

THEORY AND POLITICS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP

by Jason Burton

Who are we and what are we doing here? These are the metaphysical questions that are at not only the root of Western philosophy, but are the intellectual urges that define humanity against the backdrop of nature. Two particular questions deriving from these are the focus here; namely what is the philosophical orientation of librarianship, and from this, what is the justification of the role of politics in librarianship? These issues seem abstract and distant from the work of public librarians. But in reality, these issues are at the heart of public librarianship. This paper will demonstrate how theories of knowledge, politics, and neutrality become central issues to the day-to-day operation of public libraries.

Library science and the concept of professional librarianship begin in the 19th century. Zandonade (2004) places the beginning of librarianship at 1876 with the founding of the American Library Association (ALA). With a central event like the founding of a professional organization, it is easier to speak of a coherent discipline, if only in the sense of self-recognition. This is not to discredit numerous other milestone events in library history. From the earliest recorded information something related to professional librarianship existed. But the 19th century ushered in modernity, and for the library this means professionalization. The ideas motivating this move to professionalization are rooted in both Enlightenment thinking as well as work in the social sciences and modern economics (Herold, 2001).

The Enlightenment is the philosophical anchor of early librarianship (Weissinger, 2003). The very focus of what it meant to be a librarian shifted, Weissinger argues, from personal talents and calling to the mastery of standardized techniques and tasks (Weissinger). Cornelius makes an even stronger argument, “The belief in progress and individual betterment or empowerment through the application of reason and the use of knowledge is the engine of the library world, and documents are just its fuel.” He continues, “The techniques we have to manage documents are directionless without the sense of purpose, cultural context, and possibilities allowed by the epistemology of the Enlightenment” (Cornelius 2004, 384). Both highlight the epistemic shift in the conceptualization of professional librarianship. The methodologies of librarianship are based out of knowledge systems unique to the Enlightenment. The very philosophical character of knowledge shifted. An overarching sense of utilitarianism begins to define librarianship.

But this radical epistemic shift did not mean that a body of theory unique to librarianship came with it. Ostler and Dahlin (1995) argue that in fact, Melvil Dewey's, and from Dewey we can generalize to the entirety of the library intelligentsia, "adoption" of this epistemological orientation towards professionalization and utility led to a direct de-emphasis on theoretical thinking. Pierce (1992) argues that a revisionist theoretical history is possible, but as Ostler and Dahlin point out, if this were to be the case it surely should have developed sooner. Cornelius (2004) actually sees the professionalization of librarianship as being a split from philosophy. Librarianship, in hopes of defining itself as a profession, did not base itself in a philosophy or theoretical school, but instead on tasks and solutions to practical problems. This idea of an epistemology negating philosophy seems on the surface to be logically impossible. But a closer examination exposes the fact that this epistemology is not an *a priori* philosophical stance. It has morphed into an epistemological position *a posteriori*.

In this same strange sense metaphysics of librarianship formed. Nitecki (1973) positions both the metaphysical substance of librarianship and the metaphysical nature of librarianship. The metaphysical substance of librarianship, "is a metaphorical relationship between the concept expressed in any given medium and its perception by the mediums interpreter, the user of the library" (Nitecki, 33). He makes a similar, but nuanced distinction when defining the nature of librarianship, "The essential metaphysical nature of librarianship...a never ending process of expanding knowledge by relating less-known to more familiar experiences" (Nitecki, 38). Crucially, librarianship in both is a passive agent. He argues for such an understanding by stating that library science does not add to the expansion of knowledge, but instead facilitates it (Nitecki, 32). Floridi (2002) makes a similar point when he states that the object of librarianship is the container of information, not the knowledge within. He continues by saying that this means librarianship, "...works at a more fundamental level than epistemology" (Floridi 2002, 41).

A dominant theme is clear. Librarianship, to some extent, works at a level that is sub-philosophical. The unit of study is pre-knowledge, the formal precursor to knowledge. Librarianship deals in the units that make up knowledge and knowledge systems. The metaphysics of librarianship is defined by facilitation. The existence of librarianship, in this philosophical sense, is solely to serve in the facilitation of knowledge acquisition and processing. Epistemology is facilitated by librarianship more so than librarianship acts from an epistemic position. As was mentioned, the epistemology of librarianship is a product of technical formulations independent of a philosophical program.

The idea of a discipline being somehow divorced from thought and reflection is not intended here. McConnell (1992) argues that value follows from the process of defining and actualizing a discipline. In a similar vein, Shaughnessy (1976) contends that a discipline is derivative of a body of knowledge and it is through that body of knowledge that

a system of values is constructed. Again we are faced with a somewhat puzzling problem. Where is reconciliation found between the concept constructed earlier that implies a level of uncritical work with this idea of knowledge-based discipline building? Again the answer is quite simple and in part answered already. A critical feature of the Enlightenment is the introduction of scientific thinking and the eventual adoption of positivism and empiricism. For now this can be limited to the ontological concept of “out there” (Gremmels, 1990). The scientific mode of thinking is based around the ontological assumption of an external reality; something distinct from the observer. This ontology, along with the methodological elements derived from it, is positioned within the intellectual space of librarianship. Dick (1995) argues that librarianship developed not as an original offshoot of the natural sciences, but adopted this methodology and ontology through social scientific disciplines maturing at the same time. Not only does this introduce another vital element to librarianship, but it produces a relationship where librarianship adopts the theories and methodologies being developed through a number of social scientific disciplines to its own needs. Olaisen (1985) presents a critical perspective on this phenomenon, arguing that in doing this, librarianship has limited itself to one narrow functionalist viewpoint at the expense of other research orientations.

