

## Neoliberalism, Democracy and the Library as a Radically Inclusive Space

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper explores the relationship between the public library and democracy. It argues that the idea of the public library is a fruitful place to start in figuring resistance (and developing radical alternatives) to what political theorist Wendy Brown has described as the political rationality of neoliberalism (2003).*

*The paper demonstrates that the link between the public library and democracy has traditionally been understood as instrumental: on this reading, libraries serve an educative function for democracy (typified in Michael Gorman's *Our Enduring Values* (2000)). However, the paper argues that this understanding is not only theoretically questionable but politically limiting. Following the thought of the philosopher Jacques Rancière (1999) the paper explores the democratic impropriety of the public library, arguing that libraries should be understood as improper spaces because of the assumption of equality that the library makes of its patrons.*

*In this way the paper poses some critical questions to institutional attempts at making libraries more inclusive: it is argued that there is a danger of losing the library's assumption of equality when institutions specifically target the socially excluded for inclusion. Drawing on the research of Aabø and Audunson (2012), the paper theorises that often it is the lack of specific targeting of the socially excluded that makes the library a radically inclusive space. Finally, it is argued that it is precisely this radical inclusivity that can help in figuring what an alternative to neoliberalism might be.*

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism, democracy, library, equality, inclusivity.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In this paper I attempt to think resistance to neoliberalism through the concept of the public library, and what I argue is its democratic impropriety. First I argue that the relationship between democracy and the public library should not be understood in terms of the library's instrumental value to democracy, but rather should be based around the library's assumption

of equality. I then argue that focusing on this assumption of equality can help in confronting the threat to public libraries that neoliberalism poses. I conclude by posing some critical questions to attempts to make libraries more inclusive, arguing that these attempts are in danger of negating the library's radical inclusivity, a quality which stems from its assumption of equality.

## THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AND DEMOCRACY

The link between the public library and democracy has been noted at various times from a variety of sources since the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Typically libraries are presented both as a necessity for any country that wishes to be an effective democracy and, to a lesser extent, as a doorway to the right of every citizen to cultural and intellectual development. Because of their educative function, libraries are consistently understood as being *instrumentally* valuable to democracy. Exemplifying this argument is the penultimate chapter of Michael Gorman's *Our Enduring Values* (2000) which directly links the educative function of libraries with democracy. For Gorman, in a time when the American electorate is increasingly "ill-informed, easily manipulated, and apathetic" libraries stand as a "means to achieve a better democracy" (Ibid. 160). It is clear that libraries supposedly achieve this end through education: through their position as "[f]oes of [i]gnorance" (Ibid. 163). Gorman claims that our modern indirect democracies require "a steady flow of information to citizens and for that citizenry to be knowledgeable about social and political issues" (Ibid. 159). He goes on to make the claim starkly: "[d]emocracy benefits from an informed citizenry; a misinformed citizenry damages it" (Ibid. 166). However, sustaining Gorman's claim (and thus sustaining the instrumental link between libraries and democracy) is a misunderstanding of what democracy is. This becomes clear if we think democracy from the perspective of Jacques Rancière.

Rancière starts with an understanding of democracy as rule by the people, as does Gorman. However, crucial for Rancière is the contestation over who the people are in this formulation. Initially this is Gorman's concern too. Gorman notes that, in Ancient Athens, the people referred not to everyone but to "a small minority of property owning males" (Ibid. 158). Following from this, Gorman argues that in our more developed modern societies we recognise that 'the people' must refer to all members of society, and thus we now maintain "the enfranchisement of all adults, irrespective of gender and race" (Ibid. 160). However, Gorman's analysis misses what Rancière's does not. In his text *Disagreement* (1999: 21) Rancière notes that in both Plato and Aristotle's account of politics a distinction is made between those who are capable of *speech* - which for Aristotle articulates "what is useful and what is harmful, [...] what is just and what is unjust" (Aristotle 1992: 60) - and mere *voice* which expresses "pain and pleasure" (Ibid.). Thus, the exclusion in Athens is a question not of one group being prioritised over another, but of the visibility of certain groups as groups; of whether they can be seen or heard as political animals. It follows that for Rancière there is always a contestation over who counts as a political animal - of who 'the people' are - which no extension of enfranchisement can do away with. Rather than discarding this notion of the people because it is incapable of fully describing any social order, Rancière instead places this paradox at the centre of his understanding of democracy. In this context democracy becomes the process by which those who suffer a primary exclusion - of not having the words they utter understood as speech but rather as animalistic noise - make themselves of some

