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# Inroad to Singularity: Arlette Farge and the Co-Authorship of the Archive

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# Inroad to Singularity: Arlette Farge and the Co-Authorship of the Archive

Modern historiography is marked by an aporia: there is meticulous positivism, but also a deeply held belief in theory. Following Roland Barthes, the question is whether or not historians are entitled to go beyond the literal sense of a particular discourse.<sup>1</sup> Compilation versus interpretation, that is the question. However, according to Barthes, critical engagement starts with the act of compiling. You don't have to add elements of your own ideas to "deform" a given text. It is enough simply to "quote", which is to say to cut and re-arrange fragments.<sup>2</sup> The art of quoting as a practice of critical engagement with written artefacts – this could be an appropriate motto for the historiographical work of Arlette Farge. Any critical engagement with Farge faces the fundamental problem of how to relate theory and modes of writing ("*écriture*"), to use the concept introduced by Barthes to capture the structural reality of texts between language and style.

## Paris streetlife and the archive

Arlette Farge's studies are almost exclusively concerned with the history of 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris. She is interested in living and working conditions, the social dynamics of urban quarters, apartment buildings, and streets. This includes studies on the history of crafts and trades, precarious employment, gender relations, and women's everyday life, in addition to the history of the police and judicial authorities, and the history of rumours and gossip. Farge is interested in "stranded lives" that appear only as "elusive silhouettes". She considers these small and fragile existences – bitterly poor and tragic – to be the "fine-grained sand of history".<sup>3</sup> Farge's topics amount to a distinguished and recognizable research programme at the crossroads of social and cultural history. It is important to note that unlike many historians, Farge does not arrive at her topics via middle-range sociological theories. Farge teases out her topics at the archive.

In reading Arlette Farge's *Le goût de l'archive* (1989), one is well advised not to search for general theorems, since it proceeds with a theorising of sorts centred on singularity. Farge does not theorise "the" archive in general, but one particular archive: the court and police collections, "assembled at the National Archive, the *Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal* and the *Bibliothèque Nationale*".<sup>4</sup> This archive's evidence was produced for contemporary administrative use, not for subsequent research

by historians. For Farge, the Bastille's archive resulted from – and was a powerful resource for – a continuous effort to produce knowledge about the people of Paris. Its documents are structured by a police logic of questioning, interrogating, and monitoring, and they are evidently focused on events and actions that departed from the routine. This kind of archive poses different challenges for historians than ministerial files, records at the Federal Archive, digital archives of journals and newspapers, or different paper mausoleums, which are the dream and nightmare of every biographer. Arlette Farge encourages us to reflect on the archives and evidence we prefer.

A single archive can nevertheless include heterogeneous evidence. For example, there are the rather coherent holdings known as *Lettres de cachet*, royal orders of detention analysed by Farge and Michel Foucault (*Le désordre des familles*, 1982). There is also a unique journal, hastily written down by an artisan whose wife refused to continue working in the marital shop (*La révolte de Mme Montjean*, 2016). Finally, there are archival “bulk goods” (Arlette Farge) – without any date, name, provenance, or further information – that cross the historian's path from time to time without being analysed (*Vies oubliées*, 2019).

## Archival evidence and The Real

At the archive there is an “impact of the real” – or more precisely an “impact of a sensation of the real”, as Farge puts it – that “no published work, no matter how unknown, could ever evoke”.<sup>5</sup> Archival material, edited files and records, memoirs, printed works – each type of evidence is different. Farge suggests that the attachment of historians to archives (including occasional relationship crises) has something to do with the characteristics of archival documents. Most often, they were not deliberately created with the purpose of being read or published. This understanding suggests that Farge has something special in mind when talking about archival evidence. Her fascination resonates with interrogation records assembled at police and judiciary archives. These archives and documents enable sudden encounters with unexpected events, with “unknown, failed, and successful lives”.<sup>6</sup> The Bastille's archive can be understood as a “sanctuary for dead but nonetheless previously uttered words”, a “place of overheard words”.<sup>7</sup> This peculiarity is striking: it is a matter of *spoken* words, *written down* with a particular purpose in mind. Much later, these words catch the attention of the historian, who is *reading* the records and trying to make all of the voices *audible* again, at least metaphorically.<sup>8</sup>

