**The Burning of Paper Instead of Children: the Symbolic Destruction of Records**

May 01 2016 archives From: [www.hillelarnold.com](http://www.hillelarnold.com) Hillel Arnold, Assistant Director, Head of Digital Programs at Rockefeller Archive Center

*This is the text of a talk Mr. Arnold gave in 2012 at the Society of American Archivists’ Annual Conference in San Diego as part of a panel on religion and archives. “Yesterday’s passing of* [*Daniel Berrigan*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Berrigan) *reminded me that I never got around to publishing this work so, warts and all, here it is. I’ve added a few links here and there, but otherwise the text is largely unchanged. The bibliography for this talk is available* [*on Zotero*](https://www.zotero.org/helrond/items/collectionKey/FQPEDZIP)*.”*

Shortly after noon on October 27, 1967, four men carrying Mr. Clean bottles filled with duck’s blood entered the Customs House in Baltimore, Maryland. Inside, they crossed the foyer to the Selective Service Office, which housed the records of the local draft board. Each of them made a different request of the head clerk. When the clerk left the office to act on one of the requests, they removed the bottles filled with blood from their pockets and began to methodically pour their contents over the files of the draft board. The four men were promptly arrested and charged with mutilating government property and interfering with the operations of the Selective Service System. This act of protest, which later became known as the [Baltimore Four](http://www.jonahhouse.org/archive/pics67-73.htm) action, was the spark that set off a movement of religiously-motivated activists destroying draft board records using symbols steeped in their faith tradition. In May of the following year, the [Catonsville Nine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catonsville_Nine), probably the most iconic of these actions, took place in a nearby suburb of Baltimore. And then, similar actions erupted all over the country. By most estimates, at least 30 such actions, which destroyed over a million draft files and associated records, took place between October of 1967 and early 1972.

What I want to do here today is show how these activists, a large number of whom were Roman Catholics motivated in their actions by their faith, had an understanding of records that prefigure recent conceptions of records as morally-loaded agents actively participating in the construction of history. And I also hope to show that this particular understanding of records grew out of these activists’ religious convictions.

To do that, we have to start by asking why these activists - who were often called the ultra resistance, or more broadly the Catholic Left - chose to destroy records in general, and why they chose to destroy these records in particular. To begin with, we have to understand the context in which these activists found themselves, with the Vietnam War continuing to escalate in the face of massive protests in the United States and around the world. They were frustrated with “safe” methods of protest, such as mass marches, rallies and full-page ads in the New York Times. All of these methods had been tried, and had failed. Something more radical was needed. That something turned out to be the symbolic destruction of draft board records, an option that was seen as viable in part because of the way in which activists perceived these records.

As the [statement of the Catonsville Nine](http://www.tomjoad.org/catonsville9.htm) makes abundantly clear, the activists saw these particular records as both part of a flawed and unjust system, as well as symbols of that same system. The Catonsville Nine and other similar groups believed that the Vietnam War was not an aberration, but a symptom of a larger malaise affecting American society. The goal of the ultra-resistance was not merely to stop the Vietnam War, but to radically reconstruct the social, political and economic fabric of the United States and indeed, the world.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the actors believed that their actions had both a symbolic and real impact. Symbolic because the ritualized destruction of these records was calculated to be a piece of political theater. Real because those same records, as one actor said, “represented lives.”

Not only did the ultra resistance see these records as symbolic of and also a very real part of an oppressive system, they saw them as active agents in that same system. The statements of groups who raided draft boards often refer to the records they destroyed as “instruments of death” or something equally ominous, and comparisons to the records of Nazi Germany were often drawn.

But how did the ultra resistance come to be convinced that these records were symbolically and actually part of and participants in a system that produced symptoms on the scale of the Vietnam war? And how does destruction of these records become, in their minds, a way to wage peace on that entire filthy rotten system?

To answer some of those questions, we need to understand a little more about the records themselves, what their function and purpose was, and what happened when they were destroyed. Although the records targeted by activists changed somewhat over time, the records most often destroyed were classification files for individuals. These files contained a number of documents pertaining to a particular individual and their classification, including at least a personal data questionnaire completed at the time of registration with the System. These files sometimes contained supporting documentation, especially in cases where an individual sought deferment or a change in classification status. However, because of the decentralized nature of the Selective Service System as well as its outdated record keeping technology, these files were often incomplete and inconsistently maintained.

At that time, the Selective Service System, which was essentially the same system that had been in place since 1917, was based on a fairly decentralized model wherein local boards (referred to by historians James Davis and Kenneth Dolbeare as “little groups of neighbors”) were legally autonomous entities that both made decisions regarding classification of individuals (and thus their eligibility and likelihood of being drafted) and also kept records documenting those decisions and providing background information on individuals. As a result, the role of state and national headquarters of the System was mainly to allocate draft calls to local boards, serve as an avenue of appeal for individuals who felt they had been misclassified and most importantly to counter the structural diffusion of the System by communicating a strong ideological position through policy documents and internal propaganda intended to increase morale.

