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Practices of archival appraisal in two National Archives of North and South America: Canada and Brazil

Abstract:

This article analyzes archival appraisal in two major archival institutions, from opposite hemispheres and realities: Canada and Brazil. The objective of this work is to expand knowledge about this important archival practice in the National Archives of these countries. The paper covers the theoretical bases of archival appraisal, influenced by Cook and Schellenberg, in light of the main legislation and instruments used. Although different, the theoretical approaches reflect in the appraisal instruments the reality of each National Archives. The instruments were and are produced for practical application, aiming to reduce the risk of unduly destruction of documents, as well as promote accountability, transparency, and social representation.

Keywords: archival appraisal, national archives, archival practice, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), National Archive (NA)

1. Introduction

The practice of appraisal is the core of archival science and is undoubtedly one of the main actions performed on records. The consequences of appraisal actions are decisive for other functions (Couture 2003). Archival appraisal, as the epistemological core of the area since the post-World War II documentary explosion, has already brought new demands to the field of archives, thought of and systematized in several countries, among them Canada. In Brazil, there has been influence from international scholars in the design of archival bases, and consequently, of archival appraisal from the 1960s onwards.

National archives were and are important for the legitimation of nation-states and empires (Berger 2012). The choice of a comparative study of these institutions is due to their strategic and political importance as great representatives and guardians of the national documentary heritage of their respective countries, as part of a larger ongoing doctoral study in Brazil.

2. Literature review

Archival appraisal is the process of assessing the value of records for the purpose of determining the length and conditions of their preservation (InterPARES 2) or the process of determining the retention period of records (International Council on Archives 1999).

It was during World War II and the post-war period, with the participation of many countries, that the exponential growth of records challenged administrations to propose a way to eliminate records, given that it is impossible to keep all documents. Theorists have demonstrated how to

preserve the documentary heritage without keeping everything, and many have written seminal texts in the appraisal area: Sir Hilary Jenkinson, Theodore R. Schellenberg, Karl Otto Müller, Philip C. Brooks, Kaye Lamb, Terry Cook, and Carol Couture, among other authors, fostered discussions in the field after the second half of the 20th century.

However, from the perspective of this paper, the two authors that stand out in appraisal works for having their theoretical bases used in the National Archives studied here are Theodore Schellenberg and Terry Cook.

Schellenberg, an American archivist, worked at the National Archives of the United States from 1935-1963 and wrote the book *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (1956). He was motivated by concerns with the volume of production of modern records, mainly in the post-war period, and emphasized the practical need to improve government efficiency to reduce the sheer volume of documents, selecting from the documentary masses what was permanently valuable, making this selection available intelligently to researchers and as a central role for the archivist. Within the scope of appraisal, he thought of two types of values: a primary value related to its usefulness as evidence for the creator, and a secondary value related to its historical and cultural functions for those who are not the creators (Schellenberg 1956). His theory had great influence in several countries, including the two countries studied. We hypothesize that Schellenberg's influence in Brazil is due to the rapid translation and publication of his works; his presence in technical visits in the country; and to the influence of North American archives brought by people from the federal administration, in the midst of administrative modernization policies in the 1930s. Schellenberg became the main theoretical reference for appraisal practices, and remains so today.

Cook, a Canadian archivist, is considered the main architect of macroappraisal. He worked at the National Archives of Canada from 1975-1998, being responsible for directing the appraisal and disposition program, implementing macroappraisal in 1991. In general terms, macroappraisal analyzes the social value of both the functional-structural context and the local culture in which these records are created, as well as the interrelation of citizens, groups, and organizations – “the public” – with this functional-structural context. Cook differentiates that, while in the conventional (Schellenbergian) appraisal the long-term value is given by the content of the documents as potential for research, macroappraisal analyzes the importance of the context of creation of records and their contemporary use and consequently “macro”. The former is about records, while latter is about their broader (macro) context (Cook 2005). Pressure on appraisal practices in Canada mounted through the 1980s with the passing of access to information and privacy legislation in 1983 (ATIP), of the *National Archives of Canada Act* in 1987, and with changes in technological and administrative dimensions of the Canadian government record keeping environment. In response to this pressure, the macroappraisal approach proposed by Terry Cook emerged in the 1991 RAMP study, *The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information*, and was introduced by the National Archives of Canada in 1991 to reform the appraisal program for government records (Roberts 2001).

