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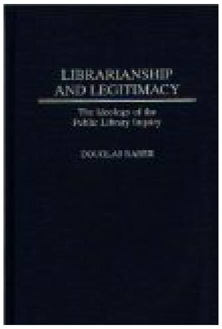

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Looking for Legitimacy

At a time when public libraries work hard to stay relevant in the eyes of funding agencies and the population in general, it is natural to carefully consider the nature and purpose, and hence legitimacy, of the institution. Douglas Raber does just that in his book *Librarianship and Legitimacy: The Ideology of the Public Library Inquiry.* Although a mainstay of American culture for almost 150 years, the public library has never been able to take its existence for granted. But sometimes the task is more urgent than others. Such was the case in the late 1940s when the country, victorious in war, was on the threshold of fulfilling and expanding upon postwar plans in all spheres of society. Business, government, and education agencies sought ways to serve–and benefit by participating in–the welcome return to peacetime life. Public libraries also sought their place in the reconfigured world.

Postwar planning for libraries had begun early and continued throughout the war. But the American Library Association (ALA) was concerned about the status of libraries following the bruising experience of World War II, when library usage dropped dramatically nationwide, despite vigorous promotional efforts, and when libraries failed to receive recognition for special war-related services in the form of federal aid. Continuing poor salaries and low social prestige added to the desire to define an appropriate role for public libraries that would bolster the status of librarianship in society. ALA leadership, and Executive Director Carl H. Milam in particular, wanted a study done by outsiders to supply an empirical basis for a redefinition of the public library. The result was the Public Library Inquiry, conducted with Carnegie support by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. The study was directed by University of Chicago political scientist Robert D. Leigh and published in the late forties and early fifties in seven monographs and five supplementary reports by separate authors, including political scientist Oliver Garceau, Columbia Library School Dean Bernard Berelson, and library educator Alice I. Bryan.

In Leigh's words, the Public Library Inquiry was an "examination of the objectives, function, structure, organization, services, and personnel of public libraries."[1] Leigh wondered about the health and relevance of the optimistic Library Faith, the guiding conviction of librarians that providing good books would produce a positive benefit to society, whose members, presumably, would read them. The conclusions of the Public Library Inquiry were not encouraging. Only one in ten adults and three in ten children used libraries, and many of them as a source of entertaining reading, not the sort of serious study that would lead to an enlightened society. The authors concluded that since they weren't achieving it anyway, librarians should abandon the ideal of serving all segments of society and concentrate their efforts on providing material of "quality and reliability" to "serious groups in the community, however small." According to the Inquiry, this approach would have a trickle-down benefit to society through its contribution to wise policy decisions affecting the communities. In the meantime, library patrons might read bestsellers for a fee and "current trashy material" could be phased out of library collections.[2]

Clearly, justification for the Library Faith was challenged by these findings of actual usage, but librarians of the time were loathe to abandon their historic raison d'etre. The study stimulated discussion that has continued to the present day; the Library History Round Table of the American Library Association devoted a program to the Inquiry at the 1992 national conference, published in 1994 as a special issue of *Libraries and Culture*. Douglas Raber was among the contributors to that issue. His book, which is based on his doctoral dissertation, is a more thorough treatment in which he proposes to "explore consistencies, contradictions, and assumptions inherent within the legitimating ideology of public librarianship expressed by the Public Library Inquiry"(6). Raber grounds his discussion in the interpretive context of the need of the library profession (or any of the "pseudo-professions") for a "legitimating discourse" through which to seek validation (p. 7). The Inquiry, according to Raber, was a significant part of that discourse since it described a unique role for public libraries in democratic society. Raber claims that "the philosophical and ideological arguments of the Inquiry remain strikingly vital," even though he acknowledges that the recommendations of the Inquiry seem "unforgivably elitist" (pp. x-xi).

Raber's book is an explication of the meaning of the unique role proposed for public libraries; he intentionally does not critique the methodology of the study, nor explore areas in which the Inquiry was curiously silent, such as gender equity or children and children's services. Raber's analysis of the inherent ideology of the Inquiry is thorough and far-reaching, extending from the intellectual fine points of the nature of American democracy to more concrete considerations such as why public libraries should not try to compete with bookstores. His efforts are more explanatory than critical. Raber cautions that the "elitism" (p. 142) of the Inquiry derives not from its preferred audience but from the edifying nature of the preferred library materials, yet the tone of his work suggests otherwise. For instance, in his critique of American culture Raber claims that the Inquiry reflected the "fear" that American political life will come to be dominated by private interest groups who "in the name of freedom" will "threaten freedom." He concludes that "the public library has a role to play in preventing this outcome, but it can be successful only if its efforts are directed to the correct audience." Raber describes this audience not as a set group of people, but instead as a dynamic construct of an "informed elite of active citizens" who "actively seek out and use knowledge" to "contribute to the production of new knowledge and the solution of social problems." It is emphatically not made up of people looking for vacation reading or children attending story hour: "That the public library might someday base its legitimacy precisely on the ability to satisfy public demand is a condition that could scarcely be imagined by the authors and supporters of the Inquiry" (pp. 96-97).

