

THE BASIS OF A HUMANIST LIBRARIANSHIP IN THE IDEAL OF HUMAN AUTONOMY

by Mark Rosenzweig

Does librarianship have any essential connection to normative humanist commitments and partisanship of the prospect of a better society? This paper will suggest the idea of “autonomy” as a key to humanism which also unlocks librarianship’s enmeshment with the goal of the “good society,” therefore as well in an overall project of social change for human development.

This runs counter to today’s claims of the “neutrality” of librarianship, its non-partisanship, claims based on a technocratic affiliation with the engineering concepts of “information science.” This neutrality is called into question, however, in the very first article of the Policy Manual of the American Library Association (ALA): ALA recognizes its broad social responsibilities. The broad social responsibilities of the American Library Association are defined in terms of the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society. What could that be but a declaration of the social mission of librarianship? In view of that it is hard to say that librarianship is neutral as regards social welfare.

However, with the trend of librarianship strongly influenced by a technocratic idea of its mission, moving away in theory and practice from this first principle, we should posit – as I do here – an explicitly humanist librarianship which hews to this principle to see what framework it provides for understanding what values are inherent in that foundational commitment. Karl Marx, in defining the “good society,” said it was, ultimately, the emergence of the set of social arrangements, which are such that they enable the free development of each as the condition for the free development of all.

I am not suggesting Marxism as a philosophy of librarianship. But, in expressing his own value-orientation, Marx, who disdained moralism, stated clearly a larger humanist vision of the future that transcended his own framework, situating him in the great tradition of humanist philosophy. One needn’t be a Marxist to ask: Could there be a better creed for librarianship? Should not librarians, act upon the maxim “the free development of each as the precondition for the free development of all” and is that not, in fact, implicit, in librarianship itself?

If we have or take this creed as our own, what does it draw upon in librarianship, which especially orients the profession towards contributing to that end? The support of this maxim's realization is clear if we start with the fact that librarianship is based on the idea of a common heritage made intellectually accessible and usable to all – today, tomorrow and thereafter – an idea which rests in turn on: a) the implicit notion of the fundamental sociality of knowledge; b) an orientation towards preserving for the future, thus working, always, for the not-yet-existing – perhaps emergent – state-of-affairs; c) a strongly democratic commitment to free and equitable access to knowledge; and d) an ethos of cooperation, mutuality, an “ethic of care” devoted to unimpeded, self-development as imperative to collective well-being, the latter a social and cultural goal only very partially, unequally, distortedly realizable under the present circumstances.

Acting on this, nonetheless, librarians and their libraries, rather than being essentially conservative in their concern for conservation or preservation of the record, would be fighting a progressive rear guard fight to keep open the possibility of a better, more humanized future for all. It is a future, moreover, which in terms of librarianship's commitments does not “cannibalize” the past, a strong enough tendency of other social practices and institutions, which tend to keep us in eternal, helpless immediacy and with no rational hope in the human prospect or our ability to shape it.

Librarianship is an endeavor which, sometimes despite itself and despite its quotidian appearance, has acted as if, while serving the intellectual needs of the present, it is preparing for a “better day” when its “resources” will be more fully available and used as if in order to help build the bridge to a more just, more equitable, more humane order. In that way, librarianship would appear, in its way, a fundamentally “optimistic” endeavor, expressing – in the presence of so much evidence to the contrary in libraries' collections – a faith, much to be valued today, in the very futurity of humankind. For librarians themselves it should be obvious, on reflection, in their own work-world (but seldom is, because of the often alienated and “un-free” nature of their own labor), that human freedom and “disalienation” are possible, achievable, if only because efforts such as theirs, quintessentially collective and cooperative, are possible and sustainable, deepening and ramifying human interconnectedness in efforts which prove by example that the prevailing mechanistic, atomized and positivist model of society is untrue and that “the market” which supposedly is the sole possible framework for human endeavor is not the necessary mediator for organized and effective human interaction, progress and development.

Ultimately, in its modest, yet essential, way, the existence of librarianship and libraries should be seen as a guarantor of both the history and the presence of this growing interconnectedness. This “human globalization” is a form of development which is not driven by the logic of the profit-system, but by a different self-given dynamic which challenges the objective

trend of a world, dominated by corporate globalization, towards privatization of social/cultural heritage and the commodification of knowledge.

