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Social History and Electronic Archives in France: Insights and Commentary
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I am here today representing both the Center for 20th Century Social History and the Collective of Documentation Centers for Social and Workers’ History (Codhos). As you may be aware, the Center for 20th Century Social History is a university research center affiliated with Paris 1 Sorbonne and the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). Since its creation the center has boasted a rich collection of contemporary academic works, pamphlets, and archives related to the history of social movements. The uniqueness of this collection stems in part from the efforts of its creator, Jean Maitron, who convinced his numerous friends among activist networks to donate their archives to the center. These types of connections with social actors have in fact been quite common since the beginning of research on worker’s history.

Today’s topic deals with numeric archives, and over the past two years the center has begun to numerically catalog its iconographic documents while also constructing an internet-linked database. This allows better conservation and better access to the iconographic documents, as well as more effective work with researchers. By transforming traditional photographic images into numeric files we have therefore assured better diffusion and higher visibility for the documents, with a system unquestionably more flexible and superior to traditional forms of cataloging. Later I will return to the more complex problem of archiving material that originates in numeric form.

In addition to several other institutions, such as the BDIC, represented here by Frank Veyron, the Centre d’histoire sociale created Codhos: the Collective of Documentation Centers for Social and Workers’ History. While centralization has long been a dominant feature of archival politics (typical for Jacobin France) the fragmentation and dispersion of workers’ archives is a glaring paradox. One cause of this dispersion is clearly the internal struggle within the French left and the fights over how to understand the history of the worker’s movement, which in turn only increased the salience of the archives. Another cause of dispersion has been the traditional skepticism of the French workers movement for the State, a fear of the repression exhibited after the Commune, and a general distance from State institutions such as the National Archives. Because of this complex situation, various centers decided to establish a network, and in 2001 created Codhos. Codhos now includes 35 institutions with varying sizes, statuses, and means, and has the express purpose of unifying different actors in the world of workers’ social history, and building common research tools.

In a certain sense, Codhos’ goal is to establish virtual centralization amidst actual dispersion. But, I am not here today to trace the formation of Codhos, or even its most important actions. Rather, I want to focus on one of Codhos’ specific projects: building numeric archives that will be accessible online. Such a project is very delicate, and must balance the dual concerns of conservation and accessibility. Therefore, I would now like to describe the development of this project, and hopefully transmit the complexity and importance of numerical archives in France.
The project started with the records of the French Workers Congress, which are rarely held by just one institution, and usually by 3 or 4. You probably know that Workers Congress records are very complex, and consist of debate summaries, official documents, various appendices, informational pamphlets, and from more recent years: extracts from online conferences. Codhos’ first goal was therefore to take an inventory of all the Worker’s Congress documents from 1870 to the present and construct a detailed bibliography with the location of each document. As a result of this work we published a guide to the sources for Congress records, from 1870-1940. We also constructed a database of all the records from 1870-2000. This database is accessible on the internet via the Codhos website. The database can be queried by the names of various organizations (PS, Mutualité, PCF), by year, or by the city of the Congress. We are in the process of adding all the Congresses of Federations, which requires integrating materials from archives all over France. Putting all of the Federation congress materials online is a massive endeavor, which Codhos cannot accomplish by itself. Therefore, Codhos has decided to work together with the French National Library (BNF), which has much more resources than Codhos, and its own system of numerical catalogues: Gallica. In addition, BNF has some records from the congresses, but unfortunately very few are already numerically catalogued. And, for those that are catalogued, there are legal limitations to public access. Therefore, our main form of cooperation with the BNF is to confirm our work with their collections. For their documents that are already numerically catalogued, we have made direct links with the Codhos database. When documents are not fully catalogued at the BNF the member of Codhos that possesses the document will work with BNF to establish links between Gallica and our database. In addition, Codhos tries to get permission to put online documents that are less than 70 years old (and are often protected by intellectual property rights), by negotiating with the various organizations concerned, for example: the CGT, the PCF, or the PS, who are also members of Codhos, and therefore easy for us to deal with. Our assistance with legal issues is therefore quite useful for the BNF. Soon, we will have a large quantity of congress documents accessible online, through the Codhos website as well as the BNF. To summarize, this project is important both for long-term and short-term research interests, and centralizes important congress documents that were until now dispersed and inaccessible.

While the afore-mentioned developments are encouraging, I have not yet touched on the topic of building numeric catalogues for documents that come in other forms. For example, documents that are originally produced in numeric form are extremely difficult to deal with. We are still in the process of understanding how to deal with this problem, and Codhos recently formed a special committee to analyze the unique dynamics of working with numeric documents. These numeric archives are quite diverse, and can be email communications, images, or maps. One goal is therefore to establish certain guidelines to encourage the social actors to conserve their records in a manner amenable to efficient archiving. This is relevant to members of Codhos, and especially unions (for example the Federation of CFDT Santé) who recently decided to make all of their documents electronic. However, these guidelines are also relevant to a variety of new social actors who use electronic forms of communication. We know that to preserve these documents in good archival condition, it is necessary to have an organized form of data collection and preservation from the beginning. One example of what not to do is
the Center for Contemporary Archives at Fontainebleau in France (which is part of the national archives), where out of 6000 documents numerically classified, 1500 are unusable because of poor archival practices. This is especially glaring when one considers the size and importance of the institution. Therefore, one must pay attention to meta-data. You are undoubtedly aware of the two most famous examples of meta-data the Dublin Core and the Mets. We know that for electronic communication, the international norm recommends to organize the messages around key subjects. As such, BNF has defined 15 key subjects for their total of 3000 employees. We therefore must work with social actors to define the appropriate key subjects, and effectively archive their electronic materials. To do that we have been working on a special edition of the journal “Matériaux” dedicated to the subject of numeric archives. We have also asked for contributions from some of you here today. When this issue is published we will use it to reach out to various social actors in France, many of which are considered “new social movements.” These new social movements are different from traditional movements because they focus on short-term goals, and the staff changes frequently, but, email, the internet, listservs, are all very important tools for these organizations. So, we want to reach out to these organizations (for example: ATTAC – an anti-globalization movement, Rights First, Fight against unemployment – and all the unemployment related organizations, Save the Research – a new organization formed in the academic and research community) and work with them to improve their record keeping. We also plan to work with the BNF to improve their methods of archiving social movement documents. Of course all conservation and preservation is difficult, both technically and financially. [But, a Directive from the European Commission states that preserving numeric documents with numeric archives should be an important priority.] However, there is the ongoing problem of making the archives relevant to the public as time passes, and frames of reference and key subjects change. This is an issue that must be considered during the process of archiving, but which also requires that databases be redone approximately every 10 years. Therefore, the social actors themselves cannot always be expected to maintain their archives, and at the moment in France only the BNF is capable of archiving numeric documents with an internet database. Unfortunately, the BNF capacities are limited to the superficial internet programs and only a few websites (for example campaign sites). So, we plan to work with the BNF to broaden their contacts with a variety of associations and have the same quality of archives for social movements that they do with government ministries. We also have the mid-tem goal of reflecting on how to share the archive websites among members of codhos. Lobbying and negotiation are therefore currently two of our must important functions in this complicated problem of data collection.

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