

The *Hegemonic Principle of Provenance* as a Conceptual Tool to Understand the Archive

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DOI: 10.30763/intervencion.242.v1n23.21.2021 · YEAR 12, ISSUE NO. 23: 49-62

Submitted: 31.12.2020 · Accepted: 06.04.2021 · Published: 28.06.2021

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ABSTRACT

The present ESSAY seeks to support the definition of *hegemonic principle of provenance* as a useful concept to research, manage and conserve documentary heritage of different types. Its definition is based on an array of bibliography which could be considered a part of the *archival turn*. This principle involves a structuring inertia in terms of interpretation derived from the context of the records' production, which implies the potential replication of forms of symbolic violence by means of the archive. The hegemonic principle of provenance of archives translates into omissions, exclusions and, indeed, the reproduction of representations foreign to the assumed identities by the people registered in the records.

KEY WORDS

archive; principle of provenance: hegemony; archival science theory; symbolic violence

THE ARCHIVE, OUT OF NEUTRALITY

To begin by questioning scientism's apriorisms of objectivity and impartiality, it becomes necessary to accept that, whoever approaches a given archive, either to research it or preserve it, does so from a specific "social place" (De Certeau, 2006, p. 69), which involves the operation of interpretative frameworks composed of both the observer's personal baggage as well as the collection in question's own characteristics and history (Cook, 2010, pp. 156-158). This essay proposes a definition of

a concept linked to the second aspect, which I have named *hegemonic principle of provenance* (HPP), to refer to the phenomenon of archive interpretation from the preponderant vision of the hegemonic producing agent. The context of record production includes forms of domination and violence exercised over the identities and experiences registered within them, albeit these frequently go unnoticed by researchers, archivists and conservators. Hence, HPP is suggested as a concept to express the “archival violence”¹ (Tello, 2018, p. 62) intrinsic to the record's origin and the archive's own historicity. The main objective in defining HPP is to warn those working in archive management, conservation and research of different types of documentary heritage of the archive's share of social involvement with forms of symbolic violence manifested through anonymity, omissions, exclusions and even the reproduction of representations of individual or collective subjects that do not match the identities assumed by these social actors.

In view of the contributions by the so-called *archival turn*, which could be summed up as the total theoretical-methodological proposals emanating from different disciplines aimed at redefining the archive in a conceptual sense and as an object of study *per se* (Ketelaar, 2017, pp. 228-268; Stoler, 2010, pp. 465-469; Sánchez-Macedo, 2020, pp. 191-199), HPP can be seen as a useful concept to understand a determining aspect in the way archives are handled for research or preservation. The HPP proposal stems from the conjunction of two elements: on the one hand, one of the key precepts of modern Archival Science —perhaps the most important— the *principle of provenance*; on the other, a fundamental concept in social sciences and 20th century Marxist theory, *hegemony*. Hence, before proceeding to explain HPP, it is worthwhile to review its etymology and understand where the principle of provenance and the notion of hegemony came from, and how the two in conjunction can help define part of the types of symbolic domination and violence inherent in the archive.

ORIGINS OF THE PRINCIPLE OF PROVENANCE

From its inception in the 19th century, modern archivism's naturalist foundation advocated for respect for the original function of archives, with the aim to rescue records' original sense, in accordance with their production context (Cook, 2010, pp. 158-160).

¹ Editorial translation. This and subsequent quotes originally in Spanish are also editorial translations.

This way of understanding archives resulted in the articulation of a foundation which, over time, has become an axiom in archival practice: the principle of provenance.

According to Sweeney, this principle, rather than precept, began as a practice exercised by those responsible for European archives. The principle of provenance was defined in various ways during the course of the 18th and 19th centuries: in France, *respect des fonds*; in the Netherlands, *herkomstbeginsel*; in Germany, *provenienzprinzip*; in Prussia, *strukturprinzip*, and in Italy, *metodo storico* (Sweeney, 2008, p. 195).

The *Dutch Manual*, considered to be the first handbook of modern Archival Science, used the French term *respect des fonds* to establish the existence of a “natural” relation between records that originally belonged to a same set (Müller, Feith & Fruin, 2003, p. 50). Nevertheless, Horsman’s 2003 introductory note to the English version of the same text includes a definition of the principle of provenance developed around 1908 by Müller, coauthor of the manual: “[the principle of provenance] method of archive regulations, according to which every document is brought into the archive and into the section of the archive, to which, when the archive was still a living organism, it most recently belonged” (Müller, Feith & Fruin, 2003, p. xix).

For their part, Duff & Harris define it in the following way:

The principle of provenance requires the identification of the whole of the records created and/or accumulated and used by one individual, family, or organization, and that these be preserved and described as one fonds. Provenance thereby protects the evidential value of records and makes visible the acts and deeds from which the records emanate (2002, p. 267).

