

Linda Giuva, Stefano Vitali, Isabella Zanni Rosiello,

Il potere degli archivi. Usi del passato e difesa dei diritti nella società contemporanea

Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2007

Review by Paola De Ferrari

Il potere degli archivi. (The power of archives) was presented on June, 19th 2007 at the offices of the Institute for the Italian Encyclopedia in Rome, in the presence of Francesco Rutelli, Minister of Cultural Heritage. This work fills a gap regarding the usage and role of archives in the current political and social situation.

The book is comprised of three essays that broach the “agents of transformation” that changed the relationship between archives and political power (traditionally, the two elements have been strongly linked—almost “genetically”). Such agents modify and renovate the “power of archives”; which is their way of placing themselves at the disposal of the needs of citizens and communities. In the introduction, Stefano Vitali stresses the “reconfiguration of the international balances towards the end of the 20th century and the processes of globalization” and analyzes their results at the level of the collective imagination. An innovative aspect of Vitali’s essay, dedicated to “Memories, genealogies and identities”, is the closer examination of the multi-faceted image of archives represented in films, essays and novels, from Totò to Saramago. The media, like seismographs, record archival transformations, which the author interprets with great subtlety. To what extent does the transformation of the concept of archives (as an instrument of memory or, “external” memory) influence the new demands for accessibility and the creation of new kinds of archives, beyond the traditional institutions? Vitali also analyzes the recent spread of personal archives as “self-testaments” as well as the transformation of the users (in Italy as in the Anglo-Saxon world, there is a notable rise in the percentage of people consulting archives to find their family or community origins) Vitali doesn’t hide the ambivalence that is inherent in these very transformations.

Linda Giuva, in her essay “Archives and citizens’ rights” deals with a fundamental theme: archival *secrecy*, whether real or imagined: sometimes there exists a disturbing “heart of darkness” in the archives’ relationship with (political) power. The author looks analytically at the global world, from the USA to Chile, from France to Australia, and Italy: no country and political system is immune to abuse and error.

Despite the changes in cultural sensitivity, which stress the importance of the citizen’s rights towards the state, among which are the right to privacy, information and transparency. Despite the various reforms and the archivists’ ethical code, “there are still some shady areas, in the democratic regimes too, called by Bobbio *failures of democracy*”. It seems that contemporary archives are marked by a sort of oxymoron: the same archives created during the tyrannies of the 20th century in Europe and in South America, the “archives of terror”, are used nowadays to recognize and claim the rights of the victims of repression. Thus, it is not the abolition or the reduction of secrecy that leads to greater democracy in archives. In many cases, these have increased the self-defensive tendency of archives through misleading practices. On the contrary, the solution may be found in careful regulation of the practice of

classifying records; a “transparent secret”, considering the political conflict for which archives are always a battle field.

The questions posited by Vitali and Giuva become clear when analyzed within the framework of the introductory essay by Isabella Zanni Rosiello: a large fresco, even if briefly described, of the changes that archives have undergone over the centuries; of the political and cultural transformations that have influenced the idea of an archives in its relationship with institutions, society and historiography. The issues raised by the author and the answers she proposes, from the heart of her longstanding professional experience, are reference points for everybody, moving towards an archival debate that tackles not only technological and organizational transformations, but also the political and social questions that concern all of us.