The Archives Made Me Do It

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on the power of archives in driving research. Just as much as informants draw the attention of researchers to social patterns, archives do, too. Both archival and ethnographic research depends on the authority of written documents like field notes and official papers—even in the sociology of art. Archives consist mainly of papers about objects and property. I argue that the material turn in my work and the study of logistics as a form of power became important to me because of my archival experience. Sociologists recognize the importance of property as a driver of social relations of power, but they rarely study logistical power. I do, but only because the archives demonstrated its importance.

Keywords Archives · Materiality · Logistical power · Material memory · Language bias

I was trained in qualitative sociology by Howie Becker. I was in his first seminar in the sociology of art and was eager to discuss how we might create ethnographies of art worlds (Becker 1982). It seemed thrilling to investigate the inside practices of groups with very public outsides, and to turn their actions into our words with field notes and thick descriptions. I never reflected at that time on the authority of words as data and did not expect that archives would use words to exercise power over me. My field notes seemed personal rather than official even though they placed constraints on what I could say; they seemed transparent reminders of the voices and practices of people I had studied, bringing their lives to the page. I entertained the thought of doing historical—if not archival—research on art, but Howie said that art historians were already doing that, and they were good at it. What sociologists could add to understandings of art, he argued, was thick description of the social words that made art possible. Doing historical sociology of art made no sense.

I was a filmmaker and married to a filmmaker at the time, so I could appreciate that there were mundane practices in worlds of art that critics and historians missed. Howie talked about the importance to art worlds of mundane objects like coffee, paint supplies, or brushes. In the film world, their counterparts seemed to be drugs at film parties and boring advertising work

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done to keep the studio going. There did indeed seem to be a lot to say about what was happening behind the scenes.

After getting my first job at Boston University, I started doing fieldwork in Frederick Wiseman's studio expecting my first book to be on documentary filmmaking. I liked the way Wiseman guided his eyes with his ears, gathering footage where the talk was interesting. But I had a problem. The story of this art world seemed somehow too precious to make public. I felt like a parasite rather than an ethnographer, so I left.

The archives, per se, were not responsible for my turn to history. It was teaching. I was reading Foucault on the history of madness (1964) for my course on deviance, reveling in his structural, deeply political, and staunchly cultural analysis. I wanted to do this kind of work but had no idea how. Instead, I experimented in my film course with rethinking film history. The culture of film industries, I argued in class, did not derive from film's roots in photography as much as the tradition of mass-produced visual printmaking with a long history in popular culture. The connection was obvious to me because I was teaching the history of popular culture, using Burke's (1978) book that emphasized the importance of inexpensive prints. To prepare for those lectures, I read about the history of political cartoons and of printed caricatures, even learning about political uses of playing cards (Plumb in McKendrick et al. 1985). I was disappointed at the time to find that historians of printing were only interested in the effects of the press on intellectual life, not the rise of popular visual culture, but this discouraged me from publishing on prints (Eisenstein 1979).

What impelled me to write a book on the early history of pictorial printing was my research on printed fabric and its use for dresses by poorer consumers. These fabrics had been key to the so-called first Industrial Revolution. As capitalism was first spreading from ports to towns in the interior, printed calicoes from India started to become fashionable among servants and storekeepers who did not have the means to dress in figured silks and satins. Calicoes allowed them to adorn themselves in colorful floral designs that had been out of reach before (Mukerji 1983). Factories in Britain mass produced printed replacements for calicoes. The cotton industry could become profitable because there already existed fashionable demand for floral cloth (Wadsworth and Mann [1931] 1965).

Excited that pictorial printing had such an interesting history, I ran to museums to get a better understanding of textiles and fashion, studying the fabulous collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. It seemed increasingly obvious that the machines used to spin and weave cotton could not in themselves produce a successful industry. Overproduction was a real possibility. The growth of a consumer culture for non-elites set the stage for industrialization.

When *From Graven Images* (1983) was published, the archives came to haunt me. My argument was appreciated well enough by sociologists, but the book received terrible reviews from historians because it was not based on archival research. I had assumed that playing cards, maps, pictorial prints, and printed calicoes were all perfectly good forms of evidence for studying past practices of material production. I thought calicoes could serve as documents and museums could be archives. But I was confounding inarticulate objects with authoritative data. There were no words from the archives to ratify what I saw in things.