Like the Inquiry itself, Raber's book raises many questions, which is one reason why both are so germane to current discussions about the purpose of public libraries. Who were the 10 percent of adults who used the library? Were they the opinion leaders the Inquiry wanted to target? Given that most adult library users sought entertainment from the collections, how did the Inquiry propose to make "serious" material more attractive and relevant to library users and put libraries in the direct service of democracy? Raber acknowledges that "the most problematic contradiction" of the Library Faith was that "libraries simply were not used" (p. 78) as founders and leaders had hoped, but he does not consider whether carrying through the vision of the Inquiry would result in a similar contradiction. What made the authors of the Inquiry confident that their recommendations would achieve any more success than the failed objectives that prompted the Inquiry? Is it realistic to think that self-selected library users would conform to such a specific purpose? Raber admits it is "a little disingenuous" to assume "that the audience for public library materials will in fact be one that will use them for public purposes," (p. 142) but that assumption forms the basis of the Inquiry conclusions.

Raber's arguments might better be applied to an institution that is less voluntary in nature, such as public education. Ultimately one must ask if implementing the recommendations of the Inquiry even could help the profession to achieve validation. Raber accepts the assumption of the Inquiry that a unique, "legitimate" role in society would provide the profession with legitimacy, but he doesn't take into account other possible reasons for the relatively low status of the profession or other sources of legitimacy. Wayne Wiegand asserts that the structure of the profession and its lack of authority to confer "value in information products" have made librarianship "a marginal profession."[3] Phyllis Dain suggests that even though libraries might not have been used by all of the population, it doesn't necessarily follow that this means they have failed, asking, "What does use mean? How can the effectiveness of a library be evaluated? " Although Carl Milam, the Inquiry authors, and

Douglas Raber were concerned over the lack of a clear focus for public libraries as an institution, Dain suggests that their "open-ended" nature frees libraries to serve "whatever purposes their users have in mind," and that their relative lack of power gives libraries flexibility, free from "close scrutiny."[4] Furthermore, how can any profession claim legitimacy by ignoring the interests of its clientele? The Public Library Inquiry is suffused with the elitist assumption that librarians know what is best for readers, but recent scholarship on reading suggests that trusting library users to make their own decisions about what is appropriate reading material "respects the reader's right to assign value to their reading" and "honors their ability to make reasoned decisions based on their own sociocultural circumstances."[5]

Raber thoroughly examines a narrow but defining aspect of the Public Library Inquiry. His sources include correspondence between some of the principals, various ALA documents, the publications of the Inquiry, and appropriate secondary material. I noted one bit of misinformation: his claim that "World War II had witnessed the development of a service to military personnel similar to the Books for Sammies program" (p. 28) of World War I is misleading; in the later war the military, not the ALA, assumed responsibility for establishing and maintaining military libraries,[6] with the Victory Book Campaign, a joint effort of the ALA, USO, and Red Cross, providing supplementary books to those libraries. Raber's book also contains a number of typographical errors.

Librarianship and Legitimacy provides engaging reading, with highly germane applications to contemporary discussions of politics, mass media, the meaning of democracy, and the role of public libraries in American society. But it is hampered by the weakness of its subject: the Public Library Inquiry, while attempting to provide a realistic, empirically based model of library service instead offered a wishful vision that, although claiming to serve democracy, was in some ways undemocratic. The Inquiry ignored the reality of who actually uses the public library and the spectrum of legitimate reasons why.

Notes:

[1]. Robert D. Leigh, *The Public Library in the United States: The General Report of the Public Library Inquiry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 11.

[2]. Ibid., 234-35.

[3]. Wayne A. Wiegand, *Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1996), 373

[4]. Phyllis Dain, "Ambivalence and Paradox: The Social Bonds of the Public Library," *Library Journal* (Feb. 1, 1975): 262.

[5]. Wayne A. Wiegand, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Why Don't We Have Any Schools of Library and Reading Studies? " _Journal of Education for Library and Information Science (Fall 1997): 314-326.

[6]. Arthur P. Young, *Books for Sammies: The American Library Association and World War I* (Beta Phi Mu, 1981), 93.

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