

Archive and Public Life

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In public discussions, archives and records – concerning everything from past genocides to the bases of claims to citizenship or the tracking of disease regimes – play a significant role in establishing what is understood as the truth about a matter. Relied on to expose fictions and misuses of power, archives are also criticised for biases, omissions and inaccessibility, and for underwriting the views of those with power. Indeed, archives are currently a topic of increasingly heated public exchanges and sites of purposeful political intervention – being actively inaugurated, burnt down and much more between those poles. They are an important site of contestation in public life.

Focusing on the operations of power in and around archives, and tracking the role of archives in public discussion in three very different case studies, this chapter examines the dynamics of how archives come in and out of public view, gaining and losing things in the process. While preservation is at the heart of any archival project, this chapter argues that archives are not inert. They are forged and changed in political and public conditions, as well as through academic engagement. In turn, archives shape and change political, public and academic discourses and practices. Going beyond questions of the bias or otherwise of archives, and theorising archives and public discourse as mutually constitutive over time, the chapter offers a fresh perspective on heated contemporary debates about the role of archives in public life.