

Searching for archives of “social suffering”?

Political life of public archives and administrative realities in interactions (France, psychiatric archives, 17th-21th centuries)

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Abstract: The article examines the epistemic possibility of archives of social suffering within public archives and from an archivist’s perspective. Public archives are understood in their political reality, with their construction and preservation linked to the materiality of power and governance. Among the shelves of state records, the article focuses on the archives of the first French psychiatric hospital, which archives are taken as a whole system of production of meaning and not isolated sources. The approach is part of an epistemology of archives, often called archival turn, taking the archives for what they are: administrative matters, and the process of archival as a social fact. Articulating institutional and personal, seeking to understand the factual reconciliation of fragments of one’s self in administrative documents and not opposing one to the other, this article questions the place of intimate and suffering discourse in the public sphere. From the asylum, the article returns to critical reflection on public archives policies and archives as logistical tools for government knowledge: informed by archival ethics, it asserts that the responsibility for collecting and preserving the private lives of citizens should not be left to the State. The social suffering encountered in public archives would then be equivalent to that of State production, and these archives, restored to their revolutionary definition (1789), would serve as evidence, for better or worse, of its governance.

Keywords: Archives; Psychiatry; Discourses; Knowledge; Governance.

Archives never seem tarnished by habit or exhausted by inspection. Archives are constantly being revisited, questioned and completed: that’s the ambitious joy of the material. Searching through them for elements of individual or social suffering may seem an obvious and easy possibility. However, in this work, we seek to pursue an epistemological continuity which is still discrete: that of the archivist, of the archives collection itself as an object of study and, even more so, a reflexive analysis of archival practice as registration and conservation of social suffering. In public archives, for which we are proposing a historical sociology based on the example of

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a psychiatric hospital, how can we search for, locate and reconstitute the elements of social suffering?

1. Public archives in France: state recording

This text comes from a particular position: that of a sociologist with historical approaches, linked to that of an archivist specialised in hospital archives and working in a French public Archives service. This disclaimer serves to emphasise both the experimental and programmatic dimension of the methodological work, but also to assert the reflexive boundaries: when we talk about archives, we are talking about public archives, legally codified in France. We are talking about the administrative archives of public structures, which are always thought of together, in plural, as a coherent institutional whole: the archives are taken as a whole system of production of meaning¹ and not isolated sources extracted from their social substratum (meaning the rest of the collection of the productive structure). No private archives are studied, and we also refer to Archives as structurally distinct from Libraries and Museum collections.

The history of archives is a political history, intrinsically linked to the history of the State. Although the consultation of documents carefully isolated between sheets, straps, boxes or registers may make this fact seems distant, this statement is no less fundamental and influential in the production, conservation and constitution of archives collections². After the writing recorded, the organisation of documents is historically “consubstantial with the assertion of public authority”, which expresses itself, mandates, observes, or to whom reports are made, requests are made, and so on³. The processes involved in preserving documents justifying governance, from the possession of a parcel of land to the borders of nation-states, are directly linked to issues of sovereignty and the institutionalisation of archives⁴. In terms of current archives collections, the question of the distribution of the archives of former colonies, or the strategies of states when faced with the conservation of and access to evidence of an undesirable past, are a number of issues that need to be addressed⁵.

¹ Poncet (2019).

² Anheim (2019).

³ Galland (2020).

⁴ Dehove and Nieus (2010), Potin (2015).

⁵ Péquignot and Potin (2022), Beerli and Qadim (2024).

In France, public archives are governed by laws mostly dating back to the French Revolution (1789), following long-standing customary practices for preserving the documents of national and local governments and authorities, then modified to cover all the documents concerned by public policy - sometimes depending on the medium, such as the adaptations provided for “digital” archives. Once the National Assembly has been constituted, it is a matter of preserving the acts of its exercise. This legal procedure was similar for the creation of the Départements⁶, whose local authorities and administrations also had to preserve records of their activity. During this time, the archives of the so-called “*Ancien Régime*” were burnt publicly, reused as military equipment and fabrics, or preserved. The revolutionaries affirmed access to public documents of their “new” administrations as an institutional means of controlling the powers and activities of the State and thus made it a fundamental democratic right. In the beginning of the 19th, the Empire wanted to establish its legitimacy by bringing together in Paris the sovereign documents of all the conquered countries in one place⁷.

