The library business

The Commodification of a Public Service

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Abstract:
In this article I investigate the way free market ideology permeated the public space of the library. Employing concepts borrowed from critical theory (such as the central concept of commodification) and from the field of critical information literacy, I attempt to outline the manner in which the free market has impacted the public library, from the privatization of management and outsourcing, to more subtle forms of commodification such as the push for information, entertainment and consumerism, to the detriment of knowledge, education and citizenship. I conclude the article by summarizing some propositions from professionals in the field which are meant to decelerate the advance of the free market on the domain of the public library and to reclaim it for the community.

Keywords*: public libraries, free market, commodification, information science, capitalism*

Introduction

Against all academic norms, the present paper begins with details of anecdotal and personal nature. Before being employed in the public library system and then in academia, I had the privilege of working in one of the largest commercial bookstores in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, namely the University Bookstore. Of all the peculiarities that come bundled with the job description of a bookseller – from the immense daily workload (at odds with the common misconception that it is a 'cool job'), to the recurrent habit of book stealing –, one is particularly relevant to the matters I am about to tackle. It sometimes happened that a person, usually of younger age, approached the counter with his ID in hand, wanting 'to register with the bookstore'. As the bookstore that hired me did not issue subscriptions of any kind, it was clear these clients were in error with regard to the services that we were offering (in fact, as we are about to see, these persons did not even enter the bookstore in their capacity as clients). To us employees, the confusion was easy to solve. The eager 'subscribers' were most probably first year university students who just wanted to register with the university library (possibly at the behest of their college advisor). And, as the bookstore where I worked was named "The University Bookstore" and had tons of books on its shelves, it seemed appropriate to these individuals that here was where they were supposed "to register".

When I started working in the public library system, I noticed with some astonishment that among the numerous peculiarities of librarianship there also is the reverse of the situation I was confronted with while working as a bookseller. It sometimes happened that some patrons asked whether we sell one or other of the titles in our collections, usually those which are not on loan. Other patrons naively ask wherefrom can they 'rent' the books that they inquire about. As far as I can tell from other professionals in the country, the same happens in other libraries, as well. Even

more surprising to me is the fact that library professionals very often identify the persons who enter the library as clients, instead of patrons.

At a superficial glance, the matter seems rather trivial. Some absent-minded first year students have mistaken the bookstore with the library, while some patrons that barely use the library have found themselves asking whether they can buy and rent goods that are public. However, if we are amenable to having a more thorough look at the issue, the whole thing reveals troublesome truths regarding the social and moral state of our society. I cannot verify the fact, but the reasonable guess with respect to the students wanting to 'register with the bookstore' is that they most probably came from small towns and villages in Romania, where in the past thirty-five years half of the existent libraries have been closed to the public. The National Statistics Institute of Romania lists 16.665 functioning libraries for the year 1990; in 2023, only 8263 were still open (see TEMPO Online, no date). Bookstores are also quasi-inexistent in the very same communities. Thereby, for many of the inhabitants of these localities, the bookstore and the library equally populate the urban geography that they project in their minds when they imagine life in the big city. The confusion is easy to understand, if this is the case.

As for the acquisitive library patrons, there is no need for statistical data to realize that they are perfectly attuned to the spirit of the age, namely to the general consumerist behaviour encouraged by the media and the large corporations, but also by the state, qua actively engaged agent in stimulating economic growth and commodity consumption. Coupled with the fact – unveiled by the same statistics – that the number of library patrons has dropped by half in the past 35 years, we can grasp how alienated are all these individuals we are talking about from the sphere of public service. The fact that some professionals in the field of librarianship do not cringe at the thought of replacing the form of address from 'patron' to 'client', is yet another testament to the dislocation we all experience in the so-called late capitalism (Jameson, 2007).

In this interpretation, the 'absent-minded first year students' might very well be the most dutiful of freshmen, diligently following the advice of their advisor, being the first of their peers to go on the hunt for the library, possibly aware of the fact that they lag behind their colleagues form the city (who probably do not suffer from the same disorientation). The fact that they end up in a commercial store while attempting this, and even worse, the fact that they do not immediately differentiate the commercial space of the bookstore from the public space of the library calls for a serious discussion.

Similarly, the acquisitive library patron is none other than the long awaited new man of capitalist society, fully accustomed to the free market, an individual who does not conceive that some goods cannot be exchanged for money. Even when library patrons clearly understand the distinction between public and private goods, they often struggle to find the right words when interacting with the library staff, frequently referring to borrowing books as "renting". The fact that language has been almost completely altered to only accommodate market friendly terminology is again telling of the extent to which market relations have managed to supplant all other social relations. Nevertheless, from the dominant perspective, there is nothing wrong with this new man who assumes the role of client in most of his interactions with the world. But the fact that he does not manage (as the above mentioned students) to differentiate between commercial space and public space begs the same serious discussion, which is certainly not limited to what is the proper terminology one should employ when interacting with public services?

