

10 The Political Histories of UK Public Libraries and Access to Knowledge

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To complement contemporary discussions on open access, this chapter considers public libraries as one element of the longer history of access to scholarly knowledge.¹ A historical perspective reveals that access to knowledge has undergone a long, slow process of change, related to social, technical, and political developments in printing, mass literacy, universities, and libraries. Until the advent of the digital technologies that enable the Open Access Movement, public access to the scholarly record required physical access to printed works. Public libraries helped facilitate this, fulfilling a vital role in extending access to scholarship beyond the academy. However, the complex power dynamics at play in the dissemination of ideas are visible in the creation of public libraries, through the role of philanthropy, Enlightenment notions of self-improvement, and the class politics of the Victorian era. This chapter examines these origins, with a focus on the UK, to reveal that current debates around the consequences of widening public access to scholarship—and how this expansion should be paid for—are nothing new. The liberal ideals underpinning librarianship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are still present in the digital era and exploring the biases and contradictions contained within public libraries' history may give us pause when considering the political context of scholarly publishing today.

Public Libraries and Expanding Access

For most of their history, libraries have existed to serve specific communities, although some were also open to members of the general public. The transition from a patchwork of community and membership libraries to what would be recognized today as a modern national public library service

is well illustrated by examining the origins of public libraries in the UK, the country generally recognized as the first to legislate for a nationwide library service.² The term “public library” was used in Britain as early as the seventeenth century to describe libraries supported by a variety of funding models:³ endowed libraries (founded by philanthropists), subscription libraries,⁴ and institutional libraries. These models encompassed a diverse range of library types, from the institutional libraries of religious organizations through to cooperatively owned workers libraries. When public libraries in the modern sense—that is, publicly funded institutions for use by the whole community—were created, they built on this earlier legacy, in some cases very directly with the transfer of books and buildings.⁵ The idea of public libraries as a network of institutions to serve an entire nation only became possible in the UK following the 1850 Public Libraries Act, which allowed town councils to establish libraries funded by raising local taxes.⁶ Over the next century, the national network slowly came into being, with steady growth in the number of libraries, driven by further legislation such as the 1919 Public Libraries Act that extended library provision beyond urban centers to counties as well. The amount of funding that could be raised through taxation was limited, so many libraries relied on philanthropy from wealthy individuals to fund the acquisition of reading materials, with the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie taking a leading role in paying for the buildings themselves.⁷ Library provision to all finally became a statutory obligation of local authorities with the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act.

Concurrently, working-class education had expanded greatly throughout the nineteenth century, and not only through state-sponsored channels: mutual improvement societies, cooperative societies, miners’ libraries and mechanics’ institutes all contributed to adult education. Formal higher education also underwent big changes in the same period: despite their medieval origins, modern universities were largely a product of the nineteenth century,⁸ during which time new universities were created in Britain’s civic centers.⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century, education reforms meant that most adults were literate to some degree,¹⁰ and details of the occupations of registered library users in the 1870s show that a majority were of the working classes.¹¹ The coupling of broadened access to education with public library provision resulted in a dramatic expansion of public appetite for access to scholarship. The professionalization of science around the turn of

the twentieth century¹² also contributed to greater participation in scholarship beyond the traditional “gentleman-scholars” who had previously dominated science, although the requirement of a university education may have had a negative impact on self-trained working-class scientists.¹³ Access to reference materials through public libraries played an important supporting role in all of this—at least in the cities—particularly in expanding access to women, who had often been excluded both from universities and from institutions designed for working men.¹⁴

