

Riforme in corsa... Archivi pubblici e archivi d'impresa tra trasformazioni, privatizzazioni e fusioni, atti del convegno di studi, Bari 17-18 June 2004,

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Review by Marco Bologna

This volume of the proceedings of the conference held in Bari in 2004 on the theme "Riforme in corsa... Archivi pubblici e archivi d'impresa tra trasformazioni, privatizzazioni e fusioni (*Riforme in corsa...* public archives and business archives: dealing with transformations, privatizations and mergers)", could have been entitled "Managing Change" as Domenica Porcaro Massafra entitled her opening speech. Juridical reforms, often rushed or fragmentary, have had repercussions on numerous private and public activities, especially on their archives. Changes have been put into effect without the agreement or even consultation of the people who are most affected. Above all, these revisions have trickled down "from the top" in forms that do not reflect the reality of the activity that they were meant to regulate.

Normative changes that have already had significant effects, will also impact the future of archives of businesses and organizations that, while differing widely in nature, are parallel with regard to law, administrative procedures and legal forms that are applied at different stages of their activity.

For this reason, the safeguard and management of the archival heritage of both business and public offices were highlighted as key issues. Although these two institutions differ in their goals and operating methods, both are undergoing notable transformation as the result of a flood of regulatory norms.

The substantial transfer of functions from the State to public bodies profoundly changed the tasks and the protective role of the archival administration. On the other hand, the risk of dispersion inherent in business archives grew without restraint due to a series of fiscal changes that were introduced by an endless stream of norms mostly related to Italy's annual financial law. Such fiscal changes frequently take place according to the political guidelines of the context in which they happen – i.e. privatizations – and to the forms of safeguard they suggest or impose.

The lectures, collected in this publication accurately reflect the current situation. Although the discussions are often based on past experiences, they serve to shed light on the peculiar set of circumstances occurring at present. It would not be inappropriate to suggest that various factors are conspiring against archives, against their proper management and preservation.

The liberalization and deregulation of many activities as well as the simplifying of some bureaucratic procedures (i.e. self-certification) has brought about substantial changes in the creation, structure and very nature of entire archives or of some parts of them. The deletion of formal obligations often results in the disappearance of some types of records (which may or may not be replaced), thereby interrupting the serial sequence and modifying the general classification frame of the archives.

Then there is globalization and the opening up of markets. In the archival niche, these broad economic processes with their normative innovations produce records, which are useful from time to time by introducing new forms and new supports, new texts and new management models. Since an archives is intended to document a business or organization's activity, it is inevitable that, if the activity changes, the archives changes too.

The essays describe both endogenous and exogenous reasons for the archival crisis. Some problems arise from the very nature of an archives as a body of records that has been handed down from past centuries. Other problems are due to external trends that are impossible to regulate, such as globalization.

Several of the essays clearly highlight some of the exogenous aspects of this crisis and of the difficulty of managing them. There is undoubtedly a decline in the ethical contents of the archives. Increasingly, the role of an archives in its stage of creation is reduced to simple probative documentation, preserved only as protection in case of legal contention. In most cases, records produced nowadays are not recognized as having historical value, nor are they ascribed worth in terms of personal or collective memory. The 'memory value' of the archives is merely proportional to the savings of time and energy, especially when recording repetitive activities. An archives value derives only from its precision in quickly finding records about something already projected or to efficiently reproduce actions already accomplished. Otherwise, whenever possible, "useless" records are destroyed in order to gain space and cut costs.

Another exogenous element of the crisis is certainly to be found in the "technological drift" that is taking over the archives, especially business archives. This has become a general trend because, in most cases, electronic records-keeping is not regulated, its consequences are not studied, and it is not projected to last. IT is complex, and may seem like a magic wand that cleans up the mess of the old paper reality, all dusty and bulky. The technological drift is swallowing up the records of decades of Italy's recent events, leaving them without archival witnesses, or with a rigorously predetermined minimum. The same thing has happened in the past, but they were just episodes while now it has become a rule. This is due to normative changes that impose the use of IT without determining what will happen later, as if the effect of a record must expire, a fact that is predetermined by how an archives is set up and by its management program.

The same technological drift has facilitated another exogenous process of change in archives. The progressive loss of uniformity and the decay of the official role models, accompanied by the increasing tolerance of pluralism – with the fundamental help of IT - has led to the fall of standards in the origin, creation, and structure of the archives, not to mention the serious consequences regarding their preservation. An archives, especially in its stage of preservation, tends to conform to the nature of the activity that created it, and by the type of records it collects. The loss of uniformity in social and economic paradigms inevitably implies the loss of the meaning of preexisting archival models connected to them. As society and its laws change, enterprise and the professions will inevitably change too along with the ways of "getting things done". All of these changes are reflected in an archives and will affect the models for preserving memory that society values as significant.

Such changes have created a basic problem in both business archives and public administration, local or governmental: what about the preservation of archives once they are no longer directly useful to their creator? How should records be managed in order to preserve them? Safeguarding archives from the "demon" of contemporary society with its current models of non-preservation and its rash normative reforms is the general and fundamental aim of all the texts published in the volume.

The proceedings of the *Riforme in corsa* conference describe situations, point out specific problems common to many, and propose at least partial solutions. Several of the essays are quite original and others demonstrate a remarkable capacity for the accomplishment in the projects they describe. Useful interventions have been carried out almost everywhere on business archives, although with disappointing results, a strong and meritorious care of archival administration in order to defend the valuable heritage to be handed down to the future generations. All of the essays express alarm and trepidation for a future without archives and the prospect of saving so few of them despite serious efforts and a profusion of energies.

Perhaps the battle is already lost, since archives follow the destiny of the society that creates them, but luckily there are many of us who believe in the importance of fighting, even if the future that our society is creating of its own memory does not seem rosy.