As we shall see, the advance of the market on the realm of public goods and services is very much underway, and public libraries have not been spared. That the established terminology is questioned in favour of a different, more market-friendly one, is just a superficial matter, yet one that signals deeper transformations in the functioning of the public library. But before examining

these in more detail, it is necessary that we understand the more ample processes underlying all these transformations.

1. The Market and its Characteristics in Capitalism

For many, the mere fact that one must discuss about the market might seem superfluous. Free-market economics tries to convince us ever since the 18th century that the market and the propensity of man to exchange goods and services are as old as the world, therefore as natural as any of the basic needs of humanity. This being the generally accepted narrative, what other explanation do we need besides the naturalness of the market?

The problem with such free-market arguments is that they were formulated some 300 years ago, while the observable reality that free-market thinkers of that age had access to (and on the basis of which they drew their conclusions) was not that of the world in its geographical entirety and historical span, but that of the western societies in their immediate reach. Subsequent historical knowledge and the contact with other types of social organization that the geographical explorations of the following centuries occasioned (this time not limited only to plunder and the exploitation of the peoples that inhabited these regions, but to anthropological research as well) revealed the marginal nature of market societies on the global and historical scale. Karl Polanyi is as trenchant as one can be on this matter:

> "[…] previously to our time no economy has ever existed that, even in principle, was controlled by markets. In spite of the chorus of academic incantations so persistent in the nineteenth century, gain and profit made on exchange never before played an important part in human economy. Though the institution of the market was fairly common since the later Stone Age, its role was no more than incidental to economic life". (Polanyi, 2001, p. 45)

Market society is therefore a creation of capitalist modernity, and this realization has grave implications in the way we perceive our world. First, it tells us that until not much long ago many of the things we pay money for today were not traded on the market. Evidently, the bulk of man's necessities were produced in the household economy (from food, to clothing), only rare or luxury goods being bought from the market (and only providing that household surpluses were generated in enough quantities in order to be traded for the mentioned goods). The transition to a market society meant that most of these necessities became commodities, a process that went on to bear the name of *commodification*.

Second, the same process of commodification triggered by the onset of capitalism, also attracted in its orbit goods that previously were not the object of the market. Karl Polanyi, in his extremely influential work, *The Great Transformation*, concentrates on three such "fictitious commodities": *human beings* – commodified through the sale of their labour power; *nature* – turned into commodities through the sale on the market of land and natural resources; and *money* – which became a commodity like any other through the mechanisms of *financialization*. Although these might seem incongruous with the present discussion, the conceptual framework developed by Polanyi can be enlarged to accommodate matters closer to the public library, such as education and information, which have been affected lately by market relations, as we shall see.

Still, one question lingers in the background: why should we be wary with regard to commodification, when the last few centuries – elapsed under the aegis of the market – are also

those that marked most profoundly the progress of humanity? Karl Polanyi is again trenchant on the matter:

> "To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society". (Polanyi, 2001, p. 76)

In a different part of his study, Polanyi is also unforgiving with the highly touted improvements that capitalism brought forth: "Improvements, we said, are, as a rule, bought at the price of social dislocation" (Polanyi, 2001, p. 79). In fact, his book entirely documents the first 150 years of capitalism, detailing the dissolution of society that *the great transformation* left in its wake. If this devastation was not complete, it was because each time the disastrous shift towards the market generated a counter-movement within society which slowed commodification, and which presented itself in different forms, from social protection and the welfare state, to economic protectionism, or more disturbingly to fascism and soviet style socialism.

Similarly, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007) trace the history of capitalism noticing the same periodical renegotiations with the free market asserted by the various critiques formulated against it by the larger society. These critiques often result in the renewal of "the spirit of capitalism", forced to meet its own social and cultural exigencies. With each incarnation, capitalism proves to be incapable to satisfy these exigencies, therefore being in a permanent state of instability. According to Polanyi, the stability of the market system is inherently unattainable because, as he puts it, the free market is nothing more than a "utopia".

At a different, more profound level, where value forms in the market society, commodification is nothing but the appropriation of the social substance of human beings – their effort, creativity, labour invested in the production of commodities – by the market. Beyond such formulations, which might be considered as 'mystical' by some, lies an incontestable truth: stripped off its raw materials and the wear and tear of the machinery employed in its production, any commodity is nothing but the human labour invested in it. Moreover, in market societies, in contrast to previous societies, when the product of man's labour almost always had an immediate and direct use value for its producer, commodities are exchanged for money. And, as Anselm Jappe (2014, p. 56) points out, in capitalism "human beings have delegated their collective power to one metal, attempting afterwards to re-appropriate that lost social substance" through the acquisition of commodities. This process is very alienating for society as a whole, the social relations between people appearing as relations between things (the impersonal exchange of commodities), while things – the very same commodities – appear as "beings endowed with willpower" (Jappe, 2014, p. 36).

