



LR
63,1/2

Past and present factors of the crisis in Italy's public libraries

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Received 19 January 2013
Revised 26 April 2013
8 July 2013
Accepted 9 July 2013

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyse the general reasons for the crisis in Italy's contemporary public library institution. This crisis is complicated by the historical origins of the public library in Italy and, more broadly, by the difficult relationship between the Italian culture and today's world.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual discussion on the role of public library in Italy.

Findings – The paper finds that the continuing delay in the acquisition of literacy, the tendency for points of view to become divided and to go to extremes and the development of a form of politics in the country suspended between centralised government and the claims of the local self-governments are all factors that have influenced the establishment of the public library in Italy.

Originality/value – Understanding the conditions of the controversial origins of the public library in Italy can be of help when deciding which model to use in the future. A suitable model for this institution must not neglect but, on the contrary, must enhance the role of the library as a social institution of the history of a specific community.

Keywords Public libraries, History, Italy, Public library models

Paper type Conceptual paper

Foreword

The public library is experiencing a profound crisis at present. The most evident cause of this crisis would appear to be the economic situation, as heavy budget cuts are making it difficult for these social institutions to survive. In fact, the matter is more complicated. For some years now, there have been radical changes in the social conditions within which libraries must operate. If libraries were initially established as an answer from the national and local political systems to the need for reading matter and information expressed by their public at a time of fundamental change, nowadays these same systems are finding it difficult to continue with this policy. The reason is that the actual political sphere is having problems in redefining an overall social communication system in which libraries have their proper place. There are inevitable and recurring doubts about the future of libraries, always assuming that they have some sort of a future (Aabø, 2005; Buschman, 2003; Council on Library and Information Resources, 2005; D'Angelo, 2006; Lancaster, 1993; Usherwood, 1997; Webster, 1999).

After a brief introduction about these general issues, the intention of this article is to consider this identity crisis within the Italian context, where the situation is further complicated by a host of factors that, over the course of time, have prevented the public library from playing its role as a democratic upholder of knowledge in a uniform way throughout Italy. In short, if, in general terms, the public library faces an uncertain future, then that of Italian public libraries is even more problematical. Paradoxically,



however, the historical reasons that held back their development could turn into a positive factor, as they have prevented the massive-scale establishment of a “bookshop model”, now strongly criticised for being passively based on purely consumerist criteria (McMenemy, 2009b; Waller, 2008). The outcome could be an approach towards development that consolidates the role of the library as a public space and its ability to provide a major gateway of access to documents that allows readers to appreciate their cultural complexity and historical importance.

The public library and the contradictions of modernity

The public library is a characteristic institution of the modern era; historically, it represented the attempt to provide society with a chance to have its say within a chaotic and insecure human dimension. This historic period, when the public library came into being during the nineteenth century, possesses singular affinities with the contradictions that characterise our post-modern society.

In other words, since Lyotard, greater attention has been paid to the reasons for the fracture between the modern era and the next one, reasons that must certainly not be neglected but which, unfortunately, overshadow the links between the two epochs. The outcome is that history, including that of libraries, is presented as a succession of chapters that are ends unto themselves.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Marx affirmed:

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary (Marx, 1,856, p. 20, cited by Berman, 1988).

These words sound topical, even prophetic, and show how uncertainties and contradictions, the driving forces even at those times, were able to appeal to the sensitivity of the modern man. A man dismayed by an era blighted by frantic change, rocked by profound social revolutions and pervaded by an inescapable feeling that the centrality of the Western world was on the decline. The effects of that long wave are appreciable even now; the century in between – the century of totalitarianisms and world wars, the cinema, television and the Internet – seems like a harrowing interlude in a single human affair now near, as Spengler foretold, to its eclipse.

Expanded and reinforced by a telecommunications system that has spread them worldwide, modernity’s contradictions are still ours because, as Giddens affirms, “we have not moved beyond modernity but are living precisely through a phase of its radicalisation” (Giddens, 1990, p. 51).

