Historical writings and archival records:
How archival records turn into historical evidence?

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ABSTRACT

This paper is to examine how historical writings utilize archival records, and how archival records are constructed to historical evidence. To do this, I will give a brief overview of the debate among cultural historians about the linguistic turn and the meaning of archival evidence in historical writings, and concludes the subjectivity of the process of becoming historical evidence in historical writings.

*Keywords: Historical evidence, archival records, historical writings, historical records
History is made with archival record.
History is knowledge through archival record.
(Langlois and Seignobs, 1898)

1. Introduction

As the postmodern theory is widely spread and new literacy criticism give strong influence across the disciplines, the answer of what history is and why it is important has been undergone the fundamental change under the postmodern debate over decades. The idea has questioned the possibility of language to represent the reality and recover a text's meaning, and led to big debate about the nature of history and the utility of archival evidence. This paper is to examine how historical writing use archival records, and how archival records are constructed to historical evidence. To do this, I will give brief overview of the debate among cultural historians about the linguistic turn (the nature of history) and the meaning of archival evidence in historical writings, and concludes the subjectivity of the archival records of becoming historical evidence in historical writings.

2. What is historical writing and what is historical evidence?: From the discussion of Hayden White.

The good example of the deconstruction of the historical text is the works of Hayden White. Hayden White is the one of provocative historians who applied this literary criticism to understanding history. In his article, The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality (White, 1980), he highlights the role of narrative in historical writing. He defines narrative as a form for representation of event which is intrinsic element of human being which related to share a reality or event. The narrative is placed between our experience of world and our efforts to describe that experience in language. But why he mentions narrative? What he highlights in the article is the distinction between world which speaks itself and the world which is spoken by others as a story. He points out that historian have believed that events can speak themselves. But real event should not speak. They just perfectly well serve as the reference of a discourse that historian want to speak. If the event cannot speak themselves, what is behind the event? Historian said historical narrative is historical analysis. However, White argues that there is no intrinsic implication in chronology and historical event, and also no inherent link in historical event and narrative. For example, he describes the structure of volume 1 of the Monumenta Germaniae Historica, the annals of European middle age; how the event and the year are organized in a historical work. According to him, in the annals, there is not
suggestion of any necessary connection between one event and another, and even sometimes it is no clear indication relation between the year and the event. For him, the narrative is added to events by historian themselves as show historical evidence in archives and no explanation between links in original event. Event does not speak, only historian argues that the event can speak themselves. So for him, the historian owns the authority to decide the reality become reality. Historical account gives these diverse events with form and coherence as a story. Scholarly community makes historiography transform into an objective discipline. However, White points out that it is historian themselves who have transformed narrativity to a realistic event.

In seeking to answer the question to Hayden White, many historians suggest to revise the nature of history that Hayden White argues: Is it really true that history is only the product of narrative? Is history considered fiction participating in the same strategies and procedures as literature does? Archival records as the literary evidence is a social form recording historical reality. To criticize Hayden White and the literary criticism, Roger Chartier depends on his argument on the reliability of historical evidence. The argument that history is fiction-making is illusory to attempt to undermine the works of historians, considering historian write history based on historical evidence representing historical reality and preserved for years in archives. So here I want to go back to my point about the nature of historical evidence. Although it is true that historical reality could exist outside of language system and that history obviously differs from novel in being supported by historical evidence, and historians have rarely paid attention to what is called historical evidence and how it is made: specifically, the process of that the historical event was recorded and the management of how these records came and preserved in archives. To understand historical writing more deeply we should have deep understanding about historical evidence in archives considered as the cornerstone of historical writing. It is not satisfied to only say that historian only can work with the trace of the past, the records from archival catalog.