Capitalism has undeniably driven unprecedented technological advancements and created levels of wealth previously unimaginable, even in its relatively short history – facts acknowledged even by its harshest critics. However, it is equally true that humanity now stands on the brink of an existential crisis, facing the collapse of ecological systems, widening structural economic inequalities, global pandemics, the spectre of political authoritarianism, and the threat of war – all of which can be directly traced to the current dynamics of capitalism (Fraser, 2022). At no point in history Polanyi's undiluted conclusions, formulated some 70 years ago, were more prophetic than today.

2. The Market and its Characteristics in Capitalism

To the unsuspecting eye, the public library might seem defended against the most harmful aspects of capitalism. Everywhere in the world libraries are (still) part of the public sector of sovereign states and with negligible exceptions they rarely engage in selling commodities (for example, in their own coffee shops or through the sale of memorabilia, etc.). Given this fact, can we truly speak of the commodification of libraries?

There is, no doubt, a climate of opinion that pushes things in this direction. The most flagrant example in this sense, which is frequently quoted in most critical studies on the matter, is that of Steve Coffman. A librarian Himself, Coffman advocated in 1998, in an article in *American Libraries*, that libraries should be organized and run in the manner typical of the great commercial bookstores (D'Angelo, 2006, p. 2; Fister, 2018). More recently, in 2018, Panos Mourdoukoutas, an economics professor at LIU New York, advocated in an opinion piece in *Forbes* that public libraries be replaced by *Amazon*, while other services of the public library could easily be replaced by *Starbucks*, where clients can connect to the internet and socialize in front of a warm beverage; *Netflix* could easily take over DVD borrowing (Grigsby, 2018; Lyons, 2018). Both of these stances were met with justified negative reactions from librarians and the greater public, Mourdoukoutas' article in *Forbes* being shortly afterwards removed from the magazine. But in the background, the commodification of public services carried on unabated. I have identified four avenues of commodification, and in the following sections I will explore them in more detail.

2.1. Privatization/private administration of the public library

The most obvious pathway to the commodification the public library is that of the privatization of the management. There are already private companies that offer their services to public libraries. In essence, these firms profit from the pressure exerted on public administrations to cut costs and reduce their budgets, and manage this way to obtain contracts for the private administration of public libraries, with the promise of more efficient library services (Anstice, 2012b, 2012a, 2017). Library Systems and Services, Inc (LSSI) is one such company. In the United States, this company prides itself with the largest market share in the business of private management of public libraries (Maybe not incidentally, the above mentioned Steve Coffman is the Vice President for Product Development of the company, according to his listing on the ALA's website, https://www.alastore.ala.org/content/steve-coffman). The way that such companies manage to 'improve efficiency' and deliver lower costs in the functioning of public libraries comes down mainly to cutting employee wages, staff reduction, turning full time jobs into part-time jobs or offering poorer healthcare coverage. After restructuring, as Meg Klinkow Hartman (2011) points out, "the administrator is often the only professional in the library", the staff that still operates is very often non-specialized, their lower salaries being thus justified. Moreover, the management contracts are "almost always written by the vendor" and do not specify precisely how library services are going to be improved. "The language used in the contracts reduces the public library to a commodity and patrons to customers", Klinkow Hartman adds, while oversight of the business is delegated to an administrator under the contract to the private company.

Library management outsourcing is probably the most radical form of the commodification of public space (surpassed only by the complete privatization of the public library system, of

course). On the global scale this is fortunately only a fringe phenomenon. But the push towards the market along the same line of outsourcing can be witnessed all over the world. Many libraries, reluctant to accept the outsourcing of management, were not quite as reticent to alienate some of the services that they administered themselves until recently in the hands of the market. Examples go from matters not necessarily specific to libraries, such as cleaning, bookbinding or IT maintenance, to aspects more central to the functioning of libraries, such as acquisitions, cataloguing, or reference desks. Whatever the case, outsourcing library services has the same effects one notices in the privatization of management, namely wage cuts, precarious employment and scant and unjust supervision (D'Angelo, 2006, pp. 114–116).