As mentioned previously, the invention of the public library comes within this context, characterised by strong tensions, like a sort of wager with two objectives. On one side, there is an undoubted trust in progress created by the enlightened view that the acquisition of literacy and permanent education play a fundamental role in the definition of *homo novus*: the citizen who knows how to read and write, who keeps himself informed and creates the basis of that form of self-government that is a parliamentary representation. Library science has rightly given ample scope to this aspect, as it is an ideal paradigm into which the genesis and development of the public library can be included, even to the extent of maintaining that “the public library was quintessentially a product of the age of Enlightenment – its archetypal institution in many ways” (Greenhalgh *et al.*, 1995, p. 19).

Less mention has been made of the public library's role as the result of a political forum intent on defining a potential element of stability within a confrontational and contradictory dimension, a role that is equally important when it comes to explaining the public library's appearance on the scene (Black *et al.*, 2009, p. 31). Whether this goal has actually been reached is of secondary importance. What counts is rather to stress a significant fact; at a certain point, a governmental policy felt that the public library could become an important instrument for influencing forms of society and, more especially, the means offered to modern man for developing his personality in a constructive manner. Well before Antonio Panizzi, Adam Smith himself considered that "those for the instruction of people of all ages" were public institutions *par excellence*.

Thus, it is reasonable to believe that without a decisive action from the government, an action stimulated by the need to establish educational structures able to act as tracks along which the traffic of a new and intense social mobility could be directed, the public library in mid-nineteenth century England would have never been invented.

At the present time, this strong political action in support of public libraries is certainly not something that can be taken for granted. The downfall of the great identitarian scenarios and the demise of unifying ideologies have led to the inability to function with a systematic approach, open to far-reaching future prospects. In addition, it is the actual fundamental idea of "public good" that is being challenged; this concept implies that the pursuit of individual good cannot be contemplated without respect for the rights of others, but must be directly or indirectly steered towards the growth of social well-being as a whole.

Thus, the public library is now facing a whole array of imposing contradictions as occurred at the origins of its history, but without the backing of a stable political outlook and, unlike in the past, no longer with the shared perception of the value of a structure publicly dedicated to books and reading:

The public library of today is a product of late modern or post-modern society just as the public library contributes to create this society. Today, public libraries have thus become part of a society that is complex, bewildering, and, to a large extent, without a sense of direction. It is on the foundation of this deep-rooted uncertainty that there are so many visions for the future role of the public library and that they seem to point in different directions (Rasmussen and Jochumsen, 2007, p. 46).

At the origins of the public library in Italy

To consider these issues within Italy's specific context is extremely complicated. In Italy, the crisis in the public library sector does not merely affect the present day situation, but it has been a characteristic feature of its entire history; controversial beginnings and a failure to evolve have, as Paolo Traniello writes, led to an institute having been handed over to the local government "after being already deprived of most of its major innovative potential" (Traniello, 2002, p. 251).

It seems that an attempt to explain how this was able to occur should not only involve issues that strictly concern librarianship – even though there have been and still are delays and shortcomings in this field – but certain specific characteristics of the Italian cultural framework that have influenced the development of the public library in a much more significant way.

The first aspect to consider concerns the extremely tormented relationship between Italians and the written word. In 1861, i.e. at the time of Unification, Italy was paying the

price for a remarkable delay in the acquisition of literacy; almost 80 per cent of the population was illiterate, a much higher percentage than the other countries of Protestant Europe and even that of Catholic France. The role played by the Roman Church, from the Renaissance period onwards, in conditioning the relationship between books and readers, is well known; as underscored by Mario Infelise, it created a system of surveillance:

[...] that acted as a model for any sort of inquisitorial thought-controlling organization of the future, with inevitable repercussions on the life of individuals, on their relationship with reality and with authority, on the progress of science and knowledge in general (Infelise, 1999, p. 4).

