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The public library, democracy and Rancière's poetics of politics

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Abstract

Introduction This paper applies the thought of Jacques Rancière to the concept of democracy as it is traditionally understood in library studies literature.
Methods The paper reviews a cross-section of instances of the link between democracy and the public library in library studies literature. It offers a close textual analysis of Michael Gorman's *Our Enduring Values* as typifying the link between the public library and democracy. It critically applies the theoretical account of democracy developed by Jacques Rancière to Gorman's account in *Our Enduring Values*.
Analysis Making use of the theory of Rancière, the paper argues that the link between the public library and democracy should instead be situated in the impropriety of the public library: the assumption of equality libraries make, and the consequent open possibility for the contestation of their function and values.
Results The paper finds that the link between democracy and the public library is situated in libraries' instrumental value to democracy; libraries are typically seen as holding an educative function for democracy.
Conclusion The paper concludes by arguing that focusing on the impropriety of public libraries is especially important in the context of their current neo-liberal restructuring. An instrumental link between democracy and the public library too easily falls prey to neo-liberal rationalisation. A link which focuses on the improper character of public libraries encourages a contestation over this restructuring.

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Introduction

This paper makes use of the thought of Jacques Rancière to argue that the public library should be understood as necessarily democratic: not because, as is the dominant thought in library studies literature, the library is instrumentally valuable to democracy, but rather because of the assumption of equality at the heart of the public library. Further, the paper suggests that Rancière's conception of democracy can help us make sense of the specific changes currently occurring in the United Kingdom (UK) public library service, and give us an indication of how to stake a claim in this transformation. First I give an overview of Rancière's thought, focusing on his notions of equality, politics and democracy. I then contrast the traditional conception of democracy in library studies literature, as exemplified by Michael Gorman (2000), with Rancière's conception. I argue that there are limits to the traditional conception of democracy and demonstrate the way in which Rancière's conception overcomes these limits. Finally, in light of the current neo-liberal restructuring of the UK library service that Greene and McMenemy (2012) have highlighted, I suggest that Rancière's thought is valuable in helping us understand and respond to these changes.

Rancière's impropriety

Jacque Rancière's career has touched on a large number of theoretical disciplines, ranging from philosophy, historiography, aesthetics, pedagogy, political theory and cultural analysis. His thought cannot be reduced to any single discipline and it would be inaccurate to say that his thought has developed over time. Indeed, a more productive place to start when conceptualising Rancière's thought would be with his methodology. When Rancière is called on to discuss his overall project he time and again stresses that, first and foremost, he is concerned not with constructing theories but rather with instigating polemical interventions. As he says, his works are not

> 'theories of', they are 'interventions on'. They are polemical interventions. This does not only mean that they take a political stance. This means that they imply a polemical view of what ideas are and do (2009: 116).

Consequently, Rancière argues that "[t]hinking for me is always a *rethinking*. It is an activity that displaces an object away from the site of its original appearance or attending discourse" (2000: 120). For Rancière, "[a]s I conceive of them, concepts are neither Platonic ideas nor mere empirical designations. They are tools with which we can draw a new topography in order to account for what happens to us" (2009a: 288). There is thus a methodological *impropriety* at play in Rancière's work: he refuses the role of the master explicator, instead attempting to intervene in what is understood as the proper, legitimate way of developing theoretical accounts of our world.

It therefore follows that impropriety is central to Rancière's understanding of the concepts of politics, equality and democracy[1] which I will be drawing on in relation to library studies. For Rancière, these concepts are intimately linked. Politics, Rancière argues, is that which disrupts the "order of the visible and the sayable" (1999: 29): the aesthetic distribution through which we experience our world, making certain subjectivities visible and others invisible, and, further, assigning specific capacities to these subjectivities; giving them a proper, legitimate place in the social order. In this way being political is a form of "trespass" (Devenney 2011: 160): it involves going where one is not meant to go; acting in a way in which one is not meant to act. For Rancière these political moments are confirmations of the fundamental equality we share with all speaking beings:

> Equality is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or a goal politics sets itself the task of attaining. It is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it (1999: 33).