A counter reading of the history of working-class education in the UK, though, shows a gradual shift of control out of the hands of the workers themselves and toward the governing classes. It began with working-class activists organizing among themselves, was solidified into institutions such as mechanics’ institutes that were much more heavily reliant on middle-class patronage, and finally led to state control of education. While in some ways this was a victory, resulting in universal free education for all children regardless of class, it also diminished traditions of mutual support and self-organization in place of benevolent “care.” This narrative is somewhat oversimplified—after all, self-educated intellectuals were always a minority within the working classes—but raises important issues around power relations that are discussed further below.¹⁵ Public libraries were part of this process. The state-funded public library network that was becoming fairly comprehensive by the early twentieth century did offer greatly expanded opportunities for working-class people to access books, but at the cost of removing some of the agency¹⁶ from the decision over what to purchase that was present in the small local libraries of a century earlier. This trade-off between access and agency has resonance with current debates surrounding the geopolitics of open access, especially regarding the relations between the Global North and South. Indeed, one specific model of funding open access, article processing charges (APCs), has been widely criticized as a form of “neocolonialism” that entrenches unequal power relations, fueling a disparity between those who can afford to publish using that model and those who cannot (for more on this, see Thomas Hervé Mboa Nkoudou’s chapter in this volume).¹⁷ The “missionary” aspect of the UK’s early public library provision, whereby wealthy philanthropists bestowed gifts upon the poor, must be avoided in new open systems of knowledge dissemination by taking care to foster relationships of mutual cooperation.

Class, Colonialism, and Access

Libraries have often been idealized as “neutral” and classless, which obscures their political dimension.¹⁸ Indeed, class relations were intrinsic to the public library movement that led to the original British legislation in 1850—enacted after campaigns by Liberal MPs William Ewart and Joseph Brotherton—with Victorian middle-class notions of social- and self-improvement a key driver in the idea of providing library facilities to all.¹⁹ Public libraries were created with the aim of “bettering” the working classes; they were designed as cultural institutions that would shape public taste and foster “good citizenship.”²⁰ It was thought by some advocates that providing free literature to workers would dull revolutionary tendencies and interest in radical socialism.²¹ Conversely, Rose argues against this—that rather than instill bourgeois values, working-class education was a means for workers to break out of prescribed class roles.²² If “economic inequality rested on inequality of education,” then institutions designed to provide greater equity of access to knowledge were part of the egalitarian spirit of liberal reform.²³ Equity of access is seen as central to the purpose of public libraries, with McMenemy arguing that they “represent the ideal that everyone within society deserves the right to access materials for their educational, cultural and leisure benefit.”²⁴

Such ideals are emblematic of the liberal Enlightenment, so it is vital to remember the destructive legacy of colonialism and empire that coexists within this same tradition. Comparing the creation of public library services in the UK with the experience of some former colonial nations shows the imprint of this imperialist legacy and the fight against it. For instance, New Zealand had an incredibly high density of libraries within a few decades of European colonization but these were almost all subscription libraries rather than being municipally funded,²⁵ as were the British-introduced libraries in Malaysia until American organizations introduced free libraries in the 1950s.²⁶ The Dutch colonial administration in Indonesia created 2,500 public libraries to cement its authority through instilling its values.²⁷ While Britain was responsible for introducing modern public libraries to some countries,²⁸ it used a similar propagandist model to the Dutch in various African and Asian colonies.²⁹ In 1930s India, on the other hand, the influential library theorist Sirkazhi Ramamrita Ranganathan saw libraries as part of an anticolonial political project, “draw[ing] a link

between open access to knowledge and the need for wider social transformation."³⁰ Although a scattering of public libraries already existed in various Indian cities,³¹ these did not cover most of the population, and the movement to create a national network of public libraries (along with mass literacy and education) was grounded in the struggle against colonial rule.³² These histories show a diverse global picture in terms of the political dynamics of introducing national public library systems, particularly in terms of their colonial origins, with lasting consequences for their future development.³³ Widening access to knowledge has been viewed as both emancipatory and, conversely, as a tool for indoctrination.³⁴ If public libraries are governed solely in the interests of governing classes rather than for ordinary citizens, their potential for facilitating a more equitable distribution of knowledge is diminished.

