

Conclusion

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This conclusion to our seminar will begin by measuring the value of public libraries against some familiar features of contemporary Britain. Several brief observations will then be made about the long, and broadly successful, struggle undertaken by the Camden Public Library Users Group (CPLUG) to convince Camden Council not to close several of its branch libraries. This will enable us to end with equally brief comments about the future of public libraries.

Contemporary Britain and its Public Libraries

We live in an increasingly globalising world. Neither countries nor individuals can any longer place themselves outside the global market place in which money and people move, with increasing rapidity and intensity, in search of profits and employment. Two aspects of this globalisation process are of particular concern to those interested in the contemporary role of public libraries: the flexibility of the labour market and the consequent fragmentation of local communities. If the movements of people which the global economy demand lead to the populations in our urban centres being increasingly transient, we need to ask what sort of social institutions are needed to ensure that localities and communities survive and prosper. Our seminar has suggested that public libraries are amongst the most important. Libraries are both public meeting grounds and fixed focal points within and around which individuals and collectivities can come together.

At their best public libraries are centres for social mobilization. Book borrowers circulate and have opportunities to meet together informally. Additionally, and increasingly, more organised social activities are also taking place: groups of toddlers in the morning, reading circles for the elderly in the afternoon, adult literacy centres and information exchanges for refugees and asylum seekers in the evening, and so on. In these ways

public libraries are sites of action and activity in a world in which there are mounting pressures for people to be passive recipients of advertising and spin.

The high level of adult illiteracy in modern Britain (in 1993 it was estimated that 6 million people lacked functional literacy) is one manifestation of more general social and economic inequality. Linked as this increasingly is to the nature of the globalising market, with its internet millionaires on the one hand and call centre workers on the other, the role of public libraries as centres of social mobility becomes increasingly significant. Indeed, in this regard recent research has shown that library usage has traditionally been spread across social classes (Greenhalgh et.al.: 40). In this sense they have been, as they must remain, institutions which promote the social inclusiveness which the market repeatedly disrupts.

Moreover, the sense of social inclusion which libraries encourage is an essential ingredient for democratic and civic life in a multi-cultural society. At a time when there is much wringing of hands over rising levels of violent crime, assorted further examples of anti-social behaviour, and other products of social and psychological alienation, the need for the contribution made by libraries to social cohesion is increasing. Building prisons while closing libraries seems a product of an economics (and politics) of the mad house.

Before leaving this train of thought the central role neighbourhood libraries have in the promotion of local economies may be emphasised. Libraries are centres of information and hence innovation. They are storehouses of specialist enthusiasms. They have lists, guides, maps and friendly advice for visitors. They are often the public face of local municipalities. They provide opportunities, directly or indirectly, for the exchange of local goods and services (many libraries hold art and/or craft exhibitions by local artists while most have bulletin boards). And, if nothing else, it is in the nature of a library, as a focus for people in a locality, to contribute in a general way to activity and commerce there.

Underlying several contributions to our seminar, and forming one of the central arguments of CPLUG's (1998) **Views from the Users Group**, is the emphasis on the importance of public libraries as public spaces. In common with parks, religious buildings, sports grounds, and museums, libraries form an essential part of the network of public space within which societies and communities form and find expression. Libraries contribute to the sense of place from which community identity flows. As the spaces of our cities grow ever more organised, 'managed' and commercial, the space which libraries provide for non commercial contemplation, relaxation, and stimulation becomes increasingly precious.

Just as communities need public libraries, so do individuals. As the power and intrusiveness of the market expands, exercising a growing pressure on people to become 'customers' and 'clients', the question arises about the ways people hold on to, or regain, their sense of self: not their commercial self but their moral, social and rational self. In his recent and engaging book on public libraries in Britain, Black (2000:10) points out that there has always been "an immensely strong idealist heritage of the public library which set out the institution as a means of advancing the individual through collective provision". Our own work suggests that this history has very considerable contemporary relevance.

This leads to a final thought. In Britain (as elsewhere in Europe, North America and beyond) there are radical changes taking place in the way that knowledge is produced and consumed. Sound bites, bullet points, 'overheads', power points, the net itself in some respects (incidentally, think for a moment about the symbolic connotations of these terms) all appear as handmaidens of the instant information which passes as knowledge. Without denying the usefulness of any of these technologies we would also argue that there is a sense in which they are part of what is sometimes called a 'knowledge economy' in which what seems to matter most are not so much substances and interiors but appearances and facades. Public libraries, by contrast, remind us that a different approach to knowledge is possible. Think of it this way. Most of the 'knowledge' we consume is programmed for us by others. But in a library we select, read and think in the

way we think fit and reasonable. This is why it is not entirely fanciful to see library users as free spirits in an increasingly conformist and programmed world, and libraries themselves as institutions which resonate with a distinctive approach to knowledge - sceptical, critical, pleasurable, full of surprise, and permissive of genuine discovery.

