What Documents Cannot Do

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In his 2009 book *Documentalità* (translated into English in 2012 under the title *Documentality*), Maurizio Ferraris makes great claims for the efficacy of documents to explain social reality. In the coming pages, I mean to cast doubt on that efficacy, indicating why I think that documents do not create social objects; that, at most, documents corroborate some social facts; and that the theory of documentality offers a misleading account of the relations between writing and social life.

The key claim of the documental theory is that every social object is constituted by an inscribed act: Ferraris presents the formula "(Social) Object = Inscribed Act" more than thirty times in his book-length exposition of the theory. By an "inscribed act" he means a public execution of a piece of writing in such a form as to be registered and subsequently consulted by more than one person, and in such a way as to be able to ascertain the configuration of social facts arising out of the performance in question. Against this key claim, it may be well to begin by considering some underlying theses that Ferraris' theory appears to share with the other major contender in contemporary theory of social reality, namely John Searle's

theory that a certain physical object counts as a social object in a certain context as a result of collective intentionality within that context. This theory was set out mainly in the first half of his 1995 book *The Construction of Social Reality* and revised so as to emphasise the notion of collective intentionality in *Making the Social World* (2010).

Among the presuppositions that Ferraris' and Searle's theories share there is the thought that social objects stand in need of explanation in terms of something that is not a social object, indeed, that is not an object at all but, interestingly enough, in both cases, an act, whether of writing or of collective intending. Perhaps there are two facets to this shared presupposition that may be distinguished. One is that there are social objects. And the other is that such social objects as there are need to be explained in terms of something that can be identified even if we do not know what social objects there are.

The first of these points seems to be almost banal: if there are such objects as – to cite some examples that recur both in Ferraris and in Searle – money, marriages, university degrees and national borders, they are paradigm cases of social objects. Given that we recognise money, marriages, university degrees and national borders, it seems that we recognise some social objects. But it is easy to feel that we are already in the territory of what Gilbert Ryle had in mind when he was deliberately abusive about what he supposed was the Cartesian "myth of the ghost in the machine". That is to say, the recognition that "money", "marriages", "uni-

versity degrees" and "national borders" are all nouns does not of itself mean that what they denote are *objects*. Though the €10 note in my wallet is undoubtedly an object, the money that it is does not seem to me to be an object. Likewise, whether I am married or not at the moment of writing these words does not seem to me to depend on whether a certain object exists or not. That I am the holder of a certain number of degrees (of various degrees) does not derive from or reduce to there being some objects that are my degrees. And, if I have to present certain documents in passing from, say, Ventimiglia to Menton, that is neither because there are objects such as France and Italy, nor because there is an object that is the France-Italy frontier.

It may well be that some of the things that a theory of social reality should take account of are objects, and hence, in some sense, social objects; yet it does not seem obvious that the things that are cited as the paradigmatic cases of what needs to be explained by a theory of social reality are really objects at all. To take the instances that we have borrowed from Ferraris and Searle, some first approximations to what is in play might sound rather as follows.

My €10 note is a piece of paper that has, at least for the time being, certain powers, such as that of being exchangeable for other €10 notes, of being exchangeable for about three thousand Hungarian Forint, of being exchangeable for a packet-of-cigarettes-and-a-€5 note, of being exchangeable for about half of a paperback copy of Ferraris' *Documentality* (but not in the sense of some set of two

hundred pages of it). And so on. Though I do not subscribe to any of the more or less fancy "ontologies of powers" that have been coming onto the market of late, my impression is that the attribution to an object of a power, such as redness (the propensity to look red in normal conditions) or weight (the tendency to turn the scales to a certain degree) to a tomato, is less problematic than the conjuring of new objects (chromatic objects? gravitational objects?). Likewise, I recognise that being exchangeable is a power that has to be multiply relativised in ways to some of which we shall return, but of which an account can be given in a theory of economic activity that does not ultimately require any objects over and above pieces of paper (some, but not all, of which are banknotes), commodities (whatever they might be) and economic agents (of probably more than one sort).

