READING AND CULTURE:
the Challenge of Progressive Era Beliefs in the Postmodern World

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Technology plays a crucial role in the social milieu of the "postmodern library" – it allows us to connect with others in virtual worlds, and we could even say that it frees us and our patrons from the bondage of physical reality, as we have seen in the Second Life phenomenon. This essay acknowledges that technology is an undeniable facet of the postmodern condition and that its possibilities can be used as a means to interrogate its affect on libraries, but our concern here is neither technology in itself nor its implications for Library 2.0. Rather we want to explore the residual strength of certain Progressive Era ideas in the context of an emergent postmodern library and speculate on reasons for their persistence.

To set the stage, let's take a look at a moment of progressive/postmodern confluence in library practice. The library catalog is an immediately accessible example of postmodernism in action in the library. Francis Miksa's tract on the Dewey Decimal System explained the postmodern library in terms of subject classification. In this short piece he delineated the relationship between subject headings and epistemology since the introduction of the DDC. The postmodern library which he describes has an ever increasing flexibility in the catalog due in part to the creation of personal online libraries. When libraries (that is, institutions) link to those personal libraries, to the larger "collection" on the internet, they are breaking out of their walls, and the internet is decidedly not organized according to traditional cataloging rules.

The DDC has been repeatedly criticized for its organization of knowledge, which reflects a Western European ethnocentrism. The democratic classification scheme offered by the internet has the potential to be "value free," as everyone has the freedom to create a unique classification system. As these wildly diverse schemes are distributed and used by others, a postmodern, or subjectively emergent system of classification could potentially arise. Most users do not create or use strict rules that are aligned with subject headings. The library catalog, which has up to the present reflected an "epistemological point of view," now "reflects how people view and arrive at the 'truth' and that observation of the world and of humans and can be made in an objective matter" (Miksa, 1998, p. 86). The objective classification scheme of the DDC is contrasted with post-

modern conceptions of the world, which brings an idea that "truth is not absolute in any sense and society must reformulate itself to accommodate this factor" (ibid.).

Classification is a reflection of a presumed natural world order which according to strict postmodernists does not exist except as a subjectively perceived and constructed phenomenon (Jameson, 1984). There may be such orders, but the existence of one does not preclude the existence of others. The evolution of subject headings is a very concrete way to conceive of the difference between the Progressive Era beginnings of the modern public library and the postmodern library. While classification is by no means simple, it is a familiar tool. Many of us have witnessed transformations not only in the cataloging scheme, but also in the way that our users interact with classification in the progression from card catalogs to OPACs to the socially driven organization schemes of Amazon and Google. Because the catalog is concrete and observable, the metamorphosis of the DDC and what's happening to it makes a nice metaphor for understanding the transformation of other library phenomena.

Postmodernism encompasses aesthetics, culture and economics. Frederic Jameson said that postmodernism is not a style, but "a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features" (1984, p. 3). In other words, postmodernism dominates thought and action in a totalizing way, directing if not determining what we do, how we do it, and how we explain it. Jameson attributes this "theoretically totalizing" conception of the postmodern world to Foucault, and describes it as "an increasingly closed and terrifying machine…(in which) the reader feels powerless, since the critical capacity of his work is paralyzed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself" (ibid., p. 5). Foucault's model describes a world that is philosophically complete; everything can be explained in terms of the system of ideas itself, including the existence and explanation of the system. In Foucault's postmodern world power is always already everywhere and existence is totalized by means of it.

As librarians, our interpretation of culture dictates our practice. This is the praxis of librarianship: the theory behind our practice dictates how we plan and execute our programs and how we define our agendas of action and research and it works in just this way regardless of our conscious awareness of our own theory. It is research put into practice. Despite our postmodern context, libraries as institutions still work with and for real people – both those who come into the library and those who access the library from home. While the world at large and our work environments have changed drastically, we are still working under some of the same fundamental principles that governed our profession when libraries, in the modern sense, developed. Our interpretation of the postmodern condition allows Progressive-Era roots to remain relevant to practice. These roots are evident in our mission statements and our values. Our conception

of how we can arrive at truth has changed, but the fact that we are still working with people has not. So, while we are working under the tyranny of a postmodern condition in which ideological critique is difficult or even impossible, we are still making judgments about what to include in our collection, who we are here to serve, and what we should be doing to make the world a better place, or at least to preserve the institution of the library. We are in a strange position: we are a modern institution located within a postmodern world, and there are some interesting and positive aspects to this predicament.

