

THE CONTROVERSY OVER “DOUBLE FOLD” AS A BATTLE OF ELITES

by David Woolwine

In 2001 Nicholson Baker, a novelist, published a bombshell of a book entitled *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*. The book subsequently received the National Book Critics Circle Award and is today, ironically, out of print. (Perhaps future generations will read it only in microfilm or in digital form.) In *Double Fold* Nicholson gives a history (of sorts) of the decisions made by the institutional elite of the library science profession beginning in the late 1940s until 1980s or even until 1999 (depending on whose story you believe) to destroy large numbers of newspaper collections, and books, with the goal of saving them by microfilming. The destruction of the originals, once microfilmed, ultimately took place partly because it is quicker to produce readable microfilm when the book or newspaper is cut from its binding and laid flat. Then, because one did not want to reshelve (preferably boxed or reconnected in some form) a cut book or newspaper, it appears that much or most of the microfilmed artifacts were pulped or otherwise removed from library collections. Baker also makes an interesting side journey into early attempts by the Library of Congress and the Council on Library Resources to use a highly dangerous chemical, DEZ (diethyl zinc) as a way of mass deacidification. This peculiar sideshow makes the profession appear to have been populated at the time not by library scientists but by mad scientists.

This paper will not detail the various decisions made by various librarians and bureaucrats. What it attempts to do is use a set of sociological concepts, that of the battle of elites and that of the outsider, to tell a story of this episode in library history. Sociological history must necessarily generalize. The goal here is to give clarity to the picture and to show how specific historical episodes are made more comprehensible if they are explained by general concepts. From the many historical details major groups, influential moments, and influential public statements can be highlighted as representative.

I see in this episode of library history three major types of responses to the book *Double Fold*. These are the responses that played various roles in pushing the debate forward to a conclusion. These three response include, first those of scholars, secondly those of librarians in elite institutions (in print, one only wonders what they might have said in private), and, thirdly, the responses of journalists and of book reviewers to *Double Fold*.

The scholarly response is perhaps best represented by Robert Darton (2001). I have selected his response because it is the most influential one among scholars at the time the debate was raging. The leaders and spokespersons of the professional library community are here represented primarily by Shirley K. Baker (2001, 2002), president of the Association of Research Libraries at the time and vice chancellor for information technology and dean of University Libraries at Washington University in St. Louis, and by Richard J. Cox (2001, 2002), professor of library and information sciences at the University of Pittsburgh. Cox is selected because he was not only an early respondent in the fray, but also because he has written a book length treatment of the claims in *Double Fold*. There were, of course, other important librarians writing about Baker at this time – but for the sake of a clear and relatively brief argument I will limit it to these professionals as representative. The third type of response, which was the popular view of the controversy, is represented here by journalists and non-scholarly journal book reviewers. Here I have selected the writing of representative journalists during a brief period of the debate, most of whom wrote for major American newspapers, with one reference to a British publication for confirmation and comparison.

Scholarly Response

If we look at Robert Darton's powerful review in the April 2001 edition of the *New York Review of Books*, we see that the review itself is sardonic and artful but, importantly, it ultimately came out supportive of Baker. Darton is a distinguished professor of European history at Princeton where he has taught since 1968. His research mainly concerns eighteenth-century France, the history of books, and censorship. Darton's review, I would argue, takes just the right tone of distance. He notes that Baker is not writing sophisticated history. He views it as more of a form of journalism, somewhat literary (which would be fine with the postmodernists with whom Darton is keeping company), but Darton clearly sees Baker having the general outline of the story right. For the academic elite, which uses the *New York Review of Books* for a broad spectrum of topics and opinions, Darton's review was solid enough proof that Baker was, on the whole, correct.

Why should other academics accept Darton's review as definitive? Darton's position within the American academy is the reason. He is a major cultural historian, arguably the most revered of American cultural historians, and holds a position at a top academic institution. Obviously, this influence speaks volumes to a very special group among the readers of the *New York Review of Books*. The readership of the *New York Review of Books* contains the core members of an intellectual elite, an elite moreover more powerful, and influential, than librarians who may happen to work at elite institutions. The pages of the *New York Review of Books* publish the works of some of the most influential scholars in what was once called "the humanities" in the United States.