Equality thus undermines the aesthetic ordering of bodies that determines not only what is proper, but who can be seen to be proper in the first place. In this context democracy, for Rancière, is the disruption of any entitlement to govern. Indeed, it is the paradoxical assertion that the only legitimate entitlement to govern is not through birth, or through wealth, or through knowledge, but through the equal lack of capacity to govern; through one's illegitimacy. As Rancière says,

> Democracy initially stirred up political philosophy because it is not a set of institutions or one kind of regime among others but a way for politics to be. Democracy is not the parliamentary system or the legitimate State. It is not a state of the social either, the reign of individualism or the masses. Democracy is, in general, politics' mode of subjectification if, by politics, we mean something other than the organization of bodies as a community and the management of places, powers and functions. Democracy is more precisely the name of a singular disruption of this order of distribution of bodies as a community that we proposed to conceptualize in the broader concept of the police. It is the name of what comes and interrupts the smooth working of this order through a singular mechanism of subjectification (Ibid. 99).

Democracy is thus concerned with aesthetics; with the power of language to be deployed in improper ways, signifying new ways in which we can relate to the world and understand our place as a part of it:

> In order to enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized. It is in this respect that we may speak of a poetics of politics (2000: 116).

As I have said, Rancière's commitment to an improper methodology - to interventions rather than theories - has led him to place a stark distance between, on the one hand, his understanding of politics, equality and democracy, and on the other the conventional understanding of these terms. It is my contention that this is precisely what makes applying his thought to the field of library studies valuable: his notion of democracy, as the contestation and disruption of a given social order, resonates with the notion of the public library in a way which hasn't been considered by library studies literature.

The public library and democracy

The link between the public library and democracy has been noted at various times from a variety of sources since the second half of the nineteenth century. Typically libraries are presented both as a necessity for any country that wishes to be an effective democracy and, to a lesser extent, as a doorway to the right of every citizen to cultural and intellectual development. Thus as Francis Miksa demonstrates, the 1876 *Special Report* (from which Melvil Dewey's classification system first grew to prominence) presents libraries as a public good because they are "aids in a common effort to bring mental and moral cultivation to the masses" (Miksa 1983: 56). Writing in 1934, Grace O. Kelley notes that

> from the beginning, the avowed purpose of public libraries has been to offer all kinds of knowledge embodied in books to all kinds of people. In this way, it was thought, libraries would further the eager quest by masses of readers for the universal enlightenment which is called for in a truly democratic country (1934: 3).

Douglas Raber notes that the United States (US) Public Library Inquiry of 1947 was commissioned in part to highlight the basic contribution of public libraries to society. This contribution was understood as

the commitment to and promotion of the freedom of inquiry necessary to the creation and maintenance of democratic society. There was a hope and a belief that this was the library's most fundamental source of legitimacy, that the library actually did this, and that American society was still a democratic one in which people's opinions were still relevant to the formation of public policy. In this view, the library's purpose was intimately connected to an informed citizenry that was the source of power, wisdom, and rightness of American culture and politics (Raber 1994: 51).

More recently, Alex Byrne, when discussing the implications of democracy for library management, notes that libraries are "instruments of democracy" (2004: 16) since "[c]hoice [...] to be meaningful must be informed" (Ibid. 11). He highlights the claim made by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in their 2002 'Glasgow Declaration' that "[l]ibraries and information services contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard democratic values and universal civil rights" (2002).

One can see that, because of their educative function, libraries are consistently understood as being *instrumentally* valuable to democracy. Exemplifying this argument is the penultimate chapter of Michael Gorman's *Our Enduring Values* (2000), which directly links the educative function of libraries with democracy. Despite some brief allusions to libraries being "living examples of democracy in action" (Ibid. 159) Gorman presents a very specific conception of democracy, limiting it to little more than a shorthand for the values that are central to the library and information studies profession. As I will argue, it may be that libraries engender these values (and in many cases should engender these values) but by conflating these values with democracy, Gorman limits how we can think the role and function of libraries in a time when their role and function is being actively threatened.

For Gorman,

> It is a sad irony that as American democracy has reached its theoretical ideal - the enfranchisement of all adults, irrespective of gender and race - it is in danger because of an increasingly ill-informed, easily manipulated, and apathetic electorate. A culture of sound bites, political ignorance, and unreasoning dislike of government are vitiating the rights for which, at different times, revolutionaries, women, and ethnic minorities fought. Libraries are part of the solution to this modern ill. As an integral part of the educational process and as a repository of the records of humankind, the library stands for the means to achieve a better democracy (Ibid. 160).