Remembering the Progressive Era

The idea of the Progressive Era conjures up images of Hull House, the temperance movement, and a backlash against the evils of big business. There were some distinct cultural beliefs and solutions to social problems offered by the Progressives, and the public library fit in well with their utopian visions. Progressives, however, were working within a larger political milieu, and they really didn't have a unified picture of the world. They were struggling with many of the same social issues that we are today, including immigration, poverty, and the gap between the rich and the poor. They offered many and sometimes competing solutions regarding methods to solve complex social ills, and not all social problems were universally conceived as problematic.

Many characteristic American beliefs regarding the effects of reading and its relationship to individual development and social reform emerged during the Progressive Era. These beliefs still circulate in the underlying currents of our thinking regarding social institutions, especially in fields such as education and library science. Some of the great thinkers regarding education and society, notably John Dewey, were searching for ways to use education to better serve all people – as a social equalizer. "The People's University," the library, was similarly conceived.

The Progressive ideology was a reaction against the excesses of late 19th century individualism, industrialism, and class divisions marked by the growth of dirty and dangerous slums. Reformers had a variety of motives, but the heart of their fight was progressive social change. Proposed cures for problems ranged from personal hygiene and temperance to settlement houses and Chautauqua, from changing personal, individual habits to changing societal habits. The reformers were activists and intellectuals; most were educated, middle class Protestants – some would say elites – who saw problems with the welfare of the working class and whose causes they judged to be identifiable and eradicable. They believed that rational thought would lead to solutions to these problems.

The workers themselves formed unions to fight for benefits such as shorter work days and child protection laws. The results of the reforms were, therefore, not only from above; they were also grassroots. The people wanted reform. Their lives were very difficult. It is hard to imagine that the

middle-class reformers didn't base some of their efforts on the likelihood that active and possible violent class conflict would result unless some progress was made toward the solution of social problems. Many of the reformers' actions resulted in laws – they used the government as a means to control what they perceived to be the excessive and destructive behavior of both the masses and the capitalist ruling class. Other, positive forms of coercion were also used, such as free public schools, and expanded public libraries, which were to provide voluntary means for equal opportunity, allowing individuals of sufficient strength of will to gain a foothold in society. The thought was that if the poor were exposed to "the good life," they would come back for more.

The work of Jane Addams is exemplary of Progressivism because of its practical radicalism and the ambivalence with which she was met. Addams sought to improve the lives of the working class by creating settlement houses in the inner cities. She hoped that the residents would pool their resources and enjoy opportunities for increased leisure time and uplifting educational experiences for the purpose of moral and practical personal development. Inspired by London's settlement houses, she brought a vision to America that she believed could solve social ills such as inadequate housing and harsh labor conditions, especially for poor immigrant populations.

She and her friend, Ellen Starr Gates, founded Hull House. They remodeled their decaying mansion in order to accommodate their plans, and it opened in September of 1889. Their goals accommodated the imminently practical problems the poor faced, such as trying to feed a family in an unfamiliar land, but they also addressed issues of the soul by teaching the humanities as a restorative means of coping with harsh living conditions. Hull House was a hub of activity, with classes teaching women how to care for their children, for children to learn about the theater and art, and for students of all ages learning to paint and write. In 1899, ten years after she founded Hull House, Addams (1899, p. 36) explained the settlement house as:

> …an attempt to express the meaning of life in terms of life itself, in forms of activity. There is no doubt that the deed often reveals when the idea does not, just as art makes us understand and feel what might be incomprehensible and inexpressible in the form of an argument…The chief characteristic of art lies in freeing the individual from a sense of separation and isolation in his emotional experience, and has usually been accomplished through painting, writing and singing…

The climate was ripe for the settlement house movement in Chicago: according to Schutz et. al., suffragists and societies for the advancement for women were actively transforming the political atmosphere. Addams was involved in activities relating to a variety of other Progressive concerns, including fights for improved public housing, arts education, workers' unionization and world peace. She didn't require that the residents of Hull

House hold similar political views, however; according to Levine (1971) the settlement was centered on activity, not necessarily political action.