The threat posed by the market to the public library system can also manifest in other ways, such as through the traditional mechanism of competition. It is not difficult to imagine that, just as large sectors of the public domain—such as healthcare and education—are being challenged by private alternatives, public libraries could face a similar fate. In Romania things seem to be well advanced on this matter. Since 2013, a "public library under private law" "rents" books to the employees of some of the largest private companies in the country, based on subscription fees paid by their employers (see at length Vătavu, 2023). Under the name *Bookster*, the said company boasts at the time this article was elaborated with impressive numbers that reflect its activity: 1.355 contracts with private companies, more than 190.000 individual readers, 7 million book loans and more than 130.000 available titles (the numbers are listed on the company's website, https://www.bookster.ro/landing/). According to an interview given in 2016 by Bogdan Georgescu, the company's founder, the model for such a business was not any of the big public libraries of the present, but *Netflix* (Voiculescu, 2016). In practice, *Bookster* arranges deals with other private companies in the country, that pay the subscriptions for their employees as employment benefits, the books being delivered to the subscribers at their workplaces. Book acquisitions are not made on such criteria as cultural relevance or the diversity of opinions, but rather on the basis of the reading lists of Harvard (one of the largest private universities in the world) or various MBAs, but also on "the recommendations of celebrities, such as Bill Gates or Warren Buffet." (Voicu, 2019).

Bookster is indeed a "public library under private law", being licensed by the Ministry of Culture and approved by the National Commission of Libraries. This way, the company is legally covered in its loan activities, making it possible for the company to advertise itself as "the first modern public library in Romania" (as stated on its website as recently as May 2021). Moreover, the company frequently advertises itself as an "experience" or an organization that promotes reading (for instance in Voicu, 2019), rather than a shrewd and successful business. These actions and statements fail to obscure the fact that under the pretence of a public service, the company engages in profit-making commercial activities. This became especially evident during a legal battle between the company and ten major Romanian publishing houses, which took place between 2020 and 2024 (Hopulele, Stoleru and Matzal, 2024). Essentially a lawsuit against *Bookster* for encroaching on the publishing industry's profits, this case serves to highlight the company's true primary interest, i.e. profit.

In any case, why should we think of *Bookster* (or any other similar company for that matter) as a threat against the public library? There are, after all, private healthcare clinics, or private schools, that function alongside those of the state, so why can't there be private book rental services? If we broaden the perspective, I believe that there can be only one satisfying answer to this question: profit-oriented schools and healthcare infrastructures, and in our case profit-oriented

libraries, should never be allowed to exist. Some goods (education, healthcare, etc.) should simply not be turned into commodities and be haggled over on the market. This is the main argument of the present paper and it points to how menacing commodification can be, not only against public libraries, but against society as a whole.

But regardless of the larger debate over which goods should be handed over to the free market, book rental businesses can easily become a genuine threat against the public library, especially in countries like Romania. In such countries, frequently exposed to market experiments and structural adjustments by such international organisms as the World Bank or the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the spectre of privatization constantly looms over public services. Poor and with strained budgets, these countries are practically forced to become indebted, these debts being ultimately paid from the public purse, through budgetary cuts in all areas. Underfunded, with precarious personnel, unmotivated and insufficient for the needs of the proper functioning of its services, the public system gains the bad reputation of inefficiency. In the empty space left behind by the feeble administration of public services, private companies (very often foreign) manage to install themselves and compete with the state. But things rarely stop here. Benefiting from considerable resources, the support of international organizations and the popular discontent with regard to the functioning of public services, these companies often times manage to influence the political agenda towards the privatization of public goods (Hickel, 2019, pp. 158–164).

Businesses like *Bookster* are in the most favourable position in this regard. As we have already seen, the public library system in Romania has already lost almost half of the libraries which were functioning in the country in 1990, and it never was listed among the budgetary priorities of the state all this time. The number of patrons has decreased by half as well, while the rate of functional illiteracy has surpassed 40% among 15 years old students, as shown by PISA, in their assessments (Vasile *et al.*, 2020). *Bookster*, on the other hand, has a significant yearly growth of subscriptions and prides itself with a yearly average of 12 reads per subscriber, contrasting the national average which is just at two books per person. It is not hard to imagine that the situation being as it is, and the state of affairs more and more in favour of privatization, *Bookster* or any other similar business could be seen as the solution – even a partial one – to the 'inefficient' public library system.

Like any other privatization of the public good, the privatization of the national library system would also mean the layoff of an important number of employees, their workloads on the shoulders of an insufficient personnel, it would bring along dwindling numbers of professionals in the trade (because employees with a diploma must be better paid) coupled with the destruction of trade unions (always a hindrance in the way of profit extraction). The general public, already strongly antagonized against public service workers, might not be so impressed by the matters detailed here, and might rather inquire about the impact of privatization on the quality of service. In this respect, there is a wide consensus that contrasts the negative experience of the public with public services, with the more positive experience of the same public with services in the private sector. Evidently, the general perception is clearly skewed due to the prolonged neglect of public services by the authorities over the past few decades. That aside, it is easy to envision how such services would evolve within a private enterprise.

