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LIBRARIANSHIP AS A RADICAL PROFESSION

by Naomi Klein

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Every speech in the world begins with pro-forma thank-yous, but this time is different. When things seemed to be spiraling into an apocalypse of violence, illness, fundamentalisms and hysteria, I would check the ALA website and make sure that, yes, the librarians were still coming. The fact that the ALA decided to come to Toronto – my city – despite SARS, became for me a sort of beacon of sanity in what seems an increasingly insane world: the U.S. and Britain might have gone to war based on no evidence of weapons of mass destruction, and my neighbors might be wearing masks to go to the corner store even though no one has been infected by SARS that way. But some people are still *thinking*, still making decisions based on facts. I do not take your presence here for granted.

Nor do I take for granted the idea that thousands of us can gather together in a room like this and freely exchange ideas, even controversial and critical ones. I confess that, until very recently, I took open borders and open forums for granted. I don't feel that way anymore. I feel like we are losing freedoms every day. We are more afraid of each other: Who is going to infect us? Who is going to blow us up? Who is going to blow the whistle on us for being anti-American – for saying the wrong thing, or reading the wrong book? I don't have to tell you this. Librarians in the United States are on the frontline of the attacks on privacy and civil liberties. The Patriot Act has put you there. You know how little evidence – in fact, none – is required to invade your users' privacy. Law enforcement officials can demand to see a record of the books

your users have taken out and the Internet sites they have visited – without so much as claiming “probable cause.” It has actually come down to this: professional archivists, the people who value information and history most, are driven to shred their own records for fear of how they could be abused. You cannot even tell each other if you have been subjected to one of these searches. It’s the not knowing that kills me.

So my thank-you this morning is not pro-forma: I truly am thankful that we can talk like this and that the ALA decided to come to Toronto. Your choice is highly relevant to my topic today: I was asked to talk about globalization.

SARS, and other highly infectious diseases, are very much a part of globalization, though a side of globalization that our politicians generally don’t like to talk about. The official discourse about globalization is usually about things, stuff: goods and services being traded across borders. But globalization is also about people – the *effect* of that movement of goods and services *on* people. And one of the effects is that people move – we travel, we migrate, we look for better opportunities.

Maybe the people who move were displaced by a war, or by a mega-dam that drowned their village, or an industrial farm that pushed them off their land. What I argue in my book *Fences and Windows* is that the current lopsided vision of globalization has been about freeing money and goods while trying to control and contain people. We in rich countries are told that we can have all the benefits of trade – cheap products, access to the world at our fingertips – without the messy people. We are told that we can live in bubbles of security while the rest of the world boils with poverty, disease and violence. What SARS reminds us of in a relatively small way is that we are all human beings, regardless of national borders. We are connected to each other – whether we like it or not. A flu in Hong Kong is connected to a conference in Toronto. An air conditioner in New York is connected to a flood in Sri Lanka, and a famine in Malawi. One continent’s pandemic becomes another’s illness. One people’s fury becomes every country’s fear. One nation’s war becomes another’s refugee crisis. No border is truly secure.

Our skins – the borders of our own bodies – don’t protect us from disease, just as the borders of our nations cannot protect us from terror. No matter what armor we use to make ourselves feel safe and protected – whether face masks, or elaborate alarm systems inside gated communities, or weapons of mass destruction – we will never be entirely sealed off. And so the question of the global age is not “Is globalization good or bad?” It is “How are we going to pull this thing off?” Will the values that connect us be profit or justice? Fear or solidarity? Are we going to keep trying to build better bubbles? Wrap ourselves in Saran Wrap and turn our nations into police states? Have even more grotesque invasions of libraries by the FBI under the Patriot Act? Or do we go another route?

When I look out at this room I see people who represent values that are distinctly different from the ones that currently govern the globe. These values are, in no particular order,

- Knowledge (as opposed to mere information gathering)
- Public Space (as opposed to commercial or private space), and
- Sharing (as opposed to buying and selling)

It so happens that those are three of the most endangered and embattled values you could have chosen to represent. If you decided to represent “profit” or “global competitiveness” your lives would be easy. But you didn’t, and the very notion that some things that are so important, that cannot be fully owned and contained, is under siege around the world.