Again, as regards marriage, the base or explanatory category here seems to be that of rights and duties that have been matured either by explicit promising or swearing, as in a wedding ceremony, or by certain persons' acting towards each other in certain ways over a certain period of time. Of course, quite how this plays out will depend very much on what the ultimate nature of rights and duties turns out to be. But it would be very odd indeed if rights and duties were such as to be able to bring into existence new objects: even though denominations like "husband" and "wife" do denote objects, the objects they denote are persons with reciprocal rights and duties.

My being a Bachelor of Arts, a Master of Arts and a *Doctor Philosophiæ* does not depend on the existence of university degrees as social objects. Rather, these qualifications are the result, respectively: of my having written certain things on certain pieces of paper in a certain examination hall, which were regarded with leniency by my teachers; of my having continued in existence for three years from B.A. graduation without infringing certain rules of my university (I have been told – probably unreliably – that if, in the specified period, I had carried a bow and arrows on King's Parade, Cambridge, I would have been excluded as a *Magister*); and of my having written other things in a stack of paper, which were again regarded with leniency by my examiners. The result of all this scribbling and hanging around was that the university emitted certain pieces of paper that have, again, some powers. These are not quite those of my €10 banknote; for instance, I cannot transfer my qualifications to others in exchange for money or commodities. But I can report my possession of them on my *curriculum vitæ*; and, if need be, I can flourish them in the face of anyone who cares to take notice of them. If someone, who has not done things at least superficially similar to the sort of writing exercises I have gestured at, nor received the requisite approbation for them, claims to have a given degree, that person is guilty of fraud (and I am rather aware that the "M.A." that I am entitled to put after my name is regarded as in odour of fraud by graduates of many universities). The fraud lies not in the non-existence of a social object but in the non-performance of a certain task or due process. Thus, if someone buys a degree certificate – and such pieces of paper are indeed on sale – her attempt to use it as an academic qualification ought to fail, because the institutions that engage in this traffic are not universities, whatever they might call themselves. Naturally, there may appear to be some sort of circularity in the legitimacy of certain sorts of accreditation and the activities that take place in certain environments (lecture rooms, examination halls and so on), but it does not seem that that circularity is vicious nor that it would be made any more virtuous by the interposition of a social object.

A similar sort of circularity may invest – and perhaps more viciously – the matter of national borders. While the universitiness of some institutions can be established by looking at what the people involved in them do (reading, writing, learning, teaching, examining, researching), the statehood of, say, France seems to amount to nothing more than the stipulation that, within a certain territory, a certain writ runs: France is French because the French say it is (and, at least for the time being, the Germans and others allow them to say so). As we shall see in a little more detail in discussing some specifics of Ferraris' proposal, a theory of social reality that posits a series of social objects arising out of documents, such as treaties and the like, will have difficulty in saying what makes such documents valid. For the present purpose, however, the thing to notice is that the Frenchness of France does not need an extra object to account for the behaviour

both of the French border police and of those who wish to cross the border. It is debatable to what extent and with what rigour a state is permitted to patrol its own borders against anything other than attempted armed invasion by another state (and hence whether or not there should be any function like that of the border police, which is not candidly military). Yet the custom (and I use the word advisedly) has grown up that even those who do have the right to pass from Ventimiglia to Menton have to be able to prove that they have that right every time they come a certain part of the road that leads from the one town to the other by being in a position to produce a passport or an identity card that the border police find convincing. And those to whom such a right has not – whether rightly or wrongly – been recognised by the French state find themselves faced with at least the threat of force against them to prevent their passage beyond a certain part of the road. Unlike my €10 note but like a degree certificate, a passport or an identity card is not transferable; and, like a marriage certificate, it is merely proof of a social fact – for instance EU citizenship – that seems to me to be capable of subsisting even in the absence of the document. For instance, a UK citizen who has not applied for a passport may have no way of proving that status: and, an instance within the instance, Queen Elizabeth II does not have a passport, but seems to be allowed to pass (relatively) unhindered on her foreign travels. The custom of passport control is in no way explained by the existence of social objects, such as states or borders; these latter are ra-

ther functions of an administrative system operating on a certain territory. And a function is not an object, even when it is backed by the threat of force.