First off, a profit-oriented and market efficient business will ultimately be interested in the balance of expenditure and the profits generated for the shareholders, and not in the services it brought to the community. Public systems, generally based on needs, are therefore more suited in

this matter, because they serve their citizens even at unprofitable costs. For instance, a book rental business could deem such titles as James Joyce's *Ulyses* or Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* as unprofitable, although they are of inestimable importance in the universal culture, despite their slow circulation among library patrons. Additionally, a commercial chain of libraries that seizes public goods through privatization could consider the activity of an existent library branch or that of a rural library does not generate enough profit, and consequently shut them for the public, depriving entire communities of library access. To turn in profits, such businesses would not be bothered by the increase in price of the services they provide (especially in monopoly conditions, as is frequently the case when public goods are privatized), placing supplementary barriers to free library access. Moreover, businesses such as *Bookster*, which are delivery-oriented, push further the ongoing erosion of public space. With no real public infrastructure (reading rooms, meeting spaces for debate, etc.), such businesses can never be truly communitarian, despite their claims, because they do not provide a space for rational deliberation, as public libraries do (D'Angelo, 2006). Capitalist efficiency has nothing to do with proper public service, because the purpose of the latter is to serve the public, and not the maximization of profits. Public services should therefore function beyond the laws of the market, and they should be freely available to the community, with no metrics of profitability being involved.

2.2. Information to the detriment of knowledge

The partial or total privatization of public service is the most evident form of commodification that threatens the public library. But commodification can also occur in subtle forms, even where the logic of the market has not penetrated the administration or the day to day functioning of the library. One of the manners in which the public library ends up being instrumental to advancing the commodity society (in Anselm Jappe's terminology) is that of adopting *information* to the detriment of *knowledge*, as the preferred object of its activity.

Today, the area of expertise of librarians everywhere in the world is known as *information science*, a syntagma invariably added to the more traditional name of the discipline: *librarianship*. Taking this into account, to say today that one of the manners in which the public library has exposed herself to the destructive effects of the market is by veering in the direction of information, could be seen as no less than a full-frontal attack at the core of the profession. But, as Maura Seale (2013) demonstrates, information literacy and the label *information science* are recent innovations in the trade, beginning in the 1980s, and they mark the neo-liberal turn to which libraries all over the world had to adapt. This label is therefore not innocent. Seale studied the *American Library Association's* (ALA) annual reports, and she shows how the reconfiguration of the public library in the last decades was made inside the confines laid out by the free-market ideology. In these reports:

> "The freedom and well-being of individuals and societies is thus repeatedly framed using the vocabulary of economics and business and is thus reduced to a «freedom of the market», in which individual workers must compete by becoming more and more flexible". (Seale, 2013, p. 48)

From a different point of view, the adoption of the label of information specialists by the entire librarian profession can only seem ridiculous today. Central intelligence agencies, as well as IT industry giants can more easily and rightfully make such claims, than any national (or international) library system. On the part of sovereign states, if one studies the budgets allocated to

intelligence agencies and compare them to those given to public libraries, we can easily figure out which of the two public services are seriously treated as information specialists by the governments they are subordinated to. As for the IT sector, any performance in *information retrieval* – a claim often associated with librarianship – pales in comparison with those obtained by *Google*, *Facebook*, *Amazon*, or, more recently *OpenAI.* This is something that even professionals in the field of information science begin to admit (Rubin, 2017, p. 213).

Such a situation should not discourage, nor disqualify libraries as a useful service to society. The argument here is that libraries should not even engage in the retrieval and delivery of information, but should rather concentrate on the production, conservation and imparting of *knowledge*.

There are fundamental differences between *information* and *knowledge*. Information, treated strictly in its conceptual dimension, is ideologically neutral and impartial – therefore neither in the service of the general good, nor in the service of evil. Information can be employed in the generation of profits (as social media giants do), to manipulate the masses or to oppress and surveil the citizens (as intelligence agencies do, and, more recently, the aforementioned social media companies). Indeed, as Nathaniel Enright (2013) and David Ellenwood (2020) point out, information is closely linked with the development of neoliberalism, being considered central to commodity exchange even in the founding texts of the economic system that ended up defining the last part of the 20th century, and the decades of the new millennium that have already passed. For Ellenwood, the economy based on information ends up defining the current sociol-political system in its entirety, under the moniker *information capitalism*. A commodity like any other in the market economy, information is therefore produced with the purpose of making profits. The desires and the beliefs of the consumers are transformed and altered through the consumption of information, not with the edification and the improvement of the individual in mind, but with the aim of maximizing profits (D'Angelo, 2006, p. 49). Ed D'Angelo points to the fact that "information is not the same as meaning", but a vehicle for meaning, that is something that "allows us to encode meaning". He draws a parallel between the way that capitalist economy (in its most extreme manifestations) reduces the use value of goods to their exchange value, and the way in which the post-modern economy of information similarly reduces meaning and knowledge to mere information. Its potential to educate and edify is of course present, but in the post-modern information economy, information is much more often consumed only with the purpose of producing pleasure to consumers, in the form of entertainment (D'Angelo, 2006, pp. 82–82).