However, this conditioning process, which must be considered along with other forms of control perpetuated by civil authorities, played a decisive role in forming a large number of non-readers scattered in an irregular way throughout Italy, especially in the South, where the vast majority of the population was illiterate. Even now, no attempt to make up for this delay in the acquisition of literacy, which accumulated as time passed by, seems to have occurred, as, according to the statistics, an average of 71 per cent of the population in the 27 member countries of the European Union reads at least one book a year, whereas that percentage drops to 45 per cent in Italy, with remarkable differences among the different geographical areas of the country (Solimine, 2010). In other words, the shortfalls in educational matters that the unitary state inherited in the nineteenth century have proved to be an enormous obstacle along the road to modernity. Italy, wrote Alberto Petrucciani:

[...] continues to carry an ancient millstone of ignorance around its neck, thus narrow-mindedness, lack of critical faculties, dependence on orality and on the more elementary forms of communication and information of poor and limited content (Petrucciani, 2012, p. 197).

The second factor to consider concerns the wholly peculiar manner in which the modernisation process has been achieved in the peninsula, the history of which is full of anomalies and paradoxes of every type. So much so that the result has been what Guido Crainz calls “the country that missed the mark”, not because of the absence of modernity, but owing to its specific *quality* (Crainz, 2003, p. 164). The reasons that led to this disappointing result are manifold and, in a certain sense, part of the genetic makeup of the Italian culture. If, in other countries, the lacerating contradictions of modernity encouraged an intensive exchange of views that led to new ways of interpreting reality and new institutions entrusted with imparting knowledge, in Italy, these same contradictions were treated as pretexts for sparking off bitter controversies among different factions stubbornly entrenched in their positions. The result is interlocutory, as Ferrarotti remarks:

[...] it is difficult to deny the modern character of its formal institutions, but it is equally difficult to deny that they possess approaches and sentiments of open, explicit anti-modernity [...]. Italy continues to be an enigma (Ferrarotti, 1997, p. 119).

Broadly speaking, modernity tends to fan the flames of extremism because it is contradictory; as Berman underlines, it “is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt” (Berman, 1988, p. 24). This tendency to group opinions into two extremes became even more accentuated in Italy, as it was fuelled by a historical legacy marked by centuries of

antagonism. This is why the famous antithesis proposed in 1964 by Umberto Eco, “apocalyptic vs integrated” (Eco, 1964), referring to the drastic division between pessimistic and optimistic intellectuals in relation to mass culture, provides an interpretative framework for the Italian culture in its widest sense, applicable to the entire parabola of modernity, to its past as to its present. For the past, the well-read academically educated intellectual’s ever-strong, often snobbish defence of his role as the sole and titled holder and interpreter of the true concept of culture could, perhaps, bear more than one justification considering our country’s specific liberal arts heritage and the decisive role played in the unification process by the members of this caste of priests of the Humanities (Bollati, 1972). For the present, however, it is disconcerting to note how publications fundamentally tuned to the same wavelength, whereby all aspects from worlds, “other” than that of Humanities, are denied, still continue to flourish just as though 50 years of *cultural studies* had elapsed in vain (Nacci, 2009, p. 31). Conversely, innovators have often adopted and are still adopting fideistically optimistic standings with respect to any solution or product created by the technological industry, enthusiastically embraced without any effort to consider the intended uses or the need to contextualise, as should occur whenever a technology is applied to cultural assets.

“Will we be modern?”, asks Sergio Romano, as his collection of articles about present-day Italy is called (Romano, 2007): the question remains open, but so long as this lack of dialogue between catastrophists and conformists remains, the answer can certainly never be other than no.

These two factors, illiteracy and the difficult process of modernisation, formed the general context in which the public library had to develop in Italy – a situation that was certainly not conducive to the development of a library model stemming from a cultural dimension so radically different from that of the United Kingdom. A context that, as Alfredo Serrai affirmed:

[...] on the one side, favoured withdrawal towards a past that was blown out of all proportion through the rhetoric of national cultural glories and supremacy, especially in Italy’s more important libraries, which were those managed by the State while on the other side, it neglected to encourage and develop more up to date and dynamic powers of contemporary thought and science (Serrai, 2006, p. 121).

It was therefore inevitable for the public library in Italy to have endeavoured to develop by attempting to radically distinguish itself from the library institutions already in existence, i.e. institutions of noble lineage, temples of knowledge in which solely scholars dwelt and that were conducted with a mainly historic-philological sort of approach. The resulting “library-related dualism”, to use Paolo Traniello’s expression (Traniello, 2002, ch. 3), was actually a real contention that was more a game of opposites than separates. To put it bluntly, Ettore Fabietti said:

In Italy, the public library was and is called *popolare* (popular, pertaining to the neighbourhood), to distinguish it from our *national* libraries for the cultural elite with which it has nothing, and will never have anything in common (Fabietti, 1908, p. 12).

