**Making usable pasts: collaboration, labour and activism in the archive**

**Abstract:**

The precarious labour geography of shaping political left histories is raised in this article to engage with and deepen accounts of the archive within geography and beyond. The focus of the paper is on the provision of radical history in Glasgow through two archive collections within the city. The analysis raises the politics of archival research practices and is positioned within a context of increasingly difficult economic circumstances for libraries, archives and museums. The insights emerging from interviews with archive representatives reveal multiple issues relating to the provision of usable pasts and asserts the continued importance of archives within places such as Glasgow. In this regard, the archive is positioned as a place of collaboration, labour and activism to suggest an alternative understanding of archival practice.

**Key words:**

Archives, usable pasts, history from below, labour, Glasgow

**Introduction**

This paper aims to illuminate the labour related to usable past making. I wish to further recognise those working most closely with archives, namely paid archivists and volunteers, as these individuals and groups are integral to the provision of, and engagement with, diverse social and political histories. This approach is pertinent within a context where many archives and libraries face funding cuts and are increasingly reliant on voluntary labour to provide previously funded for services (Millar, 2014, Norcup, 2017). To frame this empirical engagement, the paper draws upon previous work on the archive within historical geography and the ‘history from below’ tradition, before considering two usable past case studies from Glasgow. It is argued that this engagement with those working with archival collections provides a perspective, which has often been downplayed within scholarship on the archive.

My intention is to address this gap in the literature by constructing an account of usable pasts whereby the practices of archive maintenance and provision are acknowledged. Work within the sub-field of historical geography has made many useful interventions regarding the possibility for participatory historical research approaches (DeLyser, 2014), yet has seemingly paid less attention to already existing archival labour and practices. This paper seeks to build upon such literatures to argue for the inclusion of different experiences within the archive. I aim to think through the ways in which archive labour is integral to the making of usable pasts, while also foregrounding the pressures of doing this in times of austerity and the increasingly precarious nature of such past-making labour (see also Beel 2011; Gani and Flood 2016).

To explore the issues raised above the paper draws upon interviews and research experiences with archives of the political left.[[1]](#footnote-1) Firstly, I will reflect on the experiences of an archivist, Carole McCallum (hereafter Carole), from Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) and detail her commitment to usable pasts and the changes to her working conditions. Following this, the paper will draw upon focus groups with members of a political archive within the city, Spirit of Revolt, to illuminate a more activist-led form of history provision within the city. Despite significant differences between these collections, they provide useful perspectives (contrasting institutional and activist led archives) to consider how usable pasts are made. Before addressing these specific archives, the paper begins by making some links to existing work within historical geography, and related works associated with the relationship between past and present, to develop a working definition of usable pasts. The remainder of the article engages much more closely with the two Glasgow based collections to consider the specific practices and experiences of archive provision.

**Usable pasts: opening up the archive**

I believe all these histories that are written of Scotland shouldn’t be missing out the ordinary role that the working class person in Glasgow and Scotland played and a lot of the histories do miss it out so it’s just a joy that the records are here.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Carole holds a strong passion for making the history held at GCU accessible. After several conversations about her role and her zeal for usable pasts, I decided to interview her to formally record her account. The interview that followed revealed much about the archive sector, the provision of political left histories and the nature of work within archives. I felt her commitment to the provision of what she described as ‘collections of social justice’ required more than an acknowledgement and could illustrate much about archives more broadly. Her remarks relating to Scottish working class history are salient to the continuing need to document, preserve and provide counter-narratives, as shown by Doreen Lees (2016) in her work on ‘activist archives’ of student movements in Indonesia. Below, my engagement with these themes is framed through an engagement with literatures that have worked closely with broad notions of usable pasts.

The nature of building an archive and critical thought regarding what constitutes an archive has received increasing geographical attention (Cresswell 2012, De Lyser, 2016). Lorimer and Philo (2009) for example, through their engagement with their University department ‘archive’, have raised the disorderly nature of seemingly orderly archive spaces. In doing so they indicate a more human, experiential and emotional understanding of archives that begins to enable acknowledgement of alternative practices of collecting and experiences ‘from below’. DeLyser (2014, 2016) has similarly called for attention to participatory and collaborative archive making while also illuminating the underrepresentation of ‘enthusiasts’ within accounts of such cultural sites. Such practice and experiential accounts of archives usefully points to the importance of other actors that build the archive space and links to historical geographers who have stressed the potentiality in ‘working with’ archives. These collaborative geographies (Geoghegan, 2014) and engagements with the behind the scenes spaces of archives and collections (Geoghegan and Hess, 2015) usefully highlight a diversity of archival content, from scraps to official reports, and multiple actors within such spaces, indicating new directions for understanding archives as places of interest in their own right.