3. Methods

The methodology used was documentary research, drawing on the websites of both institutions. The electronic pages can be regarded as primary sources because they are considered archival

documents. On the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) website, relevant information was mainly found in the Services and Programs - Government Information Management and Disposition section. On the National Archive of Brazil (NA) website, relevant information was available in the Services – Document Management section. However, other sections of both websites were also consulted when appropriate for the purposes of this study. The research was carried out during 2021. Data collection and analysis focuses on the theoretical framework used to carry out the appraisal, along with legislation and instruments used in the process.

4. Results and Discussions

The mission of Library and Archives Canada (LAC) is to preserve Canada's documentary heritage for the benefit of present and future generations and to serve as the continuing memory of the Government of Canada and its institutions. In Brazil, the mission of National Archive (NA) is “the management and collection of documents produced and received by the Federal Executive Government, as well as preserving and providing access to documents in its custody, and monitoring and implementing the national archives policy” (Lei 8159 1991).

4.1 Theoretical framework

In Canada, LAC is based on the macroappraisal methodology to identify records of historical or archival value for institutions subject to the law, emphasizing the context of creation rather than the information they contain. (LAC 2021). It assumes that social values should provide the context for decision making in the appraisal. The LAC macroappraisal is intended to document both the functionality of the government in its role as a public administrator and the impact that its policies, programs, and services have on citizens in the broader context of governance. Under macroappraisal, analysis is carried out to understand the role of the records creator within society and the Government of Canada, the relationship to other government institutions and citizens, and mandate and activities over time this records creator.

When implementing the process, LAC archivists must first familiarize themselves with the methodology and criteria contained in the Government-Wide Plan, which is an example of macroappraisal conceived in its broadest sense. Moreover, they must carry out an additional macroappraisal of the institution to identify the appropriate targets according to their perceived importance from an archive perspective. Archivists should also review prior and precedent appraisal decisions for the other institution-specific functions as well as similar functions performed by other government intuitions. Furthermore, archivists need to be familiar with government-wide appraisal decisions made in the Records Disposition Authorizations – RDAs.

In Brazil, the theoretical basis for appraisal in the NA is Schellenberg’s approach, focused on the record’s life cycle and on primary and secondary values. This is explained in the main appraisal instruments, discussed below in section 4.3. “The archival principles established by Schellenberg, in the mid-twentieth century, had, and still have, undeniable importance in the configuration of the classification plans of current documents” (AN 2020, 7). These principles guide the archival actions and tools (administrative and specifics) and the acts produced by a government agency.

4.2 Main legislation

In Canada, the Library and Archives of Canada Act (2004) establishes the authority of the Librarian and Archivist, and by virtue of the Act the disposal of records managed by government institutions covered by this legislation must occur in accordance with processes and procedures which permit the identification and preservation of archival and historical records and the destruction to occur must be previously authorized (LAC 2021). In Brazil, the legal basis of the National Archive is Law nº 8.159, from January 8, 1991, which provides that it is the duty of the Public Government to manage public records and special protection for archival documents, as an instrument to support administration, culture, scientific development and as evidence and information; and that the disposal of records produced by public institutions and of a public nature will be carried out with the authorization of the public archival institution, the National Archive.

