

EDITORIAL:

POLITICS AND ANTI-POLITICS IN LIBRARIANSHIP

Most American librarians today take it for granted that our profession stands for the unequivocal defense of intellectual freedom, freedom of speech and a number of other very fine principles. It is surely among the best things about us that we now see ourselves as being almost definitionally committed to democratic values. But in the last decades we have perhaps grown too used to casting our profession in this heroic mold, as if historically it has always been true that librarians as a profession and *en masse* have opposed censorship, bigotry and intolerance and held tenaciously to intellectual freedom as our cardinal professional value.

This static image of librarianship is, however, a myth (comforting though it might be) as any objective examination of library history would demonstrate. Those who take it as reality are likely to lose sight not just of where we've come from but of how we must proceed. Among those who apparently take the myth for the reality are librarians who are presently railing against the intrusion of "politics" and the destruction of "neutrality" in ALA, provoked by the recent (barely successful) effort to get the association to take a stand against the Persian Gulf War and the censorship it would inevitably entail, as if this were a betrayal of our traditions and of timeless professional values.

History, however, reminds us, with regards to neutrality, that the very emergence of the library profession was intimately associated with ideologically-informed efforts to place the whole development of education and mass enlightenment under the aegis of elite business interests. These interests envisaged systems of rationalized schools and libraries as powerful instruments of social integration and control and our profession consciously placed itself at the service of this eminently ideological project. This is not, of course, to say that the organization of libraries in the public sphere in this era—which was the great impetus to the development of the entire profession—did not have a significance which transcended these ideological limits. It certainly represented a potential extension of democracy for masses of Americans. But we would do well to remember that, if libraries as institutions implicitly opened democratic vistas, our librarian predecessors were hardly democratic in their overt professional attitude or mission, being primarily concerned with the *regulation*

of literacy, the *policing* of literary taste and the *propagation* of a particular class culture with all its political, economic and social prejudices.

In fact, the idea of the neutrality of librarianship, so enshrined in today's library ideology (and so often read back into the indefinite past), was alien to these earlier generations. The origins of the ideas of impartiality and neutrality, which come to fruition much later, are perhaps more connected to the historical process of institutional rationalization and bureaucratization (of which the new librarians were enthusiastic exponents) than to a preoccupation with intellectual freedom. If we have become more democratic, more concerned with equity and social justice it has been because of a political process not because of a hewing to imaginary first principles of neutrality.

No fair historical examination of librarianship in America could fail to note as well that its annals are replete with examples of partisanship, albeit not necessarily (as one would like to believe) of free thought or the rights of minorities, but too often of the causes of the powers-that-be and the forces of order, sometimes taking the form of a passive defense of the status quo, sometimes taking shape as an active campaign for a new cause.

It is no secret, for example, that in seeking recognition of its identity and acknowledgment of its importance the profession energetically curried favor with business and government by actively endorsing World War I. Libraries were made veritable instruments of propaganda with librarians zealously weeding and censoring all unpatriotic material, promoting pro-war views, and persecuting anti-war librarians. What precluded librarians being *anti-war*? Not an aversion to politics!

During the witchhunts of the fifties, didn't librarians at New York Public Library (and elsewhere) dutifully remove the books of blacklisted authors from the shelves (though supposedly putting them in storage rather than burning them as librarians in other countries might not have been loath to do)? This cowardly political act was considered consistent with the prevailing notion of professional responsibility. Who can say politics has been alien to librarianship? But did they have to be *those* politics?

If we are inclined to believe that we have completely overcome our "political" past, we should consider that many ALA members

are fighting against implementation of a poor people's policy, that there is resistance at the highest level to discussing censorship in Israel, that effective action against South African *apartheid* was blocked by Council, and only months ago our association turned a blind eye to members who censored material going to troops in the Persian Gulf.

The question, as a glance at our history reveals, is not *whether* politics enters into professional matters (it always has), but rather *what* politics, and to what effect. We should remember too that it was only since the sixties, largely under the political impetus of activist librarians fighting for a substantive (rather than merely formal/legal) concept of intellectual freedom based on engagement with civil and human rights issues and a politicized sense of social responsibility, that the notion of our commitment to democratic values has been moved to the *central* place in librarianship and given the expanded meaning we are all apt to take for granted today. It may be convenient for some librarians to ignore or forget all this and assert that politics has no place in our profession, but such a view can only be predicated on historical amnesia.

As the chilling specter of a campaign against the fashionable bogey of "political correctness" descends on ALA, PLG maintains that every new problem which arises, whether it has to do with a new technology or responses to a new social crisis, involves questions of the library's relations to the rest of society which cannot but have a political dimension. Every such problem challenges us to live up to our sometimes all too complacently assumed and (despite our rhetoric) sometimes rather tenuous commitment to democratic values. Any stifling of political debate in the name of an ahistorical notion of professionalism would mean not the suppression of divisive politics, but only the unthinking acceptance of a particular politics.

In defiance of phony neutralism, this issue of *Progressive Librarian* investigates several aspects of the politics of librarianship: responses to homelessness, the ins-and-outs of international library cooperation with the Third World, and more general questions of the role of librarianship in creating a new, more just, international communications environment. We hope this issue is a contribution to keeping alive political debate, which alone ensures that our profession's developing principles are continuously infused with real content and meaning.

— Mark Rosenzweig