Yet the ambivalence towards Addams remained. She provided a model of appropriate behavior to those around her, on either side of the class divide, but her work remained a model not really acceptable to either the working or ruling classes. She faced a self-imposed status of insider and outsider because of her position in life. She was an upper middle class woman, but advanced a kind of paternalist socialist agenda (Levine, 1971) that aroused suspicion by members of both working and ruling classes.

Progressives were famously prescriptive in their recommendations for curing social ills. Gusfield (1986) described the temperance movement, led by Frances Willard, as one such cure. Willard, in addition to being the leader of the temperance movement, was also an avid bicyclist: the embodiment of a healthy mind and healthy body. Using temperance as the vehicle for curing the social ills of the underclass, she led campaigns to force legislation enacting a strict moral code, along with economic justice which she believed was the underlying cause of moral degeneration. While she believed that society's moral problems, notably crime and prostitution, were caused by low wages, or the gap between the rich and the poor, she also faulted personal inadequacies. While she was compassionate towards the poor, she didn't believe that their moral lapses should be excused. So, she sought the help of the middle class in leading by example, peer pressure, and the law (when all else failed) in order to mold a new morality among the poor.

During this era, practical Progressive politics carved out a social space for the welfare state to eventually occupy, as well as a different, "progressive" view of social problems and their solutions. It brought concepts of social moral responsibility, along with individual personal responsibility to the table. It also acknowledged the role of the expanding bureaucracy of the government in providing provisions for the poor. It gave an outline for the rational conduct of human affairs. However, progressive prescriptions were not always appreciated. We can speculate that the poor perhaps liked to go to the pub after a hard day at the factory, and if they wanted to read anything it might not be the uplifting books which they were told to read by the people who were trying to get them to read. In other words, the vision of the "good life" was contested. If we look ahead to the present, we realize that we're still dealing with similar issues and contests. There were arguments then surrounding the role of the government and personal responsibility in regards to the social order at that time, just as we have now.

Librarians were not so far away from such moralizing: enabling legislation which made it possible for local governments to raise taxes for the funding support for public libraries was based in a belief that reading would form a responsible and informed public. Bringing the poor to sources for continued education was to keep them off the street and out of trouble. In other words,

while the vehicles for reform were different, the goals were still moral and societal reform. Elaine Fain (1975) described that moralizing in the early public library for the purposes of subjugating the masses. George Ticknor, one of the Boston Athenaeum's original trustees was quoted as saying that education was "urgent" if the masses were to be "brought in willing subjugation to our own institutions." The public luminaries Horace Mann and Henry Barnard offered the same reasoning for compulsory education: it would offer "efficiency in promoting social order and dampening class war." Wiegand (1999) wrote about the general tone of the 1893 ALA meeting, concluding that there was a belief in a tradition of education that should be employed in forming the minds of their patrons. Their duty was to dispense knowledge and respect for the traditional canon in order to create a cohesive base for education; this cohesiveness of the literary canon was to be based on and extended to a like-minded, educated society. Allison Parker (1997) connected varied Progressive Era beliefs, pointing out that librarians and educators of that time:

> applied Progressive Era health concerns to the act of reading sensational fiction; excessive reading was deemed to be physically and mentally unhealthy for youths. The desire to balance "the benefit of outdoor play" with children's studies was particularly important to librarians who served an urban population yet who generally believed in the superior wholesome qualities of rural life (p. 86).

The Postmodern Library

Today, many librarians still maintain some prejudices against genre fiction, especially romance novels (Adkins et. al., 2006). Literary fiction is favored, with a bent toward bringing people to "the good life" through "good reading" and the traditional literary canon. This exclusion is a method designed to produce and reproduce a citizenry in the image of the dominant world view.