Following the use of archiving in art, Guasch further affirms that the definition of principle of provenance should always favor origin over meaning (2011, p. 16), an origin that inevitably linked to the recognition of a record-producing agent. Gilliland argues the same, sustaining that part of the discipline’s most entrenched paradigms is the archival practice of placing context over content for archived materials (2012, p. 341).

The principle of provenance has constituted an essential resource in modern Archival Science, to avoid partiality in the archive’s organization and description, based on maintaining the original sense assigned to the documents by a certain producer agent:

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The system [...] does not set up any arbitrary headings, but only those that are suggested by the character and organization of the archival collection itself, namely, headings that correspond to the various branches of the administrative body which produced the archival collection (Müller, Feith & Fruin, 2003, p. 52).

Towards the end of the 18th century, the articulation of the principle of provenance resided in what Cook called an “*evidential archive paradigm*” (2003, p. 106). At the time, Archival Science was defined as a field of knowledge whose main purpose was to shed light on the record's original context, providing its value as evidence of the past remained intact despite the passage of time. On that note, it went from considering that maintaining the organizational schemes derived from the record's original production would also allow conservation of the unity of the wholeness, or each of the archive's component parts “This unity in turn determines the unity of the files of incoming records and of receipts belonging to that register or account, which explain them in this most desirable way” (Müller, Feith & Fruin, 2003, p. 56).

The orthodox sense of principle of provenance synthesizes the reasoning that has traditionally defined the role of the archivist as a neutral subject in the processing and conservation of archives, whose only move is restoring a supposed “natural” state of provenance, inherent to the records original function. Although many conventional archival precepts have been revised in recent decades, the most common definition of provenance underlines the importance of the documents themselves, far above the people whose practices or identities were registered.

For Gilliland, attributing the provenance of the archive record to a single agent involves the recognition of an authority, which reinforces a position of power over any others involved in the record's production (2012, pp. 341-342). Thus, for a long time the idea that the archive always implies a hierarchy was accepted (Bearman & Lytle, 1985-1986, p. 21). Therefore, provenance contributes to perpetuating forms of symbolic violence inherent to the archives original function (Wood, Carbone, Cifor, Gilliland & Punzalan, 2014, p. 402), completely overlooking the fact that for records on slavery, delinquency or subaltern groups to exist, it was also necessary for there to have been people who in their time were considered slaves, delinquents or subaltern.

Almost from the outset of Archival Science, the principle of provenance has been considered a key precept for the treatment of

archives. To mention just two examples: in the 1960s, when the prominent archivist Schellenberg defended the application of this principle in the north American context, he did so using a Tolkienesque phrase: “one principle that should govern all the rest” (1965, p. 39). In addition, for Spanish archivist Heredia, the definition of principle of provenance ended by determining the main focus of Archival Science as a discipline concentrated on the “organicity” of the archive as opposed to ordering records by subject (1991, pp. 33-35).

Nevertheless, over the past three decades at least there has been an important debate surrounding how to understand the provenance of archive records in such a way as to propose reformulations, such as *parallel provenance* (Hurley, 2016) and *societal provenance* (Nesmith, 2006). Hurley himself subscribes to the Australian school of Archival Science which began to question the unitary meaning of provenance through the concept of *multiple provenance* since the 1960s (Hurley, 1995, pp. 242-257); however, those first contributions were still conceived on a single agency (Hurley, 2016, p. 39). In contrast, parallel provenance embraces the notion of ambiguity and accepts that a record can involve simultaneous actions by two or more subjects (Hurley, 2016, p. 40). Nesmith, in turn, sustains that all records imply a societal provenance since the social dimension encompasses all aspects of the archive:

Document creation, use and archiving have social origins. People make and archive records in social setting for social purposes. [...] Social circumstances shape what information may be known, what may be recorded, and what may not, and how it may be recorded, such as in the medium chosen. This circumstances affect who has information and why, and who may have access to it. They influence the language used to describe phenomena. They shape what is deemed trustworthy, authentic, reliable, worth remembering or forgettable, and how and when such information is used, and by whom (2006, p. 352).

Hence, from this perspective, provenance should always be identified in plural, regardless of the type of archives involved (Nesmith, 2006, p. 352).