In short, us here, and you over there. How much that original dualism affected the formation of the public library in Italy is still a matter for discussion; what is certain is that it has never been overcome. This is partly due to a justifiable difference in goals that the two different types of institutions seek to attain. On the other hand, however, those

points of contact and synergy that could have been forthcoming in a rational strategy and that, for this reason, could have been efficacious, have become inexorably lost, also owing to lack of a general policy for libraries in Italy. From the time Guido Biagi's well-known considerations were voiced in 1906 (Biagi, 1906), complaints about this shortcoming are to be found in all Italian library science literature about the subject.

Regarding this aspect, the 1960s was a very important period in the history of the public library in Italy. Until then, the only public libraries able to provide even the slightest answer to the reading requirements of the lowest social classes were the *popular libraries* mentioned previously. Established by Borough authorities, parishes and trade unions, these libraries were noteworthy for their vivacity and élan, but their scope was limited to the working class. It was only in the 1960s that the Italian library community began to take a real interest in the "library for everyone" model to be found in English-speaking countries, while professional debate as to how that model could be applied consequently grew. Moreover, the Servizio Nazionale di Lettura (National Reading Service)[1] was strengthened in an attempt to prevent individual libraries from being isolated and to encourage the greatest number of citizens to read, including those in small towns and country areas. The standards for the public library were published in 1965 by AIB, the professional Association of Italian Librarians (AIB, 1965). This document contained the minimum requirements for the establishment of libraries in Italy, the purpose being to ensure that all citizens had equal access to the service. At that time, the library policy remained firmly in the hands of the State, as it was believed that the State alone possessed the authority to develop the local libraries with adequate funding. However, these interventions were never coordinated in an organised developmental plan, and the results differed considerably from region to region. The situation did not change very much even when the legislative powers over libraries passed from the State to the Regional authorities in the 1970s. It is certainly true to say that, thanks to the regional laws, the conditions of many Italian libraries improved and they were able to provide a high-quality service. Despite this fact, the negative legacy of past delays and conflicts of jurisdiction regarding national and local laws still weighs heavily today, as the 6,000 or so libraries established by local authorities (most of which possess < 5,000 volumes) are not enough for a country with 8,000 municipalities and also because the majority of these libraries (58 per cent) are concentrated in the northern regions (ICCU, 2012).

The chronic absence of a plan for libraries at the national level brings us to the third structural factor that influenced the history of the Italian public library sector, i.e. the fragile and ephemeral constitution of the State. As Galli della Loggia writes:

[...] in Italy's past, there appear to be no historic factors capable, for instance, of evolving the State as expression, thus also guardian, of the rights and interests of individuals, as general pivot, one could say, of the sphere of individuality and neither, on the other hand, of evolving the State as representative of a collective political interest in order and power, to be achieved thanks to a dedicated and efficient organizational structure (Galli della Loggia, 1998, p. 129).

Thus, one must also take account the latency, in Italy, of that component which, in the English-speaking world but also in other European countries such as France, was the fundamental driving force behind the origin of the public library sector in the first place and then of its development. The lack of a State policy rooted in the country and shared by the people is the ruinous factor of that partial, or in some cases, completely inexistent structural framework (although paradoxically, there has been an attempt to make up for this shortage with contrived and excessive state-control); thus, in many respects, Italy is