One way of reading Darton's review, therefore, is to see it as part of a dialogue aimed at a broader discourse among this group of elite humanists. "Discourse" of course is a public cultural act, and one that, at heart, is an exercise in the power of ideas to influence. *Double Fold*, and the favorable review that followed by a leading academic, constituted a sort of one/two blow to the library professionals and experts whose authority to some degree had already been weakened by changes in the intellectual and political culture in which they operated. The excessive behavior of the librarian decision makers, as noted in Baker's book, especially silly claims to dubious science, had already begun to be felt by the academic elite as a suspect problem. (The 1995 "Statement on the Significance of Primary Records" by the Modern Language Association of America indicates such unease). These are scholars who had spent the last few decades working with books, other original sources, and, to their discomfort, microfilm. It only took a reasonably well argued book (as unscholarly as *Double Fold* might have been) and a leading academic who would give the book an imprimatur, to convince the academy that there was indeed a problem here. The importance of Darton's review is testified to by the fact that Shirley K. Baker (2001, 2002) and Richard J. Cox (2001) felt the need to respond either directly to Darton or felt obliged to crib from his review to support their own attack on *Double Fold*. Let me repeat: *Double Fold* alone would not have been able to do this job. Darton's review proved necessary for this debate between clashing cultures.

Journalistic and Book Review Responses

Before we turn to the response of librarians, let us look briefly at journalists and some of the book reviews which got published on *Double Fold*, for these too played a role in the public discourse. In a brief period of time, from April 7 to April 15, 2001, four separate treatments of Baker's book appeared in the *New York Times*. On April 7, Elaine Sciolino (2001) wrote a "balanced" article on the preservation crisis. It is balanced in that James H. Billington (the Librarian of Congress), Karin Wittenborg, and other librarians are given their say. For example, Wittenborg is allowed to say that Baker "doesn't look at scientific evidence about paper" (p. B9). But the knife is in. Baker's general argument is accepted inasmuch as the article assumes that microfilming large numbers of paper artifacts, then destroying those original artifacts, was a mistake. We intuit this because we are told that "the practice of destroying books to save them has stopped" (p. B7).

Billington moreover is mocked as the moral equivalent of the corrupt casino owner in the film *Casablanca* who is "shocked, shocked that the Library of Congress once destroyed books" (B7). He is also portrayed as someone who warns people off books that he has not bothered to read himself and to characterize *Double Fold* as advocating a conspiracy theory. Then on April 10, a low-key but supportive book review is also published (Kukutani 2001). And finally, on April 15, both a sympathetic interview with

Baker appears in the book review section of the *New York Times* (Garner 2001) along with a sympathetic book review (Gates 2001). The book review refers to decisions by the Library of Congress as a form of “insanity.” April 15 also witnessed the appearance of a favorable review in the *Washington Post* (Dirda 2001).

The United Kingdom had by this time already heard sympathetically about the book in a review in the *Guardian* (Lazard 2001) in which the title of the review used the phrase “literary vandalism” (p. 11) to refer to the actions of library decision makers. Such popular treatments of the book, especially the remarkable amount of paper and ink expended on it by the *New York Times* in such a short period of time, indicate that a well-read middle class was likely educated on the questionable behavior of library experts.

Librarians in Elite Institutions Respond

Let us turn now to the response of the librarians most affected by the publication of *Double Fold*. First, as stated earlier, responses were varied even within the library world. For sake of brevity, I have chosen only a few librarians as representative who led the charge against the book. As I also noted earlier, this is an analysis of public discourse, thus words issued publicly as part of power struggle exemplify my core thesis, with no attempts made to investigate the voluminous private communications of the critical players. One can speculate that librarians who had either helped make the decisions described in *Double Fold*, or had carried them out, or defended them, felt themselves under personal attack by Baker’s thesis. Their personal feelings, and motivations aside, these are nevertheless not key to a sociological account of the public debate. Doubtless, a certain amount of circling the wagons occurred. Our focus here is on what arguments, once the wagons were circled, were issued and promulgated.

