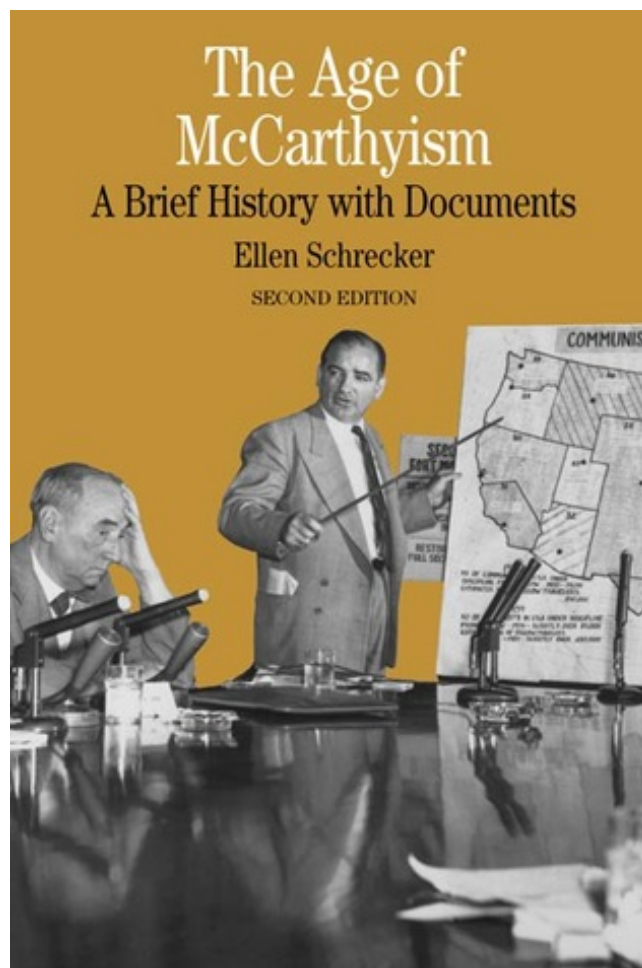


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## In the Archives: A User's Perspective

By Ellen Schrecker



I write as a consumer, a user of archives. I am a historian, who in my over forty years of research on McCarthyism and the American Left has probably worked in at least forty different archives—more if you count the individual collections housed within the larger depositories. I consider my historical work, at least in part, a contribution to making the world a better place. After all, the men and women who want to change history need history. Not only does learning about the past help us understand how our current problems came about, but it also reveals alternatives that can perhaps be resuscitated or at least suggest new strategies. Finally, it enables us to cast a critical eye on our society and work to change it, knowing that the current status quo was not and is not immutable.

***We need only recall how important the scholarship of radical historians was to the movements for black and women's liberation in the 1960s and 70s.***

Archival research is crucial to that project. Those of us on the left who hope to construct counter-narratives to the accepted wisdom of the day can do so only if we back up those narratives with concrete documentation derived from the records of the past. To be useful, our history must be credible. And that credibility demands serious archival research. While radicals may be looking primarily at radical movements, discovering previously unknown forms of social action, or offering a left perspective on a mainstream phenomenon, they must, nonetheless, carry out their research in accordance with the same set of standards that apply to all historians. They must work with as many original sources as they can. Otherwise, their findings can be more easily dismissed by the powers-that-be.

We need only recall how important the scholarship of radical historians was to the movements for black and women's liberation in the 1960s and 70s. That scholarship, it must be noted, gained acceptance because it was based on years of archival research. Thus, for example, scholars were able to challenge the accepted wisdom that had naturalized female inferiority by bringing their new feminist perspective to what they were finding in previously overlooked judicial proceedings, diaries, and other such sources. Black and white scholars did the same with regard to slavery and Reconstruction, again by finding a usable past in plantation account books, oral histories of former slaves, and local court records. Similarly, in my own earlier work on McCarthyism and the universities, it was only when I delved into the correspondence of a number of college presidents that I was able to find evidence of how extensively the academic community was collaborating with the red scare.