In this regard, the field of historical geography has made many rich engagements with the archive to suggest a more open understanding of its role and promote more participatory methods (Ashmore et al. 2012; Bressey 2014; Cameron 2014; DeLyser 2014; Lorimer 2009). This more nuanced portrayal of archives has allowed more creative methodologies to become prominent within geographical work on the archive (Griffin and Evans 2008; McGeachan et al. 2012; Patchett 2008). My own contribution to this more experiential, practice based and flexible understanding of archives is made through an emphasis on the different forms of labour found within the making of ‘usable pasts’ within these archive spaces.

Such critical discussion regarding ways of working with historical materials has been a similarly prominent and consistent thread within labour history and the ‘history from below’ tradition. This tradition is where my notion of usable pasts is borrowed and developed from and is primarily justified through my emphasis on the labour required to provide usable pasts (see Hall 2001). Such experiences of archival work have often been overlooked within historical geography, perhaps in favour of self-reflection of the researcher, and are introduced here to reveal an insight into archive provision directly from those employed or volunteering with archives. This inclusion is particularly pertinent given increasing calls for historical geographers to ‘work with’ and alongside archives.

Usable pasts can be defined as ways of ‘thinking about the past in the present’ (Kean and Ashton 2009, 4) whereby active efforts are made (by a variety of professional and non-professional practitioners) to link experiences, documents and materials of the past with contemporary issues and experiences. Kean and Ashton (2009, 9) usefully assert how this relationship, based upon multiple forms of public engagement, can begin to remove ‘knowledge barriers’ and encourage the ‘promotion of the use of different materials’. This approach borrows extensively from the ‘history from below’ tradition, Raphael Samuel, and most specifically the ‘history workshop’ movement, to suggest how archives, and others material forms of the past, can inform the present (see also Iles and Roberts 2012).

When understood through the lens of usable past making, labour and political history archives can be positioned as central components of ‘counter narratives’ within places (see Jordan and Wheedon 2000) and thus asserted as a central element of a contemporary working class presence (Crossan et al. 2016). This more politicised understanding illuminates the possibilities for ‘retrieval as an act of rebellion’ (Rowbotham 2000, xv) whereby archives inform social-political movements of the present. Further, this notion of usable pasts as resistance also opens up the archive as a potential space of activism itself, whereby community members can engage with histories and assert their significance (Flinn 2011).

These links between histories and publics are made in a similar vein to discussion within public history (see examples in *Public History Review*) and heritage and museum studies regarding public engagement, performance and ‘memory making’ (see Smith 2006). In this regard, the collections detailed below emerge from a placed context of usable past making. Glasgow’s histories of left political radicalism, particularly the histories of Red Clydeside, have held a prominent place within public memory in the city (see Burnett 1988, 82-83). This presence can be found within museums such as the People’s Palace and innovations such as ‘Glasgow’s Doors Open Days’, yet large elements of this history still remain marginalised and far less visible. Thus, the significance of the archives considered below is further emphasised by a city context of ‘culture-led regeneration’ that has arguably ‘effaced a history of working-class presence and marginalises an active radical political tradition in Glasgow’ (see Crossan et al. 2016, 359).

This paper engages with those working mostly closely and intimately with archival collections and is employed below to address a relative absence of archival labour within previous studies and is closely linked to Samuel’s challenging of historic privilege where he called for the recognition of history as a form of social knowledge:

History is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even, as postmodernism contends, a historian’s ‘invention’. It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands. (Samuel 1994, 8)

This assertion of archives as a social form of knowledge radically reworks alternative notions of the archive, such as Derrida’s (2002) well-rehearsed construction of archive as authority. This ‘top-down’ positioning, as Withers (2002, 303) points out, understood the archive as a site of ‘authority and meaning’. In contrast, Samuel’s equally well-recognised reference to the work of a thousand different hands reveals history as the result of labour and broader social interests. This positioning of history suggests a need to engage with the practices and labour of usable past making. His account proposes a need for further engagement with those working with histories. Here, I suggest that archives must be part of this account due to the long history of archive engagements beyond the academic setting (Hoyle, 2017). In this regard, I engage with two contrasting Glasgow archives to develop a more experiential and labour sensitive approach to archives, which builds upon existing historical geography work. These experiences of archival work range from the skilled labour of qualified archivists to the wider practices of outreach work.