Even if these are but first approximations, it seems to me that they suggest grounds for hesitancy before accepting the existence of social objects as explanatory of social facts. This hesitancy is perhaps reinforced when we come to consider how the two leading theories of social objects seek to define the objects in question by appeal to acts, in Ferraris' case to acts of writing and in Searle's to acts of collective intending, and both are fairly emphatic that these acts make up, constitute or are identical with the objects that are the *explananda* of the theories (as well as being the *explanantia* of what money, marriages, degrees and borders are). In one sense, it seems as if these objects have been introduced only to be eliminated by acts: ontology becomes – what shall we call it? – praxiology. But, in another, it may be cause for puzzlement that any act can be identical with any object, any more than an event can be identical with a state or a change with a function.

This latter may seem a finicky worry, but it points to a serious problem about what these theories are for. If someone thinks that social ontology is worth doing, then he is likely to think that he is called on – in the going jargon – to quantify over objects to whose existence he is thereby committed, and also that these objects stand in need of identity criteria, which can only be supplied by reference to acts. But this all seems a long way round. For it is not at all clear that an

ontology – a theory of objects – is going to get us very far in understanding social facts. If the first approximations suggested above are anywhere near right, then we need some economic theory to understand money, an account of interpersonal rights and duties to understand marriage, a description of how academic institutions work to understand degrees, and a genealogy of statehood to understand national borders. What is not at all clear is that these species of enquiry will, sooner or later, call on us to start identifying objects of sorts that are, in one way or another, of a wholly different sort from things like bits of paper and persons. And, even if we did find ourselves called on so to do, I think that, in terms of the Quinean distinction that is often blurred, we would be engaging in *ideology*. But that is another story.

Despite their convergence on the theses that there are social objects and that these objects can be identified by acts of certain sorts, Ferraris' and Searle's theories present themselves as rivals for the role of explaining social reality. Because it seems to me that these shared theses are far from obviously true and certainly not applicable in as many cases as Ferraris and Searle want to apply them, I suggest that explanations of social reality can probably do without such a proliferation of objects.

Ferraris has himself devoted some time and ingenuity to arguing that Searle's account is flawed as an explanation of social reality, so we may be brief here. As already hinted, Searle's basic formula is that a physical object X counts as a social object Y in a given context C in virtue of the imposition of a Y-function on X by an act of collective intentionality. And the equally basic objection to this is that the appeal to collective intentionality is explanation *obscurum per obscurior*. For instance, though I know about some of the powers of my €10 note, about some of my duties as a husband, about how little my degrees are worth, and about what documents to produce if I want to pass (relatively) unhindered from Ventimiglia to Menton, I am deeply in the dark about what "collective intentionality" might be, and about when or where it was enacted in any of these cases. Even if I have some inklings about what intending is, and also about why it is not the sort of thing that social facts can be based on, such collective intendings as there may be found (for instance in the co-ordination of a football team or a group of musicians – Searle's own examples) seem to be derivative of antecedent social facts about aims and projects shared by the participants. In this respect, collective intending is as useless as the not entirely dissimilar notion of a social contract: it presupposes what it is meant to explain. Likewise with "counting as", "context", "imposing" and "Y-function": none of these notions looks elementary enough to help explain any social facts, still less to conjure into being any social objects.

At first blush, then, Ferraris' theory enjoys some distinct advantages over Searle's. In its paradigm cases, the privileged objects of the documental theory are pretty readily identifiable: the presence or absence of some writing in a given language on a given physical support is a matter about which only

cavillers could invent problems. Whether or not we want to reify such things as languages, the difference between a text in English and a text in French will quickly force itself on a monoglot Englishman or a monoglot Frenchman; and the presence or absence of a text on pieces of paper, tablets of stone or hard-disc drives is, on the whole, not open to doubt and is, at least in principle, consultable by more than one person and, hence, suitably public and social.