Public archives are shaped by their political reality, with their construction and preservation linked to the materiality of power and governance. The constitution and standardisation of archival standards throughout the 19th century are linked to their regulation and legal codification, and to the professionalisation of the archival profession with the prestigious *Ecole des Chartes* (1821) along with the bureaucratic knowledge of administrations. The aim is to ensure the management and conservation of all documents attesting to the activities of public institutions at different levels (for examples: a ministry depends on the national archives, a town hall on the communal archives) and according to different public functions depending on the administrations and structures producing the archives; for examples, the police paperwork is part of the archives of the police station, the hygiene activities of a prefectural department for the management of waste water and pollution are part of the archives of the prefectural service collected by the Archives Départementales concerned.

The political reality of archives is also fundamental for understanding the foundation of History as a discipline and its links with politics. In the first 19th century, while structuring the Archives rules, ancient archives were being rediscovered: they fascinated the archivist-paleographers and historians of the century who, from Jules Michelet to Charles-Victor Lan-

⁶ France is divided into these administrative and political areas; there are currently 101 départements (2025).

⁷ Potin (2015).

glois and Charles Seignobos⁸, developed a scholarly practice defined in relation to archives. The positivism of the social sciences and history transcribed them and used them to describe the contemporary world and governments – the Middle Age was a fundamental political and scientific paradigm⁹.

The ontology of power reflected in the definition of archives indeed continues after the Revolution and shapes the institutional materiality of the contemporary State. The current definition of archives in the French *Code du Patrimoine* is an updated version, but fairly faithful to the discussions at the end of the 18th century: “all documents, including data, whatever their date, place of storage, form or medium, produced or received by any natural or legal person and by any public or private service or body in the course of their activity”¹⁰. Public archives are theorised as evidence of the governance of a State, as the means of its control, and their existence, preservation and provision of access to citizens is legally considered to be a democratic issue. Archives of the State, a tool for its control: at the very heart of administrative functioning, archives are a form of institutional engineering designed to limit the arbitrariness of power, following the thoughts of the French Revolutionary liberals. Thus, the ‘People’ constantly invoked or even invented by these theorists and jurists has – theoretically - the means of a democratic watch supported by a legalist vision of politics conserving proofs; an ordered bureaucratic stability that could prevent the new rulers from the political and revolutionary outbursts of this same people¹¹.

But are these people visible in the archives of a governance carefully writing, ordering, classifying and preserving its acts? Do their hopes, their doubts, their anger, and more specifically for this article, their suffering find their place in the prestigious conservation of past – and present – times?

⁸ From 1830 onwards; at the other end of the century, Charles Seignobos opposed the rather critical Durkheimian conception of the use of archives in historical study, with the support of Charles-Victor Langlois, director of the Archives nationales from 1913 onwards. Although archival knowledge was relegated to the technical backstage in the twentieth century, in the nineteenth century archivists were historians or their close collaborators – particularly when it came to reading ancient texts, which required palaeographical skills.

⁹ Nisbet and Azuelos (2011), Anheim and König-Pralong (2023).

¹⁰ Article L211-1, « Chapitre Premier : Dispositions Générales », *Code du patrimoine*, 2016 version.

¹¹ Cohen (2010).

Public archives are not designed to hold the voices of the common people¹². If the public archives of an administrator can sometimes be confused with fragments of private archives, revealing hesitations and interiorities, these are often the fragile glimpses of a governing authority mixing public office and private life, and more rarely of a civil servant indulging in the reverie of drawings along the margins of documents. Public archives of administrations, not public archives of citizens. Material procedures and evidence of a society in its ordering, in the strata and organisations that must ensure its functioning; archives are collected from “productives structures” producing archives to exist and function, which are distant in a way from all memories or heritage we could leave as individuals.

The very definition of (public) archives excludes intimate thoughts: archives are the materialised utopia of rationality of State. Unless we take hold of administration: complaints, registers of grievances, petitions, requests sent to the authorities to put an end to the suffering experienced, real suffering written in the rhetoric proper to the request to the authority¹³. Then, archives preserve part of the dialogue between the people and the government in specific procedures designed to.

By directing our reflections towards an administration whose function is to receive, take in and help on a massive scale hundreds of people in “social” distress, we decided to study the position and functional role of social suffering in the archives of psychiatric hospitals. These hospitals are deconcentrated public services of the State, therefore generally preserved in public archives of the departments to which they belong, under the local institutions’ rules and national laws varying through time¹⁴.