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kelley (1934: 3), Miksa (1983: 56), Raber (1994: 51), Byrne (2004: 16) and Glorieux et al. (2007: 189).

account. The subject of democracy for Rancière thus becomes the “part of those who have no part” (1999: 11), those who are excluded from a given social order through a lack of discursive visibility. On this reading of democracy it makes little sense to talk of the educative function of libraries being instrumentally valuable to democracy. Nonetheless I contend that Rancière’s understanding of democracy is not only still relevant to libraries but is valuable, in that it helps highlight the *impropriety* that is central to the idea of the library. This impropriety, I would suggest, should be taken seriously if we are to make use of the library in figuring what democracy has to do with resisting neoliberalism - not least in figuring resistance to the neoliberalisation of the public library itself.

## NEOLIBERALISM

Like most public services in the United Kingdom (UK) the library hasn’t escaped the clutches of Prime Minister David Cameron’s “Big Society” (2010), a concept that is avowedly concerned with “opening up public services; [...] empowering local communities; and [...] promoting social action through greater volunteering and civic participation” (Ishkanian 2014: 2), but at the same time uses these goals to mask a systematic privatisation and marketisation of public institutions. The library’s current neoliberal transformation is threatening the very existence of the service as it has generally been understood; indeed, given the vast number of library closures in the UK we could stop short and say neoliberalism is threatening the very existence of the service full-stop.<sup>2</sup> But things aren’t that simple, and to run a campaign on the grounds of simply keeping libraries open says nothing about the way the service is being restructured. Greene and McMenemy have noted that neoliberalism is characterised by “individualism, privatisation and decentralisation” (2012: 15); they demonstrate that after “New Labour’s election in 1997 public service restructuring in the United Kingdom continued the neoliberal approach, with the linked considerations of managerialism and consumerism impacting on the delivery of public services” (Ibid. 14). Greene and McMenemy’s paper is significant as it recognises the discursive functioning of neoliberalism: its impact on the language of librarianship and thus its power to limit the imagination of what the public library is, who it is for and how it functions.<sup>3</sup> Greene and McMenemy contend that far from being “neutral” (Ibid. 34) language “is used by neoliberalists to introduce reform and more radical public service restructuring” (Ibid.) which could “lead to the destruction of public space as a democratic arena” (Ibid. 35). They go on:

The naturalisation of the language of the market such as calling patrons ‘customers’ has become so entrenched in the mindset that it is now part of everyday language. The monetary and transactional connotations associated with a term like ‘customer’ to describe a public sector user would have appeared inappropriate to many thirty years ago, but due to the steady naturalisation of neoliberal discourse such terms appear innocuous (Ibid.).

As Greene and McMenemy note, what has occurred is a shift in the *appropriateness* of language. In previous years it wouldn’t have made sense to talk of library patrons as

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<sup>2</sup> The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals has noted that current UK government proposals would result in “the closure of up to 20% of library service points” and “[a] probable 4-6000 (full-time equivalent) reduction in the number of staff employed by public libraries” (2011: 2), an estimated 700 of which have already occurred (Page 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See also John M. Budd’s *Self Examination: The Present and Future of Librarianship* (2008: 175).

customers, precisely because they were not customers and were not treated as customers. Now, however, this phrasing has achieved a legitimacy which makes it appropriate to treat library patrons as if they were customers, and so through this action to *actualise them as customers*. This is a precise example of the operation of what Rancière describes as the police. He says:

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another is noise (1999: 29).

