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Retracing Labor in Yugoslav Socialism. Reflections on Research and Archival Approaches

Abstract. This study merges two perspectives, the historiographical and the archival, in order to capture and analyze key elements relating to issues encountered in records-based research into the labor history of Yugoslav socialism. In combining ongoing historiographical (social and labor history) and theoretical (archival science) research with auto-ethnographic, practice-based reflections, the author outlines several observations, facts, and propositions, which may be of help to both researchers and archivists. The essay accepts the recent resurgence of Yugoslav labor history as a premise upon which it discusses key problems relating to fieldwork, local and historical case study research, obstacles relating to communication and information, as well as pressing issues in the field of the archival profession, upon which it elaborates possible strategies and practical solutions to remedy the current conditions.

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A dark basement within an old, thick-walled building. Heavy, damp, hot air infused with bursts of glittering dust. Corroded pipes, naked concrete and cracked wood briefly distract the senses, overwhelmed by a fetid odor. Against the old steel stacks lean a broken chair, buckets of paint and what appears to be a plastic parasol base. The stacks are unevenly filled with old box files, over two hundred of them, and a full set of the collected works of Lenin, seemingly glued shut by the sheer duration of their abandonment. The records themselves, perforated by decayed rusted staples that could be crushed to dust with bare fingers, are colored by black, purple, and white mold. All of this is gazed upon from a dark hallway by what appear to be several metal busts representing local 'national heroes' from the once victorious Second World War partisan resistance campaign.

One could easily assume this to be a massive operation to salvage cultural heritage in various forms, followed by robust media coverage and a fine for the irresponsible custodian. But we do not live in a fairytale world where textbook examples actually come to life. This was 2015, and spring was coming early to

Banjaluka. The venue was the basement of the central trade union headquarters, and the salvage operation was a one-person mission to save the city's union records accumulated during state socialism, including their long overdue transfer to the nearby state archives. It was a fairly quiet occasion, with myself as its main protagonist wearing a facemask and covered by endless layers of sweat. I was not yet assistant director at the state archives, so I could not request that any other employee lend a hand. Instead, I insisted on doing the work alone, having been the one to initiate it, do the paperwork and reshuffle tons of paper in order to find some storage space, an illusory luxury rapidly being reduced to nonexistence. Immediately after transport, I started refolding the records in order to reduce their bulk. I also had to defend my decision from some of my colleagues, whose comments accused me of taking up shelves in order to acquire records that 'he'll use for his own research'. Luckily, my superiors remained within the confines of reason, with one responding: 'Well, that's not a bad reason for an acquisition, in fact, you're welcome to do it yourself.'

But the accusations were not completely unfounded. Shortly afterwards, I wrote two texts based on those records. One was a two-part essay published in the weekly archives column of a daily newspaper telling the story of a strike by female workers in a local garment factory in 1969.¹ The other was an edited primary source piece for the *Annual of Social History* in Belgrade, reprinting a full report on labor conditions in lumber and coal exploitation around Banjaluka during the summer of 1967.² But the fact of the matter was that these modest works, instead of initiating a stream of research into local labor history, were intended to do something entirely different. They were put forward as catalysts of an *already existing* stream of research, which was coming to prominence precisely around that time. As I already argued in the latter paper in 2015, regional historiography was witnessing the appearance of a new current led mostly by young researchers working on doctoral projects, and that was retracing the history of labor within Yugoslav state socialism and workers' self-management. That same year, during the second 'Socialism on the Bench' conference organized by the Center for Cultural and Historical Research of Socialism in Pula, out of 110 presentations, eighteen dealt with labor during Yugoslav socialism and postsocialism, which at that time marked a clear watershed.³ The majority of the panels were organized in the framework of the

¹ Владан Вуклиш, Штрајк текстилних радница 1969. у ретроспективи, *Глас Српске*, Banjaluka, 28 February / 7 March 2015.

² Владан Вуклиш, Дрво, угаљ и зној. Једна синдикална анализа из Бањалуке у љето 1967. године, *Годишњак за друштвену историју* 12, no. 2 (2015), 103-113.

³ 2nd International Conference 'Socialism on the Bench', 'Socialism. Construction and Deconstruction', Pula, 1-3 October 2015. The program can be found at https://www.unipu.hr/fileadmin/datoteke/CPKIS/socnaklupi2015_KNJIGA_SAZETAKA.pdf. All internet references were accessed on 3 April 2020..

project 'Between Class and Nation: Working Class Communities in 1980s Serbia and Montenegro', led by Rory Archer and Goran Musić and based at the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. It was not long before this trend started to produce several notable peer-reviewed publications.⁴

I was fully aware of this shift. Furthermore, I was fully supportive of its critical approach, its interdisciplinary perspective, and above all, its activist ethos. The motivation was clear: 'At a time of global economic crisis,' wrote Sabine Rutar in 2014, 'scholarship has returned to themes of *class, inequality and political economy* with renewed interest, urgency, and moral purpose.'⁵ This was the premise from which I would set forth my further work. But instead of attaching myself to the new current simply as a historian, my specific professional position came with a sense of responsibility. I intended to contribute in a way that might be unique, and in fact more meaningful. Personal connections I had established with labor historians had already made me deeply aware of the difficulties of field-based and local research. The term 'fieldwork', in the context of this study, has a somewhat broadened meaning. It usually refers to the collection of data outside of a workplace setting. For historians, these would be archives, museums and libraries. I, however, use 'fieldwork' as pertaining not only to interviews, site exploration, and research in 'living archives', i. e. enterprise registry offices, but also to locally based heritage institutions. Although the latter formally constitute a usual 'workplace setting', sometimes they pose challenges typical for what we call the 'field', thus representing a relative 'grey zone'. Various 'field' locations often share a common link: musty basements, moldy paper, and the baffled glares of disinterested gatekeepers. Thus, I was to utilize my position to become an insider archivist for labor scholarship and radical history.