Both cases attempt to complexify the notion of *provenance*, usually attributed to a single agent, in order to recognize that a complex collective of humans intervened, in some way or other, in a re-

cord's production. On this subject, Cook has suggested that there was a schism in 19th century archivism between those who opted to maintain ancient archival paradigms dating to the discipline's remote origins as the principle of provenance in its most traditional sense, as opposed to those who supported the total reinvention of archives and their recognition as centers of power and representation requiring new concepts and models to analyze, manage and conserve them (Cook, 2010, pp. 162-163). In this regard, the HPP proposal strives to join the second group. However, instead of aiming to widen the sense of provenance, as do parallel provenance or societal provenance, the HPP entails a different aspect, aiming more to identify —though not justify— forms of domination and symbolic violence of archives, understanding the latter as the imposition of legitimized meanings while concealing the power relations that govern them (Gutiérrez, 2004, pp. 289-293); that is to say, the HPP implies unconscious adherence to the dominant value system that gave rise to the archive records, manifested through exclusions, silences and representation of the subjects registered in conditions not of their choosing.

HEGEMONY AND THE ARCHIVE

The concept of hegemony used here was formulated by the Italian scholar Gramsci in the context of the rise of fascism in Italy. His aim was to try to understand the forms of domination of his times. From historic materialism, he found a vast network of institutions and agents abetting the transmission of ideologies that guaranteed stability for the *status quo* beyond the use of direct force or physical violence (Giacaglia, 2002, pp. 152-153).

The definition of hegemony for Gramsci acquires sense in the understanding of the so-called historical bloc: "The structure and superstructure conform a historical bloc, that is to say that the set of complex, contradictory and discordant superstructures [that] is the reflection of the social relations of production" (1971, p. 46). This historic bloc gains cohesion through the dissemination and acceptance of a dominant ideology, and it is precisely this phenomenon that is identified as hegemony; serving as the glue that holds together the construction that constitutes a form of social organization in a specific historical context.

It should be mentioned that Gramsci's ideas on hegemony were mostly left unconcluded due to his terrible imprisonment and death, hence most notes on the subject were reinterpreted, long after, following the appearance of the so-called *Prison Notebooks* (Bates,

1975). On this subject, Gilly succinctly defines hegemony as "The recognition, constructed in the history and the subject always in discussion, of the legitimacy of a domination within the ideology shared by an imaginary or real community" (2007, p. 26).

Hence, hegemony is the ideological order that provides unity and stability to a determined form of social organization; it reflects the relations of dominance that govern a concrete historical context. It is important to stress that this phenomenon is not exclusive to the field of politics, it embraces numerous social manifestations, one of which is, undoubtedly, the archive. Records —mainly those produced by the State— establish the materialization of a hegemony exerted over people, social relations and territory, since the archive, like "a powerful technology of government" (Stoler, 2010, p. 480), is a fundamental mechanism of representation and control through which reality is produced and apprehended. In one of the seminal texts in the field of Archival Science, Derrida even affirmed on the subject that: "there is no political power without control of the archives" (1997, p. 12).

Though Gramsci's definition of hegemony presents important differences regarding symbolic violence, attributed to the French sociologist Bourdieu (Fernández, 2005, pp. 14-15), through the archive's HPP it is deemed possible to find common elements between the two concepts, especially if symbolic violence is taken as an expression of a determined hegemony. Since, according to Fernández, "symbolic violence is exercised through symbolic forms, adopted by the dominated to interpret the world, which simultaneously implies knowledge and ignorance of its violent character or imposition" (2005, p. 15). Therefore, according to the type of archive, symbolic violence would be expressed by means of assertions or silence that reinforce representations that are inherent to the value system of the hegemonizing agents taking part in document production.

DEFINING THE HEGEMONIC PRINCIPLE OF PROVENANCE

With different angles, recent research concurs in identifying a degree of inherent violence to archive functioning (Cook, 2010, pp. 153-154; Yale, 2015, pp. 335-345; Castillejo, 2016, pp. 114-139), exerted directly or symbolically. Tello says the following on the subject:

No forming of an *arkhé* (archive) is exempt of an active operation to exclude traces, of archival violence manifested in modes

of selective elimination of inscriptions or even a planned or random destruction of registries [...] there is no archive without any display of archival violence [...] that acts using the sensory domain, the statements and visibilities on which any hegemonic form operates [2018, pp. 61-62].

Furthermore, Dong, Blanco-Rivera, Caswell & Steele (2017, pp. 935-940) argue that at their creation, a majority of records contributed to the control and supervision of people subject to the institutional framework that produced the archives. Moreover, in many cases the archives' mere persistence is proof of their own hegemony. Hence a significant number of archives conserved nowadays constitute a reflection of dominant institutions which, in their time, used different documentary mediums to capture the world, inscribing their own value systems on them (Cook, 2010, p. 154). Therefore, in archival and research tasks it is patently necessary to identify and articulate the inequalities that form part the records' provenance. Following Millar's contributions, HPP would aim to delve into "the history of who created, accumulated and used the records" as well as their transfer processes, from producer to custodian (2002, pp. 12-13).