This brings up the interesting question of a paradigm of librarianship. It would be easy to argue for such a scientific agenda, but in fact librarianship lacks any such thing. Again, a paradoxical situation presents itself. Librarianship on one hand has a monolithic “philosophical” orientation, including the adoption of empiricism, but yet no paradigmatic science has been developed. Ostler and Dahlin (1995) argue that librarianship began before it had its “theoretical bearings.” The discipline was informed by external concepts and before any organic theory in librarianship could be thoughtfully developed the profession was moving full steam ahead. Shaughnessy (1976) sees the “preoccupation with its various institutional contexts” as a main reason a general body of theory could be developed in librarianship (169). Dick (1995) makes the most succinct point when he states that with the existence of competing paradigms, a product of a lack of general theory, the theoretical consensus that is at the heart of a paradigmatic science is missing.

To this point we have seen the philosophical character of librarianship and the effect this had on theory building. Namely, librarianship constructed a profession around social scientific principles, but in building a profession lost the theoretical aspect of other disciplines. There is one further philosophical aspect to librarianship, but there is a necessary step to get there that has, to this point, not been mentioned.

Libraries exist in the world with some purpose. Part of this purpose is obvious (the collection, maintenance, and borrowing of books, etc.), but there is a conceptual element that is worthy of discussion. Martin (1937) argues that the library, namely the public library, is a social institution. He defines a social institution as, “A social institution is an integrated

pattern of human relationships established by the common will and serving some vital human need” (547). The human need in this instance is the transmission of cultural heritage through the generations. Birdsall (1985) added another element to the transmission of cultural heritage, the passing on of “cosmopolitan values” (22).

The last philosophical element appears at this point. Birdsall’s statement that along with the fairly innocuous task of cultural heritage reproduction (this too will be criticized at a later point) librarians began passing on cosmopolitan values. They began to act, regardless of the slight degree, in a normative fashion. Librarians in the pre-professional days prior to the adoption of professional and scientific standards had acted in a normative, specifically moralistic, fashion. In reality, this practice had not waned. But Blanke (1989) makes clear the motivation behind the attempted banishment of such behavior, “A scientific mode of inquiry eschewing political commitments, social ideals, or value judgements have been desideratum of the social sciences since Max Webber...librarianship has embraced political neutrality as a means toward acquiring professional status” (39). Gremmels (1989) echoes this, arguing that librarianship works under an “axiological assumption” of neutrality (364). Dick (1995) goes as far as to argue that librarianship can be seen as “traditional liberal social science” for its adoption of neutrality (217). Neutrality, as an ethical position, is part of the philosophical program that defines librarianship. It is also a major part of the public policy of organizations like the American Library Association (ALA).

But it is not as simple as arguing that librarianship is neutral because a professional organization calls for that to be the case. Both Cornelius (2004) and Floridi (2002) argue that librarianship can be normative on philosophical grounds. Cornelius bases his argument on the concept of becoming part of the community in which the librarian is serving. This allows, if not outright demands, that the librarian adopts the normative values of the community. Floridi (2004) calls the work of the librarian steward of a semantic environment, an inherently non-neutral position. But this brings up larger issues, namely that of politics.

Public libraries, as with a great deal of libraries, exist in the political world of public institutions. Libraries by this point alone are not neutral. They must participate in the political process for their own survival and well being, and by doing this have destroyed claims of absolute neutrality. This facet is excusable, though Hennessey (1981) questions the logic of library-government interactions and the precarious support libraries are shown. The concept of neutrality being discussed here deals directly with the interaction of patrons with the library (through staff interactions or interactions with the collection).

The collection itself is a central feature in the debate over neutrality. Budd (2006) highlights how the collection can be used to support claims of political bias of librarians. Alfino and Pierce (2001) discuss an historical

example of collection development and neutrality. Popular works of fiction were originally not allowed in library collections. As the demand grew librarians chose a path of neutrality. In doing this, they allowed for the collection to grow in a way they may not have agreed with, while not taking responsibility for its inclusion. Neutrality became a form of blame removal. Moody (2004) argues that, "...it is likely that some librarians suppress controversial materials without considering their actions to be censorship" (169). The collection can be a divisive and political issue in a library. It is difficult for librarians to remain loyal to the professional and philosophical idea of neutrality when materials become problematic in the collection.

