



Title: *Archives as Ruins: Means of Understanding the Future in an Era of Wrecks*

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How to cite this article:

Iorga, Alexandru. 2019. "Archives as Ruins: Means of Understanding the Future in an Era of Wrecks." *Martor* 24: 43-54.

Published by: Editura MARTOR (MARTOR Publishing House), Muzeul Național al Țăranului Român (National Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-24-2019/>

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Martor is indexed by:

CEEOL, EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Anthropological Index Online (AIO), MLA International Bibliography.

This issue of *Martor* has been published with the financial support of the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN Romania).

Archives as Ruins: Means of Understanding the Future in an Era of Wrecks

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ABSTRACT

Archives are not all the time talking about themselves—as if a self might be forced on them until their disappearance. Why are we so much into archives, museums, collections, and accumulation? What is the purpose of individual and public archives? How are they imagined, built and used? What are the ends of archives and museums in an era of breaking off with the past? The paper aims to discuss some possible answers to these questions. It scrutinizes the ways in which archives are storage places and knowledge producers, as well as the manners in which they are and can be instrumentalized. It will examine the meanings of archives and museums in post-colonial, neo-colonial and national environments.

KEYWORDS

Archives, ruins, knowledge production, museums, anthropology and ethnology.

“What is fundamental is to understand that your great Project . . . is profoundly modern.” “No, we are talking of something profoundly modern. It is well established—and indeed it has been incontrovertibly proven by many of those I have earlier cited—that nowadays we prefer the replica to the original. We prefer the reproduction of the work of art to the work of art itself, the perfect sound and solitude of the compact disc to the symphony concert in the company of a thousand victims of throat complaints, the book on tape to the book on the lap.”

— Julian Barnes, *England, England*

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Introduction

In early April 2016, under the heading Syrian Civil War, BBC announced: “Palmyra’s Arch of Triumph recreated

in London” (Turner 2016). According to the news, Palmyra’s Arch of Triumph had been successfully printed using 3D technology to be displayed in downtown London, after the destruction of the original. Two years later, artnet.com ran the headline “The Ghost of Iraq’s Lost Heritage Comes to Trafalgar Square as Michael Rakowitz Unveils His Fourth Plinth Sculpture.” The story said that “the lions in Trafalgar Square in London will get a strange and powerful companion that is part lion, part bull, and part eagle, when the Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz unveils his Fourth Plinth . . . Rakowitz has recreated a full-scale version of the sculpture of a Lamassu, a protective deity which guarded the Nergal Gate at the entrance of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh for almost three millennia. The winged creature stood fast from 700 BC until 2015, when it was destroyed by Daesh after the Islamist extremists gained control of the site near Mosul in northern Iraq” and he “has clad



his sculpture with empty cans of date syrup, referencing Iraq's now-decimated date industry" (Rea 2018).

In 2018, in Brazil, due to underfunding and negligence, the largest and most comprehensive museum of the history and prehistory of South America has burned down. Losses were considered incalculable (Phillips 2018). Thousands of years of history have quickly vanished into dust and ashes, together with tens of thousands of working hours and the last records of extinct peoples and local languages. In 2013, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews was inaugurated in Warsaw—a museum of the Holocaust memorial of Jews settled in Poland. Since the museum did not start from capitalizing on a consistent material heritage—there were not many artefacts around to build the contents of a museum—it was rather a call to memory, devotion and remembrance: “a journey of a thousand years” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2016). More and more former colonies have claimed from former colonizers the return of cultural and patrimonial elements—be it the recognition of rights (sovereignty, self-determination, etc.) or the return of some goods and artefacts. As far as the last category is concerned, the repatriation of objects is only a part of a more substantial process aiming to enhance the emancipation of former colonies, including symbolic and de facto recognition of colonial rule. It is also a process through which colonial history is set aside in favour of a post-colonial local one (Brown 2018).

The above examples were not randomly chosen. Each of them has a complex story behind and is largely related to what Derrida called *archive fever* (Derrida and Prenowitz 1995). In Derrida's terms:

The *trouble de l'archive* stems from a *mal d'archive*. We are *en mal d'archive*: in need of archives. Listening to the French idiom, and in it the attribute *en mal de*, to be *en mal d'archive* can mean something else than to suffer from a sickness, from a trouble or from what the noun

mal might name. It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it archives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. No desire, no passion, no drive, no compulsion, indeed no repetition compulsion, no *mal-de* can arise for a person who is not already, in one way or another, *en mal d'archive* (Derrida and Prenowitz 1995: 57).

