

Connecting for International Librarianship

A conversation with Shiraz Durrani

Questions from Julian Jaravata

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Given the focus of the course on international librarianship, I was wondering in what ways you see progressive librarianship as a distinct field from international librarianship, but also the different ways in which they relate. I know you discuss the role of progressive librarianship in the context of globalization, but I wanted to ask if you see internationalism as intrinsic to progressive librarianship.

An important issue raised by your question is perhaps conceptual: progressive librarianship is seen in contrast to international librarianship. Is this appropriate? The real contradiction is between national and international *progressive librarianship* (socialist-orientated), and national and international *conservative librarianship* (capitalist-orientated). This opens up the possibility of national AND international librarianship being progressive and socialist-orientated — whereas the current situation is both, national and international librarianship are conservative and capitalist-orientated. This needs to be at the centre of any studies on international librarianship.

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Let us understand the real meaning and purpose of “progressive librarianship” (PL). PL has arisen in response to the traditional librarianship (TL) model developed under capitalism and propagated internationally by imperialism. TL has been promoted as the only possible model of librarianship and so goes without the defining term “conservative” before the name, thus becoming the universal term “librarianship”. In this context, even the term “conservative” is inadequate and should be replaced by “capitalist” librarianship (CL) as opposed to socialist librarianship.

In view of the embargo on the concept and ideals of socialism placed by capitalism and imperialism, it has been difficult for those seeking an alternative to CL to call the alternative *Socialist Librarianship* as that would make it difficult to put it into practice because of the power of finance capital. I recall that when I first started working in UK at Hackney Public Libraries in 1987, the term socialist library was used quite often, until the attacks on any alternative to capitalism under Maggie Thatcher’s Conservative government made it difficult to use even the term, socialism. That began the TINA era—There is No Alternative to capitalism—and full-scale attacks began on any progressive developments in libraries—or in any other field.

Now, if we accept that the PL movement in general aspires to socialist ideals of justice and equality for working classes and those oppressed by capitalism, then it follows that issues of classes, class conflicts and class struggles are central concerns for PL. Without this, it remains a meaningless jargon used to create a false sense of “alternatives” to CL. So it is important to understand that PL without class analysis is a meaningless term.

In that scenario, International Librarianship (IL) gains new significance. It is not a question of whether PL is “a distinct field from international librarianship”. PL sees the struggle of working classes against capitalism and imperialism in its national as well as in its internationalist contexts. Capitalism is not confined to one country. Imperialism, by its very nature, is also not confined to one country. They have global approach and global reach. For PL to be effective in one country, it has, of necessity, to link up with PL movements in other countries and globally if it is to be an effective social force. This implies that PL has to link up and work in solidarity with the struggles of working classes in its own, as well as, in other countries.

The situation that PL faces is the oppression of working classes by capitalism and imperialism. It cannot resolve this by ignoring its real enemies. For this it needs to work with its class allies internally and internationally.

This understanding of PL and its social and international context may be problematic for some PL organisations in that they are in

countries which officially follow capitalism and are against socialism. But PL work, of necessity, involves engaging in class struggles in their society. The issue is how to challenge capitalism/imperialism in the library and information world. Some may do it openly, others stealthily, but the fundamental contradiction that PL addresses are the same.

The progressive librarianship movements in USA and Europe, as well as in some countries of Africa have developed links with each other and a recent publication by Al Kagan¹ records their history and aims. Such activities have strengthened these organisations individually as well as the PL movement internationally.

The elephant in the room for international librarianship, as for national librarianship, is capitalism and imperialism. Once this is fully recognised, there will be clarity on where librarianship needs to go. Progressive librarianship can then be seen as a step towards non-capitalist or socialist library service from the present capitalist/conservative setup. That is the key struggle in librarianship today, for both, national and international librarianship. The power relations between capitalist/conservative librarianship and progressive/socialist librarianship can then be seen more clearly—both nationally and internationally.

Along those lines, what have been your experiences working with and across different borders, both regionally within Africa as well as throughout the globe, with progressive librarian networks?

The situation of **Britain** is that of a country brought development and growth by plundering the resources of the entire world under the so-called British Empire. This was a glorified term for global looting, massacres and plunder. The loot enabled the rich and powerful to amass massive wealth, and the crumbs from their table ensured that the revolutionary flames of working class were not allowed to engulf the entire country. But the situation began to change gradually with the decline of the Empire under resistance from the conquered countries. As countries achieved independence, the power of the empire to syphon off wealth of workers and peasants declined. This is when neo-colonialism replaced colonialism, but for Britain the change was more traumatic as the new imperialist power, USA, muscled in with its share of the loot. This further weakened British capitalism and reduced its ability to suppress militancy among working classes.

