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6

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

On December 5, 1877, dedicating a branch of the Boston Public Library, Mayor Frederick Prince claimed, rather triumphantly, that the public library "has become so fixed in the affections of the people that it may now safely defy all opposition" (Boston Public Library 1878, 4). The mayor's assessment was generally accurate; by that time, the library had become part and parcel of urban life in New England and beyond. If there was disagreement—and there was, and still is—it had largely to do with the function of public libraries, not with whether they should exist at all.

With regard to the function of the public library, the specific points of contention have changed over the years. In the late nineteenth century, debate raged on how the public library should address the growing popular interest in works of fiction, especially among women. Should the library guide readers away from works of fiction or make them readily available? Today, the points of contention often relate to internet access in public libraries (e.g., the installation of filtering software for protection of children). While the specific points of contention change, the friction point is deeply rooted: the normative view of the stewards of the library versus the alternative perspectives within the public.

In this chapter, we examine the underlying dynamics of the long-running debate on the role of the public library. We then look for blind

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spots and see whether the analytical strategy of recentering-on-reversal could be helpful in identifying them.

EXPANSION OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The early public libraries in the US varied in accordance with their local specificities: For instance, Salisbury, Connecticut, founded a public library in 1810, the first in the nation, when a vote at a town meeting approved the use of public money to build on a gift of 150 books from a publisher;[1] Peterborough, New Hampshire, established its public library in 1833 with funding from the State Literary Fund, tax money that had proved inadequate for realizing the original intent—building a state university;[2] and Wayland, Massachusetts, received a $500 gift in 1847, prompting 208 of its residents to donate a total of $553.90 for establishing a public library.[3]

Many influential figures embracing "universal cultural brotherhood" saw the public library as the "destroyer of class distinctions, sectional antagonisms, and international ill will" (Ditzion 1947, 6). Francis Wayland, a prominent Baptist educator, spoke of the public library as an instrument for cultivating a virtuous culture, which kept decadence at bay.[4] Edward Everett, a Unitarian clergyman, thought that the public library would fill Boston's "noble system of public instructions" by aiding life-long learning (1851, 255). George Ticknor, a prominent leader of the library movement, holding illiteracy to be the germinator of social upheavals, championed the public library as a vehicle for promoting self-culture. In general, the elites saw the library as a means for countering "tendencies to dissipation" and producing educated and well-behaved workers (Ditzion 1947, 24). In this fashion, a medley of voices, distinct but converging, laid the groundwork for the development of public libraries in Boston and beyond.

In 1876, the US had approximately 300 public libraries with at least 300 volumes,[5] two-thirds of which were in the Northeast. In the following decades, the public library movement gained momentum. On the one hand, a number of states, starting with Massachusetts in 1890, passed legislation for state-level support of public libraries. On the other hand, the industrialist Andrew Carnegie began providing funds for the construction of libraries—the first Carnegie library opened in 1889. With these initiatives, public libraries spread rapidly until World War 1 (Prentice 2011). In

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1913, on the eve of World War 1, the US had about 2,100 public libraries with at least 5,000 volumes (Kevane and Sundstrom 2014). Carnegie had funded the construction of about 1,700 public libraries, including some with fewer than 5,000 volumes (Mitchell 2018).

Interestingly, the Progressive Era's public library legislation and Carnegie's philanthropy were similarly motivated: the elevation of the working class, assimilation of immigrants, and advancement of civilization. In the interwar years, Carnegie did not fund library construction, focusing instead on librarian training (Anderson 1963). Support by the local and state governments for the expansion of public libraries continued, with the number of libraries having at least 5,000 volumes reaching about 5,600 in 1929, when the Great Depression started (Kevane and Sundstrom 2014). After World War II, federal funds enabled further expansion of public libraries (Prentice 2011). Today, there are about 9,000 public libraries (not counting branch libraries) in the US.[6]

While scholars largely agree about such facts, their interpretations diverge. Ditzion's early account, which gave much weight to social reformers such as Wayland, Everett, and Ticknor, is considered to be a "progressivist interpretation" in need of serious revision. The historian Dee Garrison (1979) provides one such revisionist interpretation, which, as we shall see, views librarians as closely aligned with the upper and middle classes.

INEQUITIES AND INEQUITIES THAT MATTER

Although the role of New England and New York elites is often exaggerated and rightly criticized by some historians (e.g., Garrison 1979; McCook 2001), there is no question that their home states were the harbingers of public libraries. Moreover, the dynamic set in motion by the New England and New York elites shaped the development of the public libraries all over the US—public libraries spread to the rest of the country in a westward movement.