I would argue that their primary argument was a mischaracterization of both Baker and Darton’s arguments and, effectively, a sort of character assassination of Baker on the side. ARL President Shirley K. Baker posted a letter to the *New York Review of Books* on the ARL web page (2001). The letter was quickly summarized in one of the main journals of the library profession (Albanese 2001) and subsequently appeared in the *New York Review of Books* (2002). In the letter, Ms. Baker characterizes Nicholson Baker as having carried out “purposeful misrepresentation” (p. 48). (Clearly this is a personal attack, where Nicholson Baker’s intellectual honesty is called into question). She further states that the practices described have now stopped and only existed for a short period of time anyway. (Odd since the British Library as late as 1999 was still selling off complete newspaper collections.) She attempts to enlist Darton’s own words to support the above claim and also to argue that Nicholson Baker overstates his case – ignoring the fact that Darton finds it on the whole persuasive. And finally, a palm branch of sorts, a middling compliment is offered, in that she is happy that “(b)oth Baker’s book and Darton’s review have served

to bring the preservation of print artifacts to the attention of the public... We are glad to see the interest people have in this issue and hope that public discussion will elevate the importance of preservation and reaffirm the positive role research libraries play in this effort” (p. 48).

This, of course, ignores the role that films like “Slow Fires” had played earlier in bringing this whole matter to the attention of the public with a message, and with consequences, quite opposite to those of Baker’s book and of Darton’s review. Most striking is the absence in Ms. Baker’s letter, of any in-depth presentation of refuting facts or any substantive attempt to discuss in detail the main points which Nicholson Baker, or Darton, make. For regular readers of the letters section of the *New York Review of Books*, this must have stood out as an oddity since most letters printed there are usually lengthy refutations of claims made either in the books reviewed or in a subsequent review itself.

Richard J. Cox’s early response (2001) is also telling. Cox begins by saying that he is shocked that the “purpose of libraries and archives was being considered, anew, by social pundits through every conceivable media outlet” (p. 2). This is a sentiment opposite to the one expressed by Shirley K. Baker who welcomed public interest. What Cox does not seem to realize is that it is precisely the claims to authority by expert professionals that are under attack here. Clearly, since someone of Darton’s stature has already had his say, one may assume with equal clarity that it is not barbarians who are making such attacks, thus Cox’s claims are doubly perplexing. In his preliminary assessment of Baker’s book, Cox argues, misleadingly, that Darton holds that *Double Fold* is little more than an extension of Baker’s fictional work. Darton does note the similarities but he does not treat *Double Fold* as literature – indeed he wrote to the *New York Review of Books* precisely because the facts in *Double Fold* justified a review. Cox further notes that Darton sees the work as strongly journalistic, while ignoring the more troubling fact that Darton also sees Nicholson Baker’s arguments as largely correct. And finally Cox utters the ultimate anti-intellectual charge, that Baker simply sees the acts of librarians in their quest for preservation solutions as “a conspiracy.”

Of course, this is problematic in several ways. First Cox does not define what “a conspiracy” is, but he seems to see it as a charge of lying and concealing of misdeeds by a group of people. Be that as it may, conspiracies are not entirely definable as lying, still less of simply concealing of misdeeds. There must also be concerted secretive planning beforehand, and a concerted organized effort afterward to keep the group’s actions hidden from public view. Since this rarely occurs, and generally never at the level or with the number of participants that conspiracy theorists assert, charges of conspiracy are usually rejected by trained historians and social commentators as naive and anti-intellectual. It is with this brush (naive and anti-intellectual) that Cox appears to want to paint Baker. But Baker does not argue that this sort of conspiracy existed. Self delusion, arrogance, stupid professional decisions, refusal to ask tough questions which go against

pet theories and ideologies, all indulged in individually and in concert with others – these are what are described by Baker in *Double Fold*. These are not per se conspiracies in any meaningful sense of the word. They are rather all too often standards of detrimental organizational behaviors.