Why? A simple, prosaic reason: because there is money to be made. There aren’t nearly enough middle class people in the world to consume all of the cheap products that are being produced. That means that the current stage of globalization is not simply about “trade” in the traditional sense of selling more products across borders. It is about feeding the market’s insatiable need for growth by redefining entire sectors that were previously considered part of “the commons” – and not for sale – as “products.” When we talk about free trade or globalization, what we are really talking about is the fencing in, the enclosing, of the commons. This has reached into every aspect of our lives: health and education, of course, but also ideas, seeds (now purchased and patented), as well as traditional remedies, plants, water and even human genes – *the privatization of life itself*. As you know, it is also reaching into libraries. Information – your stock and trade – ranks just below fuel as the most precious commodity coursing through the global economy. The U.S.’s single largest export is not manufactured goods or arms or food, it is copyrights – patents on everything from books to drugs. The implications are not abstract, as I have learned in my research.

I was in South Africa a little less than a year ago. It was during the World Summit on Sustainable Development – or Rio plus 10. All the talk was of public private partnerships (PPP): the solution to hunger would come, voluntarily, from Monsanto, while thirst would be dealt with by Suez and Bechtel. Yet in the poor townships, privatization has meant that 40,000 households lose access to electricity every month. Hundreds of thousands have been forced to drink from cholera-infested rivers. I went to a community meeting about water cut-offs in Durban. A woman stood up named Orlean Naidoo. She said something that really stuck with me: “There are people in this country who have made a mistake. They think that water is like gold or diamonds. But you don’t need gold or diamonds to survive. Water isn’t diamonds. It’s life.” Water isn’t the only thing that is fundamental to life. So is shelter. So, I would argue, is knowledge. So is medicine.

Yet try and tell that to the trade tribunals that have allowed drug companies to sue governments like Brazil for daring to produce generic life saving AIDS drugs and distribute them for free to those in need. Would that life-saving drugs were shared like library books, simply because people need them to live and can't afford to pay. Sharing is under siege. It is the sworn enemy of the global market – which is why so much of international trade law is designed to criminalize sharing. Forget Napster and the crackdowns on pirated CDs and software. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, the uprising against Bechtel was sparked by the fact that, under the water-privatizing contract, it became illegal to collect rainwater since the company had bought all water rights. In India, farmers are sued by Monsanto for engaging in the age old practice of saving their seeds and sharing them with their neighbours – they are supposed to buy them anew each year from Monsanto.

This is the essence of free trade: making sure that absolutely nothing – whether books or water or ideas – is offered for free. The role of international trade law must be understood not only as taking down “barriers to trade” as it claims, but also as a legal process that systematically puts up new barriers around knowledge, technology and the commons itself through fiercely protective patent and trademark law. There is absolutely nothing free about it. Most of you probably didn't think that helping people to share books was subversive when you decided to become librarians. It shouldn't be: sharing, giving, saving and reusing are the most human of impulses and we are at our best and most human when we act on them. The desire to share, as you know, is immense, yet the fact is that you have chosen a profession that has become radical.

Being a librarian today means being more than an archivist, more than a researcher, more than an educator. It means being a guardian of the embattled values of knowledge, public space and sharing that animate your profession. You may not have chosen it, but the fight against privatization and in defense of the public good has been thrust upon you – by the mania for privatization, public private partnerships, and outsourcing. It has also been thrust upon you by GATS: the General Agreement on Trade and Services, a World Trade Organization side agreement. Before we waded into those waters, a warning: GATS is purposefully confusing, designed to prompt lay people to delegate the whole mess to the “experts” who will rob them blind. But you aren't lay people – you're librarians. So let's give it a try.

There are two main problems with GATS: one is that it takes privatizations and locks them in so they become irreversible. The other is that it takes partial privatizations – like outsourcing or fee-for-service within a public system – and uses it as a legal wedge to force full privatization. So let's talk about the first problem: locking privatization in.