Studying the political materiality of psychiatric archives makes it possible to reconcile, by taking the archives seriously, the elements of a science of government, of public policy, and of this porous space of paper and procedures where the social shapes the organised administrative process – here between the medical and political authorities and the patients targeted or interned. The main example will come from the collection of the Maison de Charenton, a former religious house secularised and nationalised in 1797 by the Directoire government “considering that among the charitable institutions there is no establishment in France where, in terms of art, madness is treated methodically and in such a way as to achieve a

¹² Baptiste-Voisin (2025).

¹³ Farge and Foucault (2014).

¹⁴ Dupont (2007).

more assured cure”, and a psychiatric hospital still in activity today¹⁵. This example is one of a collection that we know by heart, in its own forms and in comparison with others hospitals’ archives, and for which we studied how the history of its archives reveals as much as their content: because it is the one we have been responsible for classifying as archivist¹⁶. This hospital is also a fundamental space for the emergence of a discipline focused on suffering, articulating social and individual issues, as it was the first psychiatric hospital in France and was directly managed by the government. The plan announced during the Directoire period was to open the hospital as “constant proof of the Government’s concern for the unfortunate”. “Unfortunate class”, “unfortunate”, were the words used by the administration of the following century to define the patient population¹⁷. This misfortune is the stated cause and objective of the institution, in a functionalist definition claimed by the authorities. Social suffering is a point of historical observation of the asylum, its reality and its social function; on the other way, asylum also provides a relevant way of thinking about social suffering in public administrations, and consequently in public archives.

2. Politics of Archives

The archives’ collection is shaped by the history of the institution. The history – and in this case the histories – of the production, preservation and collection of hospital archives show the relief of the social and political dynamics of the hospital.

The rules of archival classification are worth examining, because they suggest a social organisation of the world through the organisation of data. Hospital archives, and more specifically psychiatric hospitals, are often indexed under X: *Assistance et prévoyance sociale* (assistance and welfare), and more recently under HDEPOT: *fonds hospitaliers* (hospitals’ archives), within the Archives Départementales Val-de-Marne, to which these hospitals belong as a decentralised public service of the State - in the same way as

¹⁵ Now the Hôpital Esquirol, named after the famous alienist who practised there in the 19th century. The archives are kept at the Archives départementales du Val-de-Marne / Val-de-Marne Departmental Archives.

¹⁶ Meridjen-Manoukian (2025).

¹⁷ We also refer to the title of Anatole le Bras’ PhD thesis: “L’infortune la plus grave qui puisse frapper un citoyen” (“The most serious misfortune that can befall a citizen”), as it can affect all social classes – and the Maison de Charenton is indeed a bourgeois hospice – in the words of the authorities (2021), and to the publication that followed Le Bras (2024).

prisons for example. Within these codified series, each hospital represents its own series, directly constituted and enriched by the material reality of that hospital's data as long as the hospital is still existing: in this respect, the collection is said to be organic. From the corridors of the hospital to the definitive archives, and whether the document is kept or not, there is a social life of data¹⁸ that the archivist approaches in its entirety, in a system.

Until 1920, hospitals were under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior: health was a matter of public order. This is why psychiatric hospitals used to be list as X in the Archives Départementales Val-de-Marne: this codification implies a tutelary relationship with the Prefecture of Police at local level. In the case of the Maison de Charenton, which is under the immediate supervision of the Minister of the Interior rather than the Prefect of Police in the 19th and most of the 20th century, the archives are therefore the concern of the higher administrative and institutional level: the Archives nationales, as part of the activities of the Ministry of the Interior. The concerned series is the F one of the Archives nationales. In series F, all the ministries have sub-series entries; during the second half of the 19th century, it was mainly the archival collections of the Ministry of the Interior that occupied this classification space.

After having had its old archives (mostly from 1641 to 1815) classified several times between the 18th and late 19th centuries, the Maison de Charenton decided to transfer them to the Archives nationales in 1906. The archives are classified in a specific sub-series FF, then in a newly created series AJ 2: the director of the Archives nationales, Charles-Victor Langlois, assumes that the specific nature of a collection containing the archives of a religious house specialising in the ‘insane of the mind’, which then became part of a national hospital, and which had officially a psychiatric character as soon as the end of the 18th century, made it difficult to match it with the hospitals archives and realities traditionally included in the F series¹⁹. The Maison de Charenton established itself as a model of 19th century alienism, the institutional example of the first psychiatric law of 1838 (which remained effective until the 1990s), through skillful writing and representation supported by the use of its archives, which were regularly quoted in official monographs and publicity brochures in the 19th century. The omnipresence of the Maison de Charenton in the medical and political literature of the century is also based on the accessible trans-

¹⁸ Kreplak and Potin (2022).