Historian friends kindly explained to me that I could not know what objects "meant," so I could not use them as the basis of good history. As Ted Porter (1995) would later show, it was a question of authority. Words and even more so, numbers, had an authority that artifacts—mere consumer goods in this case—never had.

I was troubled that this system of authority went unchallenged and made the social standing of things itself the object of my research. The status of objects in social life would henceforth

drive my work methodologically as well as conceptually. I focused on the silent power of built environments as well as consumer goods. I was restoring my right to study “things,” but the archives shaped what I did.

Ironically, historians influenced by British cultural studies began inviting me to conferences on consumer culture and fashion (Brewer and Porter 1993). I was not a pariah to all historians, but I had to do archival work. I had no idea what that meant. But I needed to go to France to help my father and began to do research there on the gardens of Versailles. The royal park was an object with plenty of archival material (Mukerji 1993).

Materiality and Logistical Politics

At first, when I looked through archives on the gardens of Versailles, I was overwhelmed with evidence. I could barely make sense of what I was finding. I was studying the king’s household—a whole section of the Archives Nationales and the major subject of the archives in Versailles. But I convinced myself that it was like the experience I had had as an ethnographer, entering a new research site where things would blur together before they began to make sense.

In the confusion of boxes and files, one pattern stood out and seemed to ratify my interest in materiality. Most documents pertained to land, buildings, natural resources, artifacts, taxes, contracts, family records, and inventories—material forms and relations. These were the tools of power that Marx described so well. But they took cultural forms he did not consider. Land included the gardens—a kind of living sculpture that was endlessly evolving and clearly unnatural. It was a source of power precisely because it could be reconfigured by draining marshes, building a water supply, setting out walkways and roads, erecting walls, putting in plumbing, installing fountains, building garden rooms with trees and bushes, and filling parterres with flowers.

Land, as I encountered it in the archives, was not singular. It was not just property. It took many forms. It could be mountain peaks whose resources were shared by people in the two valleys abutting them, or a domain that carried a political office with independent legal powers. Land could be a cemetery filled with bones, church land set aside for a monastery, or a region subject to church laws and taxes. Or land could be a forest pertaining to the king but used as common land. Land could change, too. Common land could be enclosed and privatized, or fens could be drained and made into fields. How this worked varied from place to place. Similarly, natural resources were not just natural, but were the product of human enterprises like mines, pools of hot springs, improved rivers, or mill streams. Comparably, taxes were culturally fashioned, too, both collected and distributed in distinct forms in different places. Even bookkeeping varied from place to place in the early period I studied. Some tax records were even kept in roman numerals. I could see why most historical researchers in sociology, doing comparative historical analysis, did not go into archives where comparisons were harder to justify. I appreciated more the social researchers who did archival research (e.g., Sewell 1980; Joyce 2003). I began to realize that historians’ accounts of Louis XIV’s court could be thin if they were based on courtiers’ gossip, paying no attention to work of the architects, sculptors, and gardeners that were the support personnel that Howie emphasized in art worlds.

This taught me the importance of contracts in the archives. Contracts were precisely the kind of thing that the administration wanted to archive, and they left records of everyday activity. They provided proof of what had been agreed upon, and evidence of what it cost.

Most revealing were the official accounts for the king's household, detailing expenses chronologically. They not only showed who did what work and at what price, but they also revealed rhythms in payments fluctuating with wars and major projects. I found them strangely but delightfully egalitarian. They held evidence of payments to the great architect, Bernini, and equally to suppliers.

The visual documents particularly drew my interest. This was partly because they were inarticulate objects that counted as archival material, but also, they helped me see the past through eyes that were there. Plans for the *petit parc* helped me understand how forest rooms were conceptualized as they were created. And garden prints provided me with images of men with wheelbarrows tending flowerbeds, and evidence of gardeners moving trees. I also found designs for cutting topiary trees that helped me understand how military elements in the garden were made charming. On paper, the highly trimmed trees seemed like clipped poodles set out in rows on paper like dolls in pattern books. The trees looked like variants on human figures or strange aliens—more animal than vegetable. Their charming shapes were used to serious purpose when such topiaries were planted along borders of walkways and walls like guards. They looked like soldiers atop the walls of fortress battlements, embodying a mix of charm and seriousness repeated by the bronze statues on the terrace by the chateau. The latter looked like river gods but were signed by metallurgists from the arsenal who cast cannon. The drawings of topiaries led me to understand better how the garden worked as an immersive environment, drawing visitors seductively into a display of French military capacity. The garden was a clever tool of diplomatic intimidation—an introduction to French logistical power (Mukerji 2010; 1997).