And yet, at that same time, by a combination of chance and design, I was pulled into another stream composed of international archival academics, which enabled me to present my ideas in a highly creative environment and gave me much needed direction and mentorship. From the Banjaluka union basement, in 2015 I leaped into the Archival Education and Research Institute

⁴ For example, Rory Archer / Igor Duda / Paul Stubbs, eds, *Social Inequalities and Discontent in Yugoslav Socialism*, London, New York/NY 2016; Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, *The Economic Struggle for Power in Tito's Yugoslavia. From World War II to Non-Alignment*, London, New York/NY 2016; Ulrike Schult, *Zwischen Stechuhr und Selbstverwaltung. Eine Mikrogeschichte sozialer Konflikte in der jugoslawischen Fahrzeugindustrie 1965-1985*, Berlin 2017; Chiara Bonfiglioli, *Women and Industry in the Balkans. The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Textile Sector*, London, New York/NY 2019.

⁵ Sabine Rutar, *Towards a Southeast European History of Labour. Examples from Yugoslavia*, in: Sabine Rutar, ed, *Beyond the Balkans. Towards an Inclusive History of Southeastern Europe*, Berlin 2014, 325-356, 326.

(AERI), a week-long seminar which in that year was held at the University of Maryland at College Park.⁶ I gave a paper on the archival base for the investigation of the social history of our former socialist homeland, Yugoslavia. The records I had acquired previously were an integral part of that presentation.⁷ In the US, I was introduced to a whole new world of archival theory that had conquered the central lanes within information studies, but was still struggling for attention within the professional mainstream of continental Europe. I accepted F. Gerald Ham's vision of archives as reflecting 'the broad spectrum of human experience'.⁸ I also learned that many years ago, in the 1970s, Howard Zinn—the American radical historian and activist many young historians looked up to—had called upon archivists to take a more active role in documenting the lives and struggles of ordinary people, workers, the oppressed, and the dispossessed.⁹ Finally, this absorption of archival theory engaged me with the most difficult issue of archival theory and practice, that of appraisal, or the selection of records for permanent safekeeping.¹⁰ The conceptual models created in different environments, it seemed, were quite transferable to the postsocialist world of what was once Yugoslavia.

Looking back, there are valid reasons to open a discussion on labor research and archives based on more personalized, auto-ethnographic reflection. While classic expositions of our work may be of value, they come with several drawbacks. On the one hand, although much-needed discussions on why social, labor, and/or radical history are important, and for the most part relevant, they generally form a self-serving narrative. On the other hand, archival papers, both academic and produced by archival professionals, have a limited audience and impact. Expert articles by archivists tend to completely lack any wider perspective, are limited by myopia, and are not of much real use to historians. Theoretical essays, in contrast, are often regarded as 'impractical' by both practitioners and researchers. Finding a middle ground seems most appropriate. The two-way leaps between dirty basements and theoretical frameworks reflect what now appear to be constant intersections of regular work and *praxis*. These

⁶ Cf. the conference program at <http://aeri2015.umd.edu>.

⁷ The paper laid the groundwork for Vladan Vukliš, *Writing Social History of Socialist Yugoslavia. The Archival Perspective*, *Archival Science* 17, no. 1 (2017), 55-77, DOI: 10.1007/s10502-016-9269-5.

⁸ F. Gerald Ham, *The Archival Edge*, *The American Archivist* 38, no. 1 (1975), 5-13, 8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40011737>.

⁹ Howard Zinn, *The Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest*, *The Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977), 14-26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41101382>.

¹⁰ A year after that conference, I published some thoughts outlining a rough theoretical framework for proactive appraisal and selection, cf. Владан Вуклиш, *Повратак креативном незадовољству. Перспективе проактивног вредновања*, in: Зоран Вељановић, ed, *Архивска грађа у теорији и пракси*, Belgrade 2016, 45-62.

leaps and intersections entail further practice-based reflections that may offer a useful insight into the nuts and bolts of our everyday work, while keeping in mind its ever-present theoretical, ideological, and practical implications.

Researchers and Archives. What Needs to Be Understood

While we should note that no research is easy, everyday experience shows comparable disparities between different types of historical research. The considerable spans between different subject matters, applied methodologies, and desired outcomes, make history, in terms of heuristics, an extremely divergent field. Applied in the real world, the different starting points translate into disproportionate varieties of difficulty. For example, one can safely assume that a clear-cut research question in diplomatic history will generate an at least slightly simpler research process than a local case study on labor or housing. Of course, this applies only if the sources, especially archival ones, are just as easy to access as the foreign affairs records safely deposited in a national archival institution. And that is almost never the case. As an example from the field, I refer to an excerpt from 'Archives in Bosnia in Minutes and Hours', written by Max Bergholz as an account of his research trajectory through local archives:

'At the entrance I was given a set of instructions. "You have two hours to look around!" the archive's director shouted at me from his car. "No more! I'm going to lunch now with some out-of-town guests." He stepped on the gas and sped off. I stared into the depot. It was filled with huge mounds of papers, books, folders, and boxes of what were once catalogued documents. The materials looked like they had been dumped there. There were no shelves, was no order. A team of physically fit movers would need days—if not weeks—to stack and sort these tons of papers. I had two hours. [...] The director of the archive then returned. After seeing that I had actually found something, which meant I would be staying to work in his archive, he began cursing me—and all my female relatives—in the most colorful Bosnian expletives I had ever heard. It took several weeks of struggle with him, as well as with the local authorities, before I finally received approval to read these materials. Ultimately, the fight was worth it. The documents from deep within the mound formed the backbone of my book.'¹¹