The significant conceptual difference between the postmodern vision and that of the modern era is that there is a belief that there is a natural order of the world (Habermas, 1983). The social sciences have been changed irrevocably by postmodernism. Even in these disciplines there is more than some acceptance of the notion that a "natural order" does not exist and cannot be defined. The decay of the idea of a natural order perhaps has had some progressive consequences. The agenda for political action is, fortunately, more democratic and inclusive since the civil rights movements. Race and gender issues have certainly not been resolved, but the fight that is in process is definitely acknowledged, for better or worse, by all sectors of society. However, we still have not solved our social problems; in fact, when everyone is able to speak up, perhaps we realize that there are more social ills on the table and more agendas to be addressed than we had before. Phillip Harper (1994) said that "despite what we know theoretically" regarding the decentered nature of postmodern society (that

is, one which recognizes the marginalized), "certain individuals have less access than others to political power in contemporary U.S. society, based on the configuration of their 'identities' and other factors that mark them socially" (p. 12). While postmodernism is framed by multiple viewpoints, there is still not a political equality.

Postmodernism stresses the notion that everyone has their own reality and way of solving problems. The problem is that a functioning institution, such as the library, cannot completely abandon rationalism. Critical theorists have allowed us the means to question some of our methods and motives, but there are still some unchanging truths that we, as a profession, need to agree about in order to have some type of cohesion, in order to make the case for libraries and education.

Libraries are still grounded in reality, not hyper-reality, and the library itself is governed by ideas about equal service to all people. The intention here is to explore the convergence of Progressive Era ideas about reading, education, and moral reform, to better understand their relevance, if any, to contemporary librarianship. Reading and education are social forces, and are part of the Progressive ideal of the "good society." We are in the fortunate historical position of having gone through civil rights movements, which caused us to critically examine our motives, yet we still face some of the same issues; some problems will not go away, so we must continually fight for them. While some of the social sciences changed drastically by the introduction of postmodern thought, more pragmatic fields still cling to Progressive Era ideas.

The development of cultural institutions for the masses has been viewed by historians in essentially two ways. The "true believers" tend to see them as instruments in the fight against darkness – recall the "library faith." Critical theorists, however, insist that they are often used as a means for the upper echelons of society to control the masses by guiding their activities in ways that they find acceptable. Questions turn on which was in need of reform: the individual unfortunate or the social system that created him; in other words, are social ills caused by individual problems or are they systemic or structural products of American democratic capitalism? More importantly, do the institutions which we are building still hold on to classist or racist ideas? Do they effectively accommodate cultural pluralism? If not, they're meaningless for the people who we are trying to empower. The source of social problems is one area of contention with which we struggle today. Even the conception of a social problem is a quandary in the postmodern conception of reality. Because social reality is determined by the subject, the individual would have to determine whether there is a problem, and, if so, how it might be solved. Education is, of course, one diversion from economic troubles; there is plenty of quantitative evidence to prove it. But how can reading or libraries cure social ills?

This questioning and acknowledgment of the fragmentation of human existence marks the postmodern crisis in education, and is the root of the problem with the library in the postmodern world. When we, as librarians, realize our own biases and prejudices, we are plagued by questioning our interpretation of the world. However, this critical examination also causes us to look at what we're researching and doing with that research so that our work positively affects those whom we are trying to teach or collect for. In other words, we can let our patrons tell us how their world is structured, and respond to their needs by attempting to meet those various needs.

Adult literacy education is an area that exemplifies the possibilities and limitations for library collection and service development. Demetrion (2005) describes a dichotomy in adult literacy education in terms of a policy/humanities division: "In the baldest of terms, from the policy perspective…adult literacy students are viewed as clients of the state, whereas proponents of participatory literacy education consider them equal partners in the learning process and co-creators of the curriculum" (p. 36). Policy aims place literacy programs under the welfare rubric, whereas participatory literacy educators frame literacy as a humanitarian effort. The dichotomy could be difficult for libraries.

In order to explore this problem, we now turn to the personal experiences of one of this paper's authors (Bossaller) and to the first person in order to give concrete evidence to theory. Adult literacy education is one method for solving a real social ill. It is difficult to imagine an obstacle greater than illiteracy to participation in economic, social, and cultural life.