The gardens of Versailles demonstrated power rather than represented it. They were not intended to tell a story or relay a message. In fact, when Louis XIV wrote itineraries for tours by foreign dignitaries, he avoided saying what the garden was supposed to convey. Instead, he described where visitors should go and what they should look at, e.g., he choreographed the visits. His guests were meant to see for themselves his capacity to make the earth abundant and beautiful—the markers of good stewardship. They could visit the miniature fortresses in the forest rooms, walk the grand canal, appreciate the reflecting ponds for the fountains, and walk by the lake or through the imitation swamp. The garden had miniature features of a larger landscape. It was a microcosm of France—not a map of the kingdom or even a commentary on the king's power, but rather a model of governance. The royal park was a demonstration whose formality made evident the king's rule (Mukerji 1997).

The inarticulacy of things that made them “bad” evidence also made them effective tools of power. The gardens of Versailles had their political impact outside of discourse, beyond political debate. Versailles did not have to “say” anything to convey the power of Louis XIV over France or the nobles at court. The gardens themselves demonstrated the subordination of French territory to his governance, while the plays and ballets in the park enrolled nobles in the roles that he commanded. The inarticulacy of things could be an advantage, keeping silent about these shifts in power.

The archives I used later to study the Canal du Midi (Mukerji 2009) revealed a similar pattern of monarchical control. The canal dug across Languedoc created a landscape that was just as unnatural as a formal garden. Its uncanny appearance—water flowing where it usually would not go—testified to the authority of the king over his territory. Like the garden of Versailles, the waterway was a display of logistical power, creating a built environment that provided evidence of power, not symbols of it.

Evidence-Based Administration

I have written many books and papers concerning inarticulacy, demonstration, and logistical power. These have been “my” contributions to sociology—the ideas I develop and work on—but they have been presented to me by the archives. The mass of paperwork in the archives serves as an enduring reminder of the importance of material practices to modern government.

Archives themselves are logistical tools of administration—little tools of knowledge (Becker and Clark 2001; Joyce and Mukerji 2017). Their documents serve as immutable mobiles (Latour 2005), whose circulation is used to forge official agreements. Because they are impersonal, they can bridge social gaps—even allowing experts without social standing to work with noble officials by insulating them with papers (Joyce 2009; Joyce and Mukerji 2017; Mukerji 2011). Documents also function as tools of surveillance collected and used to subordinate people to the state and its rules.

They were used in both ways in France by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, minister of the treasury and the navy and director of the king’s households under Louis XIV. He was insistent on gathering books and papers for archives and libraries that he used to augment the power of his administration. He used them to document activities and to discipline officials who abused their power. Jacob Soll (2009) argues that the minister was an information master—a silent and somewhat sinister figure who knew how to put pressure on people by gathering evidence and deploying it strategically. More often in his letters, Colbert seems a frustrated administrator, looking for ways to pressure people to act on behalf of the king (Colbert and Clément 1979). Whatever his character, the myriad documents, letters, and archives that Colbert used to govern, testify to their centrality to his political practice and to the effectiveness of his work.

Colbert made evidence-based administration the cornerstone of French government. There is no single explanation of why he did this, but many clues. One was his low rank that limited his ability to exercise power; another was his early political formation in the army and under Mazarin; and the final one was his distrust of noble officials.

From his family, Colbert gained little social standing, but was given useful knowledge about the importance of trade in artifacts, contracts, bookkeeping, and finance. He came from a family of textile merchants, including a major international trader with banking powers. He engaged in the complicated logistics of governing with documents, insisting on them, analyzing them, and using them to advance royal policies or reduce the power of those who impeded the king (d’Aubert 2010).