In the case of the destruction caused by Daesh, there are several keys in which this new history is being produced. On the one hand, there is the rupture with the past—which is used to legitimize some powers, ethnicities and/or states—and the physical and also symbolic destruction of the very legitimating object—which only undermines the classical criteria of legitimacy (factual history, territory, language, etc.), proposing some other based on religion and on the dissolution of the ethnic, territorial and national (see Jones 2018; Roberts 2015). On the other hand, we are dealing with a Western European post- and neo-colonial attitude in the practice of appropriation of destroyed artefacts. But this symbolic appropriation is perfectly justified if we look at the perspective suggested by Said in terms of the West's relationship with the East:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other (Said 2003: 1).

Even more, as Mitchell pointed out in his paper “The World as Exhibition,” the image of the Orient was constructed by the West by representing the world into an exhibitory order” inside museums and exhibitions:



Everything seemed to be set up as though it were the model or the picture of something, arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification, declaring itself to be a mere object, a mere “signifier of” something further (Mitchell 1989: 222).

When Mitchell introduces his findings about the image of the Orient as imagined and exhibited in Western Europe and later seen through the eyes of the Arab scholars visiting it, he clearly states: “What they found in the West were not just exhibitions of the world, but the ordering up of the world itself as an endless exhibition” (Mitchell 1989: 218).

Understanding humanity’s past and constructing the Other’s image through artefacts, their accumulation, display (see Mitchell 1989; Sahlin 2008), and, in opposition, their destruction, once again confirms that these heterotopias are specific to Western nineteenth century culture and are not universal practices:

The idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century (Foucault 1986: 26).

Yet, archival production is not only about *them*, it is also about *us*. Archival practice might be looked upon as modern and contemporary complex processes through which the vanishing ancestral memories are safeguarded, as oral traditions are constantly fading away (see Nora 1984).

It seems more and more clear that three elements have contributed massively to the birth of archives: paper, print and state

(Derrida and Prenowitz 1995; Stoler 2009). The term *archive*, by its etymology, is closely related to governance and power, but more to the idea of centrality, governance and centralized power (Stoler 2009). In spite of the ambiguous meaning of the term emphasized by Derrida “nothing is thus more troubled and more troubling today than the concept archived in this word ‘archive’” (Derrida and Prenowitz 1995: 57), archives always have a history, a genealogy, and a context:

Because the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory. There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside (Derrida and Prenowitz 1995: 14).

Archives—as both processes and practices and specific places in which various documents with a sort of historical meaning are stored—are the products of specific contexts and also one of the instruments of power through which the governing of particular populations is ensured by centralized political structures (see also Stoler 2009). Anderson discusses them in the final part of his landmark *Imagined communities*, stating:

The census, the map, and the museum: together, they profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion—the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry (Anderson 2006: 183–4).

From that viewpoint, it became very clear why the former colonies are more interested in the restitution of the colonial archives than in the return of artefact and museum





collections. It is the historical truth embedded in the colonial past they want, it is the past exploitation they want to recall, reclaim, and re-establish. As Gathara puts it in his recent article “The Path to Colonial Reckoning Is through Archives, Not Museums”:

The colonial archive, the thousands of official records and documents that trace the history of subjugation, oppression and looting of the continent by the European powers is largely resident in Europe. And it is not a history that the Europeans have been eager to reveal, preferring to think of their time as overlords of the continent as something of a benevolent occupation (Gathara 2019).

And indeed, it is not about the wish of former colonial entities to physically possess the archives, it is not archival fetishism; what they are after is the contents of the archives that they want to make public in order to start decolonizing their history. To some extent, all these practices seem to be part of a larger process of post-colonial and de-colonial emancipation from the hegemony of the Western world. It seems to be a backlash of the situation described by Said:

Reflection, debate, rational argument, moral principle based on a secular notion that human beings must create their own history, have been replaced by abstract ideas that celebrate American or Western exceptionalism, denigrate the relevance of context, and regard other cultures with derisive contempt (Said 2003: XX).