Knowledge, on the other hand, D'Angelo further argues, although it definitely can produce pleasure to those who pursue it, manages to do this through edification and education, with lasting effects and without pandering the public, the way that information delivered as commodity does, in a frivolous manner (D'Angelo, 2006, pp. 27–34). Therefore, as opposed to the neutral and dull 'information', knowledge implies learning, engagement with and pondering of information on the part of the subject. I consider that libraries should commit to engaging with knowledge, rather than claiming, unrealistically, the impartiality with which they deliver information to their patrons.

Knowledge also has its pitfalls, of course. Because it involves engaging with information, knowledge can be elaborated so as to serve the various competing interests extant in society. Maura Seale (2013, p. 42) draws attention to this fact, arguing that "the production of knowledge never occurs outside power relations – whether capital, colonial relations, or social hierarchies such as race, class, gender, and sexuality – and knowledge contributes to the maintenance of these hierarchies". But the fact that we should be aware of the contexts in which knowledge is produced

and of the ways in which it is employed in society, operates as a safety net for the pitfalls that surround knowledge. This awareness should only make us more vigilant and more thorough as professionals, with regard to the public mission and the social commitments of the library. Adopting core values that prioritize the common good over the impersonal interests of the market is, therefore, a fundamental issue in librarianship. As long as these values are fully internalized and remain non-negotiable, there is no reason to fear the consequences of the knowledge that public libraries seek to generate, preserve, and share.

2.3. Entertainment to the detriment of education

Related to the discussion about the nature of information, overlapping with it here and there, is the one regarding *entertainment* and *education*. If knowledge and information at least seem to be part of the same picture, in the case of entertainment and education it is easy to draw the conclusion that they are unrelated. However, Ed D'Angelo clearly demonstrates their descent from information:

> "Education is the consumption of information for the purpose of improving our understanding and, insofar as desire depends upon understanding, of improving our moral and aesthetic choices. Thus education is edifying as well as illuminating. Entertainment on the other hand is the consumption of information for the purpose of pleasure only. It is neither educational nor edifying. Education and edification do not necessarily exclude pleasure. Pleasure is necessarily a part of education insofar as education makes higher levels of pleasure and the pleasurable consumption of information possible. We consume education and we are pleasured by it. But it is possible to consume information without being educated or edified." (D'Angelo, 2006, p. 27)

Public libraries have always been places of education par excellence, and lately – when the focus has moved away from books and towards leisure and programs for the community – its educational dimension seems to have been gaining more weight. But we have to ask ourselves one thing: can we honestly qualify as education (in the terms of the definition above) most of the leisure activities unrolling in public libraries? Or do they look more and more like entertainment?

There is no doubt that a consistent part of the programs designed by libraries everywhere can truly be qualified as education, in D'Angelo's understanding of the term. But in some aspects, the contours of these activities are polluted by the entertainment industry. Handy examples can be found, for instance, in the *disneyfication* of children's programs, *disneyification* proper in this case, but also in the wider meaning of this sociological concept (Matusitz and Palermo, 2014). Librarians frequently resort in their programs (out of ease or ignorance) to Disney characters (or characters from different, equally commercial universes) which are painstakingly created and adjusted in the creative laboratories of the said company with the maximization of profits in mind, and not to humour its customers or to promote standards of morality or patterns of good behaviour. The universe created by such companies is not meant to stimulate the imagination of children but, through aggressive advertising and the promotion of hybrid consumption (i.e. blending various forms of commodity consumption, from theme parks, to toys, action figures and other consumables), this universe manages in fact to supplant the imagination of younger minds, depriving them of one of the most important elements of education, and contributing to the cultural levelling unfolding now all around the world.

One can also qualify as entertainment the book acquisition policies which are based on the various bestsellers lists, or the growing influx of self-help titles. Ed D'Angelo classifies all these under *market populism*, a current of opinion which states that through spending money on the market, individuals actually participate in an even more democratic plebiscite than political elections. In actuality, this plebiscite is based on the purchasing power of the individual, favoring the rich, and disqualifying the poor, being in fact the antithesis of democracy. The discussion here is more extensive, but what D'Angelo evidences is that by accepting the selection undemocratically made on the market, without the expertise and the competence of librarians, the public library abdicates from its historical role as *gatekeeper* of high culture. Moreover if, as we have already seen, information in capitalism is nothing but a commodity as any other, produced with the purpose of generating profits, then the desires and beliefs of the consumers will necessarily be transformed by the contact with information (bestseller lists, self-help books, etc.), not with the aim of edification and education, but with that of maximizing profits.

But as was the case with knowledge, we should not deplore the ground lost to the entertainment industry, as it often happens when the numbers of library patrons, in constant decrease over the last decades, are compared to those of shopping mall clients. The competition with malls, genuine temples of commodity consumption, – just like the one with IT giants – is not only a losing game to libraries everywhere (which cannot compare their resources with these industries), but also a useless competition. Because the purpose of the library is not to offer frivolous distractions and facile occupation of leisure time, but to educate and edify the general public. Things that one hardly finds on shopping mall shelves.