Colbert could not control officials who were noble administrators of courts or tax collection. They inherited their offices and wielded independent power well beyond those of the minister. They also kept their own official papers as judges, regulators, and treasury officials, creating local or family archives to maintain independence from the crown. If they were abusing their powers, traces of this could be buried in their papers, but if the papers got to Colbert, he would have evidence to present the king. So, by collecting paperwork on finances, legal decisions, property claims, rights to resources, inventories, and contracts from nobles or church officials, Colbert was assembling tools of power that a man of his rank needed to get things done.

Colbert probably learned about the power of paperwork from Cardinal Mazarin. The latter was in charge of the French government during Louis XIV’s childhood. Mazarin was a scholar and collector of classical art and literature for whom originals mattered. He also collected the papers of historically important political leaders to understand how they governed (Soll 2009). As caretaker of his estate during the Fronde, Colbert witnessed how Mazarin accumulated and

used historical documents to do politics (d'Aubert 2010) probably learning from this antiquarian period practices of evidence-based scholarship.

Evidence-based scholarship had become normative the century before. The legal scholars, Guillaume Budé and Jean Bodin, wanted to reform the French legal system by establishing clear relations to Roman precedents (Franklin 1963). Judges in France all claimed to be practicing Roman law, but they used different versions of it based on secondary sources. Budé and Bodin studied original documents to diagnose the problem and learned that Roman law had shifted radically over time and place—creating too jumbled a heritage for a common code. Their use of original sources not only changed how legal scholars in France tried to reform the law, but also affected practices of scholarship in France. Evidence-based studies of the past were recognized as key to knowledge and to setting policy (Franklin 1963).

Colbert used original legal sources in just this way to renegotiate the relationship of the French church to the crown. During the administrations of Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, the French clergy had assumed increased political authority in France. To reverse this, Colbert sought legal documents going back to ancient times. Papers from the time of Charlemagne showed the emperor was superior to the Church in the conduct of worldly affairs. Colbert used this evidence to assert the sovereignty of Louis XIV (Soll 2009).

Colbert started gathering documents about noble officials, too, when he realized they were using their offices improperly. He tried to initiate a survey of French forests by soliciting the help of forestry officials, but they were nobles who refused to comply. So, Colbert sent out foresters to measure and assess the forests for the state, creating an archive of historical records and maps as well as current measures (Froidour 1672; Froidour 1892; Froidour 1899).

Colbert was head of the navy and needed a good supply of tall trees for ships' masts as well as regular lumber for hulls and decks. Deforestation was already a problem for ship building in England and was endangering the Venetian Republic (Appuhn 2009). At the time, no one knew the true status of the forests of France. So, Colbert's foresters measured the woods, assessed the timber supplies, and critiqued their forest management practices, interviewing estate holders and local peasants to determine who had what rights to timber and who in the past had cut trees illegally.

In the conduct of this study, Colbert insisted on seeing noble family papers to determine what forests actually pertained to the noblemen and which were simply usurped by them. He did not have the authority due to his low rank to question the veracity of nobles when he asked questions. But he could demand, in the name of the king, documentary evidence of their legal authority to the forests. This gave the minister a mode of surveillance he could use to affect the standing of nobles with the king if they overstepped their authority. His foresters could also compare old maps with new surveys to reveal infractions, allowing the administration to fine abusers and bar them from serving on tribunals meant to manage the forests. The forests were still exploited locally, but Colbert established a basis for determining local rights and limits to noble power (Froidour 1672; Froidour 1892; Froidour 1899.) It was an archive used for surveillance, containing impersonal and disciplinary evidence of forests.

The archives of the Canal du Midi provided evidence of how judicial abuses by nobles were sometimes conducted, too. The entrepreneur for the canal, Pierre-Paul Riquet, was ennobled and given the land for the canal as his domain, which left him with legal control of the work site. Riquet used this authority to jail one of his subcontractors, Emmanuel d'Estan, after the latter asked to be reimbursed for extra work. Riquet claimed that d'Estan inflated the cost. The subcontractor had started to build a bridge-canal over the deep ravine of the Le Répudre River when a storm flooded the region and washed away some of the structure. The subcontractor

repaired the bridge and successfully completed the project, but the work entailed extra expense. Riquet was running out of money and did not have the funds to pay more than the contract. So, the entrepreneur limited his liability by producing evidence of fraud and refusing payment. The evidence was shaky, but it was hidden (Mukerji 2009).