Even if Anderson discusses the colonial situation, his findings might also be used to investigate the histories of national states, namely those states that did not have direct colonial relations or an Imperial history. The archive seems to be a category that unites and transcends these three institutions of power. Because the map, the census and the museums are ultimately collections, palpable testimonies and ordered products

of scientific knowledge—witnesses of an unreachable past, with abstract contents and a physical representation. At the same time, archives represent technical, bureaucratic accumulations and allow the creation of contexts in which power relations become manifest. As Poenaru put it:

The archives not only delineate a social terrain in which legacies of the past are intensely fought over in the present, shaping it, but also create a social space in which the present has the power to retrospectively determine the past (2013: 183-4).

Through the mediation provided by the archives, the past can be reshaped by the present, including the memory of the past and the historical facts recorded at a non-mainstream level. This does not exclude the magic veil of the archives; rather it enforces it alongside the archives’ [perceived] ability of enclosing and carrying secrets and truths (see Verdery 2014; Poenaru 2013).

While the post-colonial countries regard archives as both tremendous collections and accumulations of the colonial bureaucratic system and sources for historical truths (Gathara 2019; Stoler 2009), East European countries, having none or limited colonial experience, traditionally see archives as accumulations of documents (including ethnographic ones) of a highly historical value in terms of nation-building and national and ethnic identity (Mihăilescu 2004; Karnoouh 2011).



A few histories

In Romania, the practice of archives—in its contemporary understanding, as well as museum practice—is relatively recent compared to other European countries. The official web page of the National Archives of Romania states that archives and archival practice in Romania are quite young:

As an institution, the Archives on the territory of the Romanian extra-Carpathian Principalities were officially established in the context of elaborating the first modern administrative laws, namely the Organic Regulations, between 1831–1832. For the period prior to the nineteenth century, however, the existence of archives outside the chancellery is not to be overlooked, namely the ones preserved by the ecclesiastical authorities, as well as private archives constituted by the various ranks in the boyar hierarchy. Among them, the oldest places to store documents were the monasteries, which, due to their safe nature, allowed the grouping of secular documents as well (Romanian National Archives).

Medieval documents and especially those related to centralized bureaucracy and to state potentiality have backed the process of archive building. Personal¹ and professional² collections contributed as well. Long before that, collections converted into archives became disciplinary instruments with a three-fold purpose: firstly, to order materials, secondly, to lend disciplinary legitimation, and thirdly, to be an instrument designed to save the testimonies of worlds that were about to disappear. The third reason relates to a practice of building and protecting national memory, generally with the aim to be of use to others. Piling up things in the hope that the present world will become a better one and a future generation will manage everything in order to find the [historical] truth, gathering records in the present time archives for the future, this is in fact the very purpose of archives: to facilitate access to and the use of all their records for scholars from various disciplines and for other interested individuals.

The myth of the archives holding the historical truth is still active, and it increases proportionally with the new fascination for old epochs, distant times in the history of humanity (see also Poenaru 2013; Verdery 2014; Derrida and Prenowitz 1995). But these distant worlds are also created and re-created. In the last chapter of his book *Silencing the*

Past, Trouillot insists on the relationship of historians with the construction of the socio-historical past stating that:

Professional historians have made good use of the creation of the past as a distinct entity, a creation that paralleled the growth of their own practice. That practice, in turn, reinforced the belief that made it possible. The more historians wrote about past worlds, the more The Past became real as a separate world. But as various crises of our times impinge upon identities thought to be long established or silent, we move closer to the era when professional historians will have to position themselves more clearly within the present, lest politicians, magnates, or ethnic leaders alone write history for them (Trouillot, 1995: 152).

On the other hand, in his epilogue to *Provincializing Europe*, about reason and the critique of historicism, Chakrabarty discusses the relation between historical evidence and the creation of a historical consciousness and reality:

Historical evidence (the archive) is produced by our capacity to see something that is contemporaneous with us—ranging from practices, humans, institutions, and stone-inscriptions to documents—as a relic of another time or place. The person gifted with historical consciousness sees these objects as things that once belonged to their historical context and now exist in the observer's time as a “bit” of that past. A particular past thus becomes objectified in the observer's time. If such an object continues to have effects on the present, then the historically minded person sees that as the effect of the past. It is through such objectification—predicated on the principle of anachronism—that the eye of the participant is converted into the eye of the witness. This is how a participant in an historical “event” becomes an “eyewitness” for the historian, affirming the “rule of evidence” of historiography. . . . If historical or anthropological consciousness is seen as the

1) These have become visible in private or private collections open to the public, and later in public museums.