It is in this way that I read Wendy Brown's formulation of neoliberalism as a "political rationality" (2005: 37). For Brown, ethical and moral considerations have been eviscerated from debates and discussions concerning how and why we are to organise our society: the notion of the 'good' is now dominated by the values of the market. For Brown, neoliberal rationality "involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and action" (Ibid. 39-40). The good is reduced to what can increase the flow, accumulation and appreciation of capital, crucially even in institutions which previously had little directly to do with capital. This is not to say that libraries are necessarily being transformed into profit making entities, but it is to say that the processes internal to the library are being dominated by a drive to efficiency, accountability and transparency which are plucked from the private sector and transplanted into the public. Not only does this make public services ripe for future acquisition by investment capital, but it simultaneously instantiates a particular fabric of legitimacy and illegitimacy, property and impropriety, appropriateness and inappropriateness. This fabric, or what Rancière describes as the "*partage du sensible*" (2010: 36), polices the association of our actions, our capacities and our identities within and in relation to the library. As 'customers', rather than 'patrons', 'users', or simply 'people', certain possibilities of what the library can be are closed down, while others are reinforced, and yet others are opened up. As John M. Budd argues, "[i]f circulation equals transaction, and the goal is to maximise circulation, then a library's *raison d'être* is *de facto* neoliberal" (2008: 174). Circulation of stock, following the logic of the market, becomes the "political *telos* of the library" (Ibid. 176), and the library as a public space and a public good becomes an impossibility. In this way and as Wendy Brown maintains, neoliberalism is not just an economic doctrine or another a form of ideology: crucially it is also a *political* doctrine that plays a structuring role in how the social is conceptualised, and "prescribes the citizen-subject of a neoliberal order" (Brown 2005: 42). By recognising the political dimension of neoliberalism we can see that peculiar to it - and again to return to Rancière - is neoliberalism's drive to obliterate the possibility of the emergence of surplus identities that are heterogeneous to the police distribution of bodies and names. Neoliberalism is thus depoliticising: as Samuel Chambers has claimed, "it is not just that neoliberalism is not politics, but that *neoliberalism seeks the end of politics*" (2013: 73).

## THE IMPROPRIETY OF THE LIBRARY

In responding to this threat to public libraries the crucial question, then, is what can be done? I will argue that a key resource in resisting neoliberal rationality in the context of public libraries can be found in the concept of the public library itself. In this way I want to draw a

distinction between two ways we can respond to the threat posed to libraries: either by *preserving* them or by *conserving* them. Conserving is not the same as preserving: if we were to preserve the notion of the library we would seek to return it to a 'golden age' prior to its attempted neoliberal transformation. This is problematic both because it reproduces the notion of the public library without critically interrogating its flaws, but also because this past public library has been fundamentally altered by its neoliberalisation; reproducing the public library does nothing to combat its exposure to marketisation and privatisation in the here and now. Instead, I argue we should *conserve* the notion of the public library which, unlike preserving, requires an alteration of its original form: to detach it from its liberal-democratic tradition and reimagine it in the context of current resistance to neoliberalism. This process can both challenge and rearticulate the value, function and purpose of the public library: not revitalising something which has been hollowed out during its exposure to neoliberal rationality, but creating something heterogeneous to its traditional setting.

To clarify, I am not arguing that to resist neoliberalism we simply need to build more libraries, or that we simply need to contest what is going on in libraries (despite both of these being necessary positions for anyone that values public libraries). Instead, I want to reimagine the public library: to polemically rework it in a way that carries relevance for resisting neoliberalism, and begins to offer what an alternative might look like. It is important to note that this process of 'reimagining' is one of the means by which neoliberalism secures itself at the level of political rationality: neoliberalism is beginning to reimagine the public library as the site of investment for *homo oeconomicus*, a particular configuration of the human understood primarily as a self-investing, utility-calculating rational individual (Brown 2005: 40). For neoliberal rationality, if we invest in our physical identities by visiting the gym then we invest in our mental identities by visiting the library. The library thus becomes the intellectual gym for *homo oeconomicus*. It is for this reason that linking the library and democracy on an instrumental level (that is, the library as educative to the demos) is a strategic misunderstanding as well as a theoretical one. As I will go on to argue, there are other ways we can connect the library and democracy.