Colbert knew that the powers assumed by local nobles by abusing their offices had kept French kings weak. The patrimonial system was built on personal trust and the exchange of favors; keeping private records for public offices was a sign of trust. But this mode of archiving allowed officials to be less trustworthy. Notaries helped them claim lands that did not belong to them; scribes that recorded legal decisions allowed them to misuse their judicial powers; and bookkeepers turned a blind eye as they skimmed money off the taxes they dispersed from the treasury.

To change this, Colbert put trust in documents rather than individuals, basing it on evidence. Taxes were still collected and dispersed locally. And there were many regional courts throughout France making legal judgments. But documents sent to Colbert reminded officials that they were being watched. Archives now set precedents, defining situations and appropriate action to address them, placing greater institutional power in the French state (d'Aubert 2010).

The effects were obvious. When Louis XIV ascended the throne, he was one of the weakest kings in Europe. Colbert used archives as tools of reform, and in roughly twenty years, Louis XIV was being called a tyrant for his absolutism. The shift was less a product of the force of royal will than an effect of evidence-based administration.

Prophetic Truths

The cultural program under Colbert was another state activity documented in the archives, but one more importantly embedded in artifacts that silently affected politics. Burke (1992) has described the art of Sun King as a failed propaganda program, but this view is based on the assumption that the art was meant to *represent* the king and his power, not *demonstrate* sovereignty. The cultural program did not equate Louis XIV with an ancient god but presented Apollo as a figure of sovereignty to which the French could aspire (Mukerji *forthcoming*). The objects created under Colbert were not meant to establish the meaning of the king or his reign, but rather to offer a cultural imaginary of sovereignty possibility and French destiny under sovereign rule.

The archives contain records of the social and material machinery used to do this. The documents reveal the “wizards” of the administration who created the “Great Oz” of the Sun King. They also establish the distinctively French vision of sovereignty not simply as a moral and natural force, but also a historical necessity. The sovereign Sun King is an oracular vision of sovereignty bringing France a new dawn.

State power, according Foucault, is necessarily a dream of possibility that mobilizes the people around it. Institutional power, he argues, cannot be stably founded on political ideologies or legal principles because words are always debatable. States can only become enduring sites of power by offering oracular visions of possibility—a sustained *purpose* that justifies attachment to it. This oracular imaginary is what Foucault calls a prophetic truth (Foucault and Davidson 2014a and b).

The French state under Louis XIV was built on dreams of sovereignty. It was Louis XIV’s desire to become sovereign, the undisputed higher power in the kingdom; and it was Colbert’s

job to realize the royal will. So, Colbert amassed legal documents to subordinate the Church and acquired family papers from nobles to subordinate them to the king. The purpose of the cultural program was to characterize the resulting sovereignty as moral, natural, and a historical necessity—in this sense a prophetic truth (Mukerji [forthcoming](#)).

Colbert started the cultural program by assembling a set of advisors known for their translations from the Greek, expertise in classical poetry, or knowledge of ancient art and architecture. They defined the Gallic heritage from which to project France's destiny under the sovereign. Colbert met with these advisors weekly, in his own home, asking them how to connect the king to the classical past and an imperial future with art. They collected historical artifacts to provide tangible evidence of ancient Gaul from which to design the signs of glory for the Sun King (d'Aubert [2010](#); Mukerji [forthcoming](#)). It was a form of evidence-based scholarship designed for proliferating evidence of the Sun King's glory.

Architectural drawings by the royal architect, Louis Le Vau, provide a vital clue about those who made the artifacts and events worthy of a true sovereign. Le Vau drew a plan for a wing of the Louvre to house artisans and their workshops. The plan named the intended occupants as well as depicting their spaces. These were artisans of the Sun King getting rooms in a royal palace. The king and many officials were leaving for Versailles. Loathe to leave the Louvre empty or misused, Colbert assigned rooms to groups under his administration with a role in the cultural program. Some royal academies were given rooms in the old Louvre while artisans were assigned paces in the new wing designed by Le Vau. The inhabitants had pensions and were expected to help with the cultural program at all the royal residences (Mukerji [2016](#)).