You are all familiar with the infamous case of the Hawaii State Library system's 1995 decision to outsource book selection to a private company in

North Carolina. Like all outsourcing and privatization, it was supposed to offer greater efficiency at less cost. In fact it was universally recognized as a disaster: lots of padding with cheap books, 61 copies of Newt Gingrich's novel, geographically inappropriate books like *A Practical Guide to Lambs and Lamb Caring* – in Hawaii. It wasn't more efficient; it wasn't better. The contract was cancelled, and the policy was changed. It became a learning experience. Under GATS, that could never happen. GATS strips us of our right to learn from our mistakes. It denies us our right to be prudent: to try something, see if it works, and if not, change our minds.

There are two real examples:

The British rails. In October, *The Guardian* newspaper got its hands on a leaked government report about GATS and its rail system. The privatization of Britain's rails is seen by most people as a scandal: accidents have increased, the trains are late, fares keep going up. Yet the document published by the Department of Trade and Industry said that in order to comply with GATS they would have to "fully bind the existing regime for road and rail" – in effect locking privatization in indefinitely and preventing re-nationalization, regardless of whether or not the public demanded it or voted for it.

A year ago in Canada, the city of Vancouver was about to privatize its water filtration system. The council backed out at the last minute, not because it was against privatization per se but because, after studying other cases, it realized that it would lose the right to reverse the decision down the road. That's what happened in Cochamaba, Bolivia, when the water was privatized by Bechtel. Then, when the company was forced to pull out by a popular revolt, it sued the Bolivian government for \$25-million for breaking the contract.

Far from making services more efficient and quicker on their feet, these rules merely lock in bad deals and rob citizens of their right to adapt – to change their minds.

The second serious problem with GATS is using partial privatizations as a wedge to force full privatizations. The way GATS works is that countries can take entire sectors out of the global market and declare them public services – but they have to go all the way, there are no half-way public services. Many trends, as you know, are pushing you towards a two-tiered library system: charging for special orders and for Internet use, outsourcing ordering, even opening bookstores inside libraries. These measures are a response to the same issues that pushed public schools to invite advertising into their classrooms or public hospitals to start charging for selective services: a desperate shortfall of government funds. Hawaii's outsourcing debacle didn't arrive

out of the blue – it was a panicked response to the fact that the state had cut the library budget by 25%.

Under GATS, the problem is that these partial privatizations could well be used against you to force complete de-funding of libraries. Private research providers, bookstores, and video-store chains could go to trade court and argue that they are being discriminated against because they don't get public subsidies and you do. Trust me on this: Barnes and Noble is not your friend, even if they do hand out cool tote bags. And the big publishers may be winning and dining you this week – but that doesn't mean they won't sue you in trade court for offering electronic books and journals for free. Yes, it's outrageous. But it's also happening.

Here in Canada, UPS launched a challenge against Canada Post – the national postal service – saying that they were being discriminated against because the Canadian government was subsidizing their competition. If having a public post office is an unfair trade barrier, having a public library could be too. There are already three ominous signs.

- 1) The debate about electronic books. Publishers and booksellers see free access to electronic books and journals as a threat to their profits. As Pat Schroeder, President of the Association of American Publishers, told the *Washington Post*: “We have a serious issue with librarians.”
- 2) The U.S. government has announced that it will accept bidding for library services under GATS.
- 3) Even though Canada hasn't put libraries on the free trade table yet, last year the government sent out a questionnaire to public libraries asking them to identify areas where they might have “export interests” – in other words, could Canadian libraries make money by offering research or cataloguing or binding services in New Zealand or Uganda?

However, these deals don't go one way: if Canadian libraries are going to become exporters of library services then U.S. and European multinationals have the right to import their library services here: think Microsoft-run catalogue systems and Bloomberg reference desks.

So, what can you do to halt this process? The primary recourse libraries have is that governments have the authority under GATS to exclude the public services they choose. But if you think your governments are going to go to the wall to protect libraries, instead of using them as a bargaining chip to push other countries to open up their water and prison markets, I fear that you are mistaken. I know that U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick hand-wrote a letter to the president of the ALA saying that you don't have to

worry about GATS. And p.s. “my first job was in a library so you can be sure I share your commitment to this valuable public service.” That may be, but Robert Zoellick works for the same administration that showed exactly how it feels about libraries – and about history and culture in general – when it stood by while Iraq’s libraries burned to the ground, its museums were looted and Iraq was turned into a country with no past. As Robert Fisk wrote from Baghdad on April 15, 2003, “for Iraq, this is Year Zero; with the destruction of the antiquities in the Museum of Archeology and the burning of the National Archives and then the Koranic library, the cultural identity of Iraq is being erased.”