In this light, librarians act as both facilitators of access to information but also as gatekeepers, a dual role that highlights a tension within the profession's ethics.³⁵ In some ways, the need to mediate between library users and their materials has been reduced over time through both social and technological advances. For instance, the term "open access" was originally used to refer to print materials held on open shelves rather than in closed stacks, a practice which was unknown in the early days of public libraries;³⁶ and after being introduced in the US from the 1890s,³⁷ it only became widespread in the UK following the First World War.³⁸ To take a more recent example, if a library now provides an electronic version of a text then members of that library may be able to access it without physically going to the library. In both of these examples, library workers are still facilitating access but their role is less obvious to the end user and so the necessity of librarians' labor is obscured. Unfortunately, the fact that labor is often hidden has resulted in calls from the libertarian right to end public library services due to ill-conceived notions that librarians have already been automated out.

Open Access and Knowledge Politics

Public libraries have always had to be responsive to the political context of the time. For example, in England under New Labour (circa 1997–2010), social inclusion became an explicit part of library policy,³⁹ whereas the later 2010–2015 Conservative-Liberal coalition government cut local government spending to such an extent that many councils closed libraries

in response.⁴⁰ Such an engagement with the policy direction of particular governments is also very clear with regard to open access. A central rationale for open access is that not all users (or potential users) of academic research are within the academy and research could have greater impact if results are made more widely available. The composition of publics outside of the academy varies at any given time, but includes teachers, further education students, retired academics, industry and entrepreneurs, refugees, and “para-academic” or contingent academic labor without a permanent faculty position (and for more on the composition of different publics, see Mourat, Ricci, and Latour in this book).⁴¹ The UK government has made open access a priority in order to exploit the economic potential of these publics—especially startups and entrepreneurs. The notion that public libraries could provide scientific and technical knowledge in order to drive innovation and therefore stimulate economic growth is an old one. Although in the late nineteenth century public libraries’ provision of technical literature was patchy,⁴² by the First World War they were seen as supporting economic activity around scientific and technical progress, leading to the development of numerous commercial and technical libraries.⁴³

A similar supporting role for public libraries was envisaged by David Willetts, the former Minister for Universities and Science (2010–2014), who initiated the UK’s current national open-access policy direction. After 150 years of expanding access to knowledge through public libraries, using them to increase access to online research can be seen as a logical expansion and resulted in the UK’s free access service, “Access to Research.”⁴⁴ The scheme provides free access to online journal articles from public library computers. This is an exception to most UK open-access policy in that it focuses on end users rather than the supply side—that is, academia. It has so far not been a runaway success—figures from the initial 19-month pilot period of the service showed a wide variance in usage between different library authorities, with some seeing no usage at all, and the national total of 89,869 searches from 34,276 user sessions during the period translates as only 1,800 users per month.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the Access to Research scheme is taking place concurrently with an unprecedented level of budgetary cuts to public library provision in the UK, alongside ongoing commercialization and deprofessionalization, which threaten to reduce the ability of public libraries to function as a site of lifelong learning and civic engagement. From 2010–2016, 343 UK public libraries were closed, 174 were deprofessionalized by handing

control over to community groups and volunteers, and 7,933 library staff (around 25 percent of the total) were made redundant.⁴⁶ Walk-in access to research is of no value to citizens whose library has been closed.

Conclusion

From the creation of public libraries, the expansion of higher education, to the global adoption of the internet, a shifting distribution of power has put more information in the hands of more people. Open access to research in the digital era is part of this longer history of access to knowledge. But if the decisions governing open-access policy are subject to whims of temporary administrations, then nothing is inevitable about the success or otherwise of open access—rights obtained after a long struggle can always be rolled back. Despite all the gains made so far,⁴⁷ not everyone has equal access to knowledge: money and social advantage are still barriers to accessing the results of scholarship, let alone participating in its creation. The extent of academic piracy highlights the uneven geographical distribution of access to research: pirate websites such as Sci-Hub and Library Genesis show great demand in countries where access is a significant problem, such as Indonesia and Iran.⁴⁸ This indicates that there is still much work to be done. Throughout history, progress in this area has often followed on the heels of grassroots or illicit activity. For example, although nineteenth-century public libraries resulted from top-down work of social reformers rather than bottom-up demand, they entered a world already containing a rich variety of autonomous working-class libraries. And piracy is often a precursor to the implementation of legal solutions.⁴⁹ By paying attention to the lessons of history, particularly its social and political dimensions, those of us who see open access as a progressive catalyst for social change can work toward the *kind* of open access we want to see.