Archives have two main functions. One is to seek out, collect, and preserve as much material as they can, especially the records of those movements and individuals that mainstream institutions ignore or simply don't know about. It goes without saying that the standards for

collecting such materials must be thoroughly catholic. The criteria for relevance is so mutable these days that a collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century cookbooks that might have drawn giggles in the 1950s would today be prized by students of food and nutrition.

At the same time, besides bringing into the archives as broad a range of materials as possible (and pressing our fellow activists and colleagues to preserve their own records for donation to a suitable depository), we must also become concerned about the other function of an archive: providing access to the materials that it contains. The documentary evidence of the past—whether it is that of the powerful or the powerless— is useless for us in the present if it simply sits in boxes whose contents no archivist has catalogued or even looked at. What determines the availability of those materials is, as may be obvious to readers of *Radical Teacher*, money. The institutions that host most archives are as starved for cash as the rest of the public sector and non-profit world; and, as we shall see, many seem unable to support the services they must provide in order to make their collections accessible. Things could be worse, of course; the nation's archives could begin to charge admission.

***But digitizing older documents and then putting them up on the internet requires a serious commitment of resources.***

Enter technology. To a certain extent, the internet now provides considerable access to the raw materials of history. Thus, for example, sitting at my laptop in my son's dining room in California while working on a book about college and university teachers in the 1960s and early 1970s, I can look at digitized copies of student newspapers like the *Harvard Crimson* and the *Columbia Spectator* without having to go to Cambridge or New York. But, alas, the University of Michigan has only just begun to put the *Michigan Daily* on line, while the run of SUNY-Buffalo's digitized student newspaper available on the internet ends in the spring of 1962. Similarly, I can access many oral history interviews on line, especially if they were transcribed recently enough to have been done on a computer.

But digitizing older documents and then putting them up on the internet requires a serious commitment of resources. Keeping the websites that hold them alive and user-friendly also requires attention. At the moment, there is a random quality to what is available on line. And, as might be expected within such an anarchical universe, some archive websites contain amazing materials, but some are sparse, glitch-prone, or strangely incomplete. And, to be quite frank, I can't envision any depository, even the wealthiest, finding the staff and financing to scan the hundreds of thousands or, perhaps, millions of documents in its collections. Nor am I optimistic that some future "Google-Archive" software will function in ways that facilitate its use by historians rather than geeks. In fact, it may soon be the case that researchers who want to take



advantage of the web will need much more IT training that they currently get.

So, we must trek to the archives if we want to look at the official records and correspondence of a university president or the minutes of faculty meetings or the records of a radical campus organization or the invaluable ephemera in somebody's private papers. There are, of course, many different kinds of archives that progressive researchers need to consult. They range from the converted Berkeley garage that until recently housed the Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute Archives and its collection of key First Amendment legal briefs to the massive National Archives in Washington and College Park, Maryland. I can, for example, recall spending several days sitting in the cramped law offices of the left-wing attorney Marshall Perlin going through thousands of pages of FBI files, though I have also looked at similar documents at the FBI headquarters where you need to have a minder whenever you go to the ladies room. Archival materials, in other words, can be found in all kinds of settings

There are the presidential libraries scattered across the United States in such not always exciting locations as Abilene, Kansas (Eisenhower) and West Branch, Iowa (Hoover). There are college and university archives and libraries that often contain a wide variety of specialized collections, as well as the records of the institutions themselves. Thus, for example, when the University of Texas was flush with oil money in the mid-twentieth century, it acquired the papers of James Joyce and dozens of other major writers, drawing generations of English professors and graduate students down to Austin. Students of the peace movement can consult the Swarthmore College Peace Collection, while historians of labor and the Left use such specialized libraries as Wayne State's Walter P. Reuther Library and NYU's Tamiment Library and Robert Wagner Labor Archives that collect materials on unions and radicals. If they're covering Los Angeles, those historians will probably consult the small independent Southern California Library for Social Science and Research and its collection on the local left. There are hundreds of such specialized depositories that have developed as groups and individuals have become increasingly aware of the value of their records.