The artists and intellectuals of the Louvre developed a vision of sovereignty distinct from that of political theorists. Men like Bodin ([1576](#)) and Hobbes ([1651](#)) advocated strong governments to stop religious warfare. The artisans of the Louvre, in contrast, offered a more seductive sovereign. Theirs was a Sun King that would usher in a new dawn for France—an image of enlightenment before its time. Their sovereign had a glorious destiny to pursue and was not concerned with binding people to their government to control their bad impulses. The bright future of France was made plausible by reference to the Gallic heritage. The past provided evidence of what the future could bring. So, artisans constructed a new history of the “We” from Gaul—something comparable to the history of the “I” in Mead (Mead and Strauss [1956](#)).

This “history of the we”—the Gallic past of Roman France—was a disciplinary tool as much as a seduction. Evidence from Rome revealed how much beauty and learning had been lost under the watch of noble officials. The glorious past of the ancient world had given way to a less-than-glorious present. Gaul had turned into a small, fractured kingdom surrounded by more powerful enemies like the Hapsburg Empire. The French failure to preserve this heritage was as palpable as the possibilities for a better future visible in the past. What had been done before could arguably be repeated. But success in the future depended on learning from ancient precedent, claiming the Gallic heritage to return France to its proper form of life.

Archivists as Informants

Archives have called me, but archivists have been less welcoming. Going into the archives is like going into the field, looking for informants; only a few people are in a position to know what you want to know, and they may reject you out of hand. It is their world, and they don't have to tell you about it.

I went into the “field” of archives without preconceptions of what I should find, and with no idea of how to proceed. I wanted to study Versailles, but there were multiple archives for that, and I had no idea where to start. When I looked at documents, I found inventories that made no sense to me, and when I looked at papers, I found them written in handwriting I could not read. So, I turned to archivists for help.

I first encountered a librarian/archivist who claimed to be a monarchist and refused to open his files to an American. Surprised by this but armed with an American sense of humor, I hired a French research assistant to help me; she would search for and request documents that we would study together. It was a good place to start learning about archivists as gatekeepers.

In contrast, the librarians at the Natural History Museum were open and helpful. The museum was set in the old botanical gardens in Paris, the *Jardin des Plantes*, where my interest in gardens and plants made sense. So, everyone was happy to discuss my garden project, and suggest ways to proceed.

Archivists in the regional archives were more indifferent. They saw themselves as civil servants in a public office, whose job was to make documents available to all who asked. One woman explained that they were continuing a tradition from the French Revolution; this gave her job meaning. The problem was a lack of funding, making files slow in coming.

The librarians in the Bibliothèque Nationale were the most intimidating. If you wanted to see a rare manuscript, you had to go talk to one of them about the purpose. They were protecting the collection, of course, and would happily refuse you access, waving you away to see microfilm. But one man in the manuscript room of the BNF was more compassionate. He laughed at me during such an interview. I used a French word from the seventeenth century in response to his questions. This amused him, but he gave me access to the document with sure knowledge I would read it.

The most annoying archivist was a woman at the Archives Nationales, who refused to help me find plans for waterworks in the Versailles garden. I knew something like that existed because I had seen them when I was first doing the research. I had lost the reference numbers but assumed I could find the documents again. Failing in that, I asked for help. The archivist I approached told me that there were no such plans. I explained that I had seen them many years before. She told me coldly that the archives had nothing like that, turning her back on me. I yelled at her—surprising myself and everyone else in the room. She looked me in the eyes, and then went to a drawer. Out came a stack of large plans for garden waterworks, including the plans I remembered.

The kindest archivist was M. Vannier at the archives du Canal du Midi. He could become impatient with my requests or my bad French, but always finally helped me. At first, M. Vannier had me sit at a small desk in his office where he could supervise my use of the documents. After a while, he went about his own work in the huge room of boxes with shelves to the ceiling, containing centuries of archives. He had research to do for other people and would leave me alone to do it.

As I sat at my little desk, members of the community would come and go with questions. They wanted to find out where a long-gone relative had lived near the canal or where a property line had been drawn on old maps. They were concerned with genealogy and taxes, and what had been lost. Some were just curious about the waterway that flowed through their town and thought they would learn more about it. The documents contained memories that still mattered.