**Providing Glasgow’s usable pasts: two cases**

*Glasgow Caledonian University Research Collection*

The research collection at GCU holds a variety of materials relating to the Scottish labour movement, including the records of the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC). It also holds collections relating to social work and child welfare and the archives of Scottish social enterprise. I began my research within this archive during my doctoral research and have since utilised this space on many occasions to research Scottish labour history. The archive is located in the city centre of Glasgow within the library at GCU. It was established in 1993, collecting around two broad themes of histories of social work and left wing politics (or what Carole described as ‘collections of social justice’), alongside an institutional archive for the university. The collections are based around the two broad themes, with large amounts of textual material and more multi-sensory items, and researchers from all areas, ranging from local community historians to social work practitioners, are invited to use the material here. Carole describes the collection as developing organically with much of the material entering through ‘word of mouth’ or more personal connections and she is keen to encourage ‘learning and teaching with primary source material’.

Carole recalled the intentions of those first involved with establishing the archive as a conscious effort to make the archive different to the traditional institution. She stated that they:

[D]idn’t want people to come in and feel that they’re scared or they’re frightened or that it’s stuffy. So we always decided, in line with the university decision in widening access, that we would widen access to archives and special collections.

My own experience reflected this decision, and the archive feels particularly accessible; providing an environment whereby a researcher can engage with and ask questions about historical material. The approach is further evident in the room setting, which includes photos representing some of the collection themes on its walls, and is also characterised by archivist interactions with the researcher.

It is noticeable that my own experience within this collection was significantly different to Lorimer’s ethnographic account of the archive at Cambridge University. He described how ‘feelings of disorientation and confusion quickly overwhelmed me’ and that he ‘had the distinct impression that ‘the archive’ was somewhere between a labyrinth and impregnable fortress. Escape was not an option’ (Lorimer 2009, 251). Here, it should be noted that individual archives can produce different experiences for different visitors, often dependent on positionality and project motives, and that my more welcoming experience is not necessarily unique to the archives of the political left (see also Craggs 2016; Ogborn 2013).

The GCU archive itself is continually evolving but Carole remains integral to the collection with only approximately a third of the collection officially catalogued, making her knowledge invaluable for the provision of material. In 2010 the original university research collections team of seven employees was reduced to just Carole due to a voluntary redundancy scheme. Carole is now the only full time employee working with the collections. This financial pressure illustrates a further politics of the archive with many working roles deemed disposable by institutions. She described the difficulties of being a ‘one-person service’ due to funding cuts, which means she cannot catalogue materials due to the everyday demands of her role.

Carole remains resilient, describing how she ‘just keeps going’, and is positive about the collection’s future. She described feeling supported by the university library, with the recent completion of new premises and a forthcoming new archive centre. It is clear though, that staffing of the archive remains an issue. The interview revealed that for a substantial amount of time each individual request (684 requests were made in the year 2014/15 requiring the provision of 7637 items) was processed by Carole, and each item provided and returned by her and a part-time assistant. Since then, the Library has shared resources from other teams to ensure that an assistant is available daily, 9am to 5pm, and the team includes one project archivist cataloguing a particular collection but a staffing shortage remains. The physically demanding nature of such roles, in providing, maintaining and cataloguing must be recognised within an account of the labour geography of archives. This understanding of the archive relates to the earlier recognition of history as requiring ‘work’ and ‘labour’ and it is argued here that this requires foregrounding archives and their staff to be valued institutionally.

Carole is mindful that other collections and archive projects, as considered through the next example, have utilised volunteers to address such difficulties in their projects, but remains keen to maintain the act of cataloguing and archiving as a profession:

I’ve been a lifelong trade unionist and I’ve got this big thing, earlier on you’d said would I have volunteers cataloguing, and my answer to that is no because if we have volunteers cataloguing we’re doing professional people out of jobs.

Staffing capacity remains a problem for Carole and she admitted to feeling concern for the future of the collection if she were to leave. Cataloguing is a particular concern as it can ease accessibility and Carole felt uncomfortable with the current situation whereby she felt much of ‘the archives are still very much hidden’, although seemingly unofficially ordered. This concern is illustrative of the practical problems associated with usable past provision dependent on individuals who must maintain the day-to-day running of archives with little time for tasks unseen by archive users.

