

**GLI ARCHIVI DEL PRESENTE**  
**DAL DOCUMENTO TRADIZIONALE AL DOCUMENTO DIGITALE.**  
**FONTI PER UNA STORIA DEI MOVIMENTI SOCIALI CONTEMPORANEI**  
MILANO 2-3 DICEMBRE 2004

**THE ARCHIVES OF THE PRESENT**  
**FROM TRADITIONAL TO DIGITAL DOCUMENTS.**  
**SOURCES FOR A HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**  
MILAN 2-3 DECEMBER 2004



## **PIET CREVE, AMSAB-ISG.**

### **LOOKING FOR CLUES. ARCHIVES AND DOCUMENTATION OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN FLANDERS**

#### **THE AMSAB-ISG CASE.**

Amsab-Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (Amsab-Institute for Social History) is a private law archive, documentation and research center on the socialist labour movement and on various left wing or progressive social movements in Flanders.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Amsab-ISG, see [www.amsab.be](http://www.amsab.be). The website provides information on the history, the collection and the various activities of the institute. At the moment there is only a Dutch version available.



*Fondazione  
Giangiacomo Feltrinelli*

## Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli – Papers

I “Papers” sono costituiti da testi proposti nell’ambito delle iniziative promosse dalla Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. Si tratta di lavori “in progress” proposti come strumenti per la ricerca e la discussione critica.

I “Papers” sono pubblicati dalla Fondazione per gentile concessione dell’autore.

## **AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE ISSUE.**

This contribution will deal rather with a possible strategy towards the paper and digital archives of the Contemporary Social Movements (CSMs) than with an overview of technical solutions for specific problems. This strategy is not the outcome of deliberate planning, but the result of a long period of trial and error and shop-floor experience. Before I go into this matter I want to point out a few things with regard to the broader framework in which archivists are working.

1. First of all, I don't think that there is a fundamental difference between paper archives and digital archives. The latter present a lot of technical problems in an digital environment that changes very quickly, but that doesn't mean that archivists have to reinvent their trade. They have to upgrade their skills.

2. When discussing the paper and digital archives of the CSMs this presupposes the presence of these materials in one's own institution. I am fully aware that the issue of tracing and acquiring these archives is not really the subject of this meeting, nor is the consultation of archives. But I do want to stress the fact that the tracking, the processing and the consultation of CSMs archives are very closely linked; they form a kind of Holy Trinity.

3. To make things even more complicated: next to the paper and digital archives there is a third source that archivists should take into account when dealing with the CSMs.

One of the main differences between the old or traditional social movements such as the labour movement and the CSMs seems to be the weaker organizational structure of the CSMs. Hence, to get a grip on these CSMs I think that it is imperative to complement the paper or digital archives with projects of oral history. Is the creation of these sources part of the archivist's job? Maybe not in theory: the efforts in this field should be undertaken by universities or other scientific organizations. In reality though this is not the case, at least not on a structured scale. And time is running out, at least for the CSMs that originated in 1960s. I think that this is a field of opportunity in which archives and other institutions should work together.

4. Trust has always been the cornerstone of the relationship between the organizations and persons that produce archives and the institutions that are preserving them. Trust has become more important because of the larger production of digital records.

\* To an increasing extent archivists are working 'upstream'. They want to be present near the source itself, at the very spot where the archival material of an organization is being produced. This requires quite a change of mindset by archivists, but also by the organizations that produce the archives: they must be willing to provide the archivist with an intimate look into the life of the organization.

\*The use of paper documents seems to be a lot more controllable than the use of digital documents. Professional and personal tend to get mixed up, especially in e-mails. A frightening thought, not only for some archivists, but also for many organizations.

Our experience shows that acquiring digital material requires a strong relation of trust. Needless to say that forging this bond takes time and energy.

\*In the process of building this relationship archivists should try to convince their partners that taking care of one's archives is entirely one of the duties of an organization. To put it differently: we are there to help, but not to do the job for them.

## **IDENTIFYING OUR PARTNERS.**

It's important to bear in mind that CSMs are evolving. New CSMs may arise; others may disappear or resurface after a long hibernation. When you are dealing with the archives of the CSMs, it is imperative to know what movements or organizations you are talking about. No one will deny that the third world or peace movements are part of the CSMs, but for some others it is not that simple. One example: since the seventies immigrants have created their own organizations. Today the number of self organizations in Flanders is quite impressive: estimates vary between a few hundred and more than one thousand. On the other hand, the information regarding these organizations remains limited, at least in Flanders. But can we identify a 'immigrant movement' and can we file it under 'CSMs'? Basically, this question should be answered by the academic world. But up until now, there is no answer; there isn't even a real scientific discussion going on regarding this subject. From experience we know that the material of immigrant organisations is even more vulnerable than that of most other organizations, not to mention the extra difficulties they present for archivists, such as different foreign languages and relatively few paper or digital sources.