Being fascinated but not overwhelmed at the archive – that is the fundamental challenge for every historian. A passion for collecting may be the “necessary humus to cultivate one’s reasoning”, but historiography owes its existence to a different kind of “intellectual exercise”. However convincing, a mere “reconstruction” of what happened and what was recorded is not enough. Historians easily get trapped in the archive, and risk losing sight of their original task: asking questions.<sup>9</sup> *Questioning* is the important concept here. Asking questions is an on-going process with no definite closure. The relevant but always shifting questions emerge from contemporary discourses, research in progress, as well as the conserved but not easily absorbed fragments of knowledge within archival collections. These fragments are a counterpart to “globalising theories”. Their meaning, Farge suggests, can be captured only through “specific investigations”.<sup>10</sup> This, in turn, requires a different mode of writing, namely writing with the benefit of archives.

## Writing with the benefit of archives

Historiography is the result of a co-authorship between historians and the archive. Each kind of evidence induces different modes of writing and theoretical reflection. Unlike the West German tradition of social history, Arlette Farge does not separate theory from her material and writing. Theory is instead a technology for formulating and re-formulating questions in order to capture the social logic of historical situations, rather than an exercise of defining in advance.<sup>11</sup> When working on the *Lettres de cachet*, Farge recalls that Foucault was in favour of a publication without any further comment or apparatus. She had to convince him that some kind of contextualisation and interpretation was necessary to give these documents meaning.<sup>12</sup> Writing with the benefit of archives can be summarized as presenting evidence and rendering it intelligible. The process of writing takes place in several stages.

At the archive, a historian’s work begins with excerpts and transcriptions. According to Farge, this is a duplicating and isolating craft by which historians simultaneously define and confine the scope of their topics. “Apparently child’s play, this procedure nonetheless misrepresents the real for the first time, be it only by indispensable classification. [...] Whatever the purpose, research starts with similarities and the apparently identical. After that, the collection of excerpts and transcripts has to be edited, especially by breaking up similarities and marking singularities”.<sup>13</sup> Yet how to translate collected excerpts into historiography? No matter how tempting archival evidence may be, writing history cannot be restricted to its annotation, “as if the

truth of its testimony did not have to be questioned. This entails a rather descriptive and shallow historiography, unable to generate anything else than a mere reflex – or copy – of a word written two hundred years ago. Narrative subsequently becomes a boring and positivist commentary without filtering its results by means of historical critique”.<sup>14</sup>

Arlette Farge is obviously not in favour of paraphrasing and a mere summary of the contents of a particular historical document. Her writing is an art of quoting and arranging quoted evidence. This mode of writing comes close to so-called post-modernist forms that are becoming unfashionable. The most prominent and important feature of such modes of writing was (and is) the conscious break with realist and descriptive narratives in literature and historiography. In a way, Farge’s studies come to the same conclusion as Roland Barthes in one of his analyses: both novels and historiographical reports assume the existence of a “constructed, worked-through, detached world, reduced to some aspects of meaningfulness”.<sup>15</sup> Farge argues that quoting can undermine this order, as long as the quotes are not used as a simple way to make writing easier, or as a means of delusion to provide proof when reasoning is required. First, quoting and making collages of quotes should be used to create a new situation within the historian’s texts via their “abrupt power”. Second, quotes can be helpful in shifting one’s own point of view. Third, quoting is a way of freeing oneself from “learned and academic manners”. Last but not least, arranging other people’s words grants historians a short break, allowing their “usually reasonable discourse” to rest.<sup>16</sup>

Farge does not reduce archival evidence to its documentary content; she employs a particular narrative strategy and concept of theory within historiography. Historical documents help with the phrasing of theories. Claude Lévi-Strauss summarized this approach long before Farge. As an anthropologist, he stated that it is important to acknowledge the “natives” as “colleagues” to debate with.<sup>17</sup> At the archive, Farge suggests, a historian does not only find “the everyday”, but also thoughts and reflections on the everyday. “This is the richness of the archive: not to stop at the description of social life, but to understand how people are making sense of themselves, their lives and the situations they live in – thereby constantly producing knowledge”.<sup>18</sup> I believe that this collegiality and co-authorship is much more than simply granting archival evidence the power of veto.