always a step behind other advanced countries. The turbulent history of the National Library Service (SBN)[2] is a typical example of Italy's specific difficulty in turning important development and modernisation plans into functional and uniform implementation instruments throughout the country. The centralised character of the SBN is symptomatic of strong Italian leanings towards statism rather than a modern model of a state able to function in accordance with the decisions taken by the local governments (Solimine, 2004, pp. 173-177). The recent economic crisis has underscored this, our age-old cultural deficit, to an even greater extent by facing us with a brutal reduction in resources. It should have, at least, been able to oblige us to strategically plan the investments that were still possible, given the shortage of available funds. Frankly, this does not seem to have occurred. For example, the report published by the Fondazione Rinascimento Digitale in 2006 highlighted how sporadic and unplanned were the various initiatives implemented by the Italian libraries in the realm of digitalisation projects. It would have been better to perform a serious stocktake of the projects concluded in the country and those still in progress so as to avoid duplications and prevent resources from being wasted in such times of financial straits. However, what actually happened was a lasting difficulty in harmonising cultural projects and technological solutions, a fragmentary approach to the digitisation policies, and a multiplication of national and regional portals created on the basis of various preferences.

The weaknesses in Italy's public library sector are essentially long-lasting factors: one could call them "structural weaknesses". Repercussions of a far wider scope, namely, the culture of the Italian people and the internal contradictions with which it has been and is still beset, reflect on the public library as an institution. Transition towards an economy based on the advanced service industry has merely exaggerated the unresolved difficulties between the need to conserve and the need to manage information. This situation has highlighted, if there was still a need to do so, how, in Italy, the public library as an institution has been unable to discover a convincing third alternative. So much so, that the chance to play an active part in the cultural unification process has so far been denied.

Public library: which model for the future?

All this is the burdensome heritage with which we must cope. However, rather than coming up with fascinating scenarios of counterfactual history about libraries in Italy, imagining how it could have been had the country taken a different direction in its development process, it is perhaps better to try to understand if (and how), in the present situation, the public library is still able to be perceived as a place that offers an answer to the citizens' need for information, where the memory resources of the community are preserved. Or should it rather turn into a new sort of meeting venue for the people, dispensing varied social assistance services. The distinction between these two theories is inevitably an identitarian distinction.

The library world viewed the advent of post-modernity as a period of necessary renewal: a breath of fresh air from a window wide open to technological innovation and marketing strategies. The resulting benefits should not be underestimated; librarianship became aware of the momentous turning point in communication techniques and languages and, meanwhile, in the international scope of its goals. There is now a new generation of librarians possessing high-level computer and managerial

skills, while the types and forms of service that libraries can and must provide have been radically revised. Thus, a driving and particularly significant need for innovation that pervaded an institution which, as mentioned in the case of Italy, had not yet resolved its internal conflicts with the contradictions of modernity.

However, we must now turn a new leaf. Trust in the self-regulating abilities of the markets and in the promises of overall growth championed by the neoliberal credo, which played a big part in configuring the ideal conditions of the post-modern library, have revealed their limits in a dramatic and, for many, tragic way. If the recourse to public funds has prevented the system from collapsing, at least so far, it appears evident that the resources which social services are able to use in the country are, and will be, increasingly more limited. Additionally, this involves libraries, perhaps first and foremost “the first to be cut when budgets fall short” (D’Angelo, 2006, p. 1). Thus public libraries urgently need to establish among which items of expenditure they must apportion their budgets; an operation that inevitably turns out to be strategic, as it becomes necessary to choose or redefine a service model. It is certainly not by chance that during these past few years, international debate (also Italy’s in the case in point) about the role and functions of the public library has suddenly reawakened and right at the heart of the dispute is the need to understand which direction must now be taken, i.e. when all is said and done, in what way a public service must distinguish itself from the private offering (Rasmussen and Jochumsen, 2007, p. 57)[3].

There are actually two models involved:

- (1) the so-called “supermarket model” on one side, i.e. a library which conforms in certain ways to the criteria of the large-scale retail channel; and
- (2) on the other side, the “traditional” model which, true to its long-standing functions, considers that the library should represent an alternative to the other organised forms of informational mediation.

The propensity towards one or other of the models, with all the variants and undercurrents there may be between the two extremes of the issue, is inevitably bound to the many different factors that affect the way a public library is planned. In Italy, however, there are two factors that are frequently encountered in public libraries throughout the peninsula and that often influence, in a decisive way, the decision to opt for library projects very much like those of the past. These two factors concern:

- (1) where the Italian public libraries are situated: they are often found in historic buildings; thus, the user perceives them as institutions well-established over time; and
- (2) the presence, in even local Italian public libraries, of a vast quantity of documents that go back in time: a factor which can be viewed as a burden in management terms, one able to hinder the development and modernisation of the library.