It is important to realize that the provenance of a record does not necessarily identify its value for a particular project. Progressives, in particular, should not shun the archives of mainstream and even conservative institutions and individuals. FBI files are exemplary here. They are, of course, the main source we have on the doings of America's secret police. But they also contain

information about the objects of the Bureau's surveillance that can be useful in other contexts. Labor historians, for example, have found that FBI files contain otherwise unavailable publications and documents from left-wing unions in the 1940s and 1950s.

As far as I can tell, archives tend to be politically neutral with regard to access, though sometimes well-connected individuals and/or authorized biographers can get into collections closed to ordinary folk. But most of the problems researchers face affect all users. They range from inadequate finding aids to limited hours—all of them traceable to cut-backs in funding. After all, creating a useable finding aid requires the efforts of a trained archivist who must go through every carton of materials and organize the contents into a coherent system before the collection can be opened to the public. Though it's obviously better for records to be in an institutional facility than in someone's cellar or attic, they are of little use if they are not processed. And that may not be happening as quickly or effectively as it should. Underpaid, as they no doubt are, experienced archivists do not work for free. As a result, given the serious financial constraints facing most libraries and archives, we can assume that many promising collections languish in storage facilities (hopefully transferred into archive boxes so they won't rot), but essentially unavailable to the public.

A further barrier to successful research is a more subtle one that has to do with staffing. Even with a well-prepared finding aid, you can rarely navigate a major depository on your own. You will usually find that you need the help of an individual archivist who knows its collections, ideally someone who has even processed the materials you want and can steer you to the documents you need. But such expertise is dwindling and its disappearance makes it hard for researchers to find the materials they need. This was a problem, for example, at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin several years ago, where that major repository of movement records had lost much of its institutional memory because of staff turnover. Radicals may face additional difficulties in accessing materials, since archivists may simply be less knowledgeable about marginalized groups and individuals than mainstream ones. Another problem is that some depositories lump all their special collections (the rubric for archives, manuscripts, and other non-circulating materials) together. What that means is that the people staffing the reading rooms may be specialists in medieval maps and know nothing about the early LGBT community in Marin County. The University of California's Bancroft Library at Berkeley was a serious offender here.

Berkeley, Wisconsin—surely among the nation’s top flagship universities. Could there have been a relationship between the inadequacies of their archives and the defunding of public higher education? Could there have been a relationship between my inability to track down a set of papers that I *knew* were in the Library of Congress and the fiscal problems of the nation’s top library? And, what can one say about the near-shuttering of the State Archives in Georgia? Nah. Just a coincidence, except. . . . By far the most welcoming and most well organized depository I have worked in was the Hoover Institution Library and Archives at Stanford. Its experienced staff members know their collections and, more than at any other archive I’ve ever used, they want you to consult them and make it easy to do so. The home of one of the nation’s leading right-wing think tanks, the Hoover Institution does not seem to have any financial problems. But money alone may not be enough. Way down on my list of useable archives, Harvard can hardly be considered poor. Why its archives are nearly unusable remains a mystery. Perhaps in the age of corporate academe, facilitating research outside of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields is not a high priority.

Money is also a problem for the people who use archives. To begin with, their scattered locations impose burdens, since travel is expensive. Some depositories do

provide travel grants to scholars, but such largesse is limited. In the best of all possible worlds, people who donate their papers would take such constraints into consideration and put their materials in a depository that contains similar collections to reduce the financial stress on prospective researchers. It would also be a big help if archives had longer hours and didn’t require several days’ notice to provide materials. But, in every instance, whatever makes archival materials more accessible requires additional resources. And in a capitalist society where utility and the market supposedly reign, it is hard to make a case for saving and then opening up the records of the past. It might make people dissatisfied with the present.



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES



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