The significance of this passage hangs on Gorman's final claim: that libraries stand for a means to achieve a better democracy. It is clear that libraries supposedly achieve this end through education; through their position as "[f]oes of [i]gnorance" (Ibid. 163). For Gorman, our modern indirect democracies require "a steady flow of information to citizens and for that citizenry to be knowledgeable about social and political issues" (Ibid. 159). He goes on to make the claim starkly: "[d]emocracy benefits from an informed citizenry; a misinformed citizenry damages it" (Ibid. 166). On the face of it, and from the perspective of the dominant understanding of democracy in library studies, these claims make sense. After all, if power is to be placed in the hands of the people, having those people educated is a rational course of action. However, as I have demonstrated, this notion of democracy is by no means uncontested. Thinking democracy alongside Rancière makes visible some critical questions that one might pose to Gorman and others who position the library as instrumentally valuable to democracy. For example, one might ask what Gorman means when he talks of a *damaged* democracy, or of a *better* democracy. If democracy is simply rule by the people, as Gorman initially highlights (Ibid. 158), then the education of the people shouldn't have any bearing on the quality of democracy because democracy isn't a concept that can have differing levels of quality: democracy does not carry normative value. It is simply, as Gorman initially determines, rule by the people. However, a normative dimension of democracy is presupposed when Gorman talks of a *better* or a *damaged* democracy. To clarify, the normative dimension presupposed by Gorman does not specify which beliefs are necessary

for an "informed citizenry" (Ibid. 166): Gorman is attentive to the dangers of censorship, noting that "[t]here is a reason why antidemocratic individuals and groups seek to censor publications and to control what is or is not held by libraries" (Ibid. 161). Nonetheless, Gorman's commitment to the "democratic values and ideals" (Ibid. 160) of "intellectual freedom, the common good, service to all, the transmission of the human record to future generations, free access to knowledge and information, nondiscrimination, and so on" (Ibid.) themselves function to add a particular normative ideal to the notion of democracy which cannot be sustained if it is understood as rule by the people. It is important to note that I am not arguing that there is no relationship between these values and democracy, or that it is necessarily wrong to think of the relationship between libraries and democracy as being instrumental. What is wrong, I would argue, is to conflate these values with democracy itself, and thus to limit what one can do with the concept of democracy in relation to libraries. As I will go on to demonstrate, the values that Gorman specifies are indeed intimately related to democracy, but not as Gorman understands them.

Let us compare this understanding of democracy with Rancière's. Rancière too starts with an understanding of democracy as rule by the people. However, crucial for Rancière is the contestation over who the people are in this formulation. Initially this is Gorman's concern too. He notes that, in Athens, the people referred not to everyone but to "a small minority of property owning males" (Ibid. 158). Following from this, Gorman argues that in our more developed modern societies we recognise that the people must refer to all members of society, and thus we now maintain "the enfranchisement of all adults, irrespective of gender and race" (Ibid. 160). However, Gorman's analysis misses what Rancière's does not. Gorman understands the Ancient Greeks as limiting the definition of the people to "a group set apart" (Ibid. 158), but this isn't quite right. In his *Disagreement* (1999: 21) Rancière notes that in both Plato and Aristotle's account of politics a distinction is made between those who are capable of *speech* - which articulates "what is useful and what is harmful, [...] what is just and what is unjust" (Aristotle 1992: 60) - and mere voice which expresses "pain and pleasure" (Ibid.). Thus, the exclusion in Greek society is a question not of one group being prioritised over another, but of the visibility of certain groups as groups; of whether they can be seen or heard as political animals. It follows that for Rancière there is always a contestation over who counts as a political animal, which no extension of enfranchisement can do away with. As he says:

> "the people" is the name, the form of subjectification, of this immemorial and perennial wrong through which the social order is symbolized by dooming the majority of speaking beings to the night of silence or to the animal noise of voices expressing pleasure or pain (1999: 22).

Rather than doing away with this notion of the people because it is always incapable of fully describing any social order, Rancière instead places this paradox at the centre of his understanding of democracy. In this context democracy becomes the process by which those who suffer a primary exclusion make themselves of some account. The subject of democracy for Rancière thus becomes the "part of those who have no part" (Ibid. 11), those who are excluded from a given social order through a lack of discursive visibility:

> The political dispute is distinct from all conflicts of interest between constituted parts of the population, for it is a conflict over the very count of those parties. It is not a discussion between partners but an interlocution that undermines the very situation of interlocution. Democracy thus sets up communities of a specific kind, polemical communities that undermine the very opposition of the two logics - the police logic of the distribution of places and the political logic of the egalitarian act (Ibid. 100).