Along with the current difficulties in obtaining funds for the purpose of building new libraries, these two factors more or less oblige us to continue with the type of library inherited from the past, in terms of structures and collections. Apart from certain new, advanced libraries, such as those of Sala Borsa in Bologna, San Giovanni in Pesaro, San Giorgio in Pistoia and the Pertini library of Cinisello Balsamo, all housed in radically

adapted historical buildings, most Italian librarians have to deal with the past on a daily basis, as, in various ways, it is rooted within the buildings in which they work. However, this lingering legacy must not be considered solely in a negative light. The process of *dedifferentiation* (Rasmussen and Jochumsen, 2007, p. 57) which, in more modern surroundings, tends to smooth out the differences between the library itself and any other *low-intensive* meeting place (like bookstores or Internet cafés), becomes less sensitive when a library is situated in a historic building. Obviously, a distinctive place such as a historic building may fail to attract new groups of potential users, but it can also become a decisive factor in defining the library as “one of the very few remaining free public spaces in communities today” (p. 57).

Similarly, if dealt with in the right way, the wealth of documents in the Italian public libraries can become of great importance to the process by which a community enhances its intangible cultural heritage (Petrucciani, 2012, p. 200). What are needed are appropriate forms allowing the technological infrastructure to harness our documentary heritage for use by the public, so as to underscore that close-knit layering of material traces that “does not merely provide evidence of extinct or remaining material cultures, or out of date production systems: but rather real *fixed capital* belonging to the country” (Durbiano and Robiglio, 2003, p. 99).

But there is another issue to consider. Unlike the “bookshop model”, which can be applied everywhere in an almost standardised way – and I emphasise *almost*, because even that model must adapt, at least in some small way, to the social context in which it is situated – libraries with a history behind them are already symbiotically linked to their specific area and to the people who live there. If it is true to say that “libraries are a complex subset of a complex world and it behoves librarians and those interested in libraries to understand that complexity” (Crawford and Gorman, 1995, p. 115), then Italian public libraries already possess antibodies against all risks of standardisation, as, rather than abstract and stereotyped spaces, they resemble landscapes marked by a tradition, to use the phrasing of philosopher Gianni Vattimo (Vattimo, 1994, p. 113).

It therefore seems that the *identification* process of the library sector must proceed at two different levels:

- (1) that of the fundamentals, i.e. those inevitable general and limited denominators common to all libraries and which characterise their essence (known in other terms as ontological principles); and
- (2) that of the peculiar characteristics of each institution from the standpoint of its history, its documents, the area and community in which it is situated and which define each library’s evolution over time.

The specific identity of each individual library is expressed in a clear yet suggestive way by Fernando Venturini when he writes: “Each library is different from the other. They are places that absorb the history in which they are immersed and the cognition of the readers who frequent them” (Venturini, 2010, p. 93). The ability to comprehend the identity of the library in this way is also helpful in warding off, partly at least, the risks of the widespread phenomenon that Francesco Remotti called *identitarian obsession* (Remotti, 2010). The concept of “identity” is, in fact, a particular ingredient of modernity which, if mixed with other ideological components, may give rise to toxic concoctions: speaking plainly, to narrow-mindedness, intolerance, fundamentalism and defence of the presumed purity of one’s culture to the bitter end.

However, we must admit that “present-day knowledge is built up in an absolutely different way from the knowledge of yesteryear, where an identity [...] was always implied” (Galimberti, 2000, p. 368). Thus, underscoring the uniqueness of each library can become a theoretical instrument of primary importance that does away with such reductionism and, even more important, its disastrous consequences. In short, the historic experience of each library helps us to comprehend the concept of identity, not as though we were venerating a shrine of unchangeable values but as a continuous leaning towards the definition of which values can guarantee greater stability and durability than others. We acknowledge, and the history of libraries is there to prove it, that none of these values is absolutely unchangeable^[4]. Additionally, if one wishes to consider this heritage of values as possessing *approximate identity*, the result of a persistent process of research, of drawing nearer – or if one prefers not to use the term *identity*, considering it useless, indeed, harmful (Remotti, 2010) – it would be a fairly secondary issue with respect to the point made here. Rather:

It is important that we do not consider the complexity and the plurality that form the basic condition for the public library today only as something problematic. On the contrary, the library’s strength and justification today might indeed be the very fact that it actually reflects and supports the individual cultural search processes in the late modernity or post-modernity (Rasmussen and Jochumsen, 2007, p. 54).