In order to find out about the life worlds of minimally literate adults, I began tutoring in an adult basic education literacy program. Armed with theoretical knowledge but little practical experience about adult education, I came to the program with naïve ideas about empowerment and participatory democracy (not that those are naïve ideas, but my application of them was decidedly so). I envisioned students who would be eager to revolt against the system that had failed them once they were empowered by literacy, and, once empowered, they'd be ready to march on to the library, read important things, and become respected citizens. Yet, I was afraid at the same time that I'd be exposed as a member of the dominant culture by imposing what is important upon them since education, by definition, imparts values and ideals. I asked, would I become a part of their problem by participating in the educational process, of saying that "our values are better than your values"? Was I somehow saying, by teaching them, that "my subjective reality" is better than "your subjective reality"?

In order to better explain some theoretical applications of critical approaches to literacy education, it is helpful to review its historical roots. Alberto Manguel (1997) described medieval literacy instruction thus:

> The teacher would copy the complicated rules of grammar onto the blackboard – usually without explaining them, since, according to scholastic pedagogy, understanding was not a requisite of knowledge. The students were then forced to learn the rules by heart. As might be expected the results were often disappointing…(p. 76).

Rhetoric was one of the primary instructional tools. Through repetition, students learned how to speak and what to believe. The writings and received wisdom of the past were ingrained into the students' consciousness and the goal was the creation virtuous pupils who would also be virtuous persons. There was no questioning the authority or the certainty of texts. The voice of the marginalized and the recognition of its validity wouldn't even be conceptualized until the modern period. The supremacy of the canon wouldn't allow it. The subject, the powerful object within the text, is central, as opposed to the postmodern, problematic and decentered subject. The postmodern text goes against traditional canonical works; it is dangerous because it exposes the central or hegemonic culture to alienation (Harper, 1994). Fortunately, many modern adult literacy classrooms acknowledge the voices of the marginalized by incorporating their texts into the lessons; the student's difficulties are thus acknowledged so that they can connect, personally, to the text.

A fundamental basis of my personal crisis, though, was centered on questioning my placement of literacy as central to the well-being of the students. Why is literacy education so important? These students will probably not make enough money that they will be freed from poverty, even if they do get their GED. Is their destiny to remain members of the low-wage workforce? Can literacy actually help them to find a voice that they didn't know, enabling them to really change their world, or even better, the world at large? The postmodern world has a different perception of the relationship between culture and pedagogy; we can't simply assume that what we're teaching is meaningful to our students. We have to pay attention to their actions and reactions in order to evaluate the program (Demetrion, 2005).

My crisis has since been resolved, because as I talked with the students, I realized that most of the students in the classroom really do need to learn to read, and that we are doing what we can there to help them. Most of them (that is, those who aren't in there by decree of the justice system) are in the classroom because they want to read. Most of the students do need to read in order to function in their daily lives. Class time is devoted to a combination of practical literacy which helps them pass state-mandated tests and to access more transformative literature experiences, such as poetry. So, we work on phonemes and phonics, discuss poetry occasionally, and on a rare occasion politics come up.

I do believe, however, that reading is changing their lives. In interviews with the students, we explored why they want to read, and they don't

always talk about reading as a prerequisite to job skills (although that is usually the primary reason). One man said that he just wanted to be able to read. He likes the idea of it. It's important to him personally; it's a form of personal empowerment. Reading is both a powerful force as an activity in itself and as means to change minds. Learning how to read is not only a politically charged activity – it's also a life-changing personal experience, and you have to have the latter before you can have the prior.

The empowerment aspects of ideas of literacy corroborate those presented by Demetrion (2004) and Apple (1982). By allowing the students to take part in creating their curriculum, they are empowered to become subjects rather than objects in their own education. They become engaged in critical self-reflection. These concepts are also directly applicable to current library practice. Libraries, as opposed to public education facilities, have the ability to supply their users with materials to engage a widely diverse population. Library users have access to the world.

What are the implications of the postmodern condition, itself, for current library practice? Postmodernism fundamentally changed the way that society reacts to the subject. It recognizes that there is no essential collective truth, or meta-narrative (Habermas, 1983). However, this doesn't mean that librarians can't create an institution that responds to individuals. The postmodern collection is highly diversified, and includes the minor literatures as well as the traditional canon. It takes its cues from the outside world. How, then, does this description of current ideals in library practice compare to those of the Progressive Era?