2) Since the nineteenth century, professional associations have carried out a consistent collection and research activity with the clear purpose of creating archives.

work of a rational outlook, it can only “objectify”—and thus deny—the lived relations the observing subject already has with that which he or she identifies as belonging to a historical or ethnographic time and space separate from the ones he or she occupies as the analyst. In other words, the method does not allow the investigating subject to recognize himself or herself as also the figure he or she is investigating. It stops the subject from seeing his or her own present as discontinuous with itself (Chakrabarty 2000: 238-239).

From that viewpoint, an archive seems to be the depositary of old truths, secrets, secret recipes and silenced events and facts—all of them part of a larger, seemingly far-reaching picture: everything one does not know or would like to know could be potentially found inside an archive (see Burton 2005; Blouin and Rosenberg 2011; Blouin and Rosenberg 2013). The practice of archives appears to be future oriented; what matters for the present time is not so much the archival contents, but accumulation. Even more clearly put:

Archives are generally taken for granted as places of knowledge, that is, institutions that help to preserve, make available, and create knowledge. According to conventional usage, archives are “repositories” or “storerooms,” and thus are often reduced to their function of providing the prerequisites or structuring principles of knowledge. But we should not declare archives places of knowledge generically without further ado. The path from archives to knowledge was and remains neither necessary and inevitable nor simple and self-evident (Friedrich 2018: 5).

In Romania, for example, a growing body of trained historians are practising a peculiar kind of historiography, namely publishing “books” made up entirely of reproduced and reordered archival documents on various topics, which are not however accompanied by a critical or even theoretical apparatus, with the clear purpose of making the

documents available to a wider public. Their work strongly contrasts with the public openness facilitated by the National Archives. Despite their intention to make historical documents public, generally these historians’ undertakings turn out to be estranged in relation with public concerns when comparing the scholarly discourse with the intellectual one.

Museums, both as practices and places of displaying objects, stories and histories, including ethnographic museums, in the Western world are deeply rooted in the sixteenth and seventeenth century history of cabinets of curiosities or “wonder rooms,” in which exotic, extraordinary, abnormal things were displayed. In presenting the evolution of museums from simply exhibiting the exotic to a more pedagogical approach as an important feature of museum history, Fromm highlights the birth of the intangible heritage:

As the tangible collections were transformed from displays of the exotic to different types of didactic exhibits, they were reunited with aspects of intangible heritage to tell more complete stories (Fromm 2016: 89; see also Fromm *et al.* 2014).

At the same time, the practice of museums consists of assorted processes of object and ritual laicization and silencing (Karnouh 2011: 150). For Bennett, museums are not just places of instruction of the general public, but they are informed by reformatory commitments regarding social routines—memory of the state development as well as social memory. All these things put museums at the forefront of the discussion about modern relationship between culture (i.e., official vs. popular) and state centralized political power (Bennett 1995; Burton 2005).

I mentioned above that museums and archives were and still are disciplinary apparatus of accumulation and education, and also the fact that in the process of archive and museum creation in Romania, professional associations have had a huge impact. In



what follows, I shall highlight the evolution of some Romanian professional associations and discuss the role of the museums they established. I shall focus mainly on museums related to ethnography and ethnology because they were highly instrumentalized. It is acknowledged by historians of social sciences that ethnography and sociology

produced notions, metaphors, and views that offered not only society tools for self-description, but also provided [...] plans for policy making (Brunnbauer *et al.* 2011: 4).

In 1875, the Royal Romanian Society of Geography was founded, which, together with the Romanian Academic Society (founded in 1866), contributed fundamentally to the institutionalization of geography as a discipline. Its establishment also created the conditions that further made possible the institutionalization of ethnography and ethnology in Romania. Moreover, the Royal Romanian Society of Geography, at the proposal of the Romanian Academic Society, included an ethnology section because the main model at that time regarded geography as a broad discipline. Thus, material or non-material culture elements that could be empirically quantified were subjects of interest to geographers. In other words, the science of the people was the model that successfully imposed itself in Romania.