M. Vannier worked hard to make the canal he loved matter to other people and the archives he loved relevant to others. One day, he explained he was preparing documents for a proposal

to make the canal a world heritage site. That would save it from being abandoned. In a few years, the proposal was accepted, and the canal won that designation. We celebrated by looking at the maps he had used for the proposal.

After many years of summer months at the archives, M. Vannier invited me one day to move to a larger desk by the window. It was a promotion. I could look out the window when my eyes were tired. The view was not great. The archive was in a seventeenth-century building in the parking lot of a tall modern building for the *Voies Navigables*. From my window, I only saw cars, gravel, and the wall behind. But the sky seemed accepting, and so was M. Vannier.

Archives as Sources for Ethnographic Research

State archives are rich sources of data about past forms of everyday life that are not addressed by most sociologists. The partial pictures and stories I find there call me back. I see France through them; I see an institution in formation; I see everyday lives shaped by the places where they are enacted.

I found a booklet describing François Girardon's casting of a bronze equestrian statue of Louis XIV for the Place Vendôme. It has haunted me. A special forge was built at the site for the statue for mixing and melting the bronze. Girardon made a mold for the statue that had an internal structure of metal straps and supports strong enough to hold the statue together after the poured metal added weight to it. The biggest problem was that a good cast depended on keeping the metal fluid until all parts of the statue were filled. The right formula for the melt could keep it fluid longer, but the mold needed a complex circulatory system to allow the bronze to enter different parts of the statue simultaneously, filling the tail of the horse and head of the king as well as the main structure (Boffrand 1743).

The statue of the king was a triumph of technique, an echo of Colbert's cultural program after his death. The king was dressed in Roman military clothing, wearing sandals. His hand was outstretched, seemingly reaching out to subjects who would have been below him. He was a figure of the sovereign, a force of history and destiny in a pure display of logistical finesse (Boffrand 1743).

But the booklet from the archive does not haunt me because of the statue. It is the images of artisans building the forge, creating the internal structure, and pouring the melt into the cast. Where did they get their skills? With that simple question, I am off again, reading obscure books about an indigenous tradition of metallurgy in the Pyrenees, and looking at the history of arsenals with their forges. Did the artisans working on Girardon's equestrian come from the military or the Pyrenees? Or did they come from Italy with its distinct tradition of casting bronzes? The thoughts just do not go away.

I am also haunted by a set contracts signed by Louis Le Vau for work on buildings on the Ile St. Louis. Le Vau not only worked for the king as the first architect, but also collaborated with his brother, François, to develop the Ile Saint Louis. This was an artificial island in the Seine in Paris built from two smaller islands that previously had been used to graze cattle. The landfill created new real estate in the center of Paris near Notre Dame—land that was immediately in demand. The elegant baroque facades of the new buildings contrasted with the medieval structures by the old cathedral and on the shores of the Seine. It took a community of artisans with distinct skills to create this new world of architecture. I wondered who they were. Then I encountered their signatures along with that of Louis Le Vau on contracts in the archives (Ballon 1999; Franklin 1962; Laprade et al. 1960; Lemonnier 1921).

The contracts I found are dated and specify the locations for work, providing a potential means of tracking the patterns of development on the island. There are hundreds of contracts, too, providing clues to micro-processes of construction and urban development. Like the archives of the Canal du Midi, these documents have enduring value because the buildings they pertain to remain valuable structures. Images of the signatures keep calling me to learn more.

Opening folders in an archive can seem like opening a door to another world. A notary writes that a soldier in the arsenal married a daughter of a dyer who lived there. I had no idea that dyers lived in arsenals. Was the dyer an expert on chemicals, a laborer churning out blankets, or an artisan making decorations in gold for the uniforms of officers? We only know that the arsenal was a social world in which the couple could meet. The doors open; the doors close.

Working in archives is very much like fieldwork. Words have an authority, and stories are haunting and often fleeting. But archives display more clearly than ethnographies the logistical foundations of social life—the social power of objects and places. Not just the gardens of Versailles, but also homes erected on a landfill in the Seine. Even the walls of an arsenal that held a soldier and the daughter of a dyer. The archives themselves, the material alternatives to trust, display the effort involved in maintaining a tradition of evidence-based administration. Buildings and boxes of files are rarely in field notes, but they are infrastructures of modern life whose presence and power should be noted.

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