Nevertheless, there remain some underlying problems, of which we may consider three, two of which are damaging to Ferraris' central contention about paradigmatic cases of social objects as identical with inscribed acts, and the third of which concerns his approach to non-paradigmatic cases of documentality. I take it that these three problems are jointly fatal to the documental proposal as the explanation of social reality. Even if the problems are fatal to the theory, they may leave standing one way of talking about such things as money, marriage, university degrees and national borders a products of literate and bureaucratised societies, which are a relative rarity in the history of humanity, even though readers of *Philosophical Readings* surely live in one. In a similar way, I think that Ferraris' criticisms of Searle's theory leave us free, if we feel so inclined, to talk of a certain physical object counting as a social object in a certain context. That is to say, there is no real harm in talking *as if* social objects were brought into being by acts of inscribing or of collective intentionality, and indeed, many of the phenomena that Ferraris and Searle link to-

gether in expounding their theories would be hard to see as connected without these ways of talking. But it is well to be aware that the objects they invoke are not really there, and their alleged objecthood is better parsed in Rylean fashion by appeal to categories such as powers, rights and duties, accreditations and customs.

The two problems I wish to raise for the characteristic and core thesis of the documental theory are intertwined and may be just two sides of the same coin. One, which I shall rather arbitrarily call the Regress Problem and which I shall consider first, concerns the priority both causal and conceptual of social facts over documents. The other, which I shall call the Validation Problem, concerns the difficulty for the theory of recognising that some apparent inscribed acts do not constitute social objects.

What I am calling the Regress Problem arises in the following way. On Ferraris' view, the *explananda* of a theory of social reality are objects like those we have already cited as the paradigm cases: money, marriages, degrees and borders. To explain the arising of these objects and to identify the objects that arise, Ferraris makes appeal to the acts by which they are instituted. "Act" here may waver slightly between an event or action of inscribing (the issuing of a note by the central bank, the signing of the marriage register, the award ceremony in a university or the stipulation of an international treaty) and the enduring particular that issues from such an event or action (the banknote, the marriage certificate, the degree diploma or the text of the treaty). But this wavering is

not a cause for particular concern, rather as talk of an "Act of Parliament" may refer to the completion of a voting procedure or to the statute that is then to be found in law books. That is to say, we are unlikely to be misled by this categorial slide because we can distinguish fairly easily between the event or action and the document. And, in turn, the documents may be considered either as tokens (as in the case of the bank-note: reproduction is forgery and threatens debasement of the currency) or as types (as in the other three cases we have been considering: such registrations need to be copiable for the purposes for which they are kept). The move then is to say that the social object in each case (the money, the marriage, the degree or the border) can be picked out by appeal to the document that is, in some sense, its vehicle.

As already noted, it is a salient virtue of such documents that they are readily identifiable and can be appealed to when we wish to determine the contours of social reality. If such an appeal fails and no document can be identified, then, on Ferraris' view, there is no social object and no social fact. Where there are facts and objects that are not identified by some inscribed act, they must be brute facts or natural objects and, hence, not social in Ferraris' terms. That is to say, on the documental theory, behind every social fact there must be an inscribed act on pain of an explanatory failure.

Though he nowhere makes it explicit, Ferraris is thus committed to the view that in any explanatory sequence of arbitrary length of social facts or objects and inscribed acts,

we have an explanation of the facts and objects only when the final term of the sequence is an inscribed act. To take a simple case, suppose we identify the social object that is a marriage by reference to the register that the spouses signed on their wedding day and we want an explanation of that. Ferraris might allow that, for sure, we can explain its being a marriage by reference to social facts such as the eligibility of the partners, the authority of the presiding officer and the regularity of the registration. But, then, he would say that these social facts must in turn be explained by the documents that constitute that eligibility (e.g. certifications that both partners are of a suitable age, unmarried, of sound mind and so on), that authority (e.g. a declaration that the registrar is authorised to officiate), and that regularity (e.g. a law determining the observance of certain procedures).