In an attempt to get a grip on this matter Amsab-ISG organized a meeting on 'archives and documentation of ethnic-cultural minorities' in October 2003. The meeting was meant as a starting point for a broader initiative towards archives of immigrant organizations. We invited people from the academic world, from organizations that deal with immigrants and from immigrant organizations themselves. 20 People attended the meeting, but only one of them was a member of an immigrant organization. On that very evening we decided to form a task force that would follow-up the initiative, but until now the results are rather poor.

During a conference in December 2002 a speaker even mentioned the possible birth of a new CSM: the 'emo-movement'. The name refers to spontaneous mass movements that occur because of specific events that shake the nation. In Belgium 'the white movement' came about because of the Dutroux-scandal. In a very short period of time 'white committees' surfaced all over the place. They organized one of the biggest protest marches ever in the history of Belgium. But this movement disappeared nearly as rapidly as it came about. What then is the role of archivists in this case?

## THE ARCHIVIST'S TOOLBOX

When addressing the paper and digital archives of the CSMs the archivist should fill his tool box with the right instruments. To that he should consider the following guidelines:

- raise the level of archival awareness of your potential partners,
- use as many external means as you can find,
- upgrade the know-how in your institution,
- build an archival team that combines different skills.

**Guideline 1: raising the level of archival awareness of your potential partners.** There are several ways to try to achieve this goal.

### 1. [archieff@vies](mailto:archieff@vies).

Archives are a small sector in the world of knowledge. It seems to me that a culture of complaining exists in this sector. We complain about the lack of funding, the poor training facilities and the lack of archival awareness in almost all organizations. There is no that archivists have ample reasons to lament about the circumstances that they are working in, but this should not keep them from constantly taking new initiatives, e.g. trying to raise the archival awareness.

In November 2002 we started up [archieff@vies](mailto:archieff@vies), ('archival@vice'). This is an electronic newsletter with information and tips that we e-mail to approximately 120 or current and potential archival partners. In each issue we cover an archival subject at a very basic level. Of all the organizations that we have been dealing with so far, none has a trained archivist on staff, so it's very important to find the right tone of voice.

So far, we have dealt with 7 subjects: how to handle photographs, the series, digital archives... The structure is always the same: a short presentation of an issue and a number of possible solutions. Every newsletter is not only e-mailed to our mailing list, but is also added to the section [archieff@vies](mailto:archieff@vies) on our website, so that everybody can consult all available publications.

What is the response to this initiative? The number of addressees is growing slowly, because we are receiving more new ones rather than losing existing ones. But equally important is the fact that [archieff@vies](mailto:archieff@vies) functions as the starting point for a more substantial contact with an archival partner who wishes to receive additional information about a subject that was treated in one of our newsletters. In some cases this involves a visit to the organization with on the spot advice. Of course, this approach is very labour-intensive, but a lot of the investment can be recycled in other, similar situations.

### 2. Partnerships

In 2002 we also made an attempt to organize the relationships with our archival partners in a more structured way: the partnership agreement. For many years the relationships with most of our archival partners have been troubled by the unannounced arrival of large quantities of material, by transfers without lists, by the absence of contacts with the actual producers of the material etc.

The partnership agreement consists of three parts and covers the static archives, the dynamic archives and the valorization of the archives. Under the agreement

regarding static archives the archival partner commits himself to hand over this material to Amsab-ISG. Under the second part of the agreement Amsab-ISG commits itself to assist its partner in organizing the dynamic archives with special attention for the issue of digital archives. Under the third section both partners agree on finding ways to put the archives of the partner in the picture by means of an exposition, a debate, a research project etc.

Until now we have concluded three partnership agreements: with the umbrella organization of the environmental movement in Flanders, with an environmental youth movement that is active all over Flanders and with the Flemish Green Party.

What is the purpose of such a partnership and what are the results until now and what are the perspectives?

The main objective is to create a situation from which both partners benefit: Amsab-ISG gets the static archives and by assisting with the treatment of dynamic archives is also preparing future transfers. Our partners find a solution for their static archives and are able to manage their current production of archival material, both paper and digital, in a more considerate way. And going public with the archival heritage puts both partners in the picture.

Until now the results are positive, but it is already very clear that the success of this formula depends heavily on two conditions: our partners must commit themselves at the highest level and within the organization at least one person should have the explicit responsibility for and the task of implementing the content of the partnership agreement. Otherwise it will become a bureaucratic exercise, whether on paper or digital.

In the future we plan to use this formula for more partners, both current and potential.

### 3. Projects.

One of the recurring questions from our archival partners is: "What is the use of archives? What purpose do they serve?" One might mention the need for sources for a wide range of people, from university students to journalist making TV-programmes. Another but less common manner for archivists to demonstrate the possible use of archives is to participate in events and exhibitions that use archival material. When archivists get involved in these kinds of initiatives, they don't need to explain why archives can be useful. Another advantage is that they are able to correct the general belief that archives only deal with paper and digital material.

