a range of approaches to archives and archival work in political theory, consider the work of historians of political thought who mine repositories of documents to get as close as possible to an author’s thoughts and intentions, reconstruct the circumstances of a political event, or reconsider canonical arguments in light of archival evidence (see the contributions by Buccola, Longo, and Verovšek in this Spotlight). The archive, here, is both a collection of published and unpublished texts and the place where these texts are stored. It serves as a site of facts, truth, and authorial intent—what Derrida (1996) described as the archive-as-*arkhē*, in which something worth remembering is presumed to be inscribed at the origin. Indeed, as Kathy Ferguson suggests, archives sometimes serve the explicit purpose of preserving a movement’s true ideas and intentions (see her contribution to this Spotlight). Archival work, therefore, is the search for what is to be remembered and an attempt to establish what a figure or event “really meant.” It involves searching, compiling, organizing, editing, and interpreting documents to discover what already was there and to reconstruct—on the basis of these documents—a larger historical narrative.

Other forms of archival work require a more destructive approach. As Alison McQueen shows in her contribution, this is the case in archival practices that use affordances of computational and algorithmic technologies that transcend human cognitive abilities to supplement the interpretive work of scholars. Although such technologies allow for the analysis of massive datasets, distant reading of large corpora, and visualization, they also remove the immediacy of the physical archive, the sensual experience of artifacts, and the possibility of a serendipitous find. Yet, digital archival work can shift attention from details to patterns across time, place specific interventions in a larger context of cultural production, and bracket questions about authorial intent, thereby opening up new avenues for scholarship in areas that ostensibly have been exhaustively explored.

Another approach is genealogical scholarship, often inspired by the historical–philosophical inquiries of Foucault (1998). The purpose of genealogical work is to reveal the will to power and the conflicts that made the emergence of certain phenomena possible. Although genealogists engage with archives as both records and the place where records are kept, they do so not by interpreting documents to support a larger narrative but instead by describing the clash of forces that makes statements possible and intelligible. The rules of such intelligibility, in this tradition, also are described as an “archive.” Genealogists thus often use this term in a metaphorical sense to refer to “the series of rules which determine in a culture the appearance and disappearance of statements, their retention and their destruction, their paradoxical existence as events and things” (Foucault 1998, 309). By approaching the archive as what is to be described in the process of genealogical

analysis, genealogy avoids imposing a preestablished meaning on a text and instead allows meaning to emerge from the text itself. The difference between documentary and genealogical approaches, therefore, is less one of archival practices than one of orientation to documents and history.

Finally, some political theorists find their archive in space, architecture, and the built environment. Built structures serve as an archive in both the traditional and metaphorical senses insofar as they are collections of artifacts to be interpreted and

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a medium that “shapes what is salient within our visual and auditory field, habituates us to circulate in certain ways, affects who we are likely to encounter as we go about our daily affairs, and imparts meaning to what we do together” (Bell and Zacka 2021, 2). As Bernardo Zacka suggests in his contribution, the architectural features of bureaucratic institutions can be read not only with an eye to functionality and aesthetics but also for deeper insights about competing rationalities of welfare capitalism. To reveal these insights, archival work takes the form of an immersive observation that foregrounds the situated experience of the researcher and the people inhabiting spaces. This is a simultaneously descriptive and hermeneutic ethnographic practice that “interprets [ordinary people’s] interpretations of the social world” (Herzog and Zacka 2019, 764).

The distinctions suggested in this Spotlight introduction among documentary, digital, genealogical, and ethnographic approaches are not intended as a comprehensive system of pure types but rather as a preliminary heuristic device that may be useful for methodological self-reflection. Along with its immense benefits, archival work also poses difficult challenges. As Nancy Luxon and Kevin Olson describe in their contributions, archives are incomplete, partial, and limited and they contain silences. How can we discern such silences and what can be inferred from them? How can we respect the foreign context of a historical document while also making it relevant for our present? Whose history and present are we concerned with exactly? What types of translation, transcription, and transposition are necessary and possible? How are we to identify what is salient for our inquiries from the mass of available data? How do features of the researcher mediate access to and engagement with the archive? Moreover, for whom is this work? How we answer these questions depends on our particular understanding of and approach to archives, as well as on the ends to which we enlist them. These brief reflections can serve as a first step toward possible answers.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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POLITICAL THEORY, THE ARCHIVE, AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

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Political theorists are familiar with the problem of authority. We know better than to claim, say, that Hobbes is right *because he is Hobbes*. But is the line so easily drawn? After all, *he is Hobbes*. It is a natural hazard of standing on the shoulders of greats that we peer down and behold their greatness. In graduate school, the problem manifests as nagging insecurity. We want to do exciting and novel readings of texts, but the path is treacherous—it is natural to wonder: *Am I missing something?* The issue emerges early on. The first time I read Hobbes was as an undergraduate; naturally, I assumed he was brilliant—otherwise, why would I be reading him in a freshman-year philosophy lecture?