Cox's second, and lengthier, response (2002) has been reviewed and commented on in *Progressive Librarian* by Lincoln Cushing (2003) and I essentially agree with Cushing's views. Cushing notes that Cox, in this more moderately written work, nevertheless continues to claim that Baker blurs the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, that Baker makes unrealistic demands on the profession, and that he is a conspiracy theorist. Cushing argues, as I do, that Baker is writing to expose an elite viewpoint – one purveyed by the policy makers within major research library institutions – not against the library profession as a whole. And Cushing sees strength in Baker's position as an outsider as I do too, upon which I elaborate below.

To add just a few more examples, if only to show that Shirley Baker, and Richard Cox are by no means isolated in their responses to *Double Fold*, I would point out that another review of Baker's book in a major academic journal, *College & Research Libraries* by Harlan Greene (2001) is equally extreme. The most unfair characterizations of Baker probably occurred in Barbara Quint's review in *Searcher Magazine* (2001), which can be described only as "hysterical," not least beginning with its title "Don't Burn Books! Burn Librarians!"

Sociological Reflections: Giving an Account

I began by saying that two sociological concepts would be used to interpret this episode in recent library history, namely the concept of a battle of elites and secondly that of the role of the outsider. I would now like to offer a summary of that interpretation and to show how these two concepts work together to bring about what is, I would argue, a more thoughtful and well informed account of this unfolding debate.

First, it is probably true that the worst activities of the microfilmmers had stopped by the time Baker wrote *Double Fold*. The degree to which they had stopped, however, would require a thorough insider's history of library practices throughout the United States – one that would be difficult, if not impossible, to write especially post-*Double Fold* since most libraries are probably not willing to divulge information which may open them up to further criticism themselves. Such a history would need to weigh a variety of events including the 1995 MLA's statement on primary records. This, and other events, indicate that changes in library preservation and administrative practices, were afoot before the publication of Baker's book. How important these changes were, at present, are hard to weigh. I would argue that none of this discredits Baker.

The final importance of Baker's book lies not in whether he completely, and with unflinching objectivity, presents the activities of the past, or presents a list of changes that may already have been underway at the time of publication. His arguments are important because he was one of the first to influence the public view of librarians as decision makers, where it became apparent subsequently that the policies promulgated by library leaders ended up being largely discredited. With this disclosure came attendant loss of power and status at least in the eyes of that part of the public who cared about such issues, and these included scholars and no doubt an educated, well-read, middle class. What is at issue is clearly one of changing perceptions. Baker changed the perception among an important section of the populace on how library decision makers were viewed. This was essentially a battle of words between elites, with scholars and the concerned middle class on the one hand and librarians in elite institutions on the other. In this round, the librarians lost.

Further, on the issue of perceptions, I would argue that Baker's story line is that of "experts run wild." I think this story, coming in 2001, is one that the American public, and particularly its opinion setters, were more than willing to accept. Baker's review of library preservation practices begins in the 1940s and continues into the 1990s. Furthermore, evidence suggests that this postwar period in American history is one in which Americans of all classes and groups became increasingly less trusting of experts, reaching an apex in the 1960s of course. Surveys of public opinion confirm this. A comparison with urban planner Robert Moses is a reasonable one. There is now almost universal agreement that Moses' plans for the new American city in the 1950s where the automobile took precedence over community neighborhoods have produced at least as many, if not more problems in urban areas, than they solved. The Vietnam War and Watergate of course deepened American skepticism in "experts."