## **Guideline 2: using as many external means as you can find.**

### 1. Archival training.

In Flanders we have two levels of archival training. The first one is a very basic one, at a purely executive level, the second one is a thorough training that is only accessible for people who have already obtained a university degree. Every year up to 15 students sign up for the second training. It includes a traineeship of 300 hours. Organizations can suggest subjects for this traineeship. In reality it is we who supply the ideas. In the last academic year we managed to have a student work on 'A selection list for the dynamic paper archive of the national headquarters of Oxfam-Wereldwinkels', a third world organization concentrating on the subject of fair trade. The organization

originated in 1971 and has some 150 shops all over Flanders. The headquarters has a staff of 50 people.

The result of this traineeship was a report of 250 pages that can serve as a guideline for the archival policy of the organization. The experience raised the archival conscience of Oxfam-Wereldwinkels and a meeting has been scheduled to put the recommendations of the report into practice. This meeting will be attended by the Director of the organization, the head of the administration, the System Manager and myself. We will also explore the possibilities to implement the recommendations for the digital archives.

It is obvious that this kind of effort was only possible within the framework of that traineeship. Such an approach has many advantages: for all parties concerned it was a rewarding experience. Oxfam-Wereldwinkels now wants to conclude a partnership agreement with our organization. We have enhanced the know-how on a crucial archival item and this in a limited period of time. We also think that the acquired knowledge can be transferred to other organizations. Another student is about to start a traineeship on the digital archives of the Flemish Green Party.

## 2. Cooperation between institutions.

The Flemish private law archives have experienced a rather impressive evolution. But this does not automatically imply that an archival depot exists for every organization that belongs to the CSMs. An important part of the third world movement in Flanders is a collective of groups that focus on Central America. Most of these groups had a Christian background and inspiration, but some of them radicalized and adopted a left-wing, even Marxist attitude. Where do their archives belong: at KADOC, the archive and documentation centre for the Catholic world, or at Amsab-ISG?<sup>1</sup> Do both archives need to compete in this matter? We found the following solution: together we wrote a letter to the responsible persons explaining the need to save their archives and we presented them with the choice between KADOC and Amsab-ISG. Until now, none of these organizations have reacted. But at least they know now that there is an interest in their material and that they can choose between two institutions. I am also convinced that this approach gives a good signal: the preservation of archives prevails over the place where they are preserved.

### **Guideline 3: upgrading the technological know-how in your institution.**

Amsab-ISG's Archives Department employs a team of 7 people; half of them are qualified archivists who completed the intensive training that I referred to earlier. Over the last years the percentage of people that have completed this training has been on the rise. This is the result of our recruitment policy.

We also encourage our employees to attend extra training courses, of a technical nature but also regarding our fields of activity.

### **Guideline 4: building an archival team that combines many different skills.**

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<sup>1</sup> For information on KADOC, see [www.kadoc.kuleuven.be](http://www.kadoc.kuleuven.be).

You need people who are experts on the technological front, but you also need people with a broad knowledge of the field of activity, who develop their own network. In short you need people who know what is happening within the colourful world of the CSMs.

Archivists that deal with the paper and digital archives of the CSMs simply cannot afford to just wait at their desks for the material to arrive. They should gather all the information available on this subject by making use of informal contacts, press articles, attending manifestations, gathering information on websites etc... All these data are then stored in a database that is accessible for all staff at Amsab-ISG: everyone can consult the data and everyone can add new information. This is how we try to stay in touch with what our actual and potential archival partners are doing. Over time some people have really started to develop 'an archival nose'.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our experience indicates that up until now most organizations that belong to the CSM's produce both paper and digital archives which, to a large extent, overlap. Without being able to present hard proof here, we are pretty sure that the percentage of digital material is rising.

In dealing with the archives of the CSMs, we are confronted with a number of restraints and challenges. And maybe the most important one is that in spite of the technological evolution and better training, the job of an archivist will remain a relatively labour-intensive one. I don't see archival robots arriving on our shop-floor in the near future.

Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli – Papers

- 1 – Salvatore Veca, *Il modello cosmopolitico di Kant e i suoi eredi* (novembre 2004)
- 2 – Abdelaziz Abid, *Preserving Our Digital Heritage: A UNESCO Perspective* (dicembre 2004)
- 3 – Rudolf Schmitz, *Archiving the Web Sites of Political Parties in Germany. A Joint Project of the Archives of Political Foundations Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (dicembre 2004)
- 4 – Françoise Blum, *Social History and Electronic Archives in France: Insights and Commentary* (dicembre 2004)
- 5 – Tomás Maldonado, *Gli archivi del presente. Relazione introduttiva* (dicembre 2004)
- 6 – Bruno Cartosio, *Il Centro di documentazione e ricerca sui movimenti sociali contemporanei della Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. Primi passi e prospettive* (febbraio 2005)
- 7 – Maria Guercio, *Conservare le risorse digitali: lo stato dell'arte* (febbraio 2005)

