

# RECORDS AND REPRESENTATIONS

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When I proposed to give a paper on records and representations I had no idea that the programme for this conference would include the words *representing* and *representation* no fewer than six times. But when I saw the programme I was delighted to discover that my topic is of such wide interest. In considering representation in connection with our understanding of the concept of the *record* I'm going to draw on ideas from cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind, as well as on the literature of archives and records management. I will set out some propositions about representations as they are perceived by scholars in other fields, and consider how these might map to aspects of records and record systems as archivists understand them.

## **What are representations?**

*Representation* is a concept that has been discussed since the 17th century if not earlier. Today it is explored not just in philosophy and psychology but in disciplines as varied as art, anthropology, film and media studies, linguistics, mathematics, and computer science. At a very general level, representations in all these disciplines are 'things which stand for something else', and they are usually assumed to have some kind of correspondence to the things they represent. Beyond this, representation is often controversial. There is wide scope for debate about whether representations are valid in given situations, or how one type of entity can be a representation of another. As you might expect, perspectives vary between one discipline and another, and there are many different explanations of the correspondence between representations and their targets (the things they represent). Perhaps we could say that different representational systems operate in different contexts. One other thing that many disciplines might agree on is that representations are often used as surrogates or substitutes for their originals. Indeed the purpose of many representational systems is to provide surrogates for things that are unavailable or inaccessible, or expected to become so.

We can also use the word 'representation' to refer to the process of representing, or the concept of being a representative of some group or individual. Take process first. Like *description* and *classification*, representation is a word that can describe both a process and its product. Representations are the *products* of a representing *process*. When talking about the products we can use the plural form *representations*, but when talking about process we can only use the singular form. Representation as process is a non-count noun. What about the concept of being a representative? This concept is closely connected to the others, since typical representatives, lawyers, members of Parliament, are people who 'stand for' or 'stand in the place of' their clients or constituents. Mention of Parliament also leads us to think of democratic measures to ensure that everyone is represented, and perhaps also of proportionality in representation; and this leads to the last notion I want to mention, the notion that representation is something to do with equality, fairness, giving everyone a voice. All of these are non-count uses of the term *representation*, and some of today's speakers may be planning to use the word in one or more of these non-count senses. But I'm going to stick to the core meaning, and talk about 'representation' as a count noun with a plural form.

Representations in this sense are everywhere. The reflection of the moon in the still water of a pond, graphic designs on road signs, banknotes, diagrams, statues, pictures, dramatic performances, even language itself are all forms of representation. Representations are powerful. As the economist Hernando de Soto puts it, they 'help us manipulate and order the complexities of the world', and allow us 'to communicate regarding issues that we could not otherwise handle'.<sup>1</sup> They are 'one of the girders of modern society'.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, representations are always constrained. No representational system captures its targets in their full complexity. In the words of the art critic W J T Mitchell, 'every representation exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy, presence or truth'.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps because of this, scholars have sometimes argued that concepts of representation are or should be discredited. Some say that such concepts are flawed if they presuppose realities whose existence is questionable, or possibilities of exact reproductions of realities that are unattainable.<sup>4</sup> Some argue that representations are dangerous because they allegedly imply a fixity or an ordering that realities do not possess, or seek to impose a single 'closed' view of realities that are capable of multiple interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Others assert that representations shape reality or constitute the only reality there is.<sup>6</sup>

Nor is the *power* of representation always seen as a positive. Followers of Foucault and Derrida often tell us that undesirable elements of oppression and social control emerge from the power to represent knowledge. Who decides what gets represented? Who decides what represents what? It's unsurprising that in anthropology people sometimes speak of a 'crisis of representation'.<sup>7</sup>

I don't have time this morning to discuss all these different perceptions, but I will come back to some of them later in my talk. Many of them are the staple diet of postmodernist thinkers, who make similar assertions not just about representations in general, but about information stores, databases, documents, records and archives, and about the work of artists, photographers, historians, scientific researchers and many others. We'll probably hear about some of these from later speakers.

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<sup>1</sup> Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital* (Basic Books, New York, 2000), p.220.

<sup>2</sup> de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital*, p.223. Cf. Richard Bernheimer's claim, in the gendered language of an earlier age, that representation is 'an assertion of man's ability to vanquish the powers that beset him', serving as 'the expression of man's power over the unknown' (Richard Bernheimer, *The Nature of Representation* (New York University Press, New York, 1961), p.18).

<sup>3</sup> W J T Mitchell, 'Representation', in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (eds.), *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990), p.21. Cf. Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* 2nd edn. (Routledge, London, 2002), p.3: 'Reality is always more extensive and complicated than any system of representation can possibly comprehend'.