Shortly after the establishing of the first Department of Geography, in 1902, at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Bucharest, Simion Mehedinți³ introduced a course of anthropogeography and a few years later, a course on ethnography. Known as the founder of modern geography, Simion Mehedinți was one of the most important Romanian geographers and ethnologists in the first part of the nineteenth century. He also introduced the German-Austrian diffusionist ideas in Romania, which later led to methodological developments that helped and simplified the professionalization of other researchers who, in their turn, played an extremely im-

portant role in the disciplinary development of ethnography and ethnology.

In 1905, through the efforts of ASTRA, the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Romanian People's Culture (founded in 1861), the ASTRA Museum of History and Ethnography was established in Sibiu. The official website of the present-day museum states that the museum "was born from the desire of Transylvanian Romanians to define their own ethnocultural identity within the Austrian-Hungarian ethnic conglomerate and in the context of the cultural emancipation of Central and Southeast Europe peoples." Its aims were "to highlight the most representative testimonies about Romanian specificity, what differentiates us when compared with other peoples, things and phenomena that could explain to all who we are."⁴

In Bucharest, in 1906, the Museum of Ethnography, National Art, Decorative and Industrial Art was created, and Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș⁵ was appointed its director. The name of the institution changed several times, first the Museum of Ethnography and Decorative Art, then the Museum of Ethnography and National Art. In 1924, it became the Carol I National Art Museum. The purpose of the museum was very clear: "to gather all the documents regarding the culture, art and ethnography of the Romanian people from ancient times until today" (Tzigara-Samurçaș 1936: 39). At that time, such endeavours were very popular across countries in Europe. The spread of such ideas, practices, and local interest, aiming for synchronization with other European countries while trying to delineate a national identity, was common place. Museums and sciences were instrumentalized to support it. Tzigara-Samurçaș, after reviewing the actual state of museums in neighbouring countries, concluded that everyone "beat us to it," especially as regards the political vision related to museums, but also in terms of the state's interest in these issues—an interest that the author describes comparatively via the amounts of money allocated to staff and collections (see also Tzigara-Samurçaș 1936).

3) Member of the Romanian Academy, he studied in Romania, France, and Germany. He was heavily influenced by the geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel, whose student he was and from whom he has taken over the term "anthropogeography". He was a professor at the University of Bucharest at the first geography department in Romania and played an important role in the development of geographic research.

4) The ASTRA National Museum Complex official web site: <http://www.muzeulastra.ro/>.

5) Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș was an ethnographer, museologist, art historian, journalist, and professor. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Tzigara-Samurçaș is advised to go to Germany where he attends Wilhelm Riehl's courses, and then continues his studies in Berlin. He had internships at the Bavarian Museum and other museums in Germany, as well as museums in Denmark, Italy, and France. He finally returned to Romania in 1899, with a doctoral degree in art history. Tzigara-Samurçaș set up a collection of glass slides photography, and in 1906 he succeeded founding the "National Museum"—the core of the present-day Romanian Peasant Museum.

6) Romulus Vuia held a PhD in Geography at the University of Cluj (1924), with an “anthropogeography and ethnographic study.” In 1920 he became George Vâlsan’s assistant at the Institute of Geography in Cluj. He is a well-known ethnographer.

7) Ion Muşlea was a graduate of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Cluj (1922) and defended his PhD thesis in 1927. Muşlea played an important role in the institutionalization and development of folklore studies.

8) Sextil Puşcariu was a philologist, linguist, journalist and academician. Among other contributions he initiated the project of the Romanian Linguistic Atlas.

9) Dimitrie Gusti was a Romanian sociologist and philosopher. He was elected member of the Romanian Academy in 1919, and became President of the Romanian Academy (1944–1946). He also led the Minister of Public Instruction, Cults and Arts (1932 to 1933), and was an active professor at the Universities of Iaşi and

In the interwar period, Romulus Vuia⁶ founded the Ethnographic Museum (1922–1923) in Cluj, and a few years later, the National Ethnographical Park near the Hoia forest (Vâlsan 1924a: 55–59). In 1930, the literature section of the Romanian Academy decided to establish the Folklore Archives in Cluj, under the direction of I. Muşlea⁷ and S. Puşcariu,⁸ as a result of the scientific reconfiguration of folklore studies (see also Fruntelată 2017).