¹⁹ Langlois, Charles-Victor (1913) : *Etat sommaire des versements faits aux Archives nationales par les ministères et les administrations qui en dépendent (séries F, BB JUSTICE et AD XIX^e)*, Archives Nationales.

criptions of its old archives. Making its archives accessible and promoting them at the Archives nationales, legitimate place of collections, is still part of this memorial and political strategy, especially at a time when the Maison de Charenton was experiencing some difficulties at the beginning of the 20th century. During the second half of the 20th century, the Archives Départementales Val-de-Marne took over the archives of a hospital that was now sectorised and no longer under the authority of the ministries. By reflex, the 19th and 20th century archives were classified as X (we saw earlier that this was incorrect), and the rest of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century were corrected to HDEPOT. As an archivist, I collected this last part, and I had to reconstitute the whole archival system of documents and data that had been produced in the same hospital with a logic linking them, but have then been dispersed in lives of conservation and distinct social uses in different places (AJ2 well known and in the Archives nationales, 4X quite known in the hospital then Archives Départementales Val-de-Marne, the more contemporary 2HDEPOT). Classifying them meant bringing them together in their organic functioning, without ignoring their distinct trajectories outside the walls of the asylum.

These categories form part of the continuum of administrative fictions produced by and for the State, which structure and name the social world, and are operative from the organised production through to the final elimination or conservation of data²⁰. At this stage in the life of the archives, various decisions have shaped the archives, which needed to be reconstructed to understand the history of the collection: decisions taken by the internal administration, by doctors, by the external administration, by archivists from other institutions, etc. These are the politics of the archives.

It is hardly relevant to reflect on the place occupied by social suffering in the archives without considering the archival chain of conditions for the production, conservation or disposal of documents, the politics of the recorded, the copied and the classified. The archival approach to records management²¹, as a continuum from production to definitive conservation, is a useful methodology for this work, although sometimes difficult to apply in practice in France due to the influential linguistic distinction between archives and records. Archival work, public policies of order and medical-scientific work, and the established norms and laws on data, are all intertwined in the history and sociology of the archives of the Maison de Charenton²².

²⁰ Bourdieu, Christin and Will (2000).

²¹ Gilliland, McKemmish and Lau (2017).

²² Basso and Delbraccio (2018), Daston (2012).

The public production of data, which would later become archives for consultation, is partially regulated by law. The State rationalised its administration and, mainly under the Restoration (from 1815), the documents produced by the Maison de Charenton became uniform and serial, with pre-printed boxes to be filled in. More generally, and right up to the present day, psychiatric hospital records are legally kept and similar as others hospitals’ archives: the archives that ensure the regular administrative running of the hospital, in particular the management archives and accounting archives, to which are added archives that succinctly list the dates of admissions, discharges and the names of patients.

Specifically for psychiatric hospitals, some heavy registers recording admissions and discharges are known as *livres de la loi* (legal registers) because they were instituted and required to be produced and kept as early as the first psychiatric law of 1838. These registers condense into one or two pages all the information on the patient’s civil status and the certificates justifying his internment; as there isn’t any changes in the diplomatic materiality of the register produced before and after the law of 1838, the Maison de Charenton’s registers were probably the ones used to codified the others. These registers crystallise two fundamental movements in documentary life: on the one hand, the evidence value of archives, as legal documents justifying medical and not arbitrary internment, and on the other, the logistics of knowledge that organise practical paper technologies to condense information on patients over time²³. Keeping patients’ personal files is not a legal obligation, and they can be destroyed after a set period of use within the hospital, with the agreement of the Archives; their conservation in certain archives structures is already an object of study in itself, always revealing²⁴. The 17th to early 21st century archives of the Maison de Charenton that I processed only kept a few patient files which were not considered essential typologies in the long term of this hospital life. This reflects a functional reality that disappointed historians should be reminded of: archives are not kept or deleted by chance. The lightweight file, which gives the illusion of a more intimate materiality of the patient, serves as a volatile medium no to be conserved: the heavy register serves as a codex for compiling information deemed essential²⁵. In this sense, looking for traces of social suffering in a nice, big, thick patient file is not the most representative gesture of the daily reality of the hospital as a counter for suffering: most files are thin, not very full, and thrown away.

