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# Libraries and the Right to the City: Insights from Democratic Theory

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## Abstract

David Harvey's right to the city is a productive point to discuss the role of urban libraries and democracy. Harvey's ideas, however, can be further deepened by engaging them with democratic theory. Within Harvey's broader challenge to neoliberalism, democratic theory helps to tie the work of librarianship to a meaningful instantiation of a right to the city through a review of: the concepts (and brief history) of rights the founding theories of rights themselves, the public sphere (a LACUNY Institute framing concept), community, and democratic voice.

Keywords: neoliberalism; public sphere; democracy; libraries

## Introduction

The Conference description and call for papers (cfp) states that “the goal of the 2013 institute is to create a dialogue about how library and information professionals can (or should) move beyond being guarantors of access.... We consider ‘the city’ to be the public sphere broadly defined” (<http://acrlny.org/2013-lacuny-institute-cfp-libraries-information-and-the-right-to-the-city/>). For Harvey (2012) the right to the city *begins* in “individualistic and property based” concepts (p. 3), but he wants to change those, to go beyond “a right of access to what already exists” toward a right “to change [the city] after our heart’s desire,” specifically to suit collective needs (Harvey, 2003, p. 939). The city is a bellwether: a place of “political, social, and class struggles. [He views] the urban process – its disciplinary apparatuses and restraints as well as its emancipatory ... possibilities – from the standpoint of all those who attempt to gain their livelihood and reproduce their daily lives in the midst of this urban process” – a process deeply entangled with the power and expansion of global capitalism (Harvey, 2012, p. 66).<sup>1</sup> In other words, control of space and the means to transform it is a direct challenge to neoliberal capital, and Harvey (2012) posits this right to the city as a human

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<sup>1</sup> With all due respect to Harvey and the LACUNY Institute, small towns attempting to deal with the arrival of a Wal-Mart have known the issues at stake and articulated them for decades.

right “constituted by establishing democratic control over ... urbanization” (pp. 23-24).

How and where might libraries meaningfully fit into and forward these concepts? I think Harvey is fundamentally correct, but I would suggest a correction of emphasis: the *democratic* rights of “republican citizenship, ranging from ... association, demonstration, publication, and remonstrance to vot[ing] and run[ning] for office, presuppose the guarantees [of] civil equality in the eyes of the law [and] is only meaningful when it is accompanied by practices and institutions which guarantee” them (Benhabib, 2005, p. 24). In other words, “it is only within political communities – and not as a member of a general humanity – that one can have one’s right[s] recognized” and act upon them effectively; “when we are excluded from [that] community [its] importance ... becomes clear” (Castiglione, 2005, p. 21).<sup>2</sup> I am suggesting here that Harvey’s right to the city *may* be a human right, but it only becomes meaningful in democratic contexts, and in this sense democratic theory adds nuance to these ideas in concrete ways for libraries. Democratic theory helps us see that “we construct and enact our politics ... in ways that are haunted by the past [and] ... can help free us from the grip of any one particular picture of [political] relation[s] ... by articulating and making vivid ... different conceptions” of our politics and the political-democratic content of our actions (Waldron, 2013, pp. 41-42). That is the aim of this paper: to bring nuance to some of the referents Harvey invokes, and to illustrate some of the important—if seemingly small—ways libraries can forward the right to the city within a democratic theory framework. This will be done through an initial examination of the rights framework Harvey uses, followed by the public sphere—a concept that I have long argued has particular meaning for libraries and one the conference description mentions. The paper will then turn to contemporary and interrelated ideas concerning democratic voice, community, and democratizing society—key ideas in contemporary democratic theory.

## On the Origins of Democratic Rights and Their Extension

Our initial foray into democratic theory is somewhat discouraging. Harvey makes a connection between neoliberalism<sup>3</sup> as the exaltation of property rights and global capital’s shaping of the city outside of democratic control (2012, p. 15-16). It is over and against this that he posits his human right to the city, enacted democratically.

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<sup>2</sup> Undocumented immigrants in the United States are a classic illustration.

<sup>3</sup> As he writes elsewhere, neoliberalism is the contention that “human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2007, p. 22).

Democratic theory historically tells us that property was thought an originating source of rights. Locke (1996) established the connection early: first, “men, being once born, have a right to their preservation” (p. 250); second, “every man has a *property* in his own *person*: ... The *labour* of his body, and the *work* of his hands are properly his” (p. 251); third, survival means working to cultivate lands out of a state of nature, “removing them out of that common state they were in, hath *fixed* my *property* in them” (p. 251) and so “*labour ... gave a right of property* (p. 256); fourth, the only “*lawful government*” is that which is formed by a community ruled by a majority under stable rules/laws; by “*enjoy[ing] any part of the land*” (property) and the benefits of the commonwealth so governed one consents “*to submit to the government*” (pp. 260-261); finally, government “*cannot take* from any man any part of his *property* without his own consent: for the preservation of property being the end of government, and that for which men enter society, it necessarily supposes and requires [that] ... they have a right” to property and its products (p. 266). Jefferson (1944) gave Locke an American twist: those who freely emigrated established new societies and laws in a wilderness entirely at the risk and “expense of individuals, and not of the British public”; therefore they alone had the rights to the land and its political control (p. 294). Tocqueville (1862a) takes a more pragmatic view of history: liberty in the modern sense began with the aristocracy’s “ancient and necessary privilege of property” (p. 401) and their collective interests were in uniting “for the purpose of checking the Government” (Tocqueville, 1862b, p. 209). The beginnings of democratic political rights began in opposing monarchical power, paradoxically arising from an elite and its collective property interests: aristocrats could not easily flee conflict with the crown since their local power and authority were fixed in a *place* and its embedded social relations (Tocqueville 1990a, p. 236; 1990b, pp. 44, 177-180). Their long term interests were to stick and resist resulting in nascent ideas of political liberty and rights.