It can be assumed that only a handful of researchers in diplomatic or classic political history have ever had to imagine going through such an ordeal, but many field researchers can relate in at least some way to Bergholz's example. And more often than not, the success of field research depends on what Rory Archer has called 'emotional labor': the investment of time, energy, and cre-

¹¹ Max Bergholz, *Archives in Bosnia in Minutes and Hours*, Sage House News, Cornell University Press Blog, 16 February 2017, <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/archives-in-bosnia-in-minutes-and-hours/>.

ativity into social connections in order to gain access and information that in a 'normal' institutional setting would be readily available:

'Attempting to gain access to obscure local archives and living archives still inside factories is an intensely social process. It is dependent on finding connections and entry points, negotiating with gatekeepers, presenting oneself in a way that engenders trust and many, many hours of chatting, waiting, and drinking unwanted coffees with whoever may staff the factory offices.'¹²

It is, however, important to stress that the context of a research process, at least when it comes to regular archival institutions (referred to here as 'archives'), is not always riddled with abnormalities, and that the process itself is not necessarily marked by extreme difficulties. Leaving aside the complex issues of research within 'living archives', i. e. factories or municipal offices as captured in the above quote, I focus on actual archival institutions where the vast majority of historical research, local or not, still takes place. In contrast with Bergholz's experience of one of the many institutions he visited along the way, the attitude of gatekeepers towards researchers is usually neither malicious nor conditional.¹³ If anything, one might speak of pervasive indifference, with a minority of exceptions in which individuals either help out or obstruct research. But even here it would be wise to refrain from all-encompassing generalizations, and to focus on what actual practice has confirmed so far. The initial argument that I am bringing forward is that the innate difficulties of field and/or local research, which are bound to burden the process no matter where it goes, are aggravated by subjective, often predictable, complications caused by both sides in the research process, meaning by both researchers and record keepers alike.

Following the introductory observation that the academic community is witnessing a new wave of research into Yugoslav socialism, with a resurgence of social and labor history, it is only natural to stress a connected observation. So far it should be obvious that local, municipal, and regional archives, meaning all archival institutions below the national level in the former Yugoslav republics, as well as local libraries and museums, stand as custodians of primary sources for social and labor history research. These primary sources include the records of local governments, political and trade union organizations, enterprises, the judiciary and other actors. Any serious research based on case studies and local

¹² Rory Archer, *The Social Life of Small Archives and Emotional Labour*, Blog 'Between Class and Nation ... on the Study of Labour, Nationalism and Everyday Life in Late Yugoslav Socialism', 7 April 2017, <https://yulabour.wordpress.com/2017/04/07/the-social-life-of-small-archives-and-emotional-labour/>.

¹³ The introduction to his book is somewhat illustrative of this fact, cf. Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force. Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*, Ithaca/NY, London 2017, xi-xiv.

examples should include in its roadmap local heritage institutions whose holdings most commonly pertain to all local issues regardless of the given research theme. The strength of this argument is, from my perspective, supported by my own work in such an institution for over seven years, and confirmed by experience in almost every facet of the job, including acquisition, processing, working with researchers, and conducting research in other archives.

Another observation, however, identifies what might be part of the problem when it comes to the actual difficulties of local-level research. Namely, that an adequate connection and communication between locally focused researchers and locally based institutions is yet to be established. This lack of effective communication is two-sided. On the one hand, it appears that many researchers have a limited understanding of archival histories, networks, mandates, their holdings, and their practices. On the other hand, archival institutions have outdated processing procedures for the modern, mass-produced records of the state socialist era, unjustifiably inaccessible backlogs, and a lack of understanding for recent research directions. I will come back to the latter in the next section in more detail. For now, I will deal with researchers in their relationship with archives.

The most basic fact that all researchers should understand is that archives and archival networks are complex structures that have changed through times of both peace and war. First, an inquiry about the location of sought records should take the question of archival jurisdiction, both current and historical, into account. My own institution, the Archives of the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina, is only one of many examples of the complexity existing in the entire region. Formed as the Banjaluka City Archives in 1953 in the local administration's basement, the archives had two employees and comprised heaps of old paper which turned out to be invaluable records created by the regional authorities of the three states previously ruling over the wider region of Bosanska Krajina. It quickly grew to encompass that entire region and by 1963 became the largest intermunicipal archival institution in socialist Yugoslavia. In 1982, it helped to establish the archives in Bihać, voluntarily conceding historical holdings as well as record-keeping jurisdiction over the six municipalities, just as it had done two decades earlier when it relinquished the same control over several remote municipalities in favor of the much closer archives in Travnik. When the war started in 1992, it assumed the role of the *de facto* headquarters for the newly established Archives of the Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, taking the historical archives in Doboj and Foča under its wing. Due to the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995, it lost four more municipalities from its jurisdiction, but also turned to building a wider archival network as the seat of the Archives of the Republic of Srpska. In doing so, it established offices for those municipalities which in turn had

been under the jurisdiction of the archival institutions based in Tuzla, Sarajevo, and Mostar, and were now cut away by the new inter-entity border established by the Dayton Agreement.