²³ Denis and Lacour (2016), Ferrer-Bartomeu (2022).

²⁴ Le Bonhomme (2022).

²⁵ Bert and Lamy (2021), Hess and Mendelsohn (2010).

Actually, what is very carefully conserved and extracted to be used several times a year are the administrative decisions²⁶.

Psychiatry is a public policy of the State, and its data are its instruments and products. The establishment's archives highlight, through a strategy of conservation and citation, the genesis of this political project. Moreover, the archives are directly mobilised as a justification for the success of moral treatment as a means of alleviating the suffering of unreasonable and unhappy minds - and thereby healing the whole social body. The alienism (then psychiatry) that is going to be implemented – and presented – at Charenton as the officially first asylum directly supervised by the minister must represent public policy, both evaluating and prescribing a new form of government for deviance²⁷. The official narrative will be based on a positivist chronology, supported by Maison de Charenton's archives, going from a former obscurantist regime that was cruel to the suffering insane, who were locked up in iron cages²⁸, and a modern moral treatment capable of caring for and considering the patient thanks to a paternalistic doctor.

To sum up, the archival approach invites us to consider archives in terms of their double function: to prove and to organise. Archives are constructed proofs. The administration and the government use archives as proof of the administrative rationality of the Maison de Charenton, far from the obscurantism of the Bastille or *lettres de cachet*²⁹, and after as evidence of the successful advent of an alienist discipline. Archives as evidence are not an invention of historical demonstration: it is the very definition of archives and of their public preservation. They also serve, as administrative materials, to organise, classify and hierarchise the social beings and their suffering who present themselves at the gates of the asylum: patients are social trajectories materialised in paper. In this sense and for this double function, it is relevant to reflect on the social uses of archives: their state, their very existence, before observing their content.

Administrative matters, the archives are situated in the interventionism of the State for a population government. Articulating construction of a public problem³⁰ of patients suffering, propositions of solutions in clinical

²⁶ Following what the institution takes “seriously” as important archives for its daily administration, our current PhD work relies mostly on these administrative decisions and minutes.

²⁷ Foucault (1972).

²⁸ According archives copied and classified in the 19th century, even concerning the 18th.

²⁹ Maison de Charenton was a famous *maison de force* like Bastille or Vincennes.

³⁰ Gusfield and Cefaï (2009).

trials³¹ and the actual tools of counting and classifying³²: to question social suffering in the archives is to observe the material place of dialogue, of interaction, played out in a public policy between the rulers and the governed. The fact that the political stakes of the constitution and conservation of archives are forgotten reinforces, *in fine*, this belief of a state as a point of view from all points of view³³: however, these archives are not preserved by universal chance nor rationality only, and depend on the construction and legitimization of at least two policies: that of asylum as a response to social and societal suffering, that of the conservation of state acts. In a way, archivistic and archaeology have this imbricated construction of discourse and materiality in common³⁴.

3. Administrative routines and functions of archives: social suffering and the history of everyday life

While archives, understood as public archives whose production and preservation follow the organisational and political movements of the State, are not intended to preserve the individual voices that discreetly and massively make up society, research into archives has often made it possible to make some of these voices heard. Political and social histories of madness are carefully established from archives to archives, piece by piece, bit by bit, line by line. Patients of psychiatric asylums in a colonial context, for example, have recently been analysed with particular attention on articulating their paper architecture with their internal life³⁵. Moreover, since administrations remain rooted in social contexts, it is possible to compare and jump between disparate archives scattered across territories in different archival series and typologies: parishes, censuses, notarial successions, prefectural health inspections of manufacturing establishments, reports on a city's businesses, prison records, etc. Historical research, which can be likened to police work and where archives are clearly defined as evidence, is not prevented but rather encouraged by an understanding of the documentary system³⁶. Subverting the order of police archives once mastered,

³¹ Foucault (2015).

³² Desrosières (2008), Le Gallès and Lascoumes (2005). Especially concerning psychiatry, Goldstein (1987).

³³ Bourdieu (2011).