Despite these concerns and limitations, the archive itself continues to provide an extremely useable resource for the political left. Carole is keen to emphasise the political possibilities within the archive and she speaks regularly at Scottish labour historian meetings about the collection. This usable relationship with the present is most regularly practiced alongside the STUC who maintain a strong connection with their archive. This connection between past and present has broader meaning for the political left, particularly in Scotland, and Carole describes the collection as a ‘resource’ for the trade union movement. This commitment to linking past and present reflected a more personal connection to the collections which linked Carole to the archive:

You can’t help the fact that as a young woman I had a political past and was active in left wing politics so inevitably the people who come through my doors to look at collections, all of a sudden will go ‘oh my goodness I haven’t seen you for years’.

These emotive aspects and the connections between archivists, depositors and researchers are integral to the archive (see also Ashmore et al. 2012; de Leeuw 2012). They further disrupt the understanding of archive as authority and in contrast indicate more usable understanding of archival space where emotional experiences, relationships and collaborations are prominent. These connections and experiences are also integral to the archival work of staff such as Carole and must be acknowledged in a characterisation of usable past making.

*Spirit of Revolt*

Through my archival research in Glasgow, I also developed a more participatory relationship with the Spirit of Revolt (SOR) archive. The archive (held at Glasgow’s Mitchell Library), named after the pamphlet by anarchist-geographer Peter Kropotkin, collects, manages and preserves records from Glasgow and Clydeside’s anarchist and libertarian-socialist history. It was established in August 2011 by a group of politically active individuals from the Clydeside area who sought to document their own history and to create a place where their records could be stored and accessed. The archive is primarily an activist led voluntary project although recently successful funding applications have allowed the temporary hiring of an archivist to catalogue the material. I became involved with this group myself, as secretary, and attended meetings with the group and participated at public events with materials from the collection. This experience relates to what DeLyser (2014) has described as ‘participatory historical geography’ whereby researchers become engaged with archives and museums to make historical research publicly available (see also Bressey 2014). This ‘hidden labour’ of academic practice is also indicative of a further layer of work within the archive, whereby academic interests and personal practice combine (DeLyser, 2016). Below, though, I wish to place emphasis on the group themselves rather than my own self-reflection.

The motivations behind the relatively new project varied but all members shared a commitment to providing a distinctive account of Glasgow’s political history, which they felt had been marginalised. During focus group discussion, members discussed how while materials from anarchist histories remained, they were very much hidden from wider audiences. In response, the group came together through a shared sense of a need to establish what they described as an interventionist ‘anarchist presence’ within Glasgow’s history. This desire indicates the fragmented nature of usable pasts and links closely to Flinn’s (2007, 152) broader observation of marginalised historical communities filling archival gaps as there is a strong sense that the ‘archive rarely allows them to speak with their voice, through their own records’.

After several meetings, the group decided to create an archive (gathering their own materials alongside those from associated groups and individuals) and the Glasgow City Council run Mitchell Library agreed to host and provide the collection as part of their own archive. Whilst making for a strong working relationship with the library, it is important to note that SOR remains independent from the Mitchell and retains ownership of the material. The content of the archive (currently 27 collections) is vast and diverse with members describing the material as mostly relating to direct action or theoretical currents within the anarchist-libertarian tradition.[[3]](#footnote-3) They have a variety of textual and visual materials ranging from conscientious objectors’ letters in the Second World War through to posters and pamphlets from the Hetherington Occupation in 2011 by students at the University of Glasgow.

Prior to its transfer to the library archives, much of the material was held within domestic space and discussion on this topic within focus groups illustrated a political will to maintain an alternative history. As Ashmore et al. (2012) have discussed, these more mundane archiving practices within domestic spaces have largely been ignored within writing on the archive. Members of SOR would keep their materials in cereal boxes, folders and filing cabinets and the focus group discussion revealed they would hold on to vast amounts of material within their homes. This material was already organised (albeit not officially catalogued) as members commented that ‘it wasn’t just haphazard collection’ and rather reflected a feeling that ‘every idea is not dead’.

