

Activate

'The archivist, the researcher and the activist: challenges of collaboration from a historical and comparative perspective'

Call for Participation – ACTIVATE WP2 Hybrid Seminar #2

May 18, 2026 - Fondazione Feltrinelli (Milan) and online

This second hybrid seminar of Work Package 2, *Activating archives: a comparative transnational history*, of the European Marie Skłodowska-Curie Staff Exchange project ACTIVATE focuses on the challenges archivists and researchers face when collaborating with and collecting archives from political and social movements, from the 19th century to the present day. The following themes will be prioritized in the case studies and challenges discussed: revolutionary movements; feminisms; environmental struggles; international solidarity.

Initial attempts to convince activists of the importance of their archives and the need to preserve them are not always successful. Beyond the well-known challenges associated with archiving documents and data, are there specific issues related to collaborating with these archive producers? We also wish to examine in a diachronic perspective the associated changing role of the archivist (curator, mediator, facilitator). From the activists' perspective, what is their position on the constitution and deposit of their archives? What developments can be observed here as well, and how do they fit into the wider context? It is a matter of examining the purpose of archiving documents and data produced by political and social activism: to preserve the memory of activists or of a social group; to strengthen their collective identity, record their activities, and enable them to establish their own narrative in opposition to the dominant official narrative? This is where researchers also act as participants in the process, bringing their scientific expectations and methodological specifics to it.

More fundamentally, questions arise about the identity and status of these three groups, archivists/researchers/activists which are distinct a priori: aren't the boundaries between them shifting and porous? And if so, are there historical or national evolutions or specificities?

Three main themes will structure the discussions:

1) The process of establishing contact and dialogue

How does this collaboration come about? What role can the researcher play between the archivist and the activist? How can a relationship of trust be established, and the importance of archives conveyed? How can future archivists be trained for this work; what skills do they need in this respect? What lessons can be learned from past failures? What to do with different expectations? How to deal with institutions that are built on very informal organizational structures, who should you talk to?

2) Archival activists and activist archivists

What can we learn from the long-term practice of archiving about the blurring of the boundaries between archivists, researchers, and activists? Is it possible to speak of archival activists or activist archivists before the 1970's and the debate around the neutrality of archivists (Howard Zinn)? If so, what periodization can be outlined? Should archivists and activists share the same values, ideology? Should the archive bring in practice what it collects (restrict carbon footprint)?

3) New forms of activism and new archiving challenges

How have new archiving tools and ways of activism influenced collaboration between archivists and activists but also the purpose of archiving their documents and data? How can the archivists respond to the increased transnational dimension of political and social mobilizations, born digital data, as well as critical approaches to archiving, including the postcolonial approach?

To apply

We encourage archivists, activists, and researchers to submit papers addressing these topics either from a theoretical and methodological perspective or by presenting specific case studies or experiences. A historical and comparative perspective is important to shed light on current issues. The hybrid seminar will take place in English.

Please submit your proposal, with a maximum of 300 words along with a brief CV, by 27 February 2026 to caroline.moine@uvsq.fr and edr@iisg.nl (Subject: "ACTIVATE Seminar WP2 May 2026")

Organizing Committee

- Caroline Moine (University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines)
- Serena Rubinelli (Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Foundation, Milan)
- Eric de Ruijter (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)

About the project ACTIVATE

This hybrid seminar is part of the project "ACTIVATE: The activist, the archivist and the researcher. Novel collaborative strategies of transnational research, archiving and exhibiting social and political dissent in Europe (19th-21st centuries)". ACTIVATE receives funding from the European Union's Horizon 2023 research and innovation program under the Marie-Sklódowska-Curie grant agreement No 101182859.

The project was launched in January 2025 and explores in a 4-year initiative practices of collecting, archiving, and promoting documents, objects, and data, contributing to a renewed European history of social and political dissent from the early 19th century to the present day. Further information about the project is available at <https://activate-horizon.eu/>