Both principle of provenance and hegemony separately imply the preservation of a certain unit. The crossing-point of both terms should define the hegemony that gives meaning to a particular conception of the archive that predominates over others; according to the specific context in which the archival materials were produced and transited through, they are inscribed in a network of social relations that imply domination by certain sectors of society and the subjugation of others, as well as exclusion and silences. All this to become expressions of symbolic violence when, through conservation, management of research work, they reproduce forms or representation taken —consciously or not— from the archive's own hegemony.

As mentioned earlier, the principle of provenance implicitly involves recognition of a main agent of production of the archival records, as though only by expression through the hegemonic agent could it preserve its *evidential* value. Thus, the HPP links the document interpretation to the producing agent.

Defining the HPP in no way implies no longer considering archival records as evidence. Transitional judicial processes launched since the second half of the 20th century in different countries have demonstrated, more than ever, the *evidential* value of documents and archives when both have been used as proof for recognition

of, and reparations to, victims of all sorts of violence (Wood et al., 2014; Dong et al., 2017). However, the HPP helps establish that archival records not only provide evidence of the functioning of an administrative body or a certain individual, but also of value systems, inequalities and social hierarchies.

Warning about HPP would be a first step to stop amplifying the echoes of dominance that reverberate in the records, which should nowadays be a fundamental task of archival work (Caswell, 2014), whether this be for research, conservation or for its own archival treatment. On the other hand, the concept allows us to answer the question of why a certain way of understanding the archives and interpret the records sometimes prevails (Nesmith, 2006, pp. 351-353). Thence it is pertinent to question what relations of power gave rise to the archive records: what inequality or subjections molded the elements it comprises; what decisions or consequences their creation and preservation have entailed, etc. In this sense, it is worth repeating Yale's accurate phrase "no archive is innocent" (2015, p. 332). If not, naturalizing the archive's operation, from its production to its management and conservation, would imply overlooking all the different social uses of the records as well as their duress, exclusions or extinctions, whether implicit or explicit (Tello, 2018, p. 26).

Briefly, the HPP could be translated as that structuring inertia emanating from the context of production of the record's registries, which is replicated in the archive's processing, research and conservation tasks. In most cases, this means keeping the subaltern subjects anonymized, along with the banalization of the social relations of inequality and violence that gave rise to the records. It is worth clarifying that the HPP would depend on the archives' characteristics and historicity, since nowadays there are increasingly more initiatives of record's collections created counter to hegemonizing institutions: cases of community archives of historically marginalized groups or civil organizations engaged in different political and social causes, which suggest an absence of HPP.

Nevertheless, though not stated as such, HPP involves a phenomenon identified by authors dedicated to probing the operation of archives from a critical perspective (Derrida, 1997; Gilliland, 2012; Caswell, 2014; Tello, 2018). Gilliland, for example, points out the following: "The act of designating provenance is an acknowledgment of the authority and responsibility and, by implication, reinforces the power status of, the official creating entity over any other party involved in the creation of the materials" (2012, p. 341-342). The proposal, therefore, is to add HPP to the most recent reformulations

regarding provenance, to contribute to an enhanced contextualization of the records, recovering elements of the archives particular history so they may be taken into consideration during the management, research and conservation of record collections.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Where and how to manifest HPP will be up to those working with each collection, determined either by the institution's resources and infrastructure, or by the archive's available power of decision to "working along the archival grain" (Stoler, 2010, p. 480) and explore the social relations and symbolic violence related to the records' production and preservation. It should also be noted that HPP does not contravene the decision to maintain the principle of provenance as a criterion for conservation, since it does not necessarily mean the reorganization of records. Rather, the purpose is to suggest a route to understand the archives by elucidating the relations of power involved in its production and upheld in subsequent interpretations. However, the HPP proposal concurs with those who support the need to reformulate the definition of provenance applied to records collections.

Following Caswell, archives are far from being sites for neutral and objective work by archivists, researchers and conservers, since they permanently operate a series of mediations that determine which "truth" is extracted from the records (2014, p. 161). One of these mediations would doubtlessly be the HPP, which leads us to interpret the archive mainly from the point of view of the hegemonizing producing agent.

The importance of taking HPP as a conceptual tool to understand the archive is linked to improving the contextualization of documents, reinforcing their evidential sense, by adding more layers of meaning to the processes of research, management and conservation carried out. Furthermore, warning about types of symbolic violence certain archives are part of would constitute a first step to leaving its reproduction behind. According to Cook, the archivist should not function as an "agent who reinforces the institutional power" (2010, p. 164), to contribute to the democratization of the archives.

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