Americans have also come to judge with some distrust the claims of "scientific experts" and whether these self-same scientists worked solely for the common good, whether in the area of genetically modified food, the creation of nuclear and biochemical weapons, or the "scientific" claims in the 1950s and 1960s by psychotherapists who believed they were able to "cure" homosexuals, indeed whether any of these sorts of claims make any viable scientific sense today at all. The sociology of science as a discipline, of course, has grown immensely during this period, such that most scholars today are conversant in its parameters and emerging conclusions. Michel Foucault and the deconstructionists had also become leading lights in the academy by this time, focusing, among many things, on the relationship of claims of knowledge to power. "Library science" somewhat obscure in the larger academic and scholarly world, and largely self-contained, was not considered all that important, not "hot" enough from the perspective of the postmodern scholars for study or attack and, therefore, had largely been left unstudied in its claims. But with Baker's book, and with Darton's review, attention began to be paid to the evolving sociological study of the profession as a whole.

As argued earlier, among humanists who were working with actual library materials, including microfilms, there probably had been an unconscious unease for some time. Once attention was paid to this obscure discipline, the account, not of a conspiracy, but of “experts” who claim more knowledge than they actually have, or of those who undertake large scale projects with unforeseen disastrous ends, or who are unwilling to listen to the concerns of the general public, sounded sadly similar to other disconcerting accounts of activities perpetrated by other elites in the last fifty years. In short, this new story was instantly believable. Librarian experts, however, seemed unaware, or, perhaps more likely, seemed shocked that such analysis should be applied to them, and thus simply accused Baker of being foolish, in short a naive journalist and fiction writer (i.e. an outsider) merely invoking conspiracy theories. Since they were not addressing the actual narrative which scholars, and the educated public were fitting onto Baker’s and Darton’s, accounts, librarians essentially lost the upper hand in the debate. Perceptions are important.

The second sociological concept invoked here is that of the “outsider.” Baker has been called by some a “whistleblower”. I think it is important to understand that he is nothing of the sort. A whistleblower works within an organization (or, in this case, discipline) about which he or she (and recently often it seems to be a she) blows the whistle. An older sociological concept is, of course, that of the “outsider.” As a term it actually helps us understand Baker more fully. He is not part of one of the elites in the battle described here. Indeed, it should be noted, he was often called an outsider, disparagingly, by his librarian critics.

What is interesting is that the sociologist Robert K. Merton’s (1973) major point concerning the outsider is that criticisms coming from outside a discipline often produce, in extreme cases, an epistemological conflict between the outsider and those challenged. The mutual distrust between the two becomes therefore so great that real intellectual engagement cannot occur. The arguments of the outside appear implausible, even absurd, to those being criticized and they respond, not with logical arguments, but with questions that ask how such criticisms could be advanced at all. The responses of librarians in elite institutions to Baker’s book are precisely of this type. Only by accusing him of inordinate love of paper, of writing fiction not fact, of being a naive journalist and believer in conspiracy theories, in other words of being an outsider, can these same critics make sense of his criticisms. The matter would have remained at a stage of mutual distrust, indeed at an epistemological impasse between outsider and those criticized, had not other groups, e.g. scholars, journalists, book reviewers, and parts of the reading public not taken up the issues. We have here, therefore, a telling episode in which the outsider, Nicholson Baker, with the assistance of elite allies, was able to prevail.

The ultimate outcome of this episode, beyond perhaps some temporary lowering of status and power in the public’s perception of librarians as meaningful decision makers in our more elite institutions, is not yet fully

played out. I would argue that how future decisions are made among academic research library administrators on broad issues of national policy as were exposed by Baker in *Double Fold*, will indicate whether Baker himself has had some long term influence on the profession. This will most likely play out around the current hot issue of digitalization. The issues here echo Baker's thesis, for they too ask to what extent paper copies of journals now primarily distributed electronically will be kept, or whether the production and accessibility of a paper version of indexes will be superseded by only electronic copies, or they may question the use of digitalization as a preservation technique in archives. Only time will tell if lessons learned from Baker's *Double Fold* will provide enough empirical data and reasoning so that scholars, the educated public, and librarians in the trenches will be given an opportunity to weigh in with their concerns — in short, who it is that will play a real part in the digitalization debate.

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