¹ Alfred Kagan (2015): *Progressive Library Organizations: A Worldwide History*. Jefferson NC, USA: McFarland.

See also: Kagan, Al (2018): Progressive Library Organizations Update, 2013. *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, Vol. 4 (2018) pp.20–52. Available at: <https://journal.radicalibrarianship.org/index.php/journal/article/view/27/38>. [Accessed: 07-12-18].

The PL movement in Britain when I started working in 1987 reflected the state of the country—conservative. That there was very conservative professional body, the British Library Association² which later changed its name to CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals)³. It was part of the national establishment and saw no need to challenge the status quo, politically or in the context of libraries and the needs of librarians. There were no specific trade unions for library workers who joined national trade unions. While they protected the interests of librarians as workers, there was no organisation that took on the broader role of questioning the general direction of libraries, public or academic.

My experiences in UK and Kenya are recorded in my books, *Progressive Librarianship*⁴ and *Information & Liberation*⁵. In general, it was a struggle where progressive librarianship won some battles and created liberated territories which flourished while there was political, trade union and community power behind the initiatives (as in the Three Continents Liberation Collection in Hackney⁶) or the progressive staffing structure and the the Innovations Project in Merton. But as power shifted in national and local authorities from progressive Labour administration to the Conservative party, such initiatives were rendered powerless and closed down.

Perhaps a better approach was in changing the teaching curricula at the London Metropolitan University where a progressive approach was adopted. This addressed the key issue of training progressive staff from the early stages of their professional career. Another initiative was the Quality Leaders Project -Youth which developed management skills of library staff while developing progressive services too. Yet even here, the policies of the Conservative Government ensured that such initiatives were also suppressed as they posed real challenges to the capitalist model.

All this indicated the need for librarians to be active in the political as well as professional fields if they are to be successful.

Kenya lost an opportunity to build a people-oriented library service at independence.⁷ With the “aid” of the departing colonial

² In reflection of the imperial history of the country, the LA did not feel the need to use the term “British” before its name.

³ The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.

⁴ Durrani, Shiraz (2014): *Progressive Librarianship: perspectives from Kenya and Britain*, 1979-2010. Nairobi: Vita Books.

⁵ Durrani, Shiraz ((2008): *Information and Liberation: writing on the politics of information and librarianship*. Nairobi: Vita Books.

⁶ Details about this and other projects mentioned are available in the two books quoted earlier.

⁷ Durrani, Shiraz (1998): Independence in Kenya and the lost opportunity to

power, it strengthened the conservative model of libraries, both public and academic. Several attempts to introduce progressive library and information activities are recorded in my two books mentioned earlier. It was only in 2017 that a total departure took place when the Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group (PALIAct) set up the Ukombozi Library in Nairobi. The Ukombozi Library has a sizeable collection of progressive books and is establishing strong links through its ReachOut Project to link up with local working class communities and students.

Here again, there is no official government support and the public library service continues its "traditional" approach, unconnected with any progressive movement.

PALIAct has attracted support in other countries, notably in Ghana and Zimbabwe.

Given the particular way that PALIAct asserts itself as an activist organization that emphasizes serving workers and peasants, what are lessons from your experiences that might be able to be offered to other countries with class relations that may bear some similarities? (For me, the discussion around how progressive librarians should prioritize workers and peasants reminds me of the semi-feudal and semi-colonial condition of the Philippines).

The key point to note is that government policies do not take into account the information needs of workers and peasants. This follows from the assumption on the part of planners, decision-makers and power-holders that there are no classes in their societies and that there are no specific needs that relate to specific classes. This assumption is based on the class interests of those in power and even if they are aware of different needs in different classes, they ignore the needs of workers and peasants for ideological reasons in their own class interest. Combined with that is the fact that capitalism and imperialism have taken power from workers and peasants and empowered the comprador class who are then programmed to meet the needs of capital, local and international.

In view of this, the question of power and power relations in these societies becomes crucial. This applies in the wider social areas of economy, politics and cultural life as well as in specific sectors like libraries and information. This explains the reality of the situation for workers and peasants: they do not have power to formulate or implement policies; they do not have the power to change the direction of national policies from the market-orientated approach towards a socialist approach with equality and justice as key requirements; they do not control national resources to formulate policies; they do not have

build a people orientated library service. *Library Review* 47(8).

the infrastructure to implement policies that are in their interest; they do not control educational institutions that train library and information workers whose skills are in the service of maintaining the status quo.