At this point, we might wonder why a sequence (Doc) *socialfact-inscribedact-socialfact-inscribedact* is more convincing or explanatory than a sequence (Soc) *inscribedact-socialfact-inscribedact-socialfact*, where any given term is explained by the term to its left, and the final term to the right is the ultimate explanation of the sequence. If a (Doc) sequence is the basic form of theses in the theory of social reality, then inscribed acts are always required at the end of any explanatory sequence, and every (Soc) sequence is partial or incomplete as an explanation of social reality.

Let us note one feature of Ferraris' commitment to (Doc) over (Soc). This is that, if there is no society without social facts, there

is no society without inscribed acts. In the paradigm cases of the documental theory, the inscribed acts require writing. Hence, there is no society without writing. But there are, as a matter of undeniable anthropological fact, many societies without writing. Hence, the preference for (Doc) over (Soc) does not capture the essence of social reality. If some sequence (Soc) turns out to be an adequate or complete account of some slice of social reality, as it must be given that there are many societies without writing, then the documental theory applies at best to some of the practices of some societies that do use writing, and in particular to the bureaucratic practices of complex literate societies.

What the Regress Problem brings to light about the documental theory is that the preference for (Doc) over (Soc) leads to thesis that there can be no social facts of the paradigm sorts without writing. This may be true as a matter of practicality: some complex social facts may be hard to police in absence of written documents. But practicality and policing are not the objective of a theory of social reality or of social ontology: the objective should be to discern what social facts there are.

In at least three of the four paradigm cases we have been considering, relevant social facts can easily obtain even in the absence of writing. Many societies without writing have developed means for obviating the problems of barter and have thus, to some extent, invented money and attribute to certain objects some subset of the powers that I attribute to my €10 banknote. Almost

all societies, including those without writing, recognise arrangements that it is perfectly proper to call marriages because certain reciprocal rights and duties are recognised within family groups. And much social living – including nomadic living – involves the delimitation from time to time of spaces into which outsiders may enter only on certain conditions. The case of university degrees is, of course, one in which the social facts in question do make pretty essential reference to writing and are, so far forth, pretty unthinkable in a society without writing. But one might nevertheless see that the institutions in question are evolutions of the ways that, even in societies without writing, certain sorts of expertise (such as those of the "medicine man") confer rights and duties that may be exclusive to those who have matured them.

If the Regress Problem really is a problem for the documental theory, as I think it is, then one might reasonably infer that sequences (Soc) are better candidates for explaining some of the features of societies that use inscribed acts for the practical purposes of policing particularly complex or evolved social facts. In favour of preferring sequences (Soc), we may also cite the way that inscribing acts is itself a species of social fact, and hence cannot figure in the explanation of the genus of which it is a species.

This last feature of sequences (Soc) provides a passage to the Validity Problem, which I have announced as something like the flip side of the Regress Problem. If the Regress Problem for the theory of documentality boils down to the observation that a

sequence (Doc) has as its final term an inscribed act that is itself a social fact, and hence every sequence (Doc) is really a sequence (Soc) after all, then the Validity Problem boils down to the observation that social facts about inscribed acts are needed to distinguish between valid acts and invalid acts.

Although there are some passages in Ferraris' exposition of his theory in which he recognises the need to be able to distinguish between valid and invalid documents, the trend of his thought is, as we have seen, to say that the distinction can be made by appeal to some other inscribed act that validates valid documents and hence underpins the social objects that are identified by means of them. Of course, there will be cases in which some other piece of paper can be called in aid to establish the legitimacy of an inscribed act whose validity has been called into doubt. If the Regress Problem is a problem for valid documents, it should be clear how things stand with invalid ones: their invalidity derives from the lack of social facts apt to legitimate them.