The group’s outlook is positive but they do have their capacity related limitations. The project requires a lot of voluntary labour, with only the official archivist employed on a part-time basis. The funding for this paid role is crucial as the group acknowledge the concerns identified above regarding the potential undermining of skilled archival labour by volunteers. Tasks such as preservation, cataloguing and finding aids remain work assigned to the trained archivist. Due to the funding constraints, though, SOR can currently only employ an archivist for two days per week due to short term funding grants. Thus, the fundraising and applications to support this role require large amounts of work from the group. Beyond these tasks, there remains considerable work in making these collections accessible and the project is time-consuming for core members. In this regard, the group’s efforts to make the material accessible online are one of the most time-consuming and labour intensive tasks. All material must be scanned and added to a database where it can then be attached to the website to be viewed online. These factors expose the precariousness of the archive but SOR members commented that they felt some security with the material being held in the Mitchell Library.

Despite these limitations, the group were positive and very open to the political nature of their intervention with members describing their work as a form of activism:

This to me is a form of activism because I’m not doing other things that I might want to get involved with, the atos thing or whatever has been going on, but I don’t have time to do that anymore because I’m doing this but for some reason I feel driven to do this rather than these other things.[[4]](#footnote-4) I think maybe it’s using my skills better or whatever. I just think it’s a really important wee job that needs done.

I do think it is activism, at least I see it as that, it’s a continual reminder to the people that this is a struggle that is going on and it’s still here. Hearing what went on in the past and how you think you would approach it looking at this. I see it maybe as propaganda as a form of activism.

This commitment to providing alternative histories is reflected in the outreach work of the project and is illustrative of the construction of a counter-narrative history. In this regard, SOR have conducted a weeklong radical press exhibition within the Mitchell Library and have also produced window displays in Glasgow pubs on the 30th anniversary of the miner’s strike. This outreach work also includes smaller pop-up stalls and leaflets, which are disseminated by the group and forms an important part of the project for the members as they view the archive as much more of an active resource. Such works are indicative of the broader trend towards community engagement within the archive sector whereby groups are ‘documenting and making accessible their history on their own terms’ (Stevens et al. 2010: 60).

**Conclusions: archive precarity and collaborative responses**

The archives considered above are found within a context of reductions to the funding of UK public services such as archives, museums and libraries, making this is a crucial time to assert their significance (see also Norcup 2016). The archives and experiences considered must also be positioned within a wider context of budget cuts in the sector on an international scale (see Millar 2014). The experiences above are indicative of resilience within the sector, in terms of strategies to maintain usable pasts, but also reflect forthcoming challenges. GCU provides ‘collections of social justice’ in an accessible manner which is made in line with the ‘widening access’ intentions of the university as a whole (GCU n.d.). SOR makes their intervention from an activist perspective that aims to raise awareness and heighten engagement with elements of Glasgow’s history which have been previously overlooked. Both archives promote a usable sense of the past and this emphasis is aligned with trends towards participation within historical geography whereby researchers increasingly work alongside archives, museums and communities (Crossan et al. 2016).

I have argued that there is much to be gained from conversations with archivists, volunteers and enthusiasts more broadly to further explore the politics of usable past making (see also DeLyser 2016). Two concluding points emerge from this engagement with their experiences. Firstly, this emphasis facilitates an account of the archive that foregrounds the diverse experiences of work (paid and voluntary) related to the creation of usable pasts. This understanding and a broader notion of an increased usability of the past is positioned here within a longer trajectory of history movements associated with the ‘history from below’ tradition and deepens recent work within historical geography. Secondly, the accounts emerging from the discussion of such usable pasts have been positioned within a political context of austerity and raised archives as sites of resilience and resistance. The experiences considered here can be linked with other like-minded projects across the UK, such as the People’s History Museum in Manchester and The Sparrow’s Nest in Nottingham.[[5]](#footnote-5) Archival interventions for the political left are particularly crucial as documents and histories of resistance and activism, as Lees (2016) points, can often remain ‘hidden’. Such positioning of the archive as a site of retrieval for usable pasts suggests a continuing need for collaboration between archives, communities and participatory research in times of austerity.

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1. This research was conducted with full ethical approval and the paper was circulated to all participants for transparency prior to publication. Participants have agreed to the use of real names and organisations within the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Carole was speaking in a personal capacity and her views are not presented on behalf of Glasgow Caledonian University. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To view the current SOR catalogue visit: http://spiritofrevolt.info/collection/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anti-Atos protests have been prominent against the providers of work capability assessments within Glasgow. For more on this see <http://gamesmonitor2014.org/category/atos/> [Last Accessed: 11/5/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more information on these collections see: <http://thesparrowsnest.org.uk/> and <http://www.phm.org.uk/> [Last Accessed: 10/11/16] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)