

MYSTERY AND MACHINATION IN THE ARCHIVE.

By Verne Harris

“Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.”
(Jacques Derrida 1996)

Application of this ‘essential criterion’ to archives of different countries, different traditions and different conceptual underpinnings – in both Western and non-Western contexts - finds them wanting in greater or lesser measure. Always the indelible imprint of power either marginalises in them or excludes from them (in terms of both ‘content’ and ‘access’) the weak, the poor and the outcast - society’s aliens. This paper will argue, following Derrida, that this has to do with the reality that “there is no political power without control of the archive ...” So that democratisation - always a ‘process’ imperfectly realised and always drawing on powers, formations and energies which Derrida names archontic - neither removes the imprint of power from the archive nor removes ‘the political’ from ‘the archival’. Consequently the call of justice in relation to the archive - and in relation to any particular archive, even the archive of a liberation movement - is a call to activism; a call to open the archive in a fundamental way to those alienated, or estranged, in it and by it. In the memorable words of Nelson Mandela, at the inauguration of his Centre of Memory and Dialogue: “we want it to dedicate itself to the recovery of memories and stories suppressed by power. That is the call of justice.”