

# CONSTRUCTING A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY SPACE OF DIALOGUE FOR THE STUDY AND PROTECTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE IN PORTUGAL, SPAIN AND LATIN AMERICA

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## **ABSTRACT**

“Rare Books and Special Collections”, make up a fundamental part of the cultural heritage of a given society. Moreover, these materials help us understand and analyze other cultural goods. However, due to their physical characteristics, they require specific conditions for their preservation; they also demand special knowledge for their adequate understanding.

For this reason, they require the elaboration of control and identification tools in order for researchers to obtain the basic information that will allow them to find the materials they are interested in.

On the other hand, attaining a balance between the degree of exposure to the public and the need to guarantee their conservation requires research as well as the collaboration of those disciplines concerned with both their analysis and organization. This task will only be accomplished by establishing multidisciplinary frameworks geared towards a common goal: the safeguard of documentary heritage.

A distinguishing feature of research work about the heritage is the need to obtain cooperation between different countries. After all, the task at hand presents us with the same basic characteristics regardless of geographical location. These include legal, institutional and social settings. Hence, frameworks designed and consolidated should lead to specific programs and projects that leave room for discussions of theoretical and methodological focus. The latter should in turn translate into cultural products that will have an impact on larger sectors of society.

## **Introduction**

We can define the documentary heritage as that form of memory which is stored in libraries and archives and that, due to its particular conditions, is an extremely fragile cultural good. Recognizing its problematic makes us go beyond the mere identification of a number of physical objects, for within these objects we find the condensed history of the society that elaborated them. Indeed, each book or document comes about as the result of a

complex web of social, political, cultural and economic threads which leave an imprint on these survivors, in a variety of ways.

Despite the fact that these objects have always enjoyed a special degree of recognition (partly conditioned by the possibility of a field of knowledge that makes possible the appropriation of their content by the reader), their importance has been somewhat forgotten since the formulation was made of the cultural heritage as something shared by humanity as a whole. So much so, that books and documents were not counted in UNESCO's classification of cultural goods that need be protected at the national and international levels, that was established within the framework of the Convention for the protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage of 1972. Let us remember that this ideal of conservation was born out of a conscience of the progressive destruction of such goods due to natural, but also social, economic and political reasons.

Together with the agreements, recommendations and declarations it generated, this convention led to a vacuum in terms of the attention and international recognition granted to the materials we are concerned with. Further, their protection was left to the scope of national policies in those countries whose cultural and historical tradition allowed it. This trend was radically altered in 1992 with the implementation of UNESCO supervised program Memory of the World. It is noteworthy that the same notion of destruction and constant threat to the materials came into play crucially in the creation of this international program.

The work MEMOIRE PERDUE. BIBLIOTHEQUES ET ARCHIVES DETRUITES AU XXE SIECLE<sup>1</sup>, prepared by the International Council of Archives and the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), predicted a terrible panorama for the future of these collections –one that, in any case, required joint efforts to assure the safeguard of the materials involved. Nevertheless, an additional problem to the conservation of collections lies in the difficulty of coming up with adequate instruments of control and identification, for only a handful of countries are in a position to engage in concrete programs and actions to achieve this goal. This is mainly due to the scale of projects and the means required to engage in them. Unfortunately, this end of the millennium has only deepened this division of countries on the technical and economic grounds needed not only to guarantee the protection and conservation of collections, but especially to facilitate public knowledge of, and access to, the cultural riches contained in books and documents.

Undoubtedly, much interesting work has been done worldwide directed against the tendency that exists toward the deteriorating and destructive effects these collections are often subject to. However, this has not sufficed, for their longevity is as much threatened by negligent or deliberate human action as it is by natural and social causes.

It is not a leisurely matter to insist on the need to understand the different elements that make up the world's bibliographic and documentary goods. On the contrary, any action or policy directed toward the collections' safeguard shall be determined by this understanding. It may be a truism, but one cannot protect what one does not know.