³⁴ Foucault (2008).

³⁵ Gallien (2020), Marquis (2024).

³⁶ Ginzburg (2014), Morsel (2016).

reading the archives of the dominant classes “against the grain”³⁷, are now classic research methods.

Social suffering is not naturally part of administrative routines and is therefore not naturally reflected in their paper mirror, which retains the same organisation as the structure; social suffering must be sought out, reconstructed, captured in the form it wore when it was recorded by the administration. Social suffering bursts forth, loud or silent, from documents whose function was not necessarily to record it. It is in this mistrustful doubt, capable of understanding the institutional eye and hand that left the traces, that we can grasp the social suffering in the asylum without running the risk of distorting the archives – which can be done, but I prefer to take the archives seriously with a comprehensive approach of their reality. Above all, the emergence of this suffering in the archives is that of lives that have been knocked about and bruised, colliding with a State that, sometimes impassive, takes note and keeps records. In a sense, the most archived individual trajectories remain, in public archives, those of suffering: we leave the most traces as we come into contact with more and more scriptural institutions, hospitals, prisons... “Beneath the archive, the relief emerges; one simply needs to know how to read it; and see that meaning is produced in this very place where lives collide with power without having chosen to do so”³⁸.

When constructing ‘sources’ in archives, one must always be careful not to fall into the illusion of raw material when digging in the interstices, listening to the silences, bending documents to extract what was not there, or so little. In general, act as a sociologist: consider the causes “indicated in the documents by the agents or witnesses” as “the most likely causes”³⁹: beyond the assurance that the hands that scribble and type over the forms and reports are indeed attached to a living body, the writings also are institutional tools and routines. And this is a golden opportunity for study: we can examine social suffering in its very process of definition, at the intersection between an enterprise of defining and treating suffering (the asylum), governing populations (the State), and subjects who are both constantly questioned and silenced.

The asylum is a kind of street-level bureaucracy, and the written and archival works are part of it⁴⁰: not a testimony of the lost reality of the asylum but the reality of its ways of functioning every day. Scriptural facts are social

³⁷ Benjamin (2017).

³⁸ Farge (1998).

³⁹ Durkheim (2009).

⁴⁰ Lipsky (2010).

facts, of course⁴¹, as are the facts (and effects) of archiving. On the other hand, social suffering is one of the functional cause of asylum, its founding principle according to officials’ discourses: when the Maison de Charenton opened its doors under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior, its declared purpose was to treat and reintegrate troubled minds through individual therapy, thereby collectively healing a social body wounded by the crazy ideas of a revolution. This alienist utopia of proposing a medical ideology for society also persisted in mob psychology at the other end of the century and reinforced modern psychiatry. Although it had individual admission counters, the psychiatric hospital was ontologically a policy for governing the collective. Which kind of treatment of suffering, and definition of suffering, as a public matter, is then produced, printed, archived, and doing so, legitimised by and organising the hospital?

From a legalistic point of view, implying writing medical certificates legitimising the decision, psychiatric internment is an exercise of written justification and investigation on social suffering. In fact, the admission records establish a link between individual, internal suffering, and its potential extension to social suffering by spreading to loved ones and even to society as a whole: the person ‘poses a risk to others or to themselves’ in medico-legal terms often written in the certificates. This paper space for interaction in between certificates, between an outsider requesting admission and a doctor at the Maison de Charenton offering his own interpretation of the case, embodies and produces the social function of the asylum, its interactionist gateway made of written correspondences recorded in specialised procedures, and in a certain sense the transition from social suffering to medical suffering – legitimised as such by the procedure of psychiatric internment and the transition from the outside world to the asylum. If the person leaves as cured, the certificates, carefully copied and kept in the registers, print a movement towards the outside world, a social reintegration through asylum that allows social reintegration outside the walls. As the moral treatment promoted at Charenton, and which formed the founding principles of psychiatry, constantly linked the collective and the individual in its understanding and practice, never dismissing one’s alienation as a form of social suffering, proposing individually a social treatment by asylum’s collective routines, the archives also imbricate both⁴². In practical terms, the archives contain sections specifically dedicated to social causes and social environments in medical history in the

⁴¹ Denis (2018), Smith (1974).