<sup>4</sup> Those who argue that if there is no reality there can be no representation seem to posit an unnecessarily narrow view of representation. Representation can exist even where there is no implication of reality, as pictures of elves and unicorns attest: such pictures are representations, not of a real world, but of something in the imagination of the artist. Richard Rorty's influential 'antirepresentationalism' (see Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), pp.1-17) emphasises the inevitable failure of notions of perfect representation, but as F R Ankersmit argues, acknowledgment that representation is necessarily imperfect does not require us to deny the possibility of any representation at all. See F R Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2001), pp.273-80.

<sup>5</sup> In some postmodernist writing, 'representationalism' is used in place of 'modernism', 'objectivism' or 'positivism' as a label for the modes of thought that postmodernism claims to have discredited or superseded. See for example Robert Chia, *Organizational Analysis as Deconstructive Practice* (De Gruyter, Berlin, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> An accessible introduction to these ideas from a sociological standpoint can be found in Steve Woolgar, *Science: The Very Idea* (Ellis Horwood, Chichester, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Allison James, Jenny Hockey and Andrew Dawson (eds.), *After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology* (Routledge, London, 1997), pp. 2, 35, 161, 165.

## Archives, records and representations

In archival discourse, representation is a term we normally meet in connection with the processes or products of *description*. The US *DACS* standard defines description as 'the creation of an accurate representation of ... archival material'<sup>8</sup> and there are similar definitions in *ISAD(G)* and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Archivists also encounter *representation* as a synonym for *representativeness* in discussions of appraisal or collecting policy or social inclusion.<sup>10</sup> Particularly if we can't keep everything, how can archival records be sufficiently representative? Is representativeness desirable? Can keeping a sample of records provide a representation of the whole?

I want to go beyond this and suggest that records themselves are representations. More specifically, I want to suggest that they are *persistent* representations of *activities* or *occurrences*. Now, the idea that records are representations isn't wholly new. You can find it in Italian archival theory, for example. But in the English-language discourse it makes only a very occasional appearance. Archival literature in English tends to suggest that records are a kind of *evidence*, or a kind of *information*, or perhaps a kind of *document*. I have used these definitions myself in the past, but over the years I have come to feel increasingly uncomfortable with them, for reasons you can read about in my article in a recent issue of *American Archivist*.<sup>11</sup>

In that article you can also find some basic propositions about *representations* as they are understood by scholars in cognitive science. These propositions are not beyond dispute, but they are indicative of views that such scholars hold. One proposition is that all representation occurs within representational systems. Another is that such systems can model properties conventionally (i.e. using means which depend on external conventions) or iconically (using visual resemblance, or other non-arbitrary means that are inherent within the representation). And a third is that the way *relationships* are expressed in representational systems is usually symbolic of, rather than isomorphic to, the nature of those relationships in the 'real' world.

We can map these to what we know about records. For example, records can use conventions (such as words and numbers), or visual imagery, or a combination of the two. We also know that in record systems schemes of classification and arrangement are intended to correspond to systematic relationships in the world where the records were created, but that in practice they can only approximate to the complexity of those relationships. I suggested earlier that a purpose of many representational systems is to provide surrogates; records are widely used as surrogates for past activities and events that are otherwise beyond our reach. I give a fuller analysis in my article in *American Archivist*.

Of course, given that there are many kinds of representation, and not all of them are records, we need to consider briefly what kind of representation a record

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<sup>8</sup> Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2004), p.xii.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of the representational character of archival description see Wendy M. Duff and Verne Harris, 'Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings', *Archival Science* 2 (2002); Elizabeth Yakel, 'Archival Representation', *Archival Science* 3 (2003); Margaret Procter and Michael Cook, *Manual of Archival Description*, 3rd edn. (Gower, Aldershot, 2000), p.28.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ian Johnston, 'Whose History is it Anyway?', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 22 (2001), at p.216.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Yeo, 'Concepts of Record (1): Evidence, Information, and Persistent Representations', *American Archivist* 70 (2007).

might be. My first suggestion is that records are *persistent* representations. This differentiates them from the reflection in the pond or the unsaved document in a computer's temporary memory. A persistent representation is one which has the capacity to endure beyond the immediate circumstances that led to its creation.

My second suggestion is that records are persistent representations of *activities or occurrents*. Road signs and calendars and statues are all persistent representations but, unlike records, they don't normally represent activities. What do I mean by an *occurrent*? I mean that records can represent things like functions, processes, incidents and events, as well as activities. Some of you will remember that David Bearman proposed to limit the concept of records to the world of business transactions,<sup>12</sup> but I would not want to restrict it in this way. Records can represent the full range of endeavours which humans undertake. The term *occurrent* comes from the discipline of logic,<sup>13</sup> where it is sometimes used to refer to temporal phenomena in contrast to 'continuants' such as physical objects which have spatial dimensions. Archival literature doesn't have a collective term for concepts like function, process, activity and event, but I'd suggest that *occurrents* may be the most appropriate collective noun for us to employ.