Notes

1. For further information about the topics raised in this chapter, see the PhD thesis: Stuart Lawson, “Open Access Policy in the UK: From Neoliberalism to the Commons” (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 2019) <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.774255>.

2. To qualify this statement, it should be mentioned that the UK’s initial legislation only allowed individual local authorities to raise taxes for public libraries, rather

than require them to do so. And legislation was also passed at a local level in the US around the same time, such as in New Hampshire in 1849 and Boston in 1852. Jesse H. Spera, *Foundations of The Public Library—The Origins Of The Public Library Movement In New England 1629–1855* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 165–188.

3. Thomas Kelly, *History of Public Libraries in Great Britain, 1845–1975* (London: Library Association Publishing, 1977), 3–4.

4. Subscription libraries lasted until the mid-twentieth century when they were finally supplanted by tax-funded libraries. Alistair Black, *The Public Library in Britain, 1914–2000* (London: The British Library, 2000), 115; Kelly, *History of Public Libraries*, 344.

5. Kelly, *History of Public Libraries*, 72–74.

6. The initial 1850 Act only applied to England and Wales but was soon extended to Scotland through additional legislation. See Kelly, *History of Public Libraries*, 20–22.

7. Kelly, *History of Public Libraries*, 115–137; David McMenemy, *The Public Library* (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 27–30. Carnegie also funded libraries elsewhere, notably in the US.

8. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 7; Walter Rüegg, “Themes: The French and German University Models,” in *Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800–1945)*, ed. Walter Rüegg, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5–6.

9. Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012), 27–28.

10. Kelly, *History of Public Libraries*, 18; In fact, there were fairly high levels of literacy much earlier than this—see Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010)—but a national system of free primary education helped make this more consistent across different classes and regions.

11. Kelly, *History of Public Libraries*, 82–83.

12. James A. Secord, “Science, Technology and Mathematics,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. David McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 443–474, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521866248.014>.

13. Rose, *The Intellectual Life*, 70–72.

14. Chris Baggs, “‘The Whole Tragedy of Leisure in Penury’: The South Wales Miners’ Institute Libraries during the Great Depression,” *Libraries & Culture* 39, no. 2 (2004): 120; Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 18–20, 76–77.

15. Rose, *The Intellectual Life*, 236.

16. See Baggs, “‘The Whole Tragedy of Leisure in Penury,’” for details of this process in action in the miners’ libraries of south Wales.