In 1928, in Bucharest, Constantin Brăiloiu, ethnomusicologist and one of the most active and important collaborators of Dimitrie Gusti,⁹ establishes the Folklore Archives of the Romanian Composers Society. In 1936, the Sociological Museum¹⁰ is established in Bucharest by Dimitrie Gusti as an important part of his Sociological School.

In a speech before the Romanian Ethnographic Society in Cluj, on January 24, 1924, G. Vâlsan started by stating that: “Four fundamental sciences can explore the creation of a country and the nations that belong to it: Geography, Ethnography, History, and Philology” (Vâlsan 1924b: 101). From Vâlsan’s perspective, ethnography is “the science of nations and varieties of nations” (Vâlsan 1924b: 102).

Obviously, these are just snippet illustrations and jottings of a rich and not fully documented history of Romanian social sciences and the production of archives and museums. Nonetheless, we can conclude that, from its very beginning, ethnography was a discipline interconnected with rural studies (peasants) and the making of archives and museums (see also Karnoouh 2011). It was instrumentalized and put to work in order to collect historical documents and to produce scientific knowledge to define Romanian national identity. In short, “the national ethnographic museum represents the place of a new secular cult, that of the ethnic-nation and of its many embodiments, practised under the patronages of the two muses of modernity: Culture and Science” (Karnoouh 2011: 150).

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The many fears of archives and museums

The roles and purposes of museums in Romania, including critical discussions about their contents—exhibitions, collections and archives—is a subject rarely approached, although there have been efforts in this respect. Critical research on this topic is scant. After 1989, many archives and museums were reconfigured while new ones were established. Many archives have disappeared as a consequence of decommunization and privatisation processes—intentionally or unintentionally (Verdery 2014), while others were made public (Verdery 2014; Poenaru 2013). Before 1989, archives and small exhibition rooms were an important part of each and every factory, sports club, etc. The need to record every action has led to an important accumulation of materials and documents about various activities related to work and everyday social life. After 1989, the lack of funding to support small archives and libraries has led to their decommunization and/or de-Stalinization,¹¹ and even demise. Their disappearance from our present does not mean that during the communist period there were only state and secret police archives. Archiving, collecting, indexing and exhibiting were practices as important as they are today, at all levels. Some of the evidence provided by the various ways of ordering and reordering things has disappeared, some was reassessed, and some turned to dust.

In Foucauldian style, Cotoi starts his paper with the following statement: “Museum displays are never innocent ones. They are always revealing and hiding at the same time, always instituting an alterity between Self and Other, between the knowing subject and the known object” (Cotoi 2006: 203). And indeed, if we pore over the Romanian museums’ profiles, we find the *national* label in many of their titles. This is accounted by two things: firstly, museums are national because they safeguard a patrimony of enormous value for Romanian past and

present and, secondly, the values they keep are related only to Romania and Romanians. There is a notable exception among the museums in Romania, namely the Franz Binder Museum of Universal Ethnography (Muzeul de Etnografie Universală “Franz Binder”), which is part of the larger ASTRA museum in Sibiu.

From that viewpoint, it seems that the museums and main archives are devoted precisely to documenting the history of the Romanian nation-state, producing “static truths,” under the assumption that the state “has always existed” (Herzfeld 1997). At the same time, they also characterize an essential process that Anderson (2006) named “museumizing imagination,” namely the capacity of a nation’s self-representation [image] to be endlessly reproducible and at the same time to acquire the representations of the image of the others. As the image of the others is a crucial part of nationalism and self-representation, it seems peculiar to imagine and only display the otherness that could be found inside the country—be them peasants or minorities (for more, see Chatterjee 1993; Mihăilescu 2004; Chelcea 2009; Șerban and Dorondel 2014). Besides, a simple visit to the Village Museum or to Grigore Antipa National Museum of Natural History can provide strong evidence of how the peasants’ homes stand for the “real” history of Romanian rural society and, correspondingly, how some glimpses of ancient human culture and history are displayed following the truths of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, the exclusive national character of Romanian museums and archives seems to enter into contradiction with the very disciplinary particularities of ethnology (see also Grosu 2016; Grosu Candale 2017). For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett the heritage kept in museums seems to be in contention with ethnology:

Heritage is predicated on a different set of claims. But, ethnology is deeply implicated in the production of heritage, first, for the

historical reasons outlined above – its role in making culture disappear and then salvaging what remains—and, second, because of ethnology’s own complicated relationship to its own past. There is a double move here, two alienations. The first alienation occurs when ethnology makes culture disappear in the world and reappear, as ethnology, in the museum. The second alienation occurs when ethnology repudiates its own history, particularly as a museum field and in the museum itself (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2005: 5).