My third suggestion is that records are persistent representations of activities or occurrents created by persons or devices that *participated in* or *observed* those occurrents or by persons authorised to act as their proxies. This one is a little more complex but briefly the point is that participants and observers have first-hand knowledge of the activity concerned. They may not be neutral or impartial witnesses to the activity, but they have a level of knowledge unavailable to those who did not experience it. In general, representations produced by third parties – such as accounts written by historical scholars long after the event – are not records of the occurrents they describe.

Characterising records as persistent representations should present no problems to those who think that records can supply a mirror of past events. It seems consistent with the advice given in published standards and guidelines for records management; ISO 15489 for example, which asserted the need for 'a reliable record ... one whose contents can be trusted as a full and accurate representation'.<sup>14</sup> But many critics are likely to insist that the concept of accuracy has no meaning, that it is absurd to think that activities can be represented fully and accurately, that all records are constructed in accordance with the worldview of their creators. Medical casenotes, for example, are supposed to describe what occurred when patients were diagnosed, but we could argue that their content is mainly determined by the narratives chosen by physicians and other healthcare professionals, and by the cultural and organisational contexts in which physicians and patients interact. Some critics would argue that medical casenotes tell us as much about these cultural influences as about the treatment of patients. Or to take another example, sociological studies have shown that manual workers often compile worksheets in ways that represent their work as wholly compliant with formal procedures;

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<sup>12</sup> David Bearman, *Electronic Evidence* (Archives and Museum Informatics, Pittsburgh, 1994), pp.15-17, 40-1.

<sup>13</sup> W. E. Johnson, *Logic*, vol. 3 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1924), pp.xviii-xxi; Peter Simons and Joseph Melia, 'Continuants and Occurrents', *The Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 74 (2000), pp.59-92.

<sup>14</sup> ISO 15489-1:2001, *Records Management*, sec.7.2. Cf. [UK] Public Record Office, *Requirements for Electronic Records Management Systems 1: Functional Requirements* (2002), p.3, at <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/requirementsfinal.pdf>>, which similarly advocated the capture and maintenance of a 'reliable and authentic representation of ... business activity'.

such records minimise any trace of deviations from official rules.<sup>15</sup> These are insightful comments, but despite their imperfections the casenotes, the worksheets, are still representations. Representation is *never* perfect. Inevitably, the activities that records represent are gone; the records will allow us a picture of them, created by those who participated in the activities or were present when they occurred, but of necessity it will be an imperfect picture. If you want to emphasise the extent to which record systems themselves determine our construction of the past, seeing records as representations does not require you to accept any positivist notions of verifiable facts or absolute truths.

### **Metarepresentation**

Finally, besides records and their descriptive metadata, I want to mention *copies* of records as another kind of representation that archivists encounter. Photographic copies of a record are representations of the record, just as the record itself is a representation of some activity or occurrence. A set of metadata describing the record is also a representation of the record. And if we have a set of metadata describing a copy, then we have a representation of the copy. We often find a chain of representations, in which one representation represents another. There can be 'representations of representations of representations',<sup>16</sup> and the chain can continue indefinitely. But the original activity or occurrence is represented throughout the chain, even in metadata describing a copy of a copy.<sup>17</sup> Linguists and psychologists refer to this as *metarepresentation*.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, metarepresentations introduce further loss. Each link in the chain adds more distortion. But just as we use records as surrogates for past events, so we can use transcripts or image copies as surrogates for records that we cannot obtain in their original form. Descriptions have often been seen as *pointers to* records rather than *surrogates for* them, but a description can also be a surrogate, especially when a user wants an *overview* of a fonds or a collection in order to eliminate items that seem irrelevant to an investigation or research project. After identifying the items that appear relevant to the work in hand, some users will happily consult copies or detailed descriptions, if these are available, but other users will only be content with handling the originals. I suggest that these different attitudes to secondary representations offer a parallel to our varying levels of satisfaction with regard to records themselves, when we view them as more or less imperfect representations of past activities and events.

Thank you.

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<sup>15</sup> Marc Berg and Geoffrey Bowker, 'The Multiple Bodies of the Medical Record: Towards a Sociology of an Artifact', *Sociological Quarterly* 38 (1997), pp.513-37; Graham Button and R H R Harper, 'Taking the Organisation into Accounts', in Graham Button (ed.), *Technology in Working Order* (Routledge, London, 1993), at pp.99-100, 103-4; Barry A T Brown, 'Unpacking a Timesheet: Formalisation and Representation', *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* 10 (2001), pp.293-315. As I note in 'Concepts of Record (2): Prototypes and Boundary Objects', *American Archivist* 71 (2008), at pp.128-9, such studies always focus on 'probative' or separately-constructed records.

<sup>16</sup> Michael K Buckland, 'Information as Thing', *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42 (1991), at p.358; Dennis W Stampe, 'Toward a Causal Theory of Linguistic Representation', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2 (1977), at p.42.

<sup>17</sup> Stampe, 'Toward a Causal Theory', at p.42.

<sup>18</sup> See Dan Sperber (ed.), *Metarepresentations: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2000).