This dynamic differed from what we see in the case of other systems—the inequities mattered far more to the providers of access, who were certain about their mission, than the intended beneficiaries, who were conflicted. For instance, in 1892, a labor organization in Pittsburgh petitioned the city council to return Andrew Carnegie's donation, considering the money to

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be tainted and the donation motivated by desire for self-glorification—a sentiment echoed in Detroit in 1901 and in Indianapolis in 1903. But then the communities did accept Carnegie's money. For his part, Carnegie mainly asked that communities provide land and a commitment to take care of the libraries in the future, an assurance that they readily provided.[7] The communities typically located public libraries, those funded by Carnegie and others, in the middle of the town, being points of local pride (Lerner 2009).

Here, we will focus on the conflicted nature of this process. We will start by understanding the New England and New York elites and their objectives. We will then look at how the intended recipients of their benefaction, mainly members of the working class, responded. Thereafter, in the section on gains and travails, we will analyze the upshot of this interaction between the elite-driven development of public libraries and the complex responses of the intended beneficiaries.

AMBITIONS OF THE BENEFACTORS

The founders and leaders of public libraries came almost exclusively from the ranks of what Garrison calls the "new gentry"—mostly urban, mostly white, and mostly male professionals, well-to-do individuals with literary affinities, businessmen committed to genteel standards, and others (Garrison 1979; Joeckel 1939; Prentice 1973; Shelton 1976). They shared a consonant worldview, which Garrison (1979) describes as follows: "The belief that America was a radical democratic experiment in government; the sense of urban crisis and chaos; the fear of immigrant intruders; the emphasis upon the family as guarantor of tradition; the discontent of women and labor; the hope that education would right the wrongs of poverty and crime; the hunger for education among the poor" (62).

In general, the elites were anxious about the huge changes underway in American society—changes that largely stemmed from mass immigration and industrialization. In this respect, the development of public library parallels that of universal education. In 1876, W. E. Foster, the director of the public library in Providence, Rhode Island, succinctly described the relationship between the public library and the public school as "two halves of one complete purpose" (Nardini 2001, 116).

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In the case of universal education, as we have seen, its proponents championed the tax-supported public school as the "principal digestive organ of the body politic" for Americanizing immigrants, especially Catholics who were prone to setting up parochial schools (Strong 1963, 89). Likewise, the proponents of the public library championed it as an instrument for assimilating immigrants (Burgess 2013; Lerner 2009). Ticknor argued that public libraries would bring "them in willing subjection to our own institutions" (Harris 1975, 6). In the same vein, others argued that public libraries would dispel the "foreigner" of rebellion and disloyalty, which were seen as rooted in ignorance (Wadlin 1911; Wellard 1937, 56).[8]

Also, as in the case of universal education, which was taken to be a means of "reconciling freedom and order" (i.e., tutoring the newly enfranchised lower classes to respect the established system, especially property rights), public libraries were seen as a stabilizing force for the society at large, not just for immigrants (Kaestle 1983; Lerner 2009). Carnegie articulated this view very vividly when he said, "the result of knowledge [gleaned from libraries] is to make men not violent revolutionists, but cautious evolutionists; not destroyers, but careful improvers" (Harris 1975, 15).

The protests and strikes of the 1890s raised these concerns to a new level of urgency. About 14,000 protests erupted between 1880 and 1894, sparked by the railroad strike of 1877, which was crushed by local and state militias and federal troops. In the eyes of the New England and New York elite, protests, strikes, and lockouts by the working class, which included a large number of immigrants, were signs of impending social decay. According to an editorial in the *Library Journal*, this social decay could be prevented by increasing support for public libraries, which "furnish the most effective weapons against the demagogic ignorance. . . . Every book that the public library circulates helps to make . . . railroad rioters impossible" (*Library Journal* 1877, 395).

Conversely, the elites saw the public libraries as a means for creating productive and well-behaved citizens—in accordance with their conceptions (Lerner 2009). In this order of things, the librarian was the "teacher" and "missionary" to effectuate these ambitions (Nardini 2001). The stewards of public libraries, in short, were elitists with a beneficent face, motivated by varying degrees of altruism (understood in a particular way) and

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self-interest. And this affected how the rest of the society perceived public libraries from the outset.