I think there is something about libraries that makes them particularly suited to this process of conserving: there is, I will argue, an impropriety to the public library, and it is this that enacts the opposite action of neoliberalism: that is, if neoliberalism seeks the end of politics, libraries have the potential to engender politics. So: what does the library tell us about resistance to neoliberalism? What does it mean to describe the library as improper? It is clear that one cannot simply say that libraries are improper spaces: libraries have a specific purpose - the provision of information - which consequently implies a proper way for library patrons to exist within them. However, alongside this specific function is also a radical lack of function: the library opens up vast possibilities for the patron and yet refuses to demand a purpose of their visit. The democratic values that are typically associated with libraries generate a tension between the formal purpose of the library and the fundamental equality that these values recognise. By being places open to everyone which simultaneously do not demand a purpose of a patron's visit, libraries leave open the possibility that their commitment to freedom of information, equity of access, neutrality etc. can be continuously challenged. It is this open possibility of the contestation of the library, its function and its values that places democracy at its heart. As Rancière says,

The guarantee of permanent democracy is not the filling up of all the dead times and empty spaces by the forms of participation and counterpower; it is the continual renewal of the actors and of the

forms of their actions, the ever-open possibility of the fresh emergence of this fleeting subject. The test of democracy must ever be in democracy's own image: versatile, sporadic - and founded on trust (2007: 61).

The library, I would argue, is a fertile space for the emergence of this “unpredictable”, “fleeting” subject. Indeed, the picture of democracy that Rancière paints - “versatile, sporadic - and founded on trust” - offers a succinct articulation of what makes the library an ideal site of political contestation. A library can be used in a myriad of ways: as a place of research, a place of study, a place of conversation, a place of recreation, a place of shelter, a place of safety, and countless other possibilities which are dependent on the imagination and actions of the patrons and staff of the library, and on the trust that is assumed between the library and its patrons. The contestation and actualisation of the library and its associative values may not occur everywhere and at all times, but the assumption of equality made by the library leaves open the possibility of this actualisation rather than closing it down. It is this aspect of the library that should be highlighted when one constructs a link between libraries and democracy: not the education that can be offered to the people, nor the democratic values that the library symbolises, but rather the people’s verification of these democratic values.

Why is it that libraries have a long history of being sanctuaries to the excluded, even and despite when those in charge of library services have sought to instantiate this exclusion? Libraries are not immune to discrimination and exploitation: they are just as susceptible to hidden gender, race and class discrimination as any other liberal-democratic institution. The idea that the library is ideologically neutral is still the dominant understanding inside and outside the profession (Lewis et al. 2008). Long before their neoliberalisation they were limited in their scope by dependence on corporate infrastructure; and long before this they were the privately owned preserve of colonial masters. And yet despite these forms of oppression and exclusion they continue to be frequented by those who are recognised as socially excluded; from the homeless, to immigrant communities, to women who are full-time child carers, to many other peoples.<sup>4</sup> Even in the most progressive libraries the services offered to these communities are severely limited and their collections are dominated by predominantly white, male and bourgeois cultures and histories, and yet it seems that it is in part this gap in targeting these communities that gives libraries their emancipatory edge: libraries are not homeless shelters, they are not native language schools, but this means that they also do not police homeless people or immigrant communities; that they include them on the basis that they have to include everyone. Rather than accounting for various forms of officially recognised identity, the universality of the public library suspends this accounting procedure and, as a matter of principle, instantiates equity of access. As I have outlined, for Rancière democracy is the process when the un-accounted make themselves of some account. In describing Rancière’s understanding of democracy, Chambers argues that

Democracy, we might say, is the regime that cannot count properly. This is what makes democracy a space or moment of impropriety, and it is also why democracy, in truth, is not a regime at all (2013: 166).