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<sup>1</sup> Published by UNESCO in 1996

## 1. Methodology: A multi-disciplinary approach

The idea of a cultural heritage has changed a number of times in terms of concept and fundament. Nevertheless, an idea has remained constant through its evolution, namely, the importance such heritages have in the construction of a collective identity and their role in aiding the collective's processes of historicity. Why should this be so? The answer is not as straight-forward as it may seem. Different disciplines have approached this problem from different viewpoints –those they deemed most pertinent. Yet, a fuller penetration into the notion of a cultural heritage has necessitated the recognition of the advantages of a multi-disciplinary focus, especially when dealing with issues related to the design and implementation of policies targeting the adequate conservation of cultural goods.

Indeed, the cultural object that we value is a product determined by the cultural evolution of a given culture. For “culture, as a social phenomenon, follows a two-dimensional trace: the mode of signification and the criterion of order, with which a conception of reality is formed and organized.”<sup>2</sup> In this way, each society determines the essential and distinctive symbols and meanings of its culture. This is why two objects of the cultural heritage will never be identical to each other, similar as they may be: for they will mean different things and be valued differently across different societies and –even more– across distant generations.

Turning back to our more immediate object of interest, the documentary heritage is not only characterized by the conditions described above, but has the ability of letting us measure the pulse-rate of culture, science and technological development of a given society. “Indeed, we learn from our tradition and spend our lifetime in dialogue with texts and thinkers that, through large historical distances, are still our contemporaries.”<sup>3</sup> It is in this way that we recognize in this past a series of substantial contributions that both define and distinguish us. This recognition is neither easy or immediate; yet, the historical process itself will select from the past those contributions which it deems most appropriate in the light of its present viewpoint, and will dismiss others. These are not simply eliminated, but relegated as a function of the two-dimensional frontier that is always present.

Within a new world structure that has been modified without having been entirely defined yet, national and collective identities allow the recognition of elements shared by different histories. In order to promote a cultural dialogue, historical processes strive to retrieve shared meanings; this is the case with Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula. Hence the recovery, understanding and knowledge of the documentary heritage becomes a joint endeavour that allows nations sharing this space to reaffirm points of concordance and aid in common development tasks.

It is within such a space that we map the idea of cooperation that has produced concrete and enriching results for all participants. We should understand cooperation as the joining of efforts for the achievement of a specific goal. In the case of culture, this goal goes beyond a national consciousness influenced, at the most basic level, by political concerns. The cultural space allows individuals to relate and collaborate within a single framework.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ingenios para el estudio de la cultura (Libro homenaje a Lian Karp)* / coord. Raúl Bejar Navarro y Héctor Rosales Ayala. Cuernavaca, Morelos : UNAM. Centro Regional de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias, 1992. p. 50

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *Más allá del Estado nacional (Beyond the Nation State)*. Valladolid : Editorial Trotta, 1997. p. 45.

The space constituted by Spain, Portugal and Latin America is a diverse and plural one, but contains nonetheless shared cultural features consolidated by the constant exchange of people between these nations during different historical periods. Diverse historical evolutions, as well as particular features, have determined the degree of social and economic development of each country. Unfortunately, the majority of the population within this space does not enjoy standards of living that would be able to sustain a long-term cooperation project. A particular characteristic of the region is the inability to maintain institutional structures and programs that will guarantee the fruitful continuity of actions and policies undertaken. This requires the existence of a critical evaluation of what was done in the past and of the results that were achieved.

It is generally true that governments have been made responsible for the cultural realm of a nation, to the detriment of civil society's role in this regard. This situation requires some change, which is already taking place with the flourishing of N.G.O.s worldwide. Yet, these cultural and educational institutions have rarely produced the desired fruit, despite their participation in cooperation agreements. The strength of this institutional framework must be recuperated, in order to transform the cultural life of our nations. "In a world in which we are increasingly regarded as consumers (by the Market) and as voters (by political parties), recovering citizenship and a universality of proposals and identities requires everyone's effort."<sup>4</sup> From this standpoint, institutions of higher education arise as an opportunity that has not yet been exploited as a space of transformation.