RESPONSE OF THE INTENDED BENEFICIARIES

Notwithstanding the hopes and ambitions of librarians and their genteel supporters, the development of the public library was never a “vital working-class issue” (Garrison 1979, 49). People thought of the library as a valuable addition to their community, but not essential to daily life in the way that schools, hospitals, utilities, and the police were. In fact, the subtle paternalism of libraries repelled many people of the working class, whose long working hours did not leave them much time for reading books anyway.

The metaphors used by librarians themselves are quite telling. William Fletcher, president (1891–1892) of the American Library Association, characterizing the librarian as a cook following an old recipe for cooking a hare, noted that the initial step was elemental: “first catch your hare” (Fletcher 1904, 17). Works of fiction, in this thinking, were considered an effective means, the carrot, for “catching the hare” (Fletcher 1904, 17). In the same vein, Justin Winsor, president (1876–1885 and 1897) of the American Library Association, advised that once folks were in the library, “you must foster the instinct for reading, and then apply the agencies for directing it. . . . Let the attention be guided, as unwittingly as possible, from the poor to the indifferent, from this to the good, and so on to the best” (Winsor 1876, 64).

Furthermore, people of the working class were disaffected by the middle-class formality and “feminized propriety” of the library (Garrison 1979, xiii). In certain cases, people were even inspected for “a clean shave, a clean collar, and recent shine” before they were allowed access to the “better class” of literature (Kalisch 1969, 84). These measures turned libraries into uninviting and alien spaces for the working class. Harris and Spiegler (1974) characterize them as “inhospitable and cold for the man on the street” (264).

Interestingly, in this “feminized” space, the way that the late-nineteenth-century libraries dealt with women’s growing interest in recreational reading—especially fiction featuring a new type of heroine, sensual, active,

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and defiant—is telling. At first, librarians met this demand for recreational reading with resistance, imposing strict censorship measures, closely monitoring reading habits, publishing guidebooks for good reading, and even circulating lists of so-called questionable authors. Only at the turn of the century, after tasting the failure of such measures, they finally gave up on clamping down "pleasant books" (Hill 1902, 13). They became overtly more accommodating while working to subtly place limits, such as implementing a "'two-book' system," whereby patrons could borrow two books concurrently if one of them was not a novel (Wiegand 2015, 80).

The critics were not against the notion of a public library per se, but rather the particular expression of it given by the elites. For instance, Eugene Debs, the five-time Socialist Party of America nominee for US president, called for public libraries to be in "glorious abundance when capitalism is abolished and workingmen are no longer robbed by the philanthropic pirates of the Carnegie class" (Garrison 1979, 49). It is also telling that when unions undertook worker education, they did not rely on the public library—they developed their own book collections (Garceau 1949).

GAINS AND TRAVAILS

Today, Americans are able to access the services of public libraries at more than 16,500 sites (including main buildings and branches). Moreover, the national average population-weighted distance for the closest public library is only 2.1 miles[9] (Donnelly 2015). In effect, public libraries, albeit with uneven resources, are widely accessible at the physical level. About half of the US population uses the public library in some way. Given our analytical project, we should not lose sight of the fact that half of the population does not use the public library at all, even when surveys show overwhelmingly positive assessments of the public library, including by many nonusers. With this in mind, and alert to the need to capture a fuller picture, we now take stock of the gains and travails (table 6.1).

INDIVIDUAL

Gains In 2017, about 96 percent of Americans lived within a public library legal service area, a little more than half were registered users, and

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Table 6.1 Public library: Gains and travails

	Gains	**Travails**
Individual	Free access to books and other information sources Librarians often going the extra mile to provide information on government agencies and community organizations that could be of help Libraries as communal spaces Libraries helping the homeless	Part of the array of disciplinary institutions that seek to mold the individual Alienating environment in regard to class sensibilities Having to pay taxes whether or not one considers the library to be a public good
System	Libraries complementing the school system Libraries providing opportunities for the development of information technology skills, which are important for today's economy Libraries helping to dispel discontent by reducing ignorance and containing it by providing harmless entertainment	Only about half the population visiting a public library at least once a year A sizeable section of the population (about one-fifth) never visiting a public library

they made on average 4.2 visits a year (Institute of Museum and Library Services 2019b, 2020). Further, a Pew Research Center (2016) survey spotlights the high regard that Americans have for public libraries. Here, it is interesting to note that the majority of people who have never visited a public library thought that closing their local library would have a major impact on their community. Cleary, public libraries do a lot of good.