This kind of guarantorship is by no means assured. The coexistence of a different road to development – any different road – than the dominant one, is under attack by the forces of corporate-dominated globalization and the tendencies it generates even, of course, in the field of librarianship. That is why it is worth highlighting what is often unstated: the embeddedness in librarianship of an essentially “different” normative framework reflecting a humanist basis and bias which cuts across the profit system’s strident insistence that “there is no other way.”

Indeed, I would argue that librarianship as a profession, to a degree often unrecognized in its importance by librarians themselves, is rooted in a democratic humanism which is, under present circumstances, partisan, a challenge to power, privilege, and vested interests disguising themselves as general, human interests. If librarianship is not that, it will soon not be at all. It will be swept away by the tsunami of globalized capitalism, another institution of the public sphere eliminated by blind, seemingly inexorable, “market forces.” That is why a self-consciously humanist librarianship must be proposed engaging in a practice that it knows to be essential yet threatened. And it is known to be threatened not just by budget cuts, but by the movement of society and thought under the dominion of the dollar towards valuing only that which can be quantified and commodified. Functioning in this circumstance means that what the library embodies is under clear threat as almost symbolic of all public institutions that constitute a “public sphere” of communication and culture being whittled away by privatization.

What is it that libraries embody which, if taken away, constrained or minimized would lead rapidly to their demise? It is, I suggest, the commitment to the goal of human development to which all humanists too are committed. It is the contribution towards true human autonomy – the freedom and independence of associated individuals. This “autonomy” is actually a goal, not a “given,” and it is a social goal, not just an individual one. It is a telos, which also implies a different path than that being forced upon us by dominant economic powers. For it to remain open it must be actively chosen and re-chosen, over and again, in new circumstances, not only by individuals but also by the collectivities they form and re-form over time. It must be fought for.

The evolution of the possibility of individual autonomy in culture is transcribed in the dialogues and interpretations of the constitutively human activity of the creation of facts and artifacts, and the collection and organization, at first casually, then systematically – by individuals and institutions – of the resulting products of imagination and inquiry, of fantasy and analysis, not just as an accumulation of “stuff,” but as fundamentally constructive of the very matrix of “meaning,” of sense, understanding, and self-knowledge.

The shelves of the libraries of the world, full of contradictory and mutually hostile views, of the contests of interpretations and actions based on them, of the return-to-interpretation – and, hopefully, to dialogue at a higher level, define libraries not as passive repositories of “truth” or “wisdom,” but as an active tool to reach truth and wisdom, to enable us to follow the basic Socratic quest: “Know thyself!”

We librarians know that between the books, so to speak, there is an on-going dialogue of interpreters and interpretations, present and past, within the appropriated “conversation of the world” over time and place, the dialog which has been collected, classified and made accessible. The library in this manner consciously encompasses the complexity and ambiguity and depth and suggestiveness of this totality, not as the dead weight of the accumulated past, but as a dynamic on-going conversation with the past.

In this framework the humanist librarian is not, of course, the arbiter of “truth,” but the facilitator of dialogue and interpretation, and of returning to dialogue and interpretation at a higher level. The librarian is the servant of truth and in that capacity has to allow the good and bad stories of humankind’s struggles to be available. This does not mean an indifference to content, but an idea that the truth lies in the totality, an idea that infuses a humanist librarianship.

The collection of the record of this dialectic and of its unfolding in history – the work of librarians among others – contributes to making possible the ability to constitute and recognize an horizon of the “new,” of that which has not yet existed, of that which always contains the prospect, if no promise, of liberation from today’s constraints which bind us in relations of domination of one the other, relations which are the mark of unfreedom, of self-subjection, of mutual degradation, of limitation and imprisonment in meaninglessness.

Perhaps one can better grasp the concept of autonomy by looking at the cases in which it is denied. One finds, for instance, in the nihilism of, for instance, fascism, the negation of the goal of human autonomy as a social project. That is because in that regimen the basis for the dialogical in relationships is destroyed, the foundations of the plurality of interpretations meeting each other productively is made impossible. There can be no real humanities, and indeed no true librarianship under fascism. Empowering communication is not possible without communicants creating, one way or the other, an environment in which it is allowed, encouraged, to be open to hearing, to seeing, the voices and images, the traces, of the transmissible past, to being open to the otherness, too, of co-communicants’ alternative views.