Seen from a wider perspective, the complexities become even more apparent. In 1948, there was only one archival institution in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that of the republic. Four decades later, there were eight intermunicipal archives. According to my calculations, during the war of 1992-1995, due to military operations, out of a total 109 some thirty-three municipalities temporarily—at least once during the war—fell from the supervisory control of their respective intermunicipal archives, while an additional thirty-eight permanently dropped from previous archival jurisdiction, out of which nine still find themselves in non-archival limbo. While the Archives of Bosnia and Herzegovina were restored along with the institution's relatively straightforward mission to preserve the records of national-level actors, the two entities' archival networks took different roads.

The Republic of Srpska, as described above, created a centralized institution incorporating three prewar archives and adding three new ones, with the central one in Banjaluka acting as a repository for both the old county and/or (inter)municipal creators, as well as the new, Republic-level ones. The Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, while establishing its own entity-level institution, enabled already existing historical archives to transform themselves into canton-level institutions, and cantons without archives to create their own. To venture out even further into the wider Yugoslav context, we would need a whole separate study on the ever-changing archival structures. The point of this short elaboration is for all interested parties, especially researchers, to understand and appreciate the complexities stemming from the given conditions. A practical example could demonstrate how the records of one local municipal government acquired in two different periods can be found in two different archives due to changes in jurisdiction, while parts of it could find their way to a third institution for an entirely different reason. Such cases have occurred and are still happening. Thus, when it comes to seeking out records and other sources, researchers should indeed start their inquiry by determining past and present archival jurisdiction. And despite all archivist talk of provenance, regulations, and standards, there is no single record group whose certainty of location can be unequivocally assumed.

Likewise, prior assumptions should not be made about the state of any part of our vast archival heritage, especially if that heritage was created during the era of state socialism. One should always keep in mind the fact that the history of these archives is riddled with specific and diverse practices, various policies and priorities in regard to selection, appraisal, and acquisition, and shaped by the complex conditions of war and transition, which partially differ between

the former Yugoslav republics. Records crucial for social and labor history research, namely locally created sources providing material for potential case studies, have suffered extremely varying degrees of preservation and/or destruction, as well as care and/or negligence, depending on the location, era of creation, provenance, and many other factors. Take, for example, the *fonds* created by the local 'sociopolitical organizations' (*društvenopolitičke organizacije*, DPO) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, i. e. the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (*Savez komunista Jugoslavije*, SKJ), the Socialist Alliance of the Working People (*Socijalistički savez radnog naroda*, SSRN), the Confederation of Trade Unions of Yugoslavia (*Savez sindikata Jugoslavije*, SSJ), and the Socialist Youth League (*Savez socijalističke omladine*, SSO), all important for local research.¹⁴

If we look at the district-level DPOs between 1945 and 1955, there were seventy-eight districts, in which each of the DPOs had its own top-level organization. In terms of their records, only 41 % of the SKJ district committee *fonds*—i. e. 'organic' aggregations of archival records—are today preserved in archives, while for the other three DPOs the figure is around 10 %. In the subsequent decade, 1955 to 1966, when the districts were geographically enlarged and their number reduced to thirteen, around three quarters of the respective SKJ district committee *fonds* were preserved, while no other district organization comes close to even half.¹⁵ Looking at late socialism, the years between 1970 and 1990, the *fonds* of only around 10 % of the SKJ's once operational municipal committees were acquired by archival institutions, while the figures are even lower for other municipal DPOs. The above-mentioned *fonds* of the local trade union organization is one of the few of its kind to be preserved in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁶

Why this is so, is another story. An entire book, I believe, could be dedicated to the annihilation of socialist archival heritage from the former Yugoslavia,¹⁷ where testimonies from my own institution could fill a solid chapter. When

¹⁴ While there is no general consensus on how the communist party archives should be used or read, most voices stress their importance, as well as the significance of the records of local committees. For a perspective on analogous Polish records, cf. Dariusz Magier, Political Party Archives. The System of Recording and Conveying Information in Local Structures of the Communist Party in Poland's Białą Podlaska Province, from 1975 to 1989, *Archival Science* 18, no. 4 (2018), 279-290, DOI: 10.1007/s10502-018-9296-5.

¹⁵ Based on Arhivski fondovi i zbirke u arhivima i arhivskim odeljenjima u SFRJ. SR Bosna i Hercegovina, Belgrade 1981, and more recent information from online and other archival catalogues and lists, such as http://www.arhivsa.ba/wordpress/?page_id=986 and <http://www.arhivtk.ba/VODIC/vodic6.pdf>.

¹⁶ Based on a survey of DPO *fonds* in Bosnia and Herzegovina I conducted in 2015 (unpublished).

¹⁷ For an example of cases from the southwestern part of Serbia, cf. Željko Marković, Sudbina i status nepreuzete arhivske građe bivših društveno-političkih organizacija u SFRJ, *Arhivska praksa* 15 (2012), 253-259.

it comes to the records created by the local DPOs, the general story is usually of negligence and/or deliberate destruction by the new local political actors moving into former committee buildings in the early years of the 1990s. Some records survived by pure chance, others were rescued or wrestled out by archivists, while a whole set still lingers on somewhere, hidden away by people who imagine themselves the heirs to the disbanded DPOs.

Additional remarks useful to labor researchers concern the parallel process of privatization in the economic sphere, which was generally accompanied by the downsizing and closure of once powerful socialist industrial enterprises, and which bestowed a similar fate on the records created by these entities, often leading to their total destruction. Legally speaking, the creators and custodians of records may follow regulations and dispose of some parts of those holdings, like outdated financial documents, in consultation with the archival institution supervising those entities. However, no one has the authority to dispose of the records in their entirety, no matter if the archival institution is interested in acquiring those records or not. In sum, the political and economic upheavals of the early 1990s and well into the new millennium created a double rift in the historical records of Yugoslav state socialism, and the archival documents that suffered the most—those created by the political mass organizations and socialist enterprises—are precisely those of most value to labor history research.