⁴² Fassin (2004).

printed and written forms, without contradicting biological and hereditary approaches, the theory of predisposition often allowing social and biological factors to be reconciled, classified focusing more on one than the other but still conserving both data. For example, special forms of the second 19th century collect and conserve both social and individual data, but are classified by using and by emphasising more on the hereditary factors at the end of the century. There again, the material life of archives shows an ambivalent medical and political history about suffering.

Diagnoses and treatment methods are mainly based on the patient's speech and its record. Through dialogue – a key part of the moral treatment practised at Charenton – and therefore a certain degree of listening and taking notes, doctors try to measure the extent of mental illness and its recovery⁴³. The statements of the patients are therefore taken seriously by the doctors: they listen to them both for their symptomatic value as signs of delirium and as clues to the conditions that triggered the mental illness. Words remain alienated and dubious, but doctors take them as facts that can be studied: either as empirical symptoms or as relatively reliable evidence for the patient's history and medical record. In the case of convalescence, on the road to recovery, trust extends to directly copying the testimony, assuming that the feelings described by the patient are reliable, thereby giving them more decision-making power in this paper dialogue in which only one person takes notes. All of it enables us to study the institutional reaction to suffering, its definition and classification, or even its denial⁴⁴, in the very administrative routines constructing the whole reality of the asylum⁴⁵. The documentary series format shows us by materiality when dialogue is broken and organisation disrupted: in the urgency of the 1870 war, certificates and admission surveys are missing, a fact that can only be noticed if one is familiar with the entirety of regular administrative and medical practices and able to conclude on the counter and archival discontinuities.

The space given to speech or writing obviously serves a clinical purpose, conveying the position and social function of an institution⁴⁶; but psychiatric archives, through the organisation and function of the psychiatric institution, act as sensors – and filters – of social vulnerability. The letters that have been preserved, for example, kept by the doctor and never sent to the people noted, great emperors or cousins, interrupt the documentary series

⁴³ Jaccard (2024).

⁴⁴ Gallien (2022).

⁴⁵ Goffman (1961).

⁴⁶ for a time and disturb the organised materiality of archives files by making Artières (2013).

more volume and adding unconventional data: yet they fit into the files, redefined and medicalised by their inclusion in a clinical object. What social suffering can we discern in them, at the risk of playing doctor again? “Delirious” writing has fascinated people throughout the centuries and the hands holding those files⁴⁷. The anthropology of writing proposes to analyse the words as revealing windows of representation, “pieces of ethics” in the dialogue of what is audible and recorded⁴⁸: there again, the archives are understood as the product of an interaction between subjectivities, practices, representations, incorporated by the doctor and the patient. In the middle, the possibility of a social history of suffering in and from the reality of the asylum: particularly visible in the discrepancies between their discourses, the differences and hybridisations of representations encountering each other on the pages, all of which allow us to explore the sensitive reality behind the institutional production of archives⁴⁹.

4. Outline of archivistic reflexivity

These filtered testimonies bring us back to the necessary question of subaltern voices⁵⁰, in this case those of people stripped of their citizenship by being placed under guardianship and branded as irresponsible and irrational⁵¹. Of course, we can search, compare and extract this rich social life from the archives, capturing a moment of suffering as pointed by the administration in negotiations with the actual subject. Of course, the subjective words are sometimes collected and writings recorded by doctors, put into files, destroyed or quoted in medical literature then in historical works.

But, taking steps back from the isolated content and considering archives as a whole public institutional reality of written and recorded procedures allowing the administration to function and to exist, methodology and even ethics can shift a little. Public archives are the documentary prints of the State, its administrations, and its arts and practices of governing territories and populations. Private voices are here lying in the archives

⁴⁷ Guignard and Guillemain (2016).

⁴⁸ Farge (1998), Guillemain (2017).

⁴⁹ Stoler (2009).

⁵⁰ Spivak (1988), Castillo Gómez (2022).

⁵¹ Castel (1976).

because they were captured within institutions, recorded and trapped in their institutional archives, and thus maybe stolen twice.

Archivists are another particularly effective agent in recording knowledge and data about those governed. Public archives are the repository and tool of the sciences of government: should the private, suffering and intimate voice be added to the government's catalogue of social data? Archival science has its own ethical issues, and there is an archival ethic concerning the collection of information about populations in public archives⁵². The archival discipline, based in part on promoting that public archives are a means of holding the state accountable by keeping the acts of government and administrators, is not at ease with the collection of these private voices, subtly taken by the institution, archived once, and again. The epistemic possibility of archives of social suffering within public archives, from an archivist's perspective, isn't just about finding but also about collecting and conserving.