4.3 Instruments used in the appraisal process

For legislative requirements in Canada, LAC issues Records Disposition Authorizations – RDAs. Authorizations are issued in two ways: Institution Specific Disposition Authorizations - ISDAs, which provide disposal authorizations that relate to records administered by a single government institution; and Multi-Institution Disposition Authorizations – MIDAs, which provide disposal authorizations, under certain terms and conditions, that relate to records managed by all or an identified group of government institutions that have similar administrative or operational status. It is important to note that any disposition authorization, including MIDAs, issued by LAC to permit the destruction of records by a government institution do not constitute a requirement to destroy, nor do they provide direction regarding the timing of records destruction. Accountability regarding the decision to destroy records and the timing of records destruction rests solely with individual government institutions (LAC 2021).

Unlike many countries, in Brazil there is no difference between records and archives, and it is up to the National Archive to guide the agencies of the federal Executive Government in the implementation of records management programs, in any form; and inspecting the application of procedures and technical operations related to the production, registration, classification, control of the processing, use and appraisal, with a view to modernizing government archival services (AN 2021). Such a definition is close to the Canadian integrated archival science proposed by Rousseau and Couture (1998).

Aiming at the rationalization of documentary production and reduction of operation costs aiming to ensure the preservation of documents and speed up the retrieval of information, there are two instruments for appraisal used in Brazil: *Records Classification System for the Federal Government: Administrative Activities (Código de Classificação de Documentos de Arquivo para a Administração Pública: Atividade-Meio)* and the *Administrative Records Retention and Disposal Schedule for Government Agencies (Tabela Básica de Temporalidade e Destinação de Documentos de Arquivo Relativos às Atividades-Meio da Administração Pública)*. They are technical instruments used by all federal government agencies regarding administrative activities, and discuss the value and potential use that documents present for the administration that generated them and for society, in light of Schellenberg's approach. These authorized procedures cover the main functions and activities, in addition to retention periods and disposal practices. For the specific records of each Brazilian institution, they must prepare their own instrument, to be approved by the National Archive. When records are eliminated, it is also necessary to prepare a

disposal list, to be approved by a central commission within each agency and authorized by the highest leader. Finally, this list must be published in a state newspaper and kept for 30 days before being eliminated, if there is no contestation from society.

Table 1 (below) provides an overview of the comparative analysis.

	CANADA	BRAZIL
National Archives	Library and Archives Canada (LAC)	National Archive (NA)
Main Legislation	Library and Archives of Canada Act 2004	Law 8159/91 – Archives Law
Theoretical Framework	Macroappraisal	Schellenberg functional analysis
Instruments used in the appraisal process	Institution Specific Disposition Authorizations – ISDAs – when it is agency-specific Multi-Institutional Disposition Authorities – MIDA – when it is common to several agencies;	Records Classification System for the Federal Government: Administrative Activities and the Administrative Records Retention and Disposal Schedule for Government Agencies Same instruments for institution-specific activities

Table 1: Theoretical-methodological comparison between LAC and NA

5. Conclusion

We uncovered both some similarities and some differences between the two institutions. In Canada, LAC relies on macroappraisal as its approach and works on Records Disposition Authorizations, but does not take into consideration retention periods in agencies or when records can be eliminated. Additionally, it is governed by an Archives Act and collects documents that safeguard the memory of the country, but does not participate directly in records management guidance. In Brazil, the base to appraisal is Schellenberg’s approach and, although it is possible to identify the influence of other international references, including the Canadian one, NA has a central instrument that governs the retention periods and the final destination of administrative records. It guides the records management and approval of the specific instrument of agencies, monitors the disposal lists, which must be authorized by the highest director of the agency and collects documents of a permanent value.

Despite being different, the theoretical approaches reflect the appraisal instruments as well as the reality of each national archives, as they were and are produced for practical application. One may also note that the two institutions have their actions guided by important archival laws and that their instruments are fundamental to their archival appraisal and the entire process that follows these actions.

In the end, what is desired, regardless of the country and the theoretical approach, is that appraisal records practices in government agencies optimize financial resources and time; reduce the risk of improper destruction of documents; and promote accountability, transparency, access, and social representation, in their sets of documents and national heritage. This is what these institutions, respectfully and despite great difficulties, aim to do.

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