These circumstances should provide ample reason for researchers of social and labor history, especially those conducting local case studies, to carry out preliminary surveys of sources before composing their topics of investigation and finalizing their research proposals. In other words, everyone should know their sources before formulating their book or thesis topics. Unfortunately, I have noticed that this step is sometimes skipped early on and then inserted into later phases of the undertaking. More often than not, having omitted to ask the questions 'what, where, and how?' at an early stage, the researcher, upon finding no apparent or solid source foundation, is forced to ask 'what now?' Supervisors are not necessarily of much help here, even though the issue of sources—in other words, establishing whether a proposed research undertaking is feasible—should be settled in the initial stages of the mentorship process.

The simplest way to confront these questions is by browsing through the online lists of archival holdings (if they exist) or in direct consultation with one or more archival professionals. Direct communication, consequently, could serve as a barometer of not only the objective conditions concerning the initiated research, but also of the human factors that might govern further exploration. Such communication between scholars and archival institutions would enable the former to get a sense of the given conditions, assess the level of expertise,

and possibly project the investment of 'emotional labor' necessary for the upcoming inquiry.

Finally, reflecting on investigative challenges, I also believe that it would be wise to look at archival research as a craft in itself. The difficulties of tracking sources are not always of a given, objective nature with regards to their existence, accessibility, institutional context, and geographical location. Quite often these difficulties have an intrinsically subjective background. Researchers generally understand what types of records they need—in terms of their content and form—and how to qualify and use various textual sources. Historians and other scholars venturing into the past are trained to understand the notions of authorship, evidence, memory, intentionality, trustworthiness, and authenticity,¹⁸ but the key concept of provenance seems to repeatedly elude their attention, along with a more practical understanding of formal mandates, textual communication patterns, and record-keeping itself,¹⁹ not to mention 'deeper nuances of the multiple contexts surrounding records that may enhance their understanding and use'.²⁰

To give a practical example: I have witnessed several times how researchers looking into the histories of economic enterprises have avoided using SKJ records, usually assuming that the records 'originating' from politics would not reflect the business or economic aspects of society. More than one objection could be raised here. The obvious one would be that the *fonds* of the local SKJ are often comprised of the minutes of meetings of the 'basic committees'—the enterprise-level SKJ organizations—where the political, business, and economic agendas were more often than not rolled into a singular motion.²¹

The local governments also held a certain amount of authority and responsibility in the economic realm, creating their own sets of records such as special reports, bylaws, sanctions, validations, etc. A less obvious example of interconnected mandates is the fact that many records created by the local prosecution offices (*sreski* or *opštinski javni tužilac*) address the issue of economic crime (*privredni kriminal*), uncovering in their operational reports many unknown

¹⁸ Cf. Simon Gunn / Lucy Faire, eds, *Research Methods for History* (Research Methods for the Arts and the Humanities), Edinburgh 2011.

¹⁹ Recently in the US, for example, some practical suggestions have been made on how to standardize and improve the archival literacy of history majors. Sharon A. Weiner / Sammie Morris / Lawrence J. Mykytiuk, *Archival Literacy Competencies for Undergraduate History Majors*, *The American Archivist* 78, no. 1 (2015), 154-180, DOI: 10.17723/0360-9081.78.1.154.

²⁰ Terry Cook, *The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country. Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape*, *The American Archivist* 74, no. 4 (2011), 600-632, 601, DOI: 10.17723/aarc.74.2.xm04573740262424.

²¹ A good example of a holistic approach to archival sources is a 1983 pioneering study by Olivera Milosavljević on the creation of workers' councils in Belgrade. Оливера Милосављевић, *Раднички савети у Београду 1949-1953*, Belgrade 1983.

facets of business transactions and internal enterprise workings. Then, there are the not so obvious ways in which records were 'created', meaning authored, circulated, attached, and accumulated. It is often unclear to researchers, usually junior ones, that the common archival record groups, called *fonds* and labeled with the name of the entity that 'created' them, are not comprised solely of records *literally* created (authored) by that entity, but by all of the records archived (accumulated) by it. Then, for example, if we are looking for an annual report produced by an enterprise, even if the original *fonds* of that enterprise—its 'archives'—were lost, we theoretically may be able to find it in the *fonds* of practically any other entity it formally communicated with. The probability of finding it leaps from theoretical to possible if that entity had some form of mandate over any aspect of life in or surrounding that enterprise, which allowed the entity to request, receive, and then archive, the said annual report. To summarize, effective research is based not only on knowing which records hold crucial information, but equally on understanding the record-keeping and archival dimensions in which these records exist.

Of course, no researcher should be left alone to judge, assume, or guess whether the existence of information they seek is only theoretical. An understanding of the dimensions of the archival continuum may be practically useless if there is no metadata—i. e. information created and structured in order to describe other data, such as archival and library holdings—to make the connections obvious. The onus, therefore, is on the archivist. Archivists are responsible for creating metadata through archival description, in order to make information gathering not only possible, but also optimal in terms of invested labor, relative to the practical context of any given request.

I will return to a more concrete discussion of description and metadata after one final suggestion I wish to share with researchers. Remaining within the realm of the actual situation and my own experience, I am well aware of the fact that historical research will never be fully supported by prior and thorough processing, the kind that would meticulously arrange and catalogue every given set of records. Archival institutions are usually understaffed, torn between different priorities, and rarely in tune with every tone of the wide scale, not only of historical, but also of any other type of inquiry. Decades ago, Dale C. Mayer noted that social and labor history were proposing 'new ways to use materials that were previously thought to be of minimal value'.²² And as Fredric Miller argued, 'because social history often takes as its subject common human experience, social historians are theoretically interested in everything'.²³

²² Dale C. Mayer, The New Social History. Implications for Archivists, *The American Archivist* 48, no. 4 (1985), 388-399, 395, DOI: 10.17723/aarc.48.4.1107660916858k13.