The issue of politics and librarianship goes further than the local politics of collection development. The perceived political demands of the profession coupled with the political leanings of individual librarians creates another political dynamic in libraries. Good (2006) is forceful in his stance on neutrality, "The proposition that a librarian is responsible for neutrally communicating both sides of an issue, merely for the sake of ensuring both sides are heard, seems fallacious, at best" (27). Durhani and Smallwood (2006) equate the politically neutral library to a McDonalds that serves the same identical food at every location, "Librarians trained to run such global libraries take professional pride in being 'neutral' in the social divide all around them. They thus become increasingly isolated from the majority of people in their local communities" (4). Joyce (2000) argues that the current social and political status quo is discriminatory and that neutrality in library service does nothing if not support this position. He concludes that neutrality is a false concept, choosing to be neutral is choosing to accept inequality.

Both Samek (2004) and Rosenzweig (2004) look to provide theoretical context to these progressive political ideas. Samek argues that progressive political discourse forces elites to reconsider ideas of neutrality and intellectual freedom. These ideas are part of the historical development beginning with the Library Bill of Rights in 1938. Rosenzweig positions progressive politics in the broader heading of democratic humanism. As such he sees progressive politics in librarianship as currently serving the role of contesting and challenging power structures both within the library and in the society at large.

It was mentioned earlier that even the idea of cultural heritage can and will be challenged. Lloyd (2007) argues that the act of granting significance to an act, the literal act of cultural preservation, is a "largely uncontested practice" (55). These acts of significance bring up a myriad of issues relating to cultural memory, power centers, and the democratic process of historical remembrance.

Politics and librarianship are not monolithically progressive or leftist. Bivens-Tatum (2006) discusses what he calls the creation of "dissident librarians." These are alienated librarians who feel isolated by the non-

library related political actions of organizations like the ALA. The emphasis is on the fact that the political alienation is not based around issues of librarianship, but external political issues brought up through the mechanisms of the ALA. Wessells (2003) discusses an issue of anti-neutrality at the reference desk. Instead of progressive politics, he is referring to his religious faith and his calling to share it with others. Though he states that he does not preach to patrons, he does look to set an example that is based on faith with his behavior as a librarian. At the same time he is not shy in discussing his faith with the public in his role as a librarian.

Neutrality brings up several issues that were dealt with earlier, namely the existence of a position (neutrality, metaphysics, epistemology, ontology, etc.), but yet a lack of cohesiveness in regards to the formal position of these rules and/or philosophies. Again, librarianship has adopted a concept, in this case neutrality, and attached it to the discipline. There is an internal logic with the acceptance of the other philosophical elements of librarianship, but there is no theory or set of theories that unifies the discipline into something that could be called paradigmatic.

At the beginning of this paper the idea of these concepts being relevant to daily practice in the public library was introduced. This is an important idea in librarianship, the application of theory into practice, but is currently impossible to implement on a universal level. The lack of canonical theory in librarianship results in the inability for librarians nation- or worldwide from universally implementing any non-technical or non-law binding principles. To this point it has been shown that the adoption of philosophical principles by the discipline of librarianship has not created a scenario of universal implementation. Is it possible for this to happen in the future? It would be possible only if two current attributes of the discipline change. To begin with larger amounts of theoretical works must be produced and put under strict peer review. A theoretical shift in librarianship is only possible if a vibrant literature is there to support it. The second and more challenging shift would have to come on the working librarians end. It is the responsibility of librarians to engage with theoretical works and adopt a new reflective posture towards their own work. The opinion expressed by Plaiss (1983) is one major roadblock, "...drones may not ask philosophical questions or delve into the epistemology of librarianship, but they get the job done" (618). This recommendation is being made fully aware of the economic and political situation librarians currently face and the impediment these issues pose in the face of intellectually engaging work. But the point remains valid. The production of theory in a profession such as librarianship is useless if some part of it is not digested and utilized by the working public librarians across the nation.

This paper has attempted to highlight the philosophical issues that are at the heart of modern librarianship and how they affect politics and public librarianship. Librarianship is not a profession which has a rich philosophical and theoretical history. Instead it is an excellent example of vocation which was driven towards professionalization by the experiences

and problems faced by their members. In its place, librarianship adopted the scientific and political philosophy of the Enlightenment through the prism of modern social science and its own unique interaction with science and philosophy. Librarianship as a result is a discipline without a pantheon or canon that defines it. Instead practical measures were proposed, adopted, and implemented that for some period of time were sufficient in governing the discipline. But in the broader scope of librarianship's own institutional memory there is a clear lack in historical guidance and credible precedent. These issues manifest themselves in the role of neutrality and the politics of librarianship. Issues originating from both the left and the right challenge the dominant thinking of librarianship. It is the responsibility of both scholars and practicing librarians to forge and engage theory and philosophy. It is impossible to remedy the problems of theory and philosophy post hoc, but it is possible to imagine librarianship anew. Debates can begin, institutes founded, journals published all in the hopes of not only clarifying theoretical issues in librarianship, but bringing the discipline closer to the professional independence it has craved since its inception.

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