But this is not a new perspective on museums and archives; rather it appears to be dominant in East European countries and to be specific to those with no colonial history (see Kürti 1996; Baskar 2008). But then again it is long gone worlds that need to be reconstructed and reconnected both with the present and the future—which seems to be the hardest task archives have to tackle.



Conclusions

In line with Stoler (2013), we might look at archives as ruins, as evidence of an under-terminated past. However, we might also see them as the process through which the past (whether nationalistic in its various forms, colonial, bureaucratic, ethnographic, and so on) occupies and inhabits the present, or through which the past is silenced (see also Trouillot 1995; Karnoouh 2011; Chatterjee 1993; Conrad 1998). Stoler understands ruins as “privileged sites of reflection—of pensive rumination. Portrayed as enchanted, desolate spaces, large-scale monumental structures abandoned and grown over, ruins provide a favoured image of a vanished past, what is beyond repair and in decay” (Stoler 2013:9). And he goes further and shifts the focus from ruins to “ruination,” emphasizing that it is:

Also a *political project* that lays waste to certain peoples, relations, and things that ac-

Bucharest. He studied in Germany (Berlin and Leipzig) with Wilhelm Wundt, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies and in France with Émile Durkheim. Dimitrie Gusti is considered to be the creator of Romanian sociology and the leading figure of the Romanian School of Sociology in the interwar period.

10) Currently, the Romanian Village Museum.

11) The de-communization and de-Stalinization of libraries, for instance, are still in effect nowadays.

cumulate in specific places. To think with ruins of empire is to emphasize less the artefacts of empire as dead matter or remnants of a defunct regime than to attend to their re-appropriations, neglect, and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present (Stoler 2013: 11).

Archives as places of epistemological inquiry are firstly subject to human imagination and ordering, in the absence of which they are what they appear to be: a multitude of objects piling up on shelves and in boxes. Generally, archival collections do form an epistemological maze. It is no coincidence, therefore, that archives seem to be the wardens of the truth embedded into a past that keeps our memory safe and sound, but the main issue is that archives have nothing to do with the way that the human mind and memory work (Blouin and Rosenberg 2011; Blouin and Rosenberg 2013). At the same time, the maze-like organization of archival collections and the obstinacy to make them public transforms archives into, in Weberian terms, instruments of power (see also Friedrich 2018).

Since the past, the archive, and the museum do not have a voice of their own, scholars are entitled to give them one, but without forgetting that history “does not belong only to its narrators, professional or amateur” (Trouillot 1995: 153; see also Chakrabarty 2000). The ways in which they are carrying out this task needs further discussion, with the clear purpose of shedding light on superstitions related to archives and with a critical approach of the “truths” the archives allegedly hold in relation to documents regarded as *a priori* sources and producers of knowledge. Returning to the “closeness” and instrumentalization of archives and museums in Romania after 1989, we ask ourselves again: Why are we so much into archives and museums since “nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word ‘archive’” (Derrida and Prenowitz 1995: 57)?

The post-colonial efforts to return and

repatriate colonial archives and artefacts have put bureaucratic and ethnographic archives into the limelight of historical, social and political examinations. These debates are important for post-colonial countries and for East European ones alike, especially in terms of their usage and instrumentalization by both sides—from the colonizer’s perspective, the imperial history, and from the perspective of the colonized, the national, local and/or ethnic identity. In order to imagine alternative futures for archives and collections, they need to be of public use. Still more, making archives public and thus demystifying their contents seems the best way to preserve and learn from them.

From the time when some of the nineteenth century grand projects were summed up at the end of the twentieth century, we still nurture the idea that we will finish all the nineteenth century projects this century. And thus the archives and museums will find ways to reconnect the future with the present.



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