²³ Fredric Miller, Use, Appraisal, and Research. A Case Study of Social History, *The American Archivist* 49, no. 4 (1986), 371-392, 374, DOI: 10.17723/aarc.49.4.e1251j7r1125525n.

Consequently, I would add, this makes the expectation of both encompassing and thorough description even more unrealistic.

The mentioned direct communication between researchers and archivists could offer a shortcut through both the usual curves in the field research process, as well as span the gaps in metadata where cataloging and description work is insufficient. It would be wise to construct institutional frameworks of cooperation, make research projects more inclusive to the professional community, and bring in archivists as consultants or participants, preferably those with similar research interests. There are archivists, especially those trained as historians, who are open to cooperation and engagement, while their institutions are generally inclined to be more welcoming if they are properly credited. Such modes of connection may help researchers not only in terms of gaining direction, but also in obtaining access to holdings that would otherwise be withheld. Naturally, I am in no way suggesting that any sort of connection should make the decisive difference between the denial and approval of access to information and records. Preferential access is highly unethical and should be completely removed from institutional practice. It is, however, important to understand that cases of preferential access are often rooted in fear. Due to a lack of the knowledge and skills needed to navigate between seemingly opposing regulations defining both freedom of access and rights to privacy—against a backdrop of notions of governmental secrecy and hidden political powers—many archivists fear foul play and misuse of information, granting access only to those deemed for some reason to be trustworthy individuals. And while we should put some pressure on the archivist community to define and standardize the rules and conditions of access to holdings, researchers should not have to wait on the sidelines for a resolution. Instead, they should try to connect, argue their case, present their interests as benign to institutional integrity (as they usually are), grant recognition to archives as research institutions in their own right, and extend credit to archivists for the work that they are doing.

Archivists and Research. What Needs to Be Done

While appreciating the merit of archival work, I will unequivocally state that the current condition of archival best practice calls for a rigorous transformation and update. Archival scholarship has recently been very active and imaginative in identifying and promoting what has been called ‘the archival turn’, a comprehensive change in the self-perception of archives as *praxis*. This change has been called for and inspired by academic and professional reflexivity and theorizing—lasting for at least two decades—on key issues such as human and minority rights, social justice, systemic biases, identity, polycentric challenges

to global metanarratives, etc.²⁴ Arguably, in some parts of the world there were even earlier signs of dissent against the ways in which structural inequalities were translated into the elitist shaping of archival heritage, and consequently of historical memory.²⁵

New social and labor history and radical scholarship certainly played a part in these challenges and resulting transformative practices, including new acquisition policies, different documentation and description approaches, as well as in the creation of new labor archives, primarily in the United States.²⁶ Looking at these experiences in retrospect, one might argue that the increased presence of labor scholarship on socialist Yugoslavia could theoretically have at least some positive impact on the archives in the region today. However, even if we were to circumvent the material difficulties governed by a constant state of austerity in the cultural realm and eventually identify ample support within the professional community, simply accepting the postulates of socially committed academia would mean very little in practical terms. Conforming with critical archival theory while not following with similar fervor the parallel—and not entirely unconnected—stream of thought directed at the nuts and bolts of our everyday work would, at best, produce notable but very limited results, such as finding union records in a moldy basement, or some minor and hardly noticeable changes to finding aids created for a fragment of otherwise unprocessed mountains of paper.

Therefore, when calling for the rigorous transformation of archival work, there is a much more urgent and important argument to be made, one that goes beyond the needs of any specific sector of academia. Archival practices in all the successor states of Yugoslavia need to be updated because the current state of affairs is rapidly diminishing our efficiency as curators of recorded information, irrespective of who is seeking that information. What makes the new stream of social and labor history looking into socialist Yugoslavia stand out is the fact that our current practices are not inefficient when it comes to either medieval charters, Habsburg-era handwritten correspondence or even the big clusters of interwar records. Our efficiency decreases when we enter the post-1940s era of mass-produced documents, a vast sea of machine-typed records, precisely those ‘nothing is too ordinary’ papers lost within and among the boxes and box files of other equally ‘uninteresting’ paperwork—those that

²⁴ Anne Gilliland, Neutrality, Social Justice and the Obligations of Archival Educators and Education in the Twenty-First Century, *Archival Science* 11, no. 3-4 (2011), 193-209, DOI: 10.1007/s10502-011-9147-0.

²⁵ Patrick Quinn, Archivists Against the Current. For a Fair and Truly Representative Record of Our Times, *Provenance. Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 5, no. 1 (1987), 1-7.

²⁶ Ben Blake, The New Archives for American Labor. From Attic to Digital Shop Floor, *The American Archivist* 70, no. 1 (2007), 130-150, 143, 147, DOI: 10.17723/aarc.70.1.0757g7751113520.

might be of special interest to the new labor historians. And consequently, that inefficiency continues to increase in relation not only to the state socialist, but also the postsocialist era. Providing a service to new social and labor history thus might prove important not only in itself, but as a barometer for the efficiency of our work with contemporary, mass-produced records, as well as in relation to the changes that must come beforehand. Concluding, I wish to make several practical suggestions, outlined in the most concise possible terms and which have been formed through my reflections on both archival literature and practical experience.