On this reading it makes little sense to talk of libraries making democracy "better" (Gorman 2000: 160). Nonetheless I contend that Rancière's understanding of democracy is not only still relevant to libraries, but is valuable in that it helps highlight the impropriety that is central to the idea of the library. This impropriety, I would tentatively suggest, should be taken seriously if libraries are to be defended in light of their ongoing transformation.

The impropriety of the public library

What does it mean to talk of the impropriety of libraries? It is clear that one cannot simply say that libraries are improper spaces: libraries have a specific purpose - the provision of information - which consequently implies a proper way for library patrons to exist within them. However, alongside this specific function is also a radical lack of function: the library opens up vast possibilities for the patron and yet refuses to demand a purpose of their visit. The "democratic values" (Ibid. 160) that libraries are committed to generate a tension between the formal purpose of the library and the fundamental equality that these values recognise. In this way it is not that the values Gorman lists are themselves democratic, but rather by being explicitly stated the verification of these values becomes a possibility for the library patron. It is through this process of verification that these values receive their meaning: they are "forces engendered and augmented by their own actualization" (Rancière 2008: 50). By being places open to everyone which also do not demand a purpose of a patron's visit, libraries leave open the possibility that their commitment to freedom of information, equity of access, neutrality etc. can be continuously challenged. It is this open possibility of the contestation of the library, its function and its values that places democracy at its heart. As Rancière says,

> Genuine participation is the invention of that unpredictable subject which momentarily occupies the street, the invention of a movement born of nothing but democracy itself. The guarantee of permanent democracy is not the filling up of all the dead times and empty spaces by the forms of participation and counterpower; it is the continual renewal of the actors and of the forms of their actions, the ever-open possibility of the fresh emergence of this fleeting subject. The test of democracy must ever be in democracy's own image: versatile, sporadic - and founded on trust (2007: 61).

The library is a fertile space for the emergence of this "unpredictable", "fleeting" subject. Indeed, the picture of democracy that Rancière paints - "versatile, sporadic - and founded on trust" - offers a succinct articulation of what makes the library an ideal site of political contestation. A library can be used in a myriad of ways: as a place of research, a place of study, a place of conversation, a place of recreation, a place of shelter, a place of safety, and countless other possibilities which are dependent on the imagination and actions of the patrons and staff of the library, and on the trust that is assumed between the library and its patrons. The contestation and actualisation of the values at the heart of libraries may not occur everywhere and at all times, but the assumption of equality made by the library leaves open the possibility of this actualisation rather than closing it down. It is this aspect of the library that should be highlighted when one constructs a link between libraries and democracy: not the education that can be offered to the people, nor the democratic values that the library symbolises, but rather the people's verification of these democratic values.

This politics of the library becomes especially relevant because of the time in which we currently find ourselves. The idea of the public library has gone through many transformations, however it is arguable that its current transformation carries with it some stark implications. In a speech at the Re-modelling Library Services Conference on 1st July 2010, Ed Vaizey, UK Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries, made it clear that the re-modelling of libraries was "at the heart of the Big Society" (2010). Outlining what the Big Society means, Vaizey quoted a speech from Prime Minister David Cameron in which Cameron claims that the Big Society is

> a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control. It includes a whole set of unifying approaches - breaking state monopolies, allowing charities, social enterprises and companies to provide public services, devolving power down to neighbourhoods, making government more accountable (2010).

It must be recognised, however, that not only is this approach concerned with "breaking state monopolies", but it is also concerned with placing libraries into the hands of private and - in the case of "social enterprises

and companies" - profit making interests. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) has noted that current proposals would result in "the closure of up to 20% of library service points" and "[a] probable 4-6000 (full-time equivalent) reduction in the number of staff employed by public libraries" (2011: 2), an estimated 700 of which have already occurred (Page 2012).