2.4. The citizen replaced by the consumer

Just like knowledge, the production of education does not take place outside power relations, therefore education has its pitfalls as well. Maura Seale (2013, pp. 49–58), in her study of the reports produced by ALA, demonstrates how the education promoted by American libraries was refashioned in the past decades as an instrument to bring up entrepreneurs and consumers, that is individuals perfectly adjusted to the market. We must therefore return to the issue that sparked this discussion, namely how we define and classify the public that steps through the library's doors? Is it patrons? Clients? Entrepreneurs?

'Patron', as a label, although more suited in our context than that of client, does not say too much about the interactions of the individual with the library, besides the fact that it signals the ordinary usage of its services. There surely is a purpose behind these frequent visits at the library, a purpose that cannot certainly be reduced to that basic relationship of the individual with the market. In order to find out which are the values that these institutions try to instil in their patrons, we can draw inspiration from the past, from the historical mission of public libraries, but we can also browse through the mission statements of various libraries and professional associations.

If we are to look back at the historical mission of the library, we will notice that the aim of the first truly public libraries, those of the 19th century, was to improve the condition of the poor and uneducated, with librarians identifying themselves as agents of social improvement (Rubin, 2017, pp. 58–62). Today, most library professionals agree that promoting democracy and civic engagement are part of the central values of the public library (Lankes, 2016, pp. 19–23; Rubin, 2017, pp. 92–101), while the most important professional associations list the same values in their

guidelines and their mission statements (ALA, 2004; IFLA, 2008; ANBPR, 2010). Ed D'Angelo states from the first page of his book that one of the main functions of the public library is to advance and conserve the democratic values of society:

> "[…] government policymakers have missed the most important function of a public library, which is to promote and sustain the knowledge and values necessary for a democratic civilization. Conversely, the condition of public libraries may be taken as a litmus test for the state of democratic civilization. Any threat to the core values of a democratic civilization will be reflected in the state of its public libraries; and, any threat to public libraries will weaken democracy". (D'Angelo, 2006, p. 1)

The forming of a vigorous citizen body should, therefore, be the final purpose of the knowledge and the education that the public library produces and preserves. In practice, as shown by Maura Seale, but also by the programs of libraries everywhere, very often what is encouraged is the entrepreneurial or consumer aspects. In part, this situation is caused by the already mentioned market populism, which equates commodity consumption with the democratic plebiscite, or from a different perspective, by the commonplace and erroneous association between capitalism and democracy. A different idea that contributes similarly to demoting the individual to the condition of mere actor on the market is that of *human capital*. Having its roots in the same neo-liberal milieus that are to blame for the introduction of other innovations mentioned here, this idea posits that one can invest in people just as you would invest in real capital (machines, buildings, technology, etc.).

But as Nathaniel Enright (2013) demonstrates, what this notion manages to do is to create the impression that the differences between the working class and that of the employers can easily be effaced if individuals invest in themselves, through education and specialization. In practice, most individuals, despite their efforts to gain a better education, depend their whole lives on their capacity to sell their labour, leading precarious lives regardless of the skills and abilities they have accumulated. Education, however liberating it claims to be, Enright argues, contributes as such to the reproduction of capital and the subordination of labour to capital, being employed rather to boost the economic productivity of the individual, than to edify or improve him.

As the idea of human capital gained credit, libraries went their way to contribute to expand this capital, for instance by enhancing access to work for the individuals in their communities through workshops that helped them to write their CVs or cover letters for job applications, through adult education lessons, or computer and internet classes, all with the aim of boosting these individuals' employment chances. Evidently, considering the fact that most people's existence in capitalism is conditioned by their employability, such initiatives cannot be held against public libraries. On the contrary, the more that libraries contribute to the easing of misery and precarity – and boosting employability is one such method to that end –, the closer they get to accomplishing their public mission.

On the other hand, I must add that without a critical perspective on work and labour relations under capitalism, efforts to enhance employability will only perpetuate the misery and precarity inherent in free-market societies. People need to have access to work, and the library must of course be involved in any such endeavour. But it is equally important that, as promoter of democracy, the library should also for instance add to the existent 'curricula' some classes on labour legislation, trade unionism, forming co-ops, etc. Also, because we should plead for universal knowledge and education at the public library (in the double meaning of the concept: *universal*, as in 'for every one'; *universal*, that is, of universal character), these values should be championed in

themselves, for the self-actualization of the individual, and not as tools that serve the present dynamic of capitalism. Moreover, as the privileged site of knowledge, the public library has the duty to employ the knowledge that it produces and facilitates to overtake the debilitating social relations of capitalism, harmful both for the individual and climate. Boosting employability should therefore be doubled by efforts of boosting civic engagement.