Naturally, the first issue that must be addressed is that of access. First and foremost, archives must forsake the disgraceful practice of refusing access to unprocessed records. There are simply too many 'archivally' unprocessed wholes, so keeping this practice alive is extremely unethical and borderline rude. I have never heard a single valid argument as to why this approach should be upheld. The most ridiculous one, apart from the not uncommon 'but that's how we do it' phrase, is the claim that the use of unprocessed records increases the risk of theft, as if processed records have never been stolen and camera surveillance were terribly expensive.²⁷ There could be some merit to the argument that unprocessed bundles may 'hide' documents containing 'sensitive information', but this issue cannot be solved by blanket withholding. On the one hand, identifying provenance itself may be a sufficient tool for detecting possible 'soft spots'. This means that knowledge of the context and creation of records entails an understanding of their probable informational character. In most cases, that alone must be good enough.

On the other hand, solutions should be found through regulating the conditions of access and use of information, as well as by initiating deeper changes to processing procedures. The former, at least, can be easily realized where the legal framework maintains a reasonable balance between freedom of information and protection of privacy, as is still the case in most of the Yugoslav successor states. In the majority, the legal setting is composed of several laws and bylaws that grant conditional access to records, while protecting personal information from misuse. However, the legal prescriptions are not necessarily instructive, giving individual institutions a degree of leeway in their interpretation and practical application.²⁸ A solution I personally advocate is free access to all local government records as well as to all DPO records, i. e. records

²⁷ On this point I fully agree with Dennis Meissner / Mark A. Greene, *More Application while Less Appreciation. The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP*, *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 3-4 (2010), 174-226, 215, DOI: 10.1080/15332748.2010.554069.

²⁸ Such inconsistencies are often pointed out in literature and in conference discussions, cf. Boris Suljagić, 47. savjetovanje hrvatskih arhivista. Dostupnost arhivskoga gradiva, Vinkovci, 22.-24. listopada 2014, *Arhivski vjesnik* 58 (2015), 327-394, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/158882>.

of political organizations and trade unions (apart from personal membership files), and for conditional access to police and judicial records, which may not be reproduced and where users are encouraged to refrain from publishing personal information.

The latter solution—changing our processing approaches—is equally important, but will take some time and effort. Our unprocessed backlogs from the era of state socialism are abnormally large and impossible to justify. One attempt at justification draws on the fact that archival institutions are understaffed and thus unable to catch up with acquisitions. The real problem, I believe, lies in the core approach to processing, which calls for item-level work amounting to meticulous preservation, detailed description, and paper-by-paper arrangement with additional rearrangement. This classical approach to processing is essentially fragmented, lacks strategic planning, and sacrifices efficiency for uniformity: ‘The result tends to be a small number of beautifully processed collections available for use and an extensive backlog of collections that are closed while they wait to be processed.’²⁹ In our case, that extensive backlog usually consists of mass-produced socialist-era holdings, containing valuable sources for the social history of socialism, now followed by recent acquisitions of postsocialist records. If processing is to be made efficient and brought in line with the informational needs of researchers and other actors, the essential change which must be introduced is to scrap uniform item-level arrangement and description and replace it with a top-down method. In other words, we need to introduce some version of what is now known as MPLP (‘More Product, Less Process’), an archival processing doctrine defined by Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, which aims to expedite the facilitation of use, determine optimum labor input for adequate results, define the minimal steps necessary for physical preservation, and produce metadata sufficient to promote use.³⁰ MPLP refers to previous archival literature calling for the optimization of labor, removal of myopia, and introduction of research and planning.³¹ Even if its business-oriented reasoning might not please everyone, its utilitarian approach aimed at satisfying users is hard to contest.

Is MPLP applicable to archives in the former Yugoslavia? Yes. Its proposals are at the same time concrete, adaptable, and universal. MPLP calls for a top-down approach to arrangement and description, which means that archivists

²⁹ Megan Desnoyers, *When Is It Processed?*, *The Midwestern Archivist* 7 (1982), 5-24, 7.

³⁰ Mark A. Greene / Dennis Meissner, *More Product, Less Process. Revamping Traditional Archival Processing*, *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005), 208-263, DOI: 10.17723/aarc.68.2.c741823776k65863.

³¹ Cf., for example, Helen W. Slotkin / Karen T. Lynch, *An Analysis of Processing Procedures. The Adaptable Approach*, *The American Archivist* 45, no. 2 (1982), 155-163, DOI: 10.17723/aarc.45.2.63q172t634g386l4.

should start from the collection as a whole and work their way down to the series and unit level. As a rule of thumb, both arrangement and description should be done at the series level, with a differentiated approach corresponding to the actual condition of the records and their informational usefulness. Item-level work—applied in totality by the more prevalent, classical approach to processing—should be conducted only if there is a logical reason that will justify the use of time and effort. Archivists should avoid restructuring and rearrangement—in other words, ‘reshuffling’ given aggregations of records, aiming for a different order and sequence—and use the existing structures of record groups, and work from there. Item-level preservation should be abandoned for a more holistic approach to environment control. And finally, with regard to archival description, we should forego the aim to produce uniform finding aids and instead create unitary and searchable metadata structures which will allow top-down, differentiated, and adaptable processing. In the Archives of the Republic of Srpska, we have put to use ‘Access to Memory’ (or ‘Atom’): open-source, browser-operated, Linux-based software, created for archival description with integrated professional standards and universal formats (such as EAD, or Encoded Archival Description, and XML). The combination of top-down processing and software-based description should produce a strategic change in the creation of metadata: instead of writing detailed finding aids for only a small part of our holdings, we are now able to create some form of workable description for all of those holdings, and then work our way down according to actual strategies, plans, policies, and practical needs.