17. Gerald Beasley, "Article Processing Charges: A New Route to Open Access?," in *Positioning and Power in Academic Publishing: Players, Agents and Agendas*, ed. Fernando Loizides and Birgit Schmidt (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2016), 125–130, <https://doi.org/10.3233/978-1-61499-649-1-125>; Thomas Hervé Mboa Nkoudou, "The (Unconscious?) Neocolonial Face of Open Access" (Berlin, 2017); Florence Piron, "Postcolonial Open Access," in *Open Divide: Critical Studies on Open Access*, ed. Joachim Schöpfel and Ulrich Herb (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2018), 117–126, <https://corpus.ulaval.ca/jspui/handle/20.500.11794/16178>.
18. John Pateman, "Public Libraries and Social Class," in *Open to All? The Public Library and Social Exclusion*, by Dave Muddiman et al. (London: Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, 2000), 26–42, <http://eprints.rclis.org/6283/>; Alison M. Lewis, "Introduction," in *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian*, ed. Alison M. Lewis (Duluth, MI: Library Juice Press, 2008), 1–4. See Pateman on class, and Lewis for a critique of library neutrality.
19. McMenemy, *The Public Library*, 24–25.
20. Black, *The Public Library in Britain*, 4.
21. Black, *The Public Library in Britain*, 25–27, 145–146.
22. Rose, *The Intellectual Life*, 23.
23. Rose, *The Intellectual Life*, 24.
24. McMenemy, *The Public Library*, xiii; See also IFLA, "IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto," 1994, <https://www.ifla.org/publications/iflaunesco-public-library-manifesto-1994>.
25. J. E. Traue, "The Public Library Explosion in Colonial New Zealand," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 42, no. 2 (2007): 153.
26. C. Yu Priscilla, "History of Modern Librarianship in East Asia," *Library History* 24, no. 1 (2008): 65–67, <https://doi.org/10.1179/174581608X295293>; The US also played a similar role in Japan. Priscilla, "History of Modern Librarianship," 67–68.
27. Elizabeth B. Fitzpatrick, "The Public Library as Instrument of Colonialism: The Case of the Netherlands East Indies," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 43, no. 3 (2008): 270–285. For more historical context, see also L. Sulisty-Basuki, "The Rise and Growth of Libraries in Pre-War Indonesia," *Library History* 14, no. 1 (1998): 55–64, <https://doi.org/10.1179/lib.1998.14.1.55>.
28. For example, Ethiopia. See Sterling Joseph Coleman, "The British Council and Unesco in Ethiopia: A Comparison of Linear and Cyclical Patterns of Librarianship Development," *Library History* 21, no. 2 (2005): 121–130, <https://doi.org/10.1179/002423005x44952>; However, see also Rosenberg on the British colonial authority's lack of interest in setting up a national library service in Kenya. Diana Rosenberg,

"Imposing Libraries: The Establishment of National Public Library Services in Africa, with Particular Reference to Kenya," *Third World Libraries* 4, no. 1 (1993): 35–44.

29. Fitzpatrick, "The Public Library as Instrument of Colonialism."

30. George Roe, "Challenging the Control of Knowledge in Colonial India: Political Ideas in the Work of S. R. Ranganathan," *Library & Information History* 26, no. 1 (2010): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1179/175834909X12593371068342>.

31. Jashu Patel and Krishan Kumar, *Libraries and Librarianship in India* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 2–14.

32. Roe, "Challenging the Control of Knowledge in Colonial India."

33. Jennifer Cram, "Colonialism and Libraries in Third World Africa," *The Australian Library Journal* 42, no. 1 (1993): 13–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049670.1993.10755621>; Gabe Ignatow, "What Has Globalization Done to Developing Countries' Public Libraries?," *International Sociology* 26, no. 6 (2011): 746–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580910393373>; Adakole Ochai, "The Purpose of the Library in Colonial Tropical Africa: An Historical Survey," *International Library Review* 16, no. 3 (1984): 309–315, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0020-7837\(84\)90007-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0020-7837(84)90007-4); Amusi Odi, "The Colonial Origins of Library Development in Africa: Some Reflections on Their Significance," *Libraries & Culture* 26, no. 4 (1991): 594–604; Kate Parry, "Libraries in Uganda: Not Just Linguistic Imperialism," *Libri* 61, no. 4 (2011): 328–337, <https://doi.org/10.1515/libr.2011.027>.

34. See Rose, *The Intellectual Life*, on the importance of paying attention to readers' own perceptions of the effect of reading and education, rather than relying entirely on theoretical exposition.

35. Adetoun A. Oyelude and Alice A. Bamigbola, "Libraries as the Gate: 'Ways' and 'Keepers' in the Knowledge Environment," *Library Hi Tech News* 29, no. 8 (2012): 7–10, <https://doi.org/10.1108/07419051211287615>.