It is clear that cultural exchanges are always enriching; however, their effectiveness is tampered when they come about in a discontinuous form, outside the framework provided by short and long term programs. A substantial ideal of cooperation entails not only a reciprocity in the dimension of the tasks to carry out, but also in the results obtained. Albeit, economic and cultural cooperation is far from being a new idea, even less so in Latin America. Its maximum expression is found in the Latin American Summits. Yet, it is legitimate to ask what distance remains between these declarations and the application of their ideals in the social and cultural reality. It is not an overstatement to affirm that the majority of declarations of public organisms involved never go beyond good intentions printed on paper. There are, of course, exceptions that confirm this general rule.

Perhaps the most discouraging affirmation of all this comes in the terms of the International Pact of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, where we read that "...in accordance to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ideal of free human beings, liberated from fear and misery cannot be realized as long as the necessary conditions are not created, that will allow each person to enjoy his or her economic, social and cultural rights as well as his or her civil and political ones."

Of course, the cultural heritage in general, as well as the documentary heritage in particular can come as important aids in attaining this twofold goal. Indeed, any policy related to instruments of such high social value must take into account the two poles affecting them, namely, legislation and cultural policy. Nevertheless, within the context of our region, policies should be designed bearing in mind existing official frameworks and social pacts, so that it is easier for institutions of higher learning to define the scope of their involvement.

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<sup>4</sup> José María Mendiluce. *Tiempo de rebeldes*. Barcelona : Circulo de Lectores, 1998. p. 16

## 2. Research and Training Groups

Much has been written on both the virtues and the pitfalls of research. Yet, in the domain defined by the documentary heritage, research becomes crucial to guarantee the conservation of, and access to, the documents, as well as their public exposure. The achievement of such aims is subject to two primordial conditions. Firstly, an adequate understanding of the documentary heritage necessitates a specialized training. Secondly, it is generally the case that access to the materials in question is restricted to professors and researchers; students working on a specific related project may be allowed to use them, but the former are still held accountable for this use.

It must be said that the existence of such norms is neither circumstantial nor whimsical. Far from it, it is based on the professional expertise of these users, which institutions regard as the best guarantee that collections are used at no risk to their integrity. This is not the place to discuss the fact that it is precisely a user of such profile that could potentially constitute a threat to the collections, in the form of theft. Yet, we must note it, for the benefit of research groups, whose creation must bear in mind both the ethical import of its components and a due respect to the researched materials as social and not personal cultural riches.<sup>5</sup>

Herein lies what is perhaps one of the greatest advantages of favoring a multidisciplinary approach in the establishment of research and training groups for specific projects related to the documentary heritage. For a healthy diversity and plurality of opinions is not only determined by the discipline in question, but also by the cultural referents of each participating individual. With this in mind, our proposal is directed at the creation of research groups in our region, through the recovery of already existing spaces that were created to this end, as is the case with EDIBCIC.

On the other hand, today's technology enables a more dynamic information exchange, as well as the creation of virtual work spaces. Together with the space of cooperation and collaboration discussed above, such a new space can be used to design research projects with two specific ends in mind. The first one would be the elaboration of a cultural project for the documentary heritage with clear boundaries and a specified goal. The second would be the training of specialists in any of the themes related to this problematic, and from any of the participating disciplines.

Indeed, if we choose to regard the documentary heritage as a cultural product of society and its historical becoming then we shall recognize the need to promote multidisciplinary dialogues to design and implement research programs that will give back to the groups that integrate society some of their real value.

One of the main problems presented by the heritage is the pressing need to restrict access to its collections, in order to guarantee its conservation. The nature of the material makes such a condition unavoidable. If we should never forget this premiss in our postulates, we should neither lose sight of the fact that it lies within the materials' very nature as social products.

For all these reasons, institutions of higher learning arise as the ideal framework in which to carry out research projects that will obtain us a balance between conservation and

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Félix Benítez de Lugo y Guillén. "¿Por qué el Patrimonio? : sobre la necesidad de un código ético para unas disciplinas no inocentes". p. 30-31. In Boletín Informativo del Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio Histórico, No. 8 (1994)

social use of the documentary heritage. On the one hand, we are dealing with organizations that represent different social groups; on the other, their very structure allows for the possibility of counting on specialists of many disciplines. Moreover, they are committed to forming individuals capable of apprehending reality, as well as transforming it.