Individuals have free access to books and other information resources. In addition, librarians often go the extra mile to provide information on government agencies (e.g., child welfare) and community groups (e.g., community bicycle repair cooperative) that could address individuals' needs. Libraries also serve as valuable communal spaces—providing meeting rooms, among other things. Moreover, they have been at the forefront of issues related to homelessness, as the homeless gravitate toward them for shelter, restrooms, internet access, newspapers, books, and meeting friends.[10] Libraries help the homeless look for jobs and housing and

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interface with government agencies to provide food stamps and other assistance. Some libraries even hire psychiatric social workers and health and safety advocates, and also offer haircuts, meals, parking lots for shopping carts, and bus fare[11] (Fox 2015; Gunderman and Stevens 2015; Ruhlmann 2014; Simpson 2014).

Travails Reports on the public library tend to overlook the nonusers. For instance, the reports of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which administers the annual Public Library Surveys as per the Library Services Act of 2010, are full of statistics on collections, programs, services, and usage (e.g., Institute of Museum and Library Services 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Usage data, which is of interest to us, is provided on a per-user basis (e.g., book circulation per person) and broken down on the basis of location (city, suburb, town, rural) and the size of the population served. On a per-user basis, these numbers look good—but what about nonusers? Based on a 2016 telephone survey of 1,601 Americans (16 years and older), Pew provides demographic information on users (age, sex, race, education, and other characteristics). More important, though, it also provides “a portrait of those who have never been to libraries” (Pew Research Center 2016, 15). According to Pew survey data, 19 percent of Americans have never visited a public library. Who are they? They are likely to be male (24 percent), sixty-five years and older (26 percent), Hispanic (32 percent) or black (28 percent), educated up to high school graduation or less (29 percent), and living in households with income below $30,000.[12] Why they do not use the public library? This is our blind spot—one with consequences, as we will see in the next section.

We have two insights from the literature into what might be keeping people away from the library. One, the public library is part of the array of disciplinary institutions that mold individuals along lines that align with the system’s imperatives.[13] It was established as “conservator of order,” molding individuals in particular ways (Harris 1975, 14). Two, the sensibilities and ambience of the public library create an alienating environment for the working class (Garrison 1979; Harris and Spiegler 1974; Kalisch 1969).

It is important to note for our analysis that whether or not individuals use the public library, they have to pay taxes that support it.

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SYSTEM

Gains The public library complements the public school system, extending education to after-school hours for students still in school, and providing lifelong learning opportunities for former students who have entered the workforce. In our time, they provide people valuable opportunities to develop digital skills, which are important in our economy, helping them function as both workers and consumers.

The public library also helps dispel and contain discontent (Lerner 2009). It helps remove ignorance, which elites believed to the root cause of discontent (Ditzion 1947). If nothing else, it provides “a harmless form of entertainment” (Harris 1975, 3). For instance, during the temperance movement, its supporters saw public libraries as a means of keeping drinking men out of the alehouse—“an asylum for the inebriate” (Ditzion 1947, 23–24). In the same vein, reformers saw children’s libraries as “wholesome alternatives to the street-corner and saloon” (Lerner 2009, 142). Today, the library provides access to various forms of electronic recreation.

Travails As noted earlier, only about half of the population visits a public library at least once in any given year. Moreover, there is a sizable section of the population, about one-fifth, that has never visited a public library. On the one hand, lack of participation by a very large part of the population is contrary to the “library faith” (Garceau 1949, 50) in the centrality of public libraries in the democratic process. On the other hand, the fact that about one-fifth of the population remains totally beyond the reach of the library points to its shortfall as a disciplinary institution—perhaps from the standpoint of the system, these are the very people who need to be brought more deeply into the disciplinary regime.

SUCCESS AND ITS COMPLEMENT

Proponents of the public library never fail to underscore its special place in a democracy. Josephus N. Larned, president (1893–1894) of the American Library Association, went so far as to characterize the public library as the only institution capable of delivering a democratic future that is “safer and surer than any others that society can build hopes on” (Larned 1894, 4). In their preoccupation with the public library’s place in a democracy,

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these proponents tend to overlook the benefits that the propertied class sought—conformance, propriety, and ultimately compliance by the multitudes. Critics, on the other hand, focus on the motives of the elites. As we saw, their objection is not to the notion of the public library itself, but the shape that it has been given under elite tutelage. These critics, however, do not provide an alternative vision for the public library if it were to develop without undue elite influence.