Rather than reconsider the paradigm cases of inscribed acts that, for Ferraris, constitute social objects, we may describe briefly how things stand with what I think may be a paradigm case of an invalid inscribed act: the so-called *Constitutum Constantini*. Though there is some room for uncertainty about where and when this document was drawn up, copies were in circulation, both in France and at Rome, in the second half of the eighth century C.E., being included in a collection of Papal decretals in

the ninth century and in Gratian's *Concordia discordantium canonum* of about 1150 (I, xcvi, 14). What the *Constitutum* inscribes is the donation by the Emperor Constantine of temporal power over the Western Empire to the then pontiff Sylvester and in perpetuity to the Roman Church. In this, it corroborates and is corroborated by fifth-century accounts attributing to St Sylvester a part in the conversion of Constantine by means, among other things, of curing him of leprosy. Though some voices, such as that of Dante (*Inferno*, XIX, 115-7), had been raised against the effects of what is inscribed in the *Constitutum*, its validity was taken for granted over five or six centuries. But I would be very surprised if Maurizio Ferraris did not agree with me in saying that the *Constitutum* does not establish the temporal power of the Roman Church over Western Europe. While this is not a problem for me, for the documental theory it would appear to be one because we have what looked to everyone like an inscribed act, but no social fact.

The point of the Validity Problem for the theory of documentality is that that theory seems to have difficulty accounting for what was wrong with the *Constitutum*. What seems to be the difficulty? In one sense, it ought to be obvious that, if the *Constitutum* was not written by Constantine, and so is a forgery, then the inscribed act that it purports to be is not valid. But how can the documental theory account for this?

For Ferraris, the long temporal gap between the supposed donation in the fourth century and the earliest manuscripts in circu-

lation might hold the key: if the documental tradition does not stretch back to Constantine, then there was no act of inscribing (in the sense of an event of writing) to set up the inscribed act (in the sense of an enduring particular). But a gap of this sort is not so very surprising with a technology of paper and ink in which a text could only survive (as a type) over centuries by being copied onto ever-new physical supports. From where we are, we cannot verify the absence of intermediates between the fourth century and the eighth. So how can we tell that the text we have before us is not an effect of an act of Constantine's?

Consider the position in the early fifteenth century. We have a powerful institution, the Roman Catholic Church asserting its temporal authority over large swathes of Western Europe. This assertion is backed up by a document that has been reproduced for hundreds of years and incorporated into canon law. This document says that the Emperor Constantine transferred his authority to the Pope. It would seem, then, that the document could be challenged only by another document. For instance, if it were in outright conflict with what we find in Eusebius of Cæsarea's *Vita Constantini*, that might be grounds for doubt; but we have reason for thinking that Eusebius was not as well informed about Constantine's doings as he presents himself as being. So given that the *Constitutum* presents itself as being an act inscribed by Constantine and has the support of so many institutions and authorities, the temporal power of the Church was for

centuries a pretty solid social object (if you like to talk that way).

So far documentality. But this seems back-to-front.

Nevertheless, beginning with Nicholas of Cusa's rather casual assertion in 1433 that the *Constitutum* was apocryphal (De concordantia catholica, III, 2) and Lorenzo Valla's blistering attack De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione (1440), the document itself came to be discredited.

In some crucial phases of his highly elaborate argumentation, Valla proceeds more or less as follows. The alleged social fact of Constantine's donating the Western Empire to the Pope was impossible; the *Constitutum* inscribes his performing that donation; therefore the *Constitutum* is a forgery. The precise nature of the impossibilities that Valla exposes need not detain us here (though it is stirring reading that I highly recommend), but given that we know something about social facts, we can know something about a document that purports to represent one. If a certain social fact is impossible, then an inscribed act that would constitute it is invalid. If someone thinks that Valla's procedure as I have caricatured it is in some way circular, for instance because it seeks to show that the Emperor could not have donated the Western Empire on the grounds that the *Constitutum* says that he did, I would repeat my recommendation to read the *De falso credita et ementita donatione* and recall that we can often tell that a text is not telling the truth because the things it tells are impossible (flying horses, invisible men, time travel and so on).

As with the Regress Problem, the Validity Problem arises out of the way that documental theory seems to repose a certain faith in the genuineness of documents as such. Of course, without some such faith, it would be very hard to manage many of our more complex social affairs. But a document is not made valid only by other documents and is not made invalid by the absence of validating documentation. Rather, its standing depends on social facts about its being drawn up: if Constantine had donated the Western Empire to Sylvester, then that interaction would have been what would have made the *Constitutum* valid, just as being actually issued by a central bank is what makes my €10 note genuine, being conducted by a mayor is what makes some marriages binding, being earned in a reputable university is what makes a degree certificate worth hanging on the wall, and being established by inter-governmental agreement is what fixes where a border lies.