Looking Backwards and Forwards: The future of public libraries

CPLUG came to this seminar in the midst of a long, sometimes bitter and occasionally dramatic, struggle with Camden Council over the latter's attempt to follow the advice of a well known 'management consultancy' firm and close several branch libraries in the borough. A fuller history of this continuing struggle, needs to be written. Meanwhile any interested researcher should refer to the pages of the two principal local newspapers in the borough, the **Camden New Journal** and the **Hampstead and Highgate Express**, and in particular the work in them of the journalists Julie Tomlin and Denise Winterman. These newspapers played central roles in our campaign and we in CPLUG regard them as central to the well-being of local democratic processes in the borough. In the sense that no branch library has closed, and an agreement has been reached that the number of libraries in the borough will not be reduced for at least the next four years, our campaign has been successful. Nevertheless one only has to consult editions of the Association of Metropolitan Chief Librarian's **Directory of London's Public Libraries** (its second and third editions of 1963 and 1967, for example) to realise how far present library provision in Camden (as London as a whole) has fallen behind previous levels. In 1967, for example, Camden borough had 17 libraries which were open from 9.30-8.00pm on weekdays and from 9.30-5.00pm on Saturdays. Today there are 13 libraries some of which are only open on three days per week. In the 12 years, from 1987 to 1998, the borough's library budget declined by 60% in real terms (CPLUG.op.cit.: 13). Since 1979 it has declined by 80%. Such are the fruits of modernisation!

But looking further back it is sobering to realise that our own struggle is in fact part of a much longer movement in London (as elsewhere in Britain) in favour of public library provision. Kindred spirits call out to us across the generations:

The field of battle is in sight at last! The St Marylebone Mental Light Columns, escorted by Troops of Progress in bright armour, with the Advancement in Knowledge Rifle Corps - fair women, and brave men - are in marching order, and eager for the fray with the Mental Darkness Brigade, the cruel and relentless enemies of Improvements. The Obstructive Forces of the Defence of Ignorance, with a great flourish of trumpets, proclaiming themselves friends of the poor .. are marching in defile, and scenting the battle far off (Feilde, M. 1860).

The case we have made out in this seminar, as in our campaign, does not differ greatly from cases made in previous centuries. Thus, for example, building on such arguments as that made by Tornay in 1817 that knowledge and virtue could be encouraged by means of free public libraries, Mayer (1867:11) spoke of the “knowledge, wisdom and conscientiousness” to be found in libraries. Many decades later, having turned the corner of the millennium, how might we follow them and capture in a few sentences what the future of public libraries might be?

The campaign to protect and enhance Camden’s libraries was fought by a wide cross section of people in the borough. Many of the views and sentiments which were expressed during the course of the campaign have also found expression at this seminar. Perhaps we can select the following as being at the heart of the matter. The first is that the public library seems one of the few institutions capable of steering us through a cultural universe shaped by individualism and consumerism on the one hand, tabloid popularism, on the other. In that sense it is not so much that libraries have to adapt to keep pace with modern technological and other changes (of course they have to do that) but that libraries, and the knowledge they contain, can help us understand, manage and control those changes. Second, there is no doubt that in some respects the educational system as we have it is failing substantial numbers of people. The staggering level of illiteracy in Britain has already been mentioned. Newspapers are routinely punctured by stories about ‘failing schools’, the inefficacy of school exclusion policies, and so forth. Furthermore, such market driven ideas as ‘performance’ (as in ‘performance related pay’)

and the whole paraphernalia of constant 'reports' and centrally supervised audits by non teaching state officials, serve only to pile more pressure on children and their teachers. With the proliferation of league tables, and the illusions of consumer choice which these convey, education itself is becoming increasingly like a market place run by market values. This is the context in which the educational function of public libraries can best be understood. The educational value of libraries flows precisely from the fact that they are outside the formal educational framework and that they are relatively benign spaces where even (or particularly) the excluded, the needy, and the occasionally dissident, may find a welcome. Third, libraries are almost unique places in the post-modern city in that they provide space for both private and public activity. In this sense they are about the development and well-being of both self and society: one of the few institutions which have a capacity to hold us together at a time of uncertainty and change. Finally, being repositories of fiction, mythology and fantasy as well as reference works and more scientifically organised knowledge, libraries are both serious and fun, sources of both enlightenment and pleasure. As such their future should and must be assured.

References

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