3. What is to be done?

In the face of the threats posed by this "satanic mill" (the name given by Karl Polanyi to the free market, borrowing William Blake's expression), the question of Leninist origin "What is to be done?" gains urgency and must be posed unironically. In part, the answer to this question, vis-a-vis the public library, was sketched out in the previous sections. Resisting any efforts to privatize and outsource library services; a more thoughtful approach to information, along with its aggregation into knowledge; an emphasis on education, the sort of education that forces the public in the direction of critical reflection; encouraging civic engagement, they all contribute to strengthening the public library as a public, community space which fosters rational deliberation, as Ed D'Angelo suggested. But we can also think of more extensive strategies, or even policies with various degrees of applicability on a smaller or larger scale.

A central idea, advocated by all the professionals in the field who have studied the library's relations with the free market is that of the necessity of a *political economy of information* (Trosow, 2014; Ellenwood, 2020). Just like traditional political economy – which tells us not only how goods are produced, but also who controls the production and distribution of the goods –, a *political economy of information* should make explicit the processes of information production, the way it is disseminated and the purpose of its dissemination. We need what progressive information science professionals call *critical information literacy*. In the words of the editors of an important collection of studies on the matter:

> "Critical information literacy differs from standard definitions of information literacy (ex: the ability to find, use, and analyse information) in that it takes into consideration the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption." (Gregory and Higgins, 2013, p. 4)

Once internalized, critical information literacy also entails the abandonment of an idea very dear to librarians everywhere, namely the idea of neutrality. Heralded throughout the history of the modern library, neutrality has no place in an institution conscious of the social, political and economic contexts that influence the production and dissemination of information. Furthermore, any organism that assumes a set of values and a public mission, just like the public library does for a couple hundred years now, cannot realistically assume a neutral position. And when it does that, the rewards are reaped by the elites and the large corporations. As Samuel E. Trosow (2014, p. 26) cautions. "A progressive librarianship demands the recognition of the idea that libraries for the people has been one of the principal anchors of an extended free public sphere which makes an independent democratic civil society possible, something which must be defended and extended. This is partisanship, not neutrality."

Other proposals rather reactivate abandoned practices, than initiate new ones. Ed D'Angelo, for instance, deplores the deterioration of role of *gatekeeper* that libraries used to fill, alongside prestigious publishing houses. These were public instances with enough moral authority to decide what was culturally valuable, and what was not. Of course, such a position attracted the justified critique against the elitism of public libraries. But in the empty space, left behind by the retreat of these institutions from their duties as gatekeepers of high culture, the free market (along with market populism) managed to insert itself, the sole criterion for selection being this time the exchange value, and not the cultural value (D'Angelo, 2006, pp. 47–63, 117–119). As professionals, we can of course be circumspect about the universality of our moral judgements, when we select the cultural products in the general public's name, and we can also renounce our privilege. But under capitalism, the alternative is to leave the entire process to carefully curated bestseller lists designed to maximize profits, dubious advertising schemes, automated book acquisitions, or the reading preferences of elite figures like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett—much like Bookster does, as we have already seen.

The elitist excesses of the public library could nevertheless be tempered through democratization. In some places of the world there are already community councils which are consulted by the library with the purpose of improving the quality of its services. Engaging the community, the "members" – as R. David Lankes (2016, pp. 61–62) suggests we should call our patrons, thus answering the question that ignited this discussion – in taking decisions regarding the activity of the library could have a de-commodifying effect. To treat our patrons as members of a community organized around the library, Lankes argues further, is suggestive of co-ownership, of the co-managing of the public good, which gives birth to a set of social relations different from that of client-salesperson that the market encourages. Involving the community, through activating citizen councils with voting rights with regard to the policies enacted by the library, could therefore act as a brake on the commodification already unrolling in most places.

Above all, we must realize that the library is but one of the components of the public sphere threatened by the unrestrained advance of the free market. In areas that are of no direct concern to librarians, but which are detrimental to the proper functioning of society, in education and healthcare, for instance, the market has already visibly wreaked havoc. The fight for the public sphere therefore exceeds the walls of the public library. As promoter of democracy and civic engagement, the library has the duty to prevent the erosion of the public good(s). What we know so far from the history of capitalism is that when the self-regulated market ends up threatening the interests of society, a countermovement against the market invariably takes shape, as Karl Polanyi demonstrates. This countermovement can take the form of democratic demands for the expansion of fundamental rights and the eradication of inequalities. However, it can also manifest as fascism and authoritarianism in various forms. The public library must ensure that its mission actively contributes to shaping the first scenario while rejecting any pretence of neutrality. As history has shown all too often, so-called impartiality merely paves the way for the unchecked rise of the second scenario.

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