It is my contention that libraries too have a problem with counting, and it is this peculiarity that makes them improper. In this way, perhaps what is proper to libraries is their constant negotiation between the demands of the dominant social order and the demands of their

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4 See, for example, Audunson et al. (2011), Delica and Elbeshausen (2013) and Yoshida (2013).

assumption of equality. If neoliberalism is committed to the elimination of politics, I think this constant negotiation by libraries enacts the reverse: it forces the question of politics to the fore. To conserve the public library in the face of its exposure to the rationality of neoliberalism, its democratic impropriety needs to be constantly defended and reasserted. The library's "problem with counting" is crucial to this impropriety.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to briefly turn to the question of inclusivity and its relationship to libraries. Libraries, along with many liberal institutions, have long discussed the need for inclusivity in their services, and the need to develop policies that can be generative of this inclusivity. We can see this most acutely over the past fifteen years alongside the rise of the concept of 'social capital' in library and information science research.<sup>5</sup> However, rather than simply being understood as being committed to inclusivity, I would suggest that libraries first need to be understood as being *radically inclusive*, and further that the drive for inclusivity might be disruptive to this radical inclusivity. Libraries are radically inclusive because of their impropriety; because of their failure to "count properly" (Ibid.) and thus to include everyone as a matter of principle. This is different to a commitment to inclusivity, where those who are recognised as socially excluded are specifically targeted for inclusion. To go about generating inclusivity it thus become necessary to determine who it is that is excluded, to determine what their needs are, and to make sure that the library is structured to respond to these needs. There is a danger, however, that in the act of attempting to increase inclusivity the library's radical inclusivity - its assumption of equality amongst its users - is undermined. Inclusivity depends on a particular counting of the social populace: it requires that the various parts of a population be identified so that those parts which aren't making use of library services can be responded to. However, how can this accounting be balanced against the assumption of equality that the library makes, where what makes the library radically inclusive is precisely the failure to assign specific categories to specific parts of the population? If democracy, following Rancière, is when a formally accounted for part of the population refuses this accounting and acts in a way which hasn't been accounted for, what happens to the democratic impropriety of the public library when it formally sets itself the task of accounting for parts of the population? What do we lose by allowing the proper counting of an inclusive library service to negate the improper counting that, I would argue, is proper to the idea of the public library? If, as I am tentatively suggesting, it is the public library's assumption of equality that contributes to it being attractive to those that we understand as excluded or abjected, then the drive for inclusivity undermines itself from the start. As Aabø and Audunson (2012) have demonstrated, use of public library space is complex and sometimes contradictory:

Fluidity is what remains as the dominating impression, and this is also with regard to life spheres. Users float between roles and spheres - between that of a student, that of a family member, that of a friend and neighbour, that of a citizen, and so forth (Ibid. 148).

It is this "fluidity", I would argue, that is crucial to the equality that the library assumes and to its status as radically inclusive, and precisely this fluidity that is in danger of becoming lost

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Johnson (2012), Aabø and Audunson (2012), Audunson et al. (2011) and Vårheim (2011).

in a drive towards greater inclusivity by ‘fixing’ the identities of those that are targeted for inclusion.

I raise these critical questions not as an argument against inclusivity per se but rather to bring to the fore the effects that institutional attempts to promote inclusivity may have, in the hope that we can better understand how to implement forms of inclusivity in a manner which doesn’t negate the library’s democratic impropriety. This seems especially important in the context of neoliberalism, where this democratic impropriety is valuable in helping respond to the threat that public libraries currently face. Clearly, it is important to differentiate to what extent exclusion is being maintained by inclusivity, what possibilities this inclusivity opens up for those targeted for inclusion, conversely what possibilities inclusivity closes down, and finally to try to determine when the mark of exclusion becomes a mark of abjection (a shift which may not have a clearly determined ‘crossing-over’ point). To this end these final remarks do not attempt to offer an answer to this issue but rather are a call for, and the beginnings of, further research to be done.

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