All this helps to explain how the two principal goals of UNESCO's Memory of the World program succeed at defining both the scope of any policy and its desired aim. We are referring, firstly, to the need of using the most adequate means to guarantee the preservation of that part of the documentary heritage of interest to the whole world; this comes hand in hand with promoting the preservation of the heritage of national or regional import. Secondly, the program aims at ensuring that the collections integrating the heritage be accessible to the greater number of people, through the use of the most appropriate technology, and regardless of its physical location.<sup>6</sup> These two goals are very much complementary ones. In order to preserve, identifying is a prerequisite, and only after can we start thinking about opening access to any citizen of the world. Of course, the achievement of these goals relies on the different institutions that share their material and – especially- human, resources. Furthermore, it depends crucially on obtaining a pool of specialists willing to participate in some specific project. For this to be possible, national representatives must coordinate efforts. A tool of this nature is not only of use for what occupies us here; it is, further, of interest to anybody interested in aspects of Library and Information Science, Archive Science and Communication Studies.

The idea is to identify human resources specialized in this field in institutions of higher education. Once this is done, participant states can be informed about research topics, publications, etc., through a web-space related to EDIBCIC and its members. A second objective is to provide information regarding research work in process, so that researchers may join the project of their interest.

Of course, such an institutional space may also serve to enhance student exchanges –that will contribute to enrich their formation and foster research- through the creation of specific exchange programs around it. Within the context of such programs, professionals responsible for their implementation would also direct student research: papers fulfilling course requirements but also masters and doctoral theses. “Our starting point is the idea that, in the educational process, the molding of spirits is given by the quality of the transmitted contents [...] If culture is that which remains when all else has been forgotten, then the most crucial aspect of the education provided by schools is not the content of the knowledge taught, but the mode of reasoning that has been interiorized...”<sup>7</sup> to overcome established levels.

In this way, not only can participants test their hypotheses and methodology, but students are given the opportunity to confront the knowledge they have acquired with the social reality they belong to. Finally, it must be said that, with respect to the documentary heritage, research must pursue the elaboration of a cultural product that will have an ample social impact.

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<sup>6</sup> Abdelaziz Abid. Memoria del Mundo: conservando nuestro patrimonio documental. México : Comisión Nacional de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos para la UNESCO : UNAM : UAEH : UAEM, 1998. pp. 7-8

<sup>7</sup> Michel Crozier y Bruno Tiliette. La crisis de la inteligencia: ensayo sobre la incapacidad de las elites para reformarse. Madrid : Instituto Nacional de Administración Pública, 1993. p. 25

This is, in its main lines, the aim of realizing and consolidating spaces for a multi-disciplinary and inter-institutional dialogue, in such way that the sharing of resources (material and human) will foster a reasonable fulfillment of the program Memory of the World, already mentioned. After all, it is the acquisition of an adequate technical expertise –as well as of the resources that will enable it- that make up a significant part of the challenge we are faced with.

There exists, in some countries, increasing debate concerning the resource share that should be taken up by public and private sectors; especially, as to the limits of the latter. Despite commonly held social perceptions about the heritage, we must use the research discourse and, primarily, the results we obtain to bring about a change of attitude in society. This is clearly not an easy task, especially in those countries where private initiative is not held in high regard. Nevertheless, research work ought to reconcile somewhat the different sides of the problem. Obtaining private resources to support concrete cultural projects does not alter in the least the social nature of any element integrating the cultural heritage.

Cultural goods –that is, those entitled by the State, as guarantor of a number of social and cultural rights- are of public ownership, and hence are inalienable and cannot be withdrawn. In any case, the involvement of private funds does neither transfer nor even hinder this ownership status.

When funding cultural projects, the private sector is seeking to obtain prestige, publicity and fiscal benefits, among other things. What it cannot do is transform the social nature of culture into a turf on which to play for its own interest. Private goods, on the other hand, belong to a regime in which society has no direct say –even if the goods still possess some social nature as belonging to the heritage. However, this situation changes radically as soon as the private sector entrusts the State with the custody of a private good. While ownership remains unchanged, the function of the good adapts to the social interest that the State and its institutions obey. This reality is not free of some tension. For example, the problem of ownership of cultural goods guarded by public universities has not been completely solved. In general, confrontation between the parties is rare, for the nature of public interest never changes.