3. Historical Writings based on archival records: How they are constructed?

Admittedly, archival record provides access to the past. Historian cannot have an opportunity to observe how the phenomenon happens without the text in past so only way that they can understand the past is through text representation. Historian can examines social agencies, political power, and personal experience through the archival records. As Gabrielle Spiegel mentions, the historical texts are located in specific social sites that were created by political, economic, and social structure that condition human being(Spiegel, 1992). However, while we admit the archival record contain a certain kinds of historical truth to understand the past, the other thing we should consider is the process of how these records serve as the evidence in the historical writing. Because, pieces of evidence do not become automatically a part of the text from their own decision. They must be identified, chosen, and organized in certain way by historian.
In order that the record becomes evidence they are intellectually controlled by historian as well as archivist. Because historian has been seen as objective transparent researchers who disregards the process of evidentialization. In particular, considering new cultural history was introduced, owing to their broad range of topic about cultural practice requires more varied kinds of resource to see the historical phenomenon, it is significant how historian find, organize, and construct archival records as their evidence in archives.

Evidence is by nature contextual and relational. Considering the situation when we commonly speak of things as being evidence of or for other things, the terms, evidentiality or evidentiarianess is only conceived as likening one and the other, and one is treated as evidence for the other. According to Jonathan Furner, evidence is relational (Furner, 2004). The word, evidence is itself used instead of evidentiality to refer to the relationship. A common assumption of evidence is inference-an argument or process of reasoning-and is made up of a series of propositions. This relationship is a product of inferential analysis derived from two different kinds of methods: deduction and induction. So it cannot be denied that the role of historian in ensuring evidence is to provide an inferential relationship between the evidence and historical account, evidence and event, text and context. In order to define appropriate relationships to one another, it is necessary to impose meaning on the materials and to put them into a group with others of the same meanings or to take apart them in accordance with their assumed meaning. Then they record the social and cultural context of the historical evidence. So evidence is constructed not by the process that only after a large amount of historical data was gathered and classified, then historian attempt to make an historical assumptions. Rather historical evidence exists within the context of historical writing before historian gathers all data. So before historian goes to archives to find historical data, they already have in mind about what types of records they want to see and which records serves as the evidence to formulate and support his assumption. After they formulate their assumption, they head to the archives and begin gathering the data to prove that their assumption is legitimate. In this process, the record which is considered inherently open to multiple meaning is dependent on context. So here, as Kelly Thomas states in his article, two individuals (two historians) who hold different assumptions might disagree about how strongly a particular piece of evidence support a theory 1) or might produce different theories with a same piece of evidence. In historical writing the diversity and complexity of original records are limited to a certain context that historian endow to. The classification systematically attributes individual records to the various subjects and channels them into the idea that the historians attempt to deliver. Also, narrative accompanying a events is an inevitable element in understanding evidence.

Therefore historical evidence is not prior to historical truth. In positivism, it is insisted that the evidence has inherent implication to prove the truth and are seen as fundamental element to serve as bridge the connection between theory and record. However, now evidence is not regarded as objective and value-neutral entity, rather more subjective and context-oriented. If so, what form of record becomes historical evidence?

4. Conclusion

In seeking to answer the question about what historical evidence is and how they are constructed, I suggest to revise the nature of history that the postmodern theorists argue. I cannot agree with the idea that as complete objectivism is impossible in historical writing, historical writing is fiction or myth. Also I disagree with the argument that as true realism is impossible in archival record, the record is no more than constructed reality. The reader can actually acquire a portion of real life through an archival record between experience and reality. The same as history, the reader also can obtain a part of historical reality through experience and reality. The interpreted reality is the interpreted reality, not the fiction. Also historical evidence is subjective and relational, which does not mean they are nothing more than they contain the imaginary story. History contains active, constructive rhetoric elements but also historical understanding and truth. It might be true that archival records are not only defined as the evidence in history, but also constructed as evidence by historian, which does not opposed to historical truth. The rawness of archival record is interrelated and processed in historical writing by historian. Also it should be noticed that historians are interested in evidence primary for trustful historical writing, but those responsible for the selection, organization, and preservation of historical texts may first be involved in constructing evidence of past events in archives before historians begin to write history. Therefore, the meaning of historical texts should be first examined in regards to how these raw materials were selected, processed, and classified in certain institutions according to their policy.

So, as Sol Cohen states, it is nonsense to say that it is impossible to distinguish historical narratives from fictional narratives, history from the novel: though sometimes the boundary can become blurred. As Clifford Geertz states in his book, that is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer. The readers as well historian should pay attention to the social reality hidden behind the text in archives.
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