The public library crisis is inextricably linked to a perception, rather than to a new sensitivity about time and the duration of things. As Richard Terdiman notes, the symptoms of anxiety towards memory were apparent right from the beginning of the nineteenth century and were bound to two basic problems: its excess and its scarcity (Terdiman, 1993, p. 14). However, in that phase of modernity, there was still room for a notion of teleological time, characteristic of great human redemption scenarios, that could alleviate a man’s sense of bewilderment by offering him a long-term prospect for his entire existence as an individual and as a member of a community or social class. In this day and age, where this chronological dimensionality has been completely abandoned, we are forced to face up to a fragmented, disjointed and no longer sequential time^[5]. This is a notion of time that makes the life of those institutions, the prerogatives of which include the conservation of documents and thus the future of the role of the collective memory, much more complicated.

We know that memory is at risk in the digital world owing to the fragile nature of the documents and the indiscriminate way in which they have been kept, making any attempt to select, handle or manage them an arduous undertaking. The need for a “right to be forgotten”, with respect to information accumulated over time concerning the private sphere of every citizen, also reflects on the public sphere, where the problem is not so much a case of protecting the privacy of the individual, but of configuring the cultural profile of a community. Thus, as Remo Bodei writes:

[...] the greatest danger is of not only things, but of history itself being largely reduced to mere fossilized objectivity, to a heap of data and objects that have neither been mediated by awareness nor enlightened by the deciphering and contextualization of their sense (Bodei, 2009, p. 55).

“Deciphering and contextualization” of the sense of the documents, this, among their other tasks, is what public libraries have done over time and is, in our opinion, what they should continue to do today.

Conclusions

In 1964, in what could be considered, until [Traniello's \(1997, 2002\)](#) works, the first and only structured research into the public library in the Italian language, Virginia Carini Dainotti wrote:

The dispute about what the public library actually is, which must be its goals and about the methods it must use has been going on for over a century, especially in the USA but also in the United Kingdom and in certain countries in Western Europe [...]. The Italian librarians have not taken part in that dispute. Immersed in the economic-social climate of an industrially lagging nation and in the cultural climate of a country with a long and glorious past, we remained faithful, until yesterday, to a system that included a certain number of general libraries alongside the preservation libraries, advanced studies and research libraries and special libraries. But even those general libraries were intended for small minorities and their liability for the public use of the items they held in custody was considered to be their pre-eminent task ([Carini Dainotti, 1964](#), p. 432).

These remarks are considered to be of some significance, as they sum up the viewpoint expressed in this article. Lagging development of the public library in Italy is due to economic and cultural reasons. Difficult and labourious economic development, especially in certain parts of the country, the creation of a network of public infrastructures abreast of the times and cultural reasons have led to a preference for preservation rather than policies able to facilitate the dissemination of information. All of this is aggravated by the responsibilities of the political sphere, which still does nothing to clarify the ambiguous relationship between the central, state and local authorities. This is a situation which has heavily influenced the development of the public library. Although linked to the area in which they are situated, libraries must also be part of a system that comprises the entire country, something which has always been lacking. Even now, there is no national bill in Italy that governs the public library service.

The result of this combination of factors is that the Italian public library situation still remains difficult, even 50 years after the comments made by Carini Dainotti. This situation is marked by disjointed development, where admirable facilities are often situated only a few miles from objectively backward ones ([Traniello, 2002](#), pp. 315-335).