This and other issues present us with challenges that must be dealt with as research problems, in the right institutional frameworks and from a variety of perspectives. Only the fulfillment of these pre-requisites will lead to integral solutions that will solve the disagreements.

### **3. Cultural Projects**

Research related to the heritage is defined by the need to elaborate a substitute of the original product that will ease society's access to its cultural riches. Clearly, the product designed to fulfill this goal will never completely replace the original, but it is valid in its role of conveying the meaning and representation of the original, without violating its integrity.

This need arises crucially due to the reality of “ordinary vandalism”, or the use of library and documentary goods for any reason, including research. Replacing the original with a copy of the research product allows for this use to be reduced considerably, as the originals are now kept in the best conditions and only exposed in special circumstances.

All these issues, as well as possible solutions and concrete products, may be discussed within the context of specific cultural programs. These must use available knowledge and resources to benefit the different communities involved.

Despite the high social esteem they enjoy as channels of culture, ancient books and historical documents do rarely co-exist continuously in the cultural life of communities. To a large extent, it is true that they represent a cultural aspect that is limited to very specific groups. This is so because of the nature of the text they present, that requires specialized user knowledge that normally escapes the general public, as it is not timely anymore.

For this reason, these sources of culture stand in need of a mediator, which will emphasize the need of specialized research toward the elaboration of concrete products that will facilitate general access to the value contained in these materials.

Generally, such products answer the same research concerns that brought them about as results, that is, they give little importance to public exposure of their contents. Hence, they arise, to a large extent, as tools of knowledge and exposure to the same social group that made them possible. Yet, society –their legitimate heir- remains foreign to this knowledge. The aforementioned tendency thus propitiates a space of unawareness of the documentary heritage.

In order to increase society's awareness of the importance of documentary memory, cultural products must be elaborated. In this respect, we are in need of changing in a substantial way our ideas about the products of specialized research. This, of course, does not imply that we can or should do away with this form of research. However, our idea of the finished research product may be affected by the need to come up with products that will help us cover the costs of producing them. And, should there be a net profit, this should help the recovery and conservation of the original materials.

Already existing products of this sort possess a very defined characteristic: they are addressed to a very small sector of society, with specific interests and possessing a very specialized technical apparatus. It is a closed circle, limited to a few. Albeit, this reality is being gradually reversed. Increasingly, researchers are targeting a larger sector of society by exposing the content of the values that make their products special. For this to be possible, several cultural products must be elaborated for each good. This idea seems complicated, but it is feasible within a context of cooperation and exchange. On the other hand, as we have already said, these products can be used to finance conservation programs.

In such a context, digital processing begins to be used and recommended, due to the reduction of costs it entails when reproducing cultural products. However, this is not enough: we have forgotten that society is composed of different groups with very diverse interests; it is not even remotely homogeneous. It is for this reason that cultural products of different nature must exist for the exposure of each cultural good. Clearly, this can only be thought from within a framework involving several institutions and cultural objects.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Designing strategies of public exposure of the documentary memory must strive to find a balance between the necessary guarantee of conservation of the collections, and the increasing diversification of sources of funding. Whether the latter be public or private, the

social, hence collective, nature of the heritage must always be kept in mind. Insofar as its very nature is geared toward the future, it does not belong to us completely.

¿Do we have any assurance that an idea that has already been put to use will work differently from now on? Only, perhaps, the fact that we are employing old ideas in the context of new spaces of a higher social awareness. Of course, history can hardly be predicted, “for history is built from daily life. Just as freedom is preserved from the concrete. Attitudes and behavior of those holding power can transform a reality that is never inevitable. Sensibility, also, is expressed through commitment”<sup>8</sup>.

The possibility of obtaining both public and private resources will always be enhanced by designing research programs directly related to cultural programs of wider social concerns. Moreover, the more ample scope of these programs will allow them to relate better to similar endeavors, easing the way for the creation of a space of action and exchange including the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America.

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<sup>8</sup> José María Mendiluce. *Op. cit.* p. 19