This re-modelling is the latest example of what has become known as neo-liberalism: a political, economic and discursive phenomenon which can be understood as being typified by "deregulation, privatization, and the dismantling of the social contract between capital and labor" (Castell 2000: 19). As Greene and McMenemy note, neo-liberalism is characterised by "individualism, privatisation and decentralisation" (2012: 15); they demonstrate that since "New Labour's election in 1997 public service restructuring in the United Kingdom continued the neo-liberal approach, with the linked considerations of managerialism and consumerism impacting on the delivery of public services" (Ibid. 14). Greene and McMenemy's paper is significant as it recognises the discursive functioning of neo-liberalism: its impact on the language of librarianship and thus its power to limit the imagination of what the public library is, who it is for and how it functions. Greene and McMenemy contend that far from being "neutral" (Ibid. 34) language "is used by neo-liberalists to introduce reform and more radical public service restructuring" (Ibid.) which could "lead to the destruction of public space as a democratic arena" (Ibid. 35). They go on:

> The naturalisation of the language of the market such as calling patrons 'customers' has become so entrenched in the mindset that it is now part of everyday language. The monetary and transactional connotations associated with a term like 'customer' to describe a public sector user would have appeared inappropriate to many thirty years ago, but due to the steady naturalisation of neo-liberal discourse such terms appear innocuous (Ibid.).

As Greene and McMenemy note, what has occurred is a shift in the appropriateness of language. In previous years it wouldn't have made sense to talk of library patrons as customers, precisely because they were not customers and were not treated as customers. Now, however, this phrasing has achieved a legitimacy which makes it appropriate to treat library patrons as if they were customers, and so through this action to actualise them as customers. This is a precise example of the operation of what Rancière describes as the police:

> The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another is noise (1999: 29).

Greene and McMenemy's focus on the discursive power of neo-liberalism begins the process of how a challenge to this restructuring might be mounted. To continue this process I would argue that the link between the public library and democracy should be at the centre of this challenge. However, this should not be by focusing on the instrumental value of libraries to democracy as Gorman contends, which would simply further the "[r]ationalisation" (Greene and McMenemy 2012: 19) of the public library that neo-liberalism demands. Indeed, it is precisely the library's undoing of the instrumental rationality of neo-liberalism that makes it a fertile site of democratic contestation. Instead, what is necessary is a response which recognises the "poetics of politics" (Rancière 2000: 116) central to democratic activity; a response which refuses the subjectivity enforced by the "policing" (Rancière 1999: 29) of neo-liberalism. Just as neo-liberalism polices the public library through its discursive control over "the order of the visible and the sayable" (Ibid. 29), the response to this policing must also attempt to reconfigure that order. It is this, for Rancière, that makes such political activity a question of poetics: "[t]o affirm the nature of the 'poetic' in politics means to assert first and foremost that politics is an activity of reconfiguration of that which is given in the sensible" (2000: 115). On the one hand this poetics of politics may be realised by the librarian: for example through the development of an open access institutional repository; or the tender of open source library management software; or the democratisation of stock purchasing; or the extension of library opening hours. On the other hand this poetics of politics may be realised by the library patron: for example through the systematic borrowing of an entire library's stock (Kennedy 2011); or an occupation of library premises (Flood 2013); or

through the development of a "People's Library" (Lingel 2012). Further, this moment of "dissensus" (Rancière, 2010a) - the moment at which the librarian or library patron starts acting in a way which is illegitimate for them to do so - returns us to what is presupposed in libraries to begin with: equality. For Rancière,

> [e]quality is enacted within the social machine through dissensus. And dissensus is not primarily a quarrel, but is a gap in the very configuration of sensible concepts, a dissociation introduced into the correspondence between ways of being and ways of doing, seeing and speaking […] Equality is fundamental and absent, timely and untimely, always up to the initiative of individuals and groups who, set against the ordinary course of events, take the risk of verifying their equality, of inventing individual and collective forms of its verification (2010b: 15).

The equality of the library is actualised through the everyday actions of those who inhabit its space. The challenge to this equality is real: it is systematic, ideologically driven and has already resulted in the material destruction of libraries and the staffed positions within them. But it is out of this very challenge that the "democratic values" (Gorman 2000: 160) central to libraries receive their value. The question is then whether we will "take the risk of verifying [our] equality" (Rancière 2010b: 15); whether we allow poetics a part to play in our democratic contestation of the public library.

[1] Developed across a range of writings since the late 1980s, most significantly in *On the Shores of Politics* (2007), '*Ten Theses on Politics*' (2010) and *Disagreement* (1999).

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