

A Cosmopolitan Commons For Free Reading: In Defence of Public Libraries

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River Heights Library, Winnipeg MN Canada (Canadian Library Architecture, 2021)

Almost every city or town in Canada and the USA and also in many other countries across the world, has a public library. Usually they're housed in humble buildings, comfortably and quietly embedded in the ordinary urban or suburban landscape, just as trees are comfortably and quietly embedded in the ordinary natural landscape. I've loved public libraries ever since I was old enough to browse the stacks at the River Heights Library, sit at a desk and freely read whatever I wanted to read, check out as many books for two weeks as I could actually physically carry (up to seven, I seem to remember) home, as frequently as I wanted to, and to walk back and forth to the Library on my own, happily lugging a heavy armload or an almost-dragging-on-the-ground bag of books. By virtue of free access to public libraries and their contents, I was able to read for sheer enjoyment, for self-education well beyond what was being taught to me in school, and even (as I got older) for rational or spiritual enlightenment. And millions of other people all around the world have had essentially the same experiences. Long live public libraries.

In the USA, however, public libraries have become sites of vigorous and even violent moral and sociopolitical conflict. As Emily Drabinski, the current president of the American Library Association, historically contextualizes and describes it:

For many [public] library workers, the material consequences of unchecked capitalism are the stuff of everyday life. Often we are the only indoor public space in our communities and provide the only accessible public bathroom. We provide broadband internet to people who can't access it otherwise, and assistance with the email addresses and online forms required to access public welfare programs. Extreme poverty, unaddressed mental illness, the opioid crisis—all of it walks through our doors and makes itself at home.

For [Andrew] Carnegie, libraries were about ... getting the right [books] into the hands of restive workers who would then be both civilized and disciplined through their engagement with literature. Ironically, as industrialists imagined they could use libraries to mollify populations subject to the ravages of capitalism, library buildings stood as temples to democratic access to ideas. [P]ublic libraries were clear examples of the state's commitment to public ownership of a public good, to circulating public resources equally among the people, to access for everyone to everything. Public libraries may have emerged from a grotesque concentration of wealth in the hands of a few industrial magnates, but they also established what we might call the closest thing to a socialist institution in the contemporary United States.

Of course, libraries are not immune to attacks on the public sector. The current spate of book bans is partly a struggle against the public institution, though couched in terms of a moral panic: children need protection, parents have rights. In Jamestown Township, Mich., voters cut the library's funding by 84%, ostensibly because the collections included Maia Kobabe's memoir, *Gender Queer*. After a federal judge ordered the library in Llano County, Texas, to return books about racism and queer experience to the shelves, library commissioners there considered shutting the library down. When the ACLU and the Missouri Library Association challenged a law criminalizing librarians who provide "explicit sexual materials," the Missouri House voted to strip all state funding for libraries. (This budget was restored by the Missouri Senate, but the fear continues to reverberate.) The pretext may be child safety, but the effect is to dismantle these much beloved public institutions, among the last in many American communities.

Ibram X. Kendi cast library workers as "freedom fighters" in his address to a library audience at the ALA's Right to Read rally in June [2023], stating that "the freedom fight has chosen you." Kendi was directly addressing the fight against organized censorship attempts. After all, library workers are the people who decide whether to pull a book with gay characters from the shelves in response to a challenge. We are the people who host Drag Queen Story Hour and collect books about Black history, even when such actions produce a storm of controversy. Such actions secure the right to read, book by book, reader by reader.

For those of us committed to broader political projects, the fight must be conceived more broadly. Library workers secure the right to read *Gender Queer*, but they also secure public institutions, public resources and public ownership of the public good. When library workers open the door in the morning, they give the public access to public space. When library workers check out a book or check it back, they circulate public resources. When library workers screen movies and run book clubs, they produce a public good again and again, every day the library is open. Library workers must be at the heart of the fight for the world we want.... Library workers understand that we are on the front lines of the movement for public ownership of the public good. (Drabinski, 2023: pp. 35-37, and 39)

I generally agree with everything Drabinski says here, leaving aside a few minor qualifications and quibbles: for example, I think that contemporary public librarians should be every bit as willing to host the (as it were) Christian Cisgendered Heterosexual Family Story Hour as they are to host the Drag Queen Story Hour, and also every bit as willing to secure the right to read *Huck Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or Roald Dahl's books, as they are to secure the right to read *Gender Queer*. Someone's or even many people's being (even deeply) offended by a text is *not* a sufficient reason for banning it or censoring it, provided that this text has some actual or potential significance and value for humankind—period.

But in any case, I also want to extend, generalize, and radicalize Drabinski's core argument. As I noted at the outset, public libraries are commonplace in Canada, the USA, and many other countries worldwide. So you might not have self-consciously realized that public libraries constitute in fact the world's only *dignitarian* (i.e., universal-inherent-human-worth-respecting),¹ *anarcho-socialist* (i.e., authoritarian-coercion-rejecting and true-human-needs-satisfying),² *neo-luddite* (i.e., all-and-only-human-dignity-respecting-technology-affirming, especially with respect to digital technology),³ cosmopolitan social institution that's principally dedicated to enabling, exercising, and nurturing what's arguably the core rational human minded animal capacity, namely, *our capacity for freely reading hard-copy texts*,⁴ in order (i) to be able to think creatively and critically for ourselves, and also in order (ii) to be able to disseminate and share, universally, any and all textually-communicated information that's of some actual or potential significance and value for humankind. Less longwindedly expressed, public libraries constitute *a cosmopolitan commons for free reading*. Correspondingly, public libraries also provide a

¹ For a detailed presentation and defense of moral and sociopolitical dignitarianism, see (Hanna, 2023a, 2023b).

² For a detailed presentation and defense of anarcho-socialism, see (Hanna, 2016, 2018).

³ For a detailed presentation and defense of dignitarian neo-luddism with respect to digital technology, see (Hanna, 2023c).

⁴ For a detailed presentation and defense of the philosophy of reading, see (Hanna, 2023d).

paradigm case of what Michelle Maiese and I call *constructive, enabling* social institutions (Maiese and Hanna, 2019: esp. chs. 6-7).

As such, public libraries not only ought to be universally recognized and highly valued, but also ought to be philosophically, morally, and sociopolitically defended and protected against all book-banners, all book-censors, all coercive moralists and thought-police—whether of the identitarian neofascist ultraconservative right or of the identitarian social-justice-wokeist left—all nationalistic-&-xenophobic Statists, all purveyors of mind-snatching digital technology (for example Large Language Models, aka LLMs or chatbots), and all technocratic corporate capitalists who seek to addict us to the excessive use of and reliance on digital technology, especially including so-called “artificial intelligence,”⁵ *precisely because they all immorally seek to control, restrict, suppress, or undermine our capacity for freely reading hard-copy texts*. Not only library workers, but also *everyone, everywhere*, should be “freedom fighters” for public libraries and the fundamental human values they express and incorporate. It’s all-too-easily forgotten, and perhaps it’s also generally not even noticed, that the moral and sociopolitical right to *free reading* is every bit as important as the moral and sociopolitical right to *free speech*.⁶

⁵ For detailed presentation and defense of the critical philosophy of digital technology, see (Hanna, 2023e, 2023f, 2023g, 2023h, 2023i, 2023j, 2023k, 2023l, 2023m, 2023n, 2023o, 2023p).

⁶ I’m grateful to Martha Hanna for thought-provoking conversations on and around the main topics of this essay.

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