Does it work? Yes. I have applied the MPLP approach to processing the *fonds* of the SKJ Municipal Committee in Banjaluka, so far to its bulk from between 1955 and 1972. The approach consisted of identifying major thematic groups of records—or records accumulated by a particular office—using existing structures and adding new ones to bundles in disarray, applying minimal item-level work and arranging and rearranging to series and unit levels. In terms of metadata, the description provides a summary for the *fonds* as a whole, and basic information for each individual series. The metadata itself is created directly by our description software, which makes it not only immediately searchable and (eventually) accessible online, but also open to any necessary additions and corrections. The result: in twenty-four work days, I was able to process nearly nine linear meters of records, creating seventy-nine boxes (Hollinger size) with 314 series (or ‘archival units’) in total, including a software-generated finding aid. This level of arrangement and description means that on average there are now four distinct thematic clusters of records within each box, with additionally planned item-level redescription of the minutes of meetings and conferences, and where each agenda, identified as highly useful information, will be reproduced within the metadata. Far from a ‘beautifully processed col-

lection', these records have been made optimally usable in only one tenth of the time necessary for the classical processing of the same amount of documents.

Next to resolving outdated modes of processing, archivists in the region should also aim to update their approaches to appraisal and acquisition. Given the complexity of this subject, however, I will refrain from a detailed exposition. For now, in relation to the needs of the labor history of socialism, it is sufficient to mention two practical suggestions. One is inspired by the concept of 'documentation strategy',³² which calls for a multilateral, integrated, cooperative approach to documenting structures and ongoing processes. Given the destitute state of our socialist-era archival heritage and the empty spaces subsequent events have created within that historical record, applying the spirit of 'documentation strategy' to the retrospective documentation of socialist society produces the crucial benefit of addressing not only the abundance of information, but also of gaps. This documentary approach could be formulated as a combined research project to link archival professionals, academics, students, and other interested parties, and aimed at locating misplaced records, digitizing valuable items (such as factory newspapers), collecting oral interviews, and creating short histories of local communities, socialist-era enterprises, or any other defining subjects. Moreover, in the simplest application of the most basic acquisition policy, archives should collect all the remaining *fonds* of disbanded DPOs, because their records are crucial historical sources in general. Their bulk is not too large for existing institutional capacities, so there is no viable justification for postponing these acquisitions.

By contrast, the *fonds* of the big enterprises are a different story. Their sheer size is quite often so massive that full acquisitions would in some cases be functionally impossible, which is quite unfortunate, because these enterprises were usually the motors of social life in their local communities, meaning that their records are potentially valuable sources of information way beyond economic and labor history.³³ The second practical suggestion addresses this issue, and stems from the so-called 'Minnesota Method'.³⁴ This method proposes something similar to the 'categorization of creators', a part of the 'normal' acquisition process used in former Yugoslavia and some successor states, but with a sizeable upgrade. Similarly to our own three distinct categories of

³² Cf. Helen Willa Samuels, Who Controls the Past, *The American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (1986), 109-124, DOI: 10.17723/aarc.49.2.t76m2130txw40746; Richard J. Cox / Helen W. Samuels, The Archivist's First Responsibility. A Research Agenda to Improve the Identification and Retention of Records of Enduring Value, *The American Archivist* 51, no. 1-2 (1988), 28-42.

³³ Cf. Nikola Baković, Using Local Archives for a Historical Reevaluation of Socialism. Examples of Bankrupted Factories' Collections and Rehabilitation Processes in Čačak Region (Serbia), *Revista Arhivelor* 2 (2011), 42-54.

³⁴ Mark Greene, 'The Surest Proof.' A Utilitarian Approach to Appraisal, *Archivaria* 45 (1998), 127-169.

'acquire all' for the first, 'acquire some' for the second, and 'acquire none' for the third category, it divides business subjects, or economic enterprises, into five levels. The difference is that the levels in the 'Minnesota Method' are not only acquisition tools determining which *fonds* should be obtained, but also appraisal tools determining which particular series of records should be taken from each particular *fonds*. The levels are assigned just as categories are, based on a set of criteria determining the importance of the creator, but instead of taking 'some' of the entire wholes as 'samples' of 'second category' creators, the assignation of a particular level to a whole means breaking it up and taking only what was prescribed beforehand. For example, from a 'Level C' company, halfway up the scale of importance, the archives would select only the annual reports, executive board minutes, and basic product information including product and service catalogues. This would not include subject files, project files, or correspondence of any kind, which by contrast would be taken from both 'B' and 'A' creators.

This suggestion should for now be taken as only hypothetical. Before its practical application can be considered, it must go through conceptual redesign and an experimental process. Theoretically, this method should be based on archivists' own analyses of the actual records they are supposed to care for, as well as on their own criteria for evaluating creators and selecting information, which is in itself an entirely independent issue. In practical terms, it should be properly tested before being put into effect. The conceptual and experimental process could be designed with the help of labor, social, and economic historians, whose insights could be of use for creating a new, rigorous method for the selection and retention of enterprise records. But even while this suggestion remains hypothetical, it is very clear that our current practices are insufficient to cope with the challenges brought on by massive economic restructuring, which has left countless amounts of records prone to destruction. Obviously, the main advantage of the 'Minnesota Method' is to reduce the sheer bulk of business records and increase the ability of archives to conduct the wide-ranging acquisition of enterprise documents. For some of our archival institutions, only a radical selection method of a similar kind will make the difference between partial preservation and total destruction. Now is the time to experiment, otherwise much will be left to rot, most likely in a damp basement.

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