Consequently, the destruction of local draft board records had an immediate and profound impact on the ability of a local board to function, and thus had ramifications for the entire System. The destruction of an individuals’ file meant, in many cases, that not only were all records of that person’s classification destroyed, but also all of the System’s records of their existence. In other words, that person would never be drafted unless they intentionally decided to re-register with the Selective Service System.

As would be expected, the Selective Service System quickly countered with a number of measures intended to protect the functions these records supported. Files were duplicated and arranged by individual as well as classification type. These two sets of files were then linked together through a cross referencing system. In addition, records were microfilmed and the microfilm was transferred to state and national offices. Even with these countermeasures in place, a successful draft board raid could cripple the operations of a local board for weeks or months. That these countermeasures were employed speaks to the perception of records described by Ciaran Trace’s analysis of record keeping in modern organizations as “…just as much proactive as reactive in the sense that they are created in anticipation of the uses to which they may be put.”

As Fernando Baez points out in his work A Universal History of the Destruction of Books, individuals who purposefully destroy books (and other memory objects including records) usually do so out of strong ideological convictions. The destruction of draft board records by members of the Catholic Left is no exception to that rule. These activists were prodded to action by a wide variety of motivations.

Perhaps most obviously, many of these draft board raids explicitly sought to end the Vietnam War by damaging one piece of the apparatus by which it was carried out. Their hope was that destroying these records would temporarily or permanently impede the ability of the Selective Service System to function effectively, and that the reconstruction of those files would prove too time-consuming and too costly for the System to bear.

But many of the activists were concerned with more than simply ending the Vietnam War. As I mentioned earlier, many of them saw the Vietnam War as merely a symptom of an unjust and oppressive system whose tentacles reached to every corner of the globe, and their actions were motivated by a desire to counter or outright destroy that system. Citing domestic and global inequality and oppression, including the disproportionate impact of the draft on minority and impoverished communities, the statement of the Catonsville Nine concludes with the markedly unsubtle statement, “Injustice is the great catalyst of revolution,” and a call to radically revise or eradicate capitalism.

Many of these activists were interested in fomenting another kind of revolution as well; one that would radically redefine the nature of Catholicism. Working against the “strong sense of patriotism in the Catholic Church” at that time, the statement of the Catonsville Nine implicates the religious leaders of the United States for “their failure to serve our country and humankind.”

Perhaps most importantly, these activists were motivated in the symbolic destruction of records by their perception of these records. It’s my contention that their particular conception of records has a great deal in common with postmodern views of records as articulated recently by archival and organizational theorists. Both view records not as neutral, objective and passive objects, but as agents of memory, accountability, power, identity, communicating to humans through a complex array of symbols and signifiers. Let’s take a closer look at some of these ideas and the role they played in draft board raids.

First, one of the central tenets of postmodern thought in regard to records, particularly as articulated by Terry Cook and Ciaran Trace, is that they communicate and legitimize power, and that as a result they are, in fact, sources of power. Similarly, postmodern conceptions of records often describe them as agents, in the words of Terry Cook, “playing an on-going role in lives of individuals, organizations and society.”

As I’ve already discussed, the activists of the ultra resistance saw the draft board records as symbolic of a system of oppression, but also as very real participants in that system. By destroying those records, they were able to at least temporarily destroy the functions that those records supported, undermining the legitimacy of the Selective Service System and its ability to control the discourse around the morality of the draft. There’s no question they saw these records as active agents and as sources of power.

The postmodern paradigm also describes records as signifiers of institutional activities, processes and events or, as John Van Maanen and Brian T. Pentland say, “a symbolic use of legalistic rhetorical forms to create (sometimes false) impressions of legitimacy and rationality.” Archivists and historians have long understood records as sources of evidence, and the postmodern perspective builds on this, insisting that records contain evidence not only of the events they describe, but also the processes by which they were created and the reasons for which they were created.

As numerous organizational theorists have shown, records of an organization are a way of “exteriorizing” otherwise invisible processes. This phenomenon of exteriorization or representation of abstract processes can serve to present, as Ciaran Trace says, a “persuasive version of the socially organized character of an organization’s operations, regardless of what the actual order is, indeed perhaps independently of what the actual order is. Records,” he goes on to say, “consist of a socially derived, persuasive and proper account of the organization as an orderly enterprise.” In other words, representations of processes or systems become analogous with that same system; they contain the essence of a particular system in both real and symbolic ways. However, as Terry Cook reminds us, it is also possible to read against the narratives that organizations attempt to present through records, to “shift equally away from seeing the context of records creation resting within stable hierarchical organizations to situating records within fluid horizontal networks of work-flow functionality.”

An often overlooked component of the postmodern records paradigm is that records, by their very existence, imply an audience and a relationship with that audience. As Geoffrey Yeo points out, the notion of records as evidence presumes “a relativity;” that an audience for those records exists, and that that audience is able to relate to those records in some way.

Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger’s 2002 article “Traders’ Engagement with Markets” discusses the ways in which financial traders relate to the abstract entity of “the market” through the representation of its processes via a computer screen. Their description of the ways in which some individuals in their study “relate to (some) objects not only as ‘doers’ and ‘accomplishers’ of things within an agency framework but as experiencing, feeling, reflexive and remembering beings” is directly analogous to the ways in which activists of the ultra resistance describe the draft board records, although it is a far more contentious relationship than the one that traders have with the exteriorized market.

Written statements accompanying draft board raids almost universally claim that these records have “no right to exist” because their only purpose is to serve the forces of death and destruction. As any lawyer will tell you, property doesn’t have rights; people have rights in regards to property. Interestingly, as part of the justification for the destruction of these records, activists have anthropomorphized these records, and judged them by the same, if not more strict, moral standards by which people are judged. This quote from George Mische, one of the participants of the Catonsville Nine action, implies that the draft records got what they deserved:

“This is a message we’re bringing to the American people. That while people throughout the world and especially in Vietnam are suffering from napalm, these files are also napalmed.”

At this point, I hope I’ve made the case that the activists of the ultra resistance of the 1960s and 1970s viewed records in ways that we have only recently come to articulate in archival theory. If that’s the case, where did these ideas come from? Certainly strains of postmodern thought can be traced back as far as the 1920s, particularly in the arts, but my contention is that these ideas came from the activists’ faith traditions, largely Roman Catholicism.

It could be argued that almost any religion instills in its adherents a sensitivity to symbolism and power, an awareness of tradition and history, and a conception of time that is cyclical rather than linear, but I’d argue that Catholicism, with its highly formed liturgy, abundant feast days, rigidly hierarchical structures and doctrines such as transubstantiation that lean heavily on the conflation of the symbolic and the real, is particularly adept at inculcating those ideas in its adherents. As scholars of the Vietnam-era antiwar movements like Adam Garfinkle have pointed out, the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s could be seen in many ways as a religious experience; participants often spoke of their internal struggles for purification in ways that had strong religious and mystical overtones, and the process of “acting out of a new identity” can be traced to religious ideas of rebirth and renewal. Nonetheless, draft board raids represent a unique phenomenon within the larger anti-war movement because their participants were explicitly religious, and the symbols used had direct ties to Catholic liturgy and dogma.

Many of the symbols used in the draft board raids - fire, blood, ritual prayers, as well as the dress of the participants - were explicit links to religion and specifically to Catholicism. Yet the participants’ awareness of religious symbols doesn’t stop there. Take, for example this quote by Frank Kroncke, a participant in several draft board raids in which he compares his draft card to a communion host:

“Truly, I felt its [draft card] presence as icon - it made real the touch of a godly presence. The flimsy paper - as thin and frail as a communion host - was truly sacramental, that is, it made present the God of War.”

Or this quote from Linda Forest regarding a visit to her husband Jim, imprisoned for his part in a draft board raid: “The sergeant accompanied us through what looked like a series of cloisters, one building enclosed inside the other, past the chapel enclosure…”

As Fernando Baez points out, symbolic acts of destruction are similar to Christian ideas of baptism; they are simultaneously acts of revelation and purification. Through the use of symbols they reveal the true nature of the world around us, and at the same time they rid us and the world of impure and inhuman elements.

The activists’ sensitivity to symbols is related to their sensitivity to power, including their own moral agency and their location within a global hierarchy of the Catholic church. Participants who were members of the clergy wore their habits and collars during actions, creating a provocative confluence of authority and disobedience:

“As priests and nuns, these were people who embodied authority, not rebellion. Yet here they were, facing felony charges for destroying government property and calling on others to do the same.”

In addition, many draft board raiders called explicitly on the Catholic church and Christians in general to take a more progressively anti-war position.

If these activists were attuned to the power of symbols, they were also aware of the traditions and history out of which they acted. As historian Owen Chadwick notes, religion is based on tradition, and is therefore sensitive to history. Any change in the way history is understood tends to result in a change in the way religion is understood, and vice versa. Participants in draft board raids often placed themselves in a long historical tradition of symbolic disobedience, drawing analogies between disparate events such as the Boston Tea Party and Jesus throwing the moneychangers out of the temple in Jerusalem.

Finally, it’s important to remember that because religions are steeped in tradition and history, they tend to promote a conception of time that is cyclical rather than linear; one in which narratives and their moral lessons occur repeatedly. Not only are apocalypse and redemption both at hand, but human beings have the ability, as Anthony Mullaney (a participant in the Milwaukee 14 action) says, to move history in a particular direction.

“The third characteristic of the monastic life that has defined it down through the ages is that the monk is supposed to be a sign of hope, he is supposed to be a sign that history can be moved in the direction laid down in the Gospels, and therefore a sign that we are responsible for history and the direction that history takes.”

In closing, I’d like to make a plea for us archivists to engage with intellectually grounded activists and people of faith, so that we might understand their conceptions of the world, and also their conceptions of our world of archives and records. Too often, I think we let our anxiety over objectivity and shaping the historical record divide us from these communities. I hope I’ve made the case in this brief presentation that not only do these communities have a significant role in shaping the course of history, but that we as archivists might also learn something about ourselves and our work if we pay attention to what these communities have to say to the profession.

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