Archiving social suffering in its intimacy, vulnerability and direct subjectivity inside the State's archives and offices does not seem completely appropriate. We do not deny the value of studying it or searching for suffering or its episteme in the archives: in fact, we are proposing to approach the methodological object as we do as archivist. In other words, certain gestures, certain marks, certain clues are there, amid and underlying these public and institutional data: so let us take them for what they are. Let us restore the dialogues, the interactions: suffering was socially situated and dictated, socially treated, even in its intimate individuality, between one's suffering and the institutions producing public archives. Instead of jumping into sensitive fields using private remains collected inside and through public institutions, archives must be analysed first through the policies of collecting and conserving the intimacy, to restore the context of production, enunciation and conservation before studying the content. Otherwise, we risk losing most of the social meaning of what remains as private glimpses; worse, we are contributing even more to this institutional theft of the tangible reality of asylum patients⁵³, from the doctor's hands to the archivist's ones.

From the asylum, this conclusion is extended to critical reflection on public archives policies and archives as logistical tools for government knowledge: informed by archival ethics, we assert that the responsibility

⁵² Cook (1992).

⁵³ Schwartz (2012).

for collecting and preserving the private lives of citizens should not be left to the State. And concerning the social suffering encountered in public archives, as it is encountered in the public archival production of its administrations, we understand it also as a State production: materialist history of suffering replacing the State even in the realm of psychological intimacy as a producer and agent capable of creating, helping, curing, aggravating suffering. And these archives, in addition to being useful for scientific research, are considered according to their revolutionary definition of public proof of democracy (1789), and could serve as evidence, for better or worse, of its governance.

Historians recently wrote: “How should we respond to these difficult life stories, and how can we avoid exacerbating the vulnerability of people with mental health issues? [By highlighting] the relational aspect of the survey”⁵⁴. Let us extend this methodological assertion to the very issues of recording and preservation, to the archives themselves and not only the production period: what is recorded, organised and classified in the structure of knowledge, practices and data? When faced with this intimate suffering under institutional materials: why and how did it end up there? Considering the public status of archives linked to the State, what does the public and institutional teach us about the personal and the private, and the other way round, and in between?

As an almost eternal truth of the archives, the context of production can't explain alone the rest of the period of conservation, from the first use to today: archiving means adding more functions, mores uses, more chronological dates to explain the documents over time than just the day it was first produced or filed, and we need to understand the archival system as a whole on-going part of the institutions studied and of public policies. Maison de Charenton's archives have been carefully classified several times, for various uses distinct from the initial use at the time of production of the documents, through the 19th and 20th centuries: the institution can't be analysed at this period through its archives without considering the various classifications and uses of those during this same period, especially when the archives were serving as justifications for political narratives about the history of the institution and its continuity⁵⁵. From the hospital reception desk or discussions with doctors to all the intricate archiving procedures, new administrative interactions take place between the State and those

⁵⁴ Aït Mehdi and Tiquet (2020) – our translation from French.

⁵⁵ Meridjen-Manoukian (2025).

who are suffering: these interactions produce social reality beyond their written representation.

Taking a materialistic and archival approach, questioning social suffering in the archives of a psychiatric hospital spanning more than four hundred years, we affirm the political reality of archives. Their structure, their archaeology, is political, in their construction and conservation; it is also a social fact that can be analysed for itself. From suffering as an object of public policy⁵⁶ and an object of archival practices and knowledge, a material and institutional phenomenology emerges as a field of study for social sciences, as long as they considered the whole archiving reality: between the controlled illusion of bureaucratic order imposed by the institution and the challenging disorder of the ideas recorded and the individuals' choices in recording, policies and the modern State are shaped⁵⁷. Since methodology cannot be distinguished from ethics, and in a critical thinking suggested by the definition of archives as legal proof and by a kind of postmodern approach⁵⁸, the social suffering found in the archives must first be understood and defined as the production of the State, not just concerning the recording work but as an archival production. And as the archival process is still on-going, how does the political and social life of archives continue to construct and classify social suffering, to shape policies, and *vice versa*, from the present to the future and the past?

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⁵⁶ Fassin (2006).

⁵⁷ Mitchell (1991).

⁵⁸ Derrida (1995).

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