In such conditions, a preference for a standardised sort of library with characteristics dictated by the mass product distribution business could become a real step into the unknown. It would be better to think of an affordable developmental plan consistent with the historical peculiarities of each library. One of the strengths of public libraries is that they represent a knowledge-based model targeted on expansion and depth, an unrivalled role in the information society ([Galluzzi, 2011](#)). In other words, the citizens must understand that the public library is their personal asset, one whose ultimate goal is the quality of its services. As Bob Usherwood maintains: "rather than embracing an easy populism the library needs to be a public space where excellence moves to centre stage" ([Usherwood, 2007](#), p. 121). In this direction and despite their contradictions, the Italian public libraries could actually be in a better position. In a world of "fast information", they possess the appeal of places where information is "slow". First, owing to their historical background, thanks to which they are considered to be cultural institutions, and only second as places for enculturation where consulting documents is only one of the activities available. Services that are highly appreciated by a large number of citizens could conceivably be offered in a library where books (in all their

possible forms) are no longer the central part of the system, but we would have lost the chance to preserve a place specifically dedicated to the use of information focused on quality rather than quantity. As Michel Melot writes:

[...] surrounded as we are by the continual background noise of our cities, the library is one of the few places where one can take time to think and where knowledge is preserved in an orderly way [...]. Each day we are persistently bombarded with information from the media, fenced in by specialized information centres, catapulted through time and space. The library can act as a meeting point, but its other roles could be to reflect on this permanent avalanche, put it into order and set in the right perspective (Melot, 1996, p. 39).

Would this mean continuing with the idea of dusty and rarely visited libraries? One could answer with the comments written by an Italian librarian, “it’s not a matter of whether people go to the library or not, rather that they must have the chance to go” (Agnoli, 2011). The value of democratic institutions does not depend on the use that people make of them. However, there is no reason to be proud of the fact that few people use the Italian libraries (an average of 12 per cent of the population) (Solimine, 2010, p. 52). On the other hand, it is important to remember that, in Italy, two million adults are illiterate, fifteen million are semiliterate and another fifteen million are at risk. Consequently, as Tullio De Mauro points out:

[...] if there are no libraries, then no one knows that there could be and should be. Not being aware of this, no one insists on having libraries. As a result, everything degenerates into collective backwardness” (De Mauro, 2004, p. 31).

The situation created by the anguished relationship between the Italian people and the practice of reading should not be solely ascribed to the lack of public libraries or the inadequacy of their image and services. The issue is wider and more complicated. It involves schools of every type and level, the publishing world and, ultimately, the overall cultural policy of the Italian national economic system.

Notes

1. Promoted by the Ministry of Public Education in the 1950s, the National Reading Service (Servizio Nazionale di Lettura) was a network of lending facilities situated in the provinces and coordinated by a library that acted as central part of the system.
2. The National Library Service (Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale, SBN) is a network of Italian libraries promoted by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities with the cooperation of the Regione departments and the University Institutions coordinated by the Central Institute for the Single Directory of the Italian libraries and bibliographic information (ICCU). SBN is now formed by public and private libraries of a national character, as well as those of the local authorities, universities, schools and academies dealing with different disciplinary sectors.
3. The recent assessment by Christine Rooney-Browne and David McMenemy describes the basis for comparison between the two library models (with a comprehensive bibliography) on an international level (Rooney-Browne and McMenemy, 2010). An up-to-date assessment of Italy’s position concerning the role of the public library is to be found in the study by *Biblioteca Civica Bertoliana* (2010). More specifically, consult the contributions by Giovanni Solimine, Lorenzo Baldacchini e Maurizio Vivarelli in this volume.
4. Michael Gorman speaks aptly of *enduring values*, values that are not eternal but long-lasting, which is something else again: “a value, to be of use, must animate its adherents’ actions and

existence over a long period. This is not to say that values are, by definition, absolutely immutable. Anything, including anything in the realm of ideas and beliefs, may change” (Gorman, 2000, p. 6).

5. Ironically, post-modernism, to which this characteristic fragmentary temporal dimension is generally ascribed:

[...] has been unable to comprehend the deep dynamics of non-contemporaneity. The very way in which it made its entrance shows how it has remained bound to sequential thought, i.e. to that scheme of things according to which one epoch, or episode, succeeds the other and takes over from it to then, just like an assembly line, make way for the next one as soon as possible (Enzensberger, 1999, p. 7).

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