Many of the Progressive Era ideals still serve as guiding forces. The research which supports libraries undergoes periodic evaluation as libraries are forced to adapt to political and economic realities. We still want to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor and create equal opportunities by giving everyone, regardless of the ability to pay, equal access to information. This role of the library as equalizer can be thought of in simply economic terms, or reframed through the critical lens as a bridge between the dominant society and the marginalized. The idea of power, in this sense, is contested and shifting. Few people argue against economic equalizing, but shifting cultural norms cause problems. The goals of the library aren't necessarily dictated by popular decree, but rather from a certain faith in the idea that the library is a purpose-driven institution, grounded in current social science practice.

One current debate concerns the censorship of information. The American Library Association (ALA) dictates a rule of absolute freedom of information. While the ALA stands firmly against all types of censorship, the truth is that most public libraries will fall short of this dictum. We can neither provide access to all information, nor do we necessarily want to. We constantly make choices about what to include in the collection in order to bring people to "good reading," or what is more commonly called, today, "good information." Providing literacy resources involves

making judgments; a completely value-free literacy program is a difficult conception, though theoretically intriguing because of the possibilities for inclusion.

The internet, of course, opened a can of worms regarding censorship and equal access to information. While the argument about censorship of websites in the library is somewhat banal at this point, it is still worth addressing. There are, without a doubt, a lot of things on the internet that should not be in the library; sites promoting violence or cruelty don't serve any useful purpose or meet our criteria for inclusion. However, they are something that someone has produced, and so in some theoretical way we can excuse their existence if we go down the extreme route of subjectivism. This leads to questions, as a profession, of where do we stand? Where should we stand? What is actually going on? What is the root of the question, anyway? This problem will only continue to become more problematic if the catalog is becoming, as Miksa says, more democratic. If the "true believers" in the old-time library faith believe that, indeed, "good reading leads to good behavior and bad reading leads to bad behavior," we obviously should be treating internet resources as part of our selected collection.

The postmodern catalog presents us with an alternate model. Librarians have less control over the collection when they link to the internet. The people select the collection by linking to outside resources; it's given us a realm of possibilities and threats to the social order that the Progressives never would have dreamed of. Yet, many of the Progressives, such as Addams, would have advocated listening to their constituents, given the possibility. Reality, at this point in history, is less tricky than theory because most libraries have rules about what people can do on the internet, so there are some legal restraints should we need them. Library practice dictates a certain pragmatism that should be informed by theory which argues for inclusion while maintaining principles.

The critically reflective practitioner looks inward, but should also be inspired by the world outside of the walls of the library. There is a recognition that librarians can't necessarily know what our patrons need without consulting them, without observing their everyday life worlds. One librarian I talked to recently said that she routinely asks for her patrons' help in ordering for the collection; she didn't know how to order appropriate Arabic books, or French books for her growing Vietnamese population; she was recognizing that the pedagogy of traditional collection development will not meet her population's needs. Collection development had to come directly from the people.

The idea of extending collection development responsibilities to the people can of course be extended to all sorts of traditionally "othered" populations, such as adult new readers or children. Programming for literacy under the postmodern model would utilize all sorts of materials, recognizing that literacy goes beyond books and an idea of proper reading.

This is a new way of the world; "new government" organization defies traditional hierarchies (Kettl, 2002, p. 111). New governance models are outward-focused, and work in coalitions or in a spider-like fashion. They recognize the knowledge of those who are working on the ground level. Following such a model, literacy educators and libraries should turn to knowledge from indigenous sources by going to the people to find out how they are using knowledge and to find ways to mold education so that it is relevant to those we want to serve rather than mold people so they are relevant to education.

Our vision of a perfect world may not come to fruition, because there is no agreement about such a world. Questions are the norm under the postmodern condition. We will not speak with a unified voice. Rather than unquestioningly working with dictums that come from above, the reflective, critical researcher will consider the possibilities from all sources of knowledge. However, libraries still should cling to the central tenet of the profession regarding equality. If anything is post-modern about this, it's not a lack of values or uncertainty about values. There is an essential essence to be maintained. Rather it's the manifestation of the necessity of living with contradictory values.

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