The library and the system of libraries globally provides the basis for a more-than-merely-immediate dialogue between people and cultures and their histories – shared and different, overlapping and separate – and, as well, the not-just-obviously-practical and instrumental interpretation by peoples and cultures of their artifacts and texts, but also a shared, human-

izing appropriation of their meanings sometimes just for their own sake, for the sake “merely” of individual self-affirmation and pleasure. This, taken as a whole, is the complex basis for a collective practice neither extraordinary nor merely routine, but, rather, a humanist and emancipatory practice; the practice underlying mutuality in pursuit of seemingly simple common goals which are, potentially, “liberatory” goals, or even of ends pursued for mere play and pleasure (so often considered edifying only to the elite) as something not to be dismissed as escapism but as human cultururation.

Besides the satisfaction of basic needs and, more darkly, despite the terrible things we have thought we must do to better satisfy and secure them for ourselves, revealed by a review of history – wars, enslavements, degradations, treacheries, deceptions, thefts, tortures, murders, rapes, despoilments, exploitations – there is a parallel, if asynchronous story of “humanization” in each epoch. If it is based in given forms of social organization, it also transcends them to some important degree, it exceeds their limit, in providing for the possible creative, constructive cultivation of knowledge, understanding and self-understanding necessary to give birth to higher forms of organization, interaction and, ultimately, collective action for human betterment.

The goal of enabling human emancipation, which I see as implied by a humanist librarianship or any practice like it, is not as “utopian” as critics would be so quick to point out these days. “Utopian,” in fact, has become an epithet among intellectuals. I prefer to believe, along with the late Herbert Marcuse that indeed “it is the task and duty of the intellectual to recall and preserve historical possibilities which seem to have become utopian possibilities.” If we look at “the intellectual” in Marcuse’s quote as a social function as well as a social grouping and not just as an individual person then if librarianship considers itself in any sense to embody “the intellectual,” his reminder could not be more a propos. For the librarian as intellectual, the library is the institutionalization of the need to “recall and preserve” the very idea of historical possibilities, representing the possibility of a history pregnant with the future which could yet serve as a goal.

If I say the librarian is an “intellectual” it is not to say that the librarian is, as some would understand it, “contemplative” or “above the fray.” In a world of increasing and destructive irrationality the cause of reason requires passion and engagement. The humanist librarian must come to understand, despite the image of our profession, that Reason alone cannot assure the preservation of even what has been hard fought for, or assure progress or a better future. Reason cannot be sustained or advanced without emotion, nor without passion. Today, few really believe there is a kind of disinterested, disembodied reason. That is a myth at best, a lie at worst. The evil of unreason, in any case, is not emotion and passion. It is, rather, often and most chillingly in modern times, the cold dispassion and bureaucratic idea (sometimes pursued with maniacal intensity and fervor, to be sure, and taken as the norm) that reason is purely instrumental and that

it is only instrumental possibilities and conventions which determine what is do-able and therefore worth doing. This unreason of the utterly “reasonable” has become the dominant mode of life in our field, it runs counter to the humanist current, and it is typified by the dispassionate market-subordination and technological determinism of contemporary librarianship.

As opposed to the unreason of the market and the machine, which are the twin idols of our anti-humanist technocrats in librarianship, which we are on the road to taking to the degree in which we are no longer taking them but they are taking us, we suggest that it is time to pick up the threads again of the Enlightenment, or of the goal of enlightenment itself, certainly as a project for librarianship. Immanuel Kant said:

Enlightenment is man’s release from self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage [rote learning, instruction in custom] is justified only by humankind’s inability to make use of understanding without direction from others, that is, with true autonomy. It is self-incurred because – or when – its cause lies not in a lack of reason but in lack of resolution or courage to use it without direction.

“Sapere aude.” Dare to know! “Have courage to use your own reason.” – that is the motto of enlightenment, says Kant. If libraries were to proclaim their social mission in an inscription over their door they could not do much better than to proclaim as invitation: “Sapere aude.”

It is not just a matter of having intellectual freedom but of being enabled to use it. The great socialist Karl Kautsky put it well early last century: “The only real security for social well-being is the free exercise of people’s minds.” Any progressive social project if it is to prevail must be enabled, ultimately, by the full exercise of people’s minds. Librarians not only know this but, historically, have fought to see that it remains possible.

Creating the conditions for that society of emancipated individuals – whatever one calls it (and I actually call it socialism) – is the collective project to which librarianship makes a unique and irreplaceable contribution.

It will only continue to do so, however, if it probes its humanistic roots for its constitutive purpose, and invigorates its commitment to enlightenment and human autonomy as something worth struggling for against very formidable forces.