If the Regress Problem concerns in the first instance the paradigm social objects that documental theory considers and the Validity Problem is best exemplified by paradigm non-objects, the third problem for the theory that I wish briskly to raise concerns the treatment of the less-than-paradigmatic social objects that Ferraris wishes his theory to cover. These are cases in which we have a social fact or social object but we have nothing written in any language on any physical support. Among these might be – Ferraris' own examples – appointments, lunch invitations, bets and threats. These are clearly cases where there is something social insofar as they involve at least two persons: I cannot make an appointment with myself, invite myself to lunch, make a bet with myself or threaten myself. Though they may be written down, they need not be and are in force irrespective of whether they are or not.

Rigorous application of the documental theory would seem to dictate that here we do not, after all, have anything social because there is no inscribed act. If that were the position, the documental theory would collapse: if a theory dictates that an appointment, an invitation, a bet or a threat that is not written down is not a social arrangement, then the theory is simply false. And it is simply false because, even if these arrangements are not paradigmatic for the documental theory, they are certainly social, even paradigmatically social. And I would add that, if such arrangements are paradigmatically social but are not paradigmatically documental, then the claim that the documental gets to the essence of the social looks to be on very thin ice indeed.

Quite reasonably, Ferraris has to allow that uninscribed appointments, invitations, bets and threats are social, but has to accommodate them to the documental theory.

Adopting – or perhaps adapting – some terminology invented by Jacques Derrida in his book *On Grammatology* (1967), Ferraris proposes that what we have in such cases are phenomena of "archiwriting". Thus the social fact or object of an appointment, an invitation, a bet or a threat is constituted by there being traces in the participants to these events such that all of those involved recognise their bindingness. These traces are

traces of archiwriting in way not entirely dissimilar to the way that the trace of the letters I am now typing are traces of writing, even though for the time being, those letters are just configurations of bits inside my computer, on whose screen certain configurations of pixels appear. Yet these letters have two characteristics that are worth attending to. One is that, in the combination I am seeking to impose on them, the text that they make up is in a certain language, which is my idiolect of English and may be more or less understandable by other readers of any of the many varieties of English that infest the globe. The other is that the support in which they are currently imprisoned may be accessed in various ways and the writing may be fully actualised, for instance by being printed on paper or disseminated to other computers.

As we have noted, it is a strength of the documental theory that it emphasises the stability, shareability and verifiability of the documents that constitute social facts. But the appeal to Derridean archiwriting throws this strength away. For Derrida, archiwriting need not be in any language, such as French or English, and may be essentially private, residing only in the mind or brain of a single individual. I do not know how seriously Derrida himself took this proposal, or whether he meant the various things he said about it to be taken seriously by others. But, for myself, I find it hard to take at all seriously because it is highly implausible to suppose that anything that answers to his description can be called in aid to explain the social facts that are non-paradigmatic for the documental theory.

If archiwriting is not in any language, then the content of a trace of it is not responsible to any rules of meaning. Indeed, it is quite mysterious how such a thing could have meaning at all. And if it can be private, then it cannot be used to explain anything essentially public or social. Indeed, it is quite mysterious what difference its presence or absence would make. In these respects, archiwriting cannot explain any social facts. To avoid the falsity of the documental theory in the face very many day-to-day social facts that do not involve paradigmatic documents, Ferraris appeals to the notion of archiwriting, and thus consigns his theory to complete explanatory failure.

If my friend – perhaps Ferraris himself – wants to say that I should be at a certain restaurant at a certain hour because our appointment for lunch was constituted by a document in archiwriting inscribed on his brain and mine (and *mutatis mutandis* in the other non-paradigmatic cases for the documental theory), I might think that his way of talking is a bit contorted and unenlightening. But it is only if he persists in talking this way in the philosophy room, or publishing books and contributing to numbers of *Philosophical Readings* to promote this way of talking in others, that I might begin to protest. As I have.