When we examine the established order, we see a great deal of coherence—indicative of a generative metaphor guiding the development of the public library's different parts. It is that of a teacher-student relationship. Melvil Dewey himself said that the "librarian is in the highest sense a teacher" (Nardini 2001, 113). Herein, people with knowledge are one side and those deficient in it on the other. The latter come to a noble place—the public library—where the former, invested in uplifting them, attend to their deficiencies. This general point can be elaborated in various ways. For our present analysis, we should note that at the heart of this formulation, there is an asymmetry—one that is unquestioned by those in the establishment. In our analytical vocabulary, the asymmetry is as follows: the system (i.e., the library) is put in place to uplift disadvantaged individuals (i.e., ones deficient in knowledge due to lack of resources).[14]

An asymmetrical relationship is not necessarily bad; it can, in fact, be fruitful. Beyond providing access to books and other information sources, public libraries offer many programs that cater to the local community's needs—digital literacy skills, job search assistance, business skills, health-centered activities, children's recreation and education, career planning for young adults, transition help for veterans returning to civilian life, financial scam prevention workshops for senior citizens, and English conversation groups for immigrants, among others. The public libraries celebrate such accomplishments, and the public seems to be in agreement. In a 2006 telephone survey ($n = 1{,}203$), the respondents rated public libraries at the top of all services that their local communities do a good job of providing (Public Agenda 2006). In a 2007 online survey of residents ($n = 1{,}901$) in communities with populations of 200,000 or fewer, 74 percent of the respondents said they would "definitely" or "probably" support funding of the local public library in a referendum, ballot initiative, or bond measure (OCLC 2008). In a follow-up survey a decade later, 58 percent of the

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respondents said that they would "definitely" or "probably" vote in favor of funding (OCLC and ALA 2018).[15] While the latest survey suggests a softening of support, overall support remains fairly high. Pew Research Center surveys in 2015 ($n = 2{,}004$) and 2016 ($n = 1{,}601$) show that people believe public libraries to be important for their local community, and about two-thirds of the respondents of each survey said that the closure of their local library would have a major impact on their communities (Pew Research Center 2015, 2016).[16]

Given these accomplishments, is it worth our while to look for blind spots in this scheme of things? Our analytical project prompts us to do so.

The public library certainly provides open access—it is available to all, offering its services for free. Furthermore, as noted previously, it does very many good things. One could reasonably argue that this constitutes universal access.

But then, the public library has always, since its inception, had a shortcoming—a significant portion of the population (currently one-fifth, as noted) never uses it. Unlike other systems we have examined, in the case of the public library, it is not difficult to see the problematic at the margins of the established order. Furthermore, here, the establishment has not tried to hide it by obfuscation; on the contrary, it has openly acknowledged the problematic. However, after acknowledging it, the establishment discourse gravitates toward all the things that the public library does well, as opposed to focusing doggedly on this segment of the population. This calls for a recentering-on-reversal.

We know what recentering-on-reversal would entail here: decentering of the beneficent system, and recentering on the one-fifth of the population who never use the public library.[17] Then, we would need to see how things look from their vantage point.[18] But to do all this, we need to know who these people are. Pew surveys provide some idea, but we need a deeper understanding. Without a good understanding of the people who never use the public library, we are limited in what we can do. To get an idea of the kind of fresh thinking that recentering-on-reversal may yield, let us briefly consider the group that Dee Garrison, Oliver Garceau, and other authors have been telling us are disaffected with the public library—workers.[19] If we recenter on workers and see things from their vantage point, we are prompted to consider whether the asymmetrical teacher-student

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relationship and the attendant tonality are at the root of the problem. Perhaps disadvantaged individuals should be in the driver's seat—not the library. Perhaps the model should be a symmetrical one, wherein the individuals uplift themselves and the library plays only an assistive role. Perhaps the library should be more like a toolshed than a school.

If deeper research into the segment of the population that never visits the library shows that the toolshed model has merit, that does not mean that the existing model, which has its successes, should be discarded. Rather, it means that the existing model needs to be complemented by a toolshed, or some other conception that would work for people who never visit the public library.

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Universal Access and Its Asymmetries

The Untold Story of the Last 200 Years

By: Harmeet Sawhney, Hamid R. Ekbia

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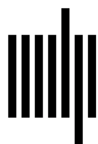

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