Archival memory is a social construct reflecting power relationships in society. Discuss the notion of power, politics, justice and human rights framed within the context of archives and recordkeeping.

Power

I don’t mean to sound cliché, but as the old saying goes, with great power comes great responsibility and after going over this week’s readings, the phrase definitely applies to archivists and record managers. Caswell (2014) states one of the most important responsibilities of archivists is to provide a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. The archives can be a powerful tool as many personal mementos were able to survive despite years of being forgotten or lost (Cox, 2012).

Politics

Everything is practically political these days, and in the archive/recordkeeping industry it’s no different. The way archives and records are received, preserved, and destroyed can depend a lot on the politics of the day. Caswell (2014), Cox (2012), and Wood, Carbone, Cifor, Gilliland, and Punzalan (2014) all mention how archives can get mixed up in politics. “Editing, selecting, and publishing the letters of combatants, at all levels, also often served a variety of political, economic, social, and historical agendas (Cox, 2012, p. 26). This can be especially true if archives are operating under a regime that violates human rights or there is a conflict going on in that region, which puts documented materials created and collected at great risk (Wood, Carbone, Cifor, Gilliland, and Punzalan 2014).

Justice

Countries under a brutal dictatorship like to erase the past or rewrite it in a way so that it does not boast people’s morals in some way. And they even make sure that current records are tailored for their own benefits. However it’s impossible to do this as there are witnesses who have lived through terrible regimes and have seen the action up-close (Cox, 2012). The role of archivists, who document human rights abuse, need to willingly stand up and work towards justice (Caswell, 2014). “Archives hold records providing crucial evidence for organizations to be compliant to laws and policies, holding officials and other leaders accountable to the public” (Cox, 2012, p. 30). In today’s social media world, it’s impossible to keep anything absolutely quiet as people’s voices will be heard no matter what it takes, and justice will be served.

Human Rights

Caswell (2014) states five principles of community-based archives and uses them to explain how archivists treat and should treat documented human rights abuse.

- **Participation**: Survivors and family members of victims of human rights abuse should be the ones making decisions about how records are appraised, described, digitized, and accessed (p. 315)
• **Shared stewardship**: Archivists must put the needs of survivors and the victims’ families above all others including, stakeholders and academic researchers (p. 319)

• **Activism**: Archivists who document human rights abuse should see themselves as activists so they can “…seek justice for past atrocities and to work toward a more just future” (p. 318)

• **Reflexivity**: It’s important for archivists to look after their well-being when dealing with records of human rights abuse as it could lead to many psychological problems (p. 318)

References