“Why?” he asked. I don’t know. But I do know that erasing a culture isn’t bad preparation for AOL-Time Warner and Viacom to come in and sell a shiny new, pre-packaged one. I’m not saying that was the plan. But I’m willing to say that the reason it wasn’t stopped – even though the danger was well known to the Pentagon – is because wiping out Iraqi culture posed no threat to “U.S. interests in the region” as the hawks like to say. How else to explain Donald Rumsfeld’s response? When asked how he felt about destruction of Iraq’s museums and libraries he offered words that will go down in history: “Stuff happens.” I congratulate the ALA for its courageously worded resolution condemning the destruction in Iraq that will come before the council tomorrow. Of course, I do hope it passes.

It shouldn’t be surprising that the U.S. government cannot appreciate what has been lost in Iraq’s libraries – there is precious little evidence that it can appreciate what is being lost when its own libraries are ravaged by state cutbacks at home.

- When all four branches of the public library in Binghamton, New York are shut down entirely, as they were in December, the books weren’t burned – nothing so dramatic – they were just put into storage.
- Or when California Governor Gray Davis actually proposes cutting library funds from \$31.5 million this year to \$1 million next year – \$31.5 million to 1 Million!!!

It looks like about half of that is going to be restored, but let’s be clear: neither U.S. nor Canadian librarians can trust either your state, provincial or federal politicians to stand up for you at the World Trade Organization – you can’t even trust them to stand up for you at home.

All is not lost, however. There are measures you can take to protect yourselves. The best way you can preserve the state funding you currently receive is to resist the temptation to partially privatize your precious public spaces – whether by letting advertisements into libraries, or co-branding with Microsoft, or outsourcing more of your core services. The more you allow the

lines to be blurred between a library and a superstore, or a library and, heaven forbid, Google Answer, the more these multinationals will be able to turn around and claim that you are robbing them of their rightful market share. Partial privatizations will be used as the thin edge of the wedge, the legal precedent, to force more complete privatization down the road. It's already happening with water, health care, sewers, and energy. Why – when information is so profitable – would libraries be immune?

There are another reasons to resist partial privatizations. No matter what you do, libraries are going to have to fight for their very existence. That means you are going to need your most valuable asset on your side: library users. Your communities will have to fight for you and with you. If that's going to happen, your users have to know in their bones that there is no comparison between a chain of book superstores, or an Internet café, and a genuine community library. They have to feel your "public-ness" – which is about much more than whether or not your funding comes from the state and whether your services are free. It's about that ephemeral quality that gives a community a sense of collective ownership over a space. You know what it takes much better than I:

- an ongoing, never-ending conversation between the library and the community it serves;
- a presence in people's lives that goes beyond anything offered by the market: great librarians teach children to love reading, they introduce young adults to the thrill of research, and they become de facto social workers for adults who turn to the library when they have lost their jobs;
- a provision of physical space for people of all ages to debate the issues that matter to them; and
- a sense of community ownership over people's public institutions is expressed in accountability to the community (as opposed to their shareholders) that means running libraries transparently, openly and, when possible, democratically.

It means not just being public but *feeling* public.

Bookstore chains can imitate that feeling with local interest sections and storytimes, and Amazon can talk about "community stake holders," but a marketing concept will never be able to replicate the passion that flows from an institution that is truly an outgrowth of the people it serves. That passion, that sense of collective ownership, is your greatest protection in the unavoidable battles ahead. Remember that the next time a management consultant tells you that the only way to save your library is to act more like a corporation, or to turn your library into a bargain Barnes and Noble. Not only won't it work,

it will hurt you in the future when your users don't fight for you because they can't tell the difference between public and private space. The best way to stay public is to be public – truly, defiantly, radically public. It's your suit of armor. Wear it with pride.

You committed an act of faith in coming here to Toronto. Actually, it wasn't an act of faith, but a sober, clear-eyed judgment. I trust it is the beginning of many more acts of practical bravery. Our times call for nothing less.