Given this situation, progressive organisations like PALIAct need to be clear about their role in meeting the needs of workers and peasants. First, they need to understand that the traditional libraries, their organisations and government policies will not change themselves to a people-orientated service. While the long-term goal is to move these national institutions to change their policies, in the short term some action can be taken. Some aspects of such action are:

1. **People:** For progressive social change to happen it needs progressive people: librarians, community workers, workers and peasants and their organisations, development workers, artists, progressive students and academics, among others. They will be the engine that brings about change.
2. **Leadership:** This will emerge from among the group of people mentioned above. They would not be afraid to learn from history and experiences from other countries.
3. **Vision:** develop a vision that can guide the new movement towards a people-oriented service with justice and equality in command.
4. **Organisation:** set up a progressive library organisation that can formulate alternative policies to provide relevant library and information services and also seek ways of influencing government policies. The organisation needs to bring together all progressive individuals and institutions that can work together.

An important requirement in achieving the above is resources. As there is no official backing for the initiative, there will not be funds to set up the organisation. In this situation, there is need for self-reliance and those committed to change need to provide whatever resources they can and contribute in terms of their time and skills. This means that they need to be employed elsewhere for survival but to put in time and efforts in the new initiative as their contribution for change. Thus the initiative is not for people who seek gain such as employment or favours or services in return for work. The key requirement for the new organisation is commitment to equality and justice and enthusiasm to achieve meaningful change. While funds can be sought at a later stage when the organisation is strong, such external funds need to be rejected if they come with strings that subvert the vision of the organisation. There is boundless energy and commitment among workers and peasants and they will support this move if the aims and visions are clearly explained to them. It may be necessary for all those involved in the new initiative to attend study classes where they would

learn about classes and class struggles, their own history, the politics of information etc. so as to ensure they are committed to the new approach. Capitalism and imperialism have kept us ignorant about alternative information, ideas, and experiences, and the start of any movement for change needs to fill these gaps.

It is well to keep in mind that in the case of Mau Mau in Kenya, they did not wait for money from donor agencies to help them set up the resistance that ended colonialism. They used their own labour and resources, ideas and imagination to face a challenging enemy. That is the approach needed in the information world today.

*After reading the article you co-authored Elizabeth Smallwood in the **Progressive Librarian**, I wonder what are the challenges that you've faced in international librarianship settings in combatting the idea of "neutrality" as a quality that the profession as a whole should strive towards?*

The question of neutrality hides the larger political issues that are the background to the debate. Those who promote neutrality are in effect stating that they favour the *status quo* in a capitalist society. Being neutral means pretending not to take sides, which, in effect, means, supporting the power relations as they are. If the desire is to change the system so that those marginalised become the masters of their own destiny, then one cannot sit on the neutrality fence. One has to be on the side of those struggling to get their share of power and resources. In essence, key questions are about class struggle and on whose side one stands.

The challenges we face are hidden and below-the-surface and so more difficult to identify and challenge. Nobody comes and says they are neutral or explains what neutrality means. They "show" themselves in the actions and results they achieve through their policies and practices. Here are some examples of how "neutrality" hits working people: when funds are taken away from services needed by working classes and given to the rich elite; when libraries are cut while the military keeps getting more funds; when hospitals, education and other services that benefit working people the most are reduced to fund taxes cuts for the rich; when library funds are used for travel and luxury books but not for books that support people's learning, awareness of their rights, and exposure to experiences of resistance and change; when professional library staff are replaced by volunteers. All these policy decisions are made by politicians claiming to be neutral in allocating national resources.

So how does one challenge such "neutrality"? That is the key challenge in national as well as international context. It is necessary to challenge not only local library associations, but international ones such

as IFLA to ensure that such “neutrality” is exposed at all levels. At the same time, politicians who claim to represent their constituents need to be effectively challenged, as do the corporations which squeeze out surplus from the labour of working people. In short, a social revolution is the only answer.

The resolution of the neutrality issue is in the title of another of our articles: “The Professional is political: redefining the social role of public libraries.”⁸ Librarians can bring about change in libraries by becoming active in the political sphere. They also need to redefine the social role of libraries under capitalism. But again, this cannot be achieved fully unless there is an internationalist approach. Working with other progressive people in many countries is more likely to change the mind-sets among policy makers than just working on the level of individual countries.

⁸Durrani, Shiraz & Elizabeth Smallwood (2006): The Professional Is Political: Redefining The Social Role of Public Libraries. *Progressive Librarian*. 27 (2006,3-21).