36. Kelly, *History of Public Libraries*, 176–182.

37. Wayne Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 79–81.

38. Black, *The Public Library in Britain*, 52.

39. Department for Culture, Media and Sport, "Libraries for All: Social Inclusion in Public Libraries," 1999, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/Social_Inclusion_PLibraries.pdf; McMenemy, *The Public Library*; Dave Muddiman et al., *Open to All? The Public Library and Social Exclusion*, ed. Dave Muddiman, vol. 1, Ove (London: Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, 2000), <http://eprints.rclis.org/6283/>. Muddiman et al. questioned the efficacy of this policy.

40. BBC, "Libraries 'Facing Greatest Crisis,'" March 29, 2016, sec. England, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-35707956>.

41. An often-overlooked point, but many refugees are university students or graduates. Jessica Magaziner, "The Importance of Higher Education for Syrian Refugees," *World Education News + Reviews*, December 7, 2015, <https://wenr.wes.org/2015/12/the-importance-of-higher-education-for-syrian-refugees>. With close to 1 percent of the global population now displaced—there are an estimated 65.3 million refugees out of a global population of 7.4 billion, i.e., 0.8 percent of people—access to education and research for refugees has become a major global issue. Sam Jones, "One in Every 113 People Forced to Flee, Says UN Refugee Agency," *The Guardian*, June 20, 2016, sec. Global development, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jun/20/one-in-every-113-people-uprooted-war-persecution-says-un-refugee-agency>; United Nations Refugee Agency, "Figures at a Glance," UNHCR, accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

42. Kelly, *History of Public Libraries*, 77–78.

43. Black, *The Public Library in Britain*, 13–14, 28–29; Kelly, *History of Public Libraries*, 243–244.

44. Sarah Faulder and Shinwha Cha, "Access to Research: The Experience of Implementing a Pilot in Public Libraries," *Learned Publishing* 27, no. 2 (2014): 85–92, <https://doi.org/10.1087/20140202>. The Access to Research site is available at <http://www.accessstoresearch.org.uk/>.

45. Shared Intelligence, "Access to Research: A Report to the Publishers Licensing Society and the Society of Chief Librarians," 2015, 15–19, <https://www.pls.org.uk/media/199841/Access-to-Research-final-report-Oct-2015.pdf>. The Shared Intelligence report treats this as successful, but 1,800 out of a population of 65 million is extremely low.

46. BBC, "Libraries 'Facing Greatest Crisis.'"

47. For data on the growth of open access, see Archambault et al., "Proportion of Open Access Papers Published in Peer-Reviewed Journals at the European and World Levels—1996–2013"; Rob Johnson, Anthony Watkinson, and Michael Mabe, *The STM Report: An Overview of Scientific and Scholarly Journal Publishing*, 5th ed. (The Hague: International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers, 2018), https://www.stm-assoc.org/2018_10_04_STM_Report_2018.pdf.

48. See Bodó on "shadow libraries," the geographical distribution of their users, and the historical reasons why Russia is the center of much academic piracy. Balázs Bodó, "The Genesis of Library Genesis: The Birth of a Global Scholarly Shadow Library," in *Shadow Libraries: Access to Educational Materials in Global Higher Education*, ed. Joe Karaganis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 25–52; Balázs Bodó, "Library Genesis in Numbers: Mapping the Underground Flow of Knowledge," in

Shadow Libraries: Access to Educational Materials in Global Higher Education, ed. Joe Karaganis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 53–78. High-income nations do also have significant use of pirate websites though, as analysis of Sci-Hub usage data has made clear. John Bohannon, “Who’s Downloading Pirated Papers? Everyone,” *Science*, April 25, 2016, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/04/whos-downloading-pirated-papers-everyone>; Bastian Greshake, “Correlating the Sci-Hub Data with World Bank Indicators and Identifying Academic Use,” *The Wimmower* 3 (May 30, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.15200/winn.146485.57797>.

49. Adrian Johns, *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

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