

Libraries and Liberation

Anarchist Federation

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PUBLIC LIBRARIES MAY not sound like a site of class struggle, nor a model of anarchist communism. But in the conflict of values which they embody, and with the changing shape of the world (and more especially Western) economy, they are certainly significant.

They began in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, paid for by a penny on the local rates and gradually spreading throughout the country. Though the educational side of libraries was one reason for their promotion by the middle class, another was their role in providing a literally sobering influence on the working class, by way of being an alternative to the gin palace and through their provision of “improving” literature.

Yet through the years a certain outlook, albeit liberal, has developed among librarians and users. Implicitly it subverts both the belief of those who thought libraries would merely promote social peace and the basic idea of capitalism. Firstly, there is the view of the library as a place to enable anyone to pursue self-education in whatever subject. This in turn has meant that libraries, as local national and international systems- which incidentally demonstrate the federalism anarchists support- have an ideal which opposes censorship and encourages the collection of mainstream and non-mainstream ideas and information. There are many examples of people turning to the library for answers and intellectual ammunition when dissatisfaction with the established society has been felt.

Secondly, as the Anarchist thinker Kropotkin was already observing in the 19th century, in *The Conquest of Bread* : “ When you go into a public library...the librarian does not ask what services you have rendered to society before giving you the book...which you require; he(sic) even comes to your assistance if you do not know how to manage the catalogue”. As well as an affirmation of equality, this kind of non-cash transaction is a suggestion of anarchist communism : the individual decides on his/her need, and the only restriction is a common limit as a guarantee of general access to the product. Thus libraries have limits as to how many items a person may borrow, and for how long.

Cuts

But there is another side to this picture. Precisely because they are a public service funded by taxes, the Tories have indirectly made cuts in them by rate-capping and their consistent reductions in grant to local councils. (Labour did the same back in the mid-1970s). Their uncontroversial image has made them publicly respected and yet, when cuts have come, often easy victims. And in a climate where performance figures are sacrosanct (as for hospitals and schools) so the issue figures for books, regardless of their quality or range, are increasingly focussed upon. This necessarily promotes the mainstream over the radical. But since issue figures have gradually been decreasing in most places (though this is but one crude measure of how a library is used) this fact has been seized upon by the Right (in particular the Adam Smith Institute, the “intellectual” vanguard of the market economy) as an argument against freely lending public libraries and for making money out of their stock wherever possible (e.g. from reference enquiries).

Information Costs

For parallel to the development of electric information forms in the 1980s and 90s (online databases and CD-ROMs) has come the concept of information as a commodity. It's no accident

that many electronic sources are chiefly marketed to business. They are said to be a way of getting ahead of competitors, because of their speed of use as compared to printed sources. Yet these electronic sources are usually based on those self-same printed sources. So the form of use has changed, and a new way of making money has developed for capitalist publishers, but the overall control and filtering of information remains concentrated in familiar hands. For example, Financial Times Information publishes not only the FT on CD-ROM but also the Independent and Daily Telegraph as well.

Then there is the Internet, which started as a network of American defence computers (to be used in the event of a nuclear war!). This has to an extent been wrested away from that purpose by the impulse of some users to spread alternative news and ideas in an unregulated way. Some public libraries are starting to give access to it. But from a non-, even anti-, commercial start, it is increasingly being touted now as a global marketplace, while governments discuss how it might be policed (under the guise of concern over such issues as child pornography).

In this climate, librarians have succumbed to varying degrees. Because of the stress on issue figures and the decrease in budgets, there is increased conservatism in what is bought. Naturally this makes it still harder for minority publishers and viewpoints to achieve exposure to the public. For some years various library authorities have run commercial business information services, with a further trend being such areas such as Brent in London positively relishing the prospect of being entrepreneurs or contracting out libraries to the private sector. And those who enter libraries nowadays are most often referred to as “customers” rather than the more active “users” or “readers”, with the commercial aura which that implies. Will the reality be far behind?

The Price

Within a capitalist society like Britain, it is ultimately tradition and the lack of a method to privatise it that keeps the public library alive. For if even information can be given a price, why should people be better informed or educated beyond what they can afford or is useful to the ruling class? But it is the putting of a price on information which already denies it to many, not just in this country but as a reflection of the global North-South divide as well, since the South has far less in the way of libraries and telecommunications. This denial has far more than financial consequences. It denies people a full sense of their history, of their potential and of what might be possible if the world was organised to serve the needs of all. But in the public library the seed of this possibility can still be seen.

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