## Social history and the “average man”

For Farge, focusing on archival evidence is, after all, an appropriate way of problematising concepts of representativeness. Farge argues that efforts to go beyond historiography’s long-lasting focus on Great Men and Grand Ideas engendered concepts of the “average man” as part of the newer social history and the history of mentalities, with claims to be representative agents of a particular society or social group.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to such efforts, Farge insists on the importance of small gestures and words as singular events. Historians should not bury unique stories under hasty generalisations. This sounds like Edward P. Thompson’s crusade against economic history’s obsession with the “mythical average” (of standards of living, for example), and his insistence on the creativity and individuality of historical agents. In contrast to Thompson, Farge refrains from evoking “social types”. In her writings, there is no counterpart to Thompson’s iconic “obsolete handloom weaver”.<sup>20</sup> Focussing on the fragmentary character of archival evidence and its surplus of meaning, the adequacy of historiographical concepts is at stake. In this sense, Farge’s advice is to stop using phrases like “Such people...”.<sup>21</sup>

## “We are working differently”

At the beginning of this essay, I suggested capturing the essence of Arlette Farge’s work with reference to Roland Barthes, which makes writing theory into an art of quoting and arranging quotes. Quoting from the archival evidence within historiographical writing signals the existence of a multitude of voices. It is the historian’s way of introducing history into present reasoning. Historiography entails translation with the purpose of connecting contemporary societies with those from the past. According to this idea, the work of writing history changes as much as the historian’s relation to historical agents. Most importantly, it recalibrates the relationship to archival material and theorising. “The notion that historiography is condemned to ‘documentary accuracy’, and philosophy to ‘constructing elaborate systems of thought’”, Farge and Foucault once noted, “is nonsense. We are working differently.”<sup>22</sup>

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**Tags:** archive / evidence / Farge / representativeness

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Am Nullpunkt der Literatur. Literatur oder Geschichte. Kritik und Wahrheit*, translated from French by Helmut Scheffel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2016, 171–231, here 190.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>3</sup> Arlette Farge, *Das brüchige Leben. Verführung und Aufruhr im Paris des 18. Jahrhunderts*, translated from French by Wolfgang Kaiser, Berlin: Wagenbach 1989, 9, translation T. L.

<sup>4</sup> Arlette Farge, *Der Geschmack des Archivs*, translated from French by Jörn Etzold, Göttingen: Wallstein 2011, 7, translation T. L.

<sup>5</sup> Farge, *Der Geschmack des Archivs*, 10, translation T. L.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 12, translation T. L.

<sup>7</sup> Farge, *Das brüchige Leben*, 7; Farge, *Der Geschmack des Archivs*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> The same approach can be found in the work of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, as Monika Hohkamp recently pointed out (Michaela Hohkamp, "Neu gelesen: Montaignou," *WerkstattGeschichte* 84 (2021), 151–155).

<sup>9</sup> Farge, *Der Geschmack des Archivs*, 56–57.

<sup>10</sup> Farge, *Das brüchige Leben*, 11; Farge, *Der Geschmack des Archivs*, 78–79.

<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Uwe Walter argues in favour of a "reduced" understanding of theory: "the carefully considered structuring of a subject area, neither completely far ahead nor simply catching up but in a hermeneutic alternating process with work on the material". (Uwe Walter, "Between identity, power and truth: The use of theory in the science of history," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (05.10.2021), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/912>).

<sup>12</sup> Arlette Farge, *La révolte de Mme Montjean. L'histoire d'un couple d'artisans au siècle des Lumières*. Paris: Albin Michel 2016, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Farge, *Der Geschmack des Archivs*, 52–53, translation T. L.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 59, translation T. L.

<sup>15</sup> Barthes, *Nullpunkt der Literatur*, 9–69, here 30, translation T. L.

<sup>16</sup> Farge, *Der Geschmack des Archivs*, 59–61, translation T. L.

<sup>17</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Einleitung in das Werk von Marcel Mauss," in *Soziologie und Anthropologie, Band I. Theorie der Magie, soziale Morphologie*, Marcel Mauss. Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein 1978, 7–41, here 32.

<sup>18</sup> Farge, *Der Geschmack des Archivs*, 80, translation T. L.

<sup>19</sup> Farge, *Das brüchige Leben*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Edward P. Thompson, *Die Entstehung der englischen Arbeiterklasse*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1987, 11.

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<sup>21</sup> Farge, *La révolte de Mme Montjean*, 164: "afin que ne soit plus employée la phrase 'ces gens-là...'"

<sup>22</sup> Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, *Familiäre Konflikte. Die "Lettres de cachet" aus den Archiven der Bastille im 18. Jahrhundert*, translated from French by Chris E. Paschold and Albert Gier, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1989, 9, translation T. L.