History tells us that political rights within a democracy came first and remain primary: “In most liberal democracies, citizens look first to their domestic rights and remedies, and only when these are exhausted or denied do they turn to human rights conventions and inter-national bodies” (Ignatieff, 2001, p. 296). Attempts to extend rights are not simple cases of moral assertion. Rights conflict and can cancel one another out: it is an “illusion ... that human rights is above politics, a set of moral trump cards whose function is to bring political disputes about competing claims to closure and conclusion” (Ignatieff, 2001, p. 300; Glendon 1991). Historically when rights *have* been extended, communitarians point out that they can have an eroding factor: on the ability of society to meet the needs new rights address (welfare rights) and on commonality the common good and community in promoting an excessive rights-based individualism (Bryner, 1987, pp. 8-9; Etzioni, 2009, pp.116-118; Sandel, 1987). A surfeit of this condition means that “the world between [people] has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them” (Arendt, 1998, p. 53). Rights then have a “pedigree,” and though Harvey argues for a new human right to the city, that new right “comes trailing its

own history, which is quite often different from the way [he] want[s] to present it to the world” (Waldron, 2013, p. 41). Harvey’s simple formulation is pragmatically difficult for libraries to act upon: as a *human* right, libraries can be ill-positioned to be effective politically;<sup>4</sup> as a *political* right it flies directly in the face of the property-based genealogy of such rights and, to be frank, the financial foundation behind much that supports the existence of libraries in the first place.

## Democratic Possibilities and the Right to the City

I have so far discouraged easy rights talk from the vantage of democratic theory, but recall that the promise was held out that this field could help to articulate and make vivid different concepts of politics and the political-democratic content of librarians’ actions in pushing forward concepts of a right to the city, and in concrete ways. Three such resources and perspectives will be the content of the remainder of this paper concerning the public sphere, the related ideas of community and democratizing society, and democratic voice.

### The Public Sphere

Recall that this institute wanted to move beyond the role of guarantors of access and considered the city the public sphere broadly defined. I have written extensively about Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere and its relationship to libraries and the modern genesis of democratic practices. While this is not the place to review how Habermas (1989) reconstructed our thinking about those democratic re-beginnings, I *do* think there is some call to push back at the implicit minimizing of *mere* access in the call for proposals, and I would argue that the libraries in their collective existence in democracies broadly embody and enact much of Habermas's classical definition of the public sphere:

- Libraries house and further rational discourse through the organization of collections coupled with the principle of unfettered information access.
- The field enacts the principle of critique and rational argumentation through the commitment to balanced collections, preserving them over time, and furthering inclusion through active attempts to make collections and resources reflect historical and current intellectual diversity.
- By their very existence libraries potentially verify (or refute) claims to authority in making current and retrospective organized resources available

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<sup>4</sup> And leaves librarians open to the charge of a feel-good “telescopic” extension of citizen or student or user rights that characterized the arguments around and against social responsibility in the field (Uricchio 1994).

to check the bases of a thesis, law, book, article, policy etc. continuing the process of debate which lies at the heart of the public sphere and democracy.<sup>5</sup>

- By policy and practice libraries reach out to those not served to make access to information and education more widely and universally available.

The ideas embedded represent elaborations on Habermas’s analysis of the historical development of a democratic public sphere; I have only linked them to library practices (Buschman, 2003, pp. 46-47). Habermas teaches us that we should never underestimate the “stimulating and productive power of discursive disputes” that intellectual freedom and library resource underwrite in combination (1987, pp. 16-17): there is an “affinity [between] the enterprise of knowledge ... [and] the democratic form of decision-making” (Habermas as cited in Ostovich, 1995, p. 473) and “without the flow of information gained through extensive research, and without the stimulation of arguments based on ... expertise ... public communication loses its discursive vitality” (Habermas, 2007). Library-promoted processes of rational inquiry and rational discourse stand importantly at the center of *any* newly-conceived right because its establishment and operation relies on these core processes within democratic functioning. It stands to reason that they would be doubly important in librarianship’s role in forwarding a right to the city.

### Libraries, Community, and Democratizing Society

If libraries instantiate a form or an aspect of the public sphere, then I would argue that they are well-placed as a resource to promote the right to the city – but in specific ways. These next two sections again use ideas from democratic theory to explore those ways. The first of these ideas concerns community. Neoliberal hegemony is characterized by an economic “scope of liberty ... extended ever more, reach[ing] a point where it will undermine the social order” – that is, community and social bonds (Etzioni, 2000, p. 357).<sup>6</sup> Maximally, community “denotes

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<sup>5</sup> One need only think of the *lack* of access and its damages: secrecy operates “to prevent [public] disclosure [as] a source of power”—something governments have known for a long time (Schlesinger as cited in Maret, 2011, xii). Knowledge—or in this case its withholding—is power after all, and again, it is implicated in the ethics of the work of information professionals (Capurro, 1985). Finally and more simply, there are independent and visiting scholars worry about access to collections (<http://www.ncis.org/>; <http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/reader-input-how-much-per-month-for-scholarly-database-access/34949>).

<sup>6</sup> I specifically take issue with communitarian thought when the clear and obvious implications of neoliberalism and global capital (the destruction of community) are equated with epiphenomena such as individualism (Buschman, 2012a, pp. 128-132). That is why the Etzioni quote is adapted here.

solidarity between persons united in their sense of belonging through a shared past and/or common goals” (Wallacavage and Gruters, 2007, p. 221). I take a more modest view where libraries fit more comfortably.<sup>7</sup> A view of community that does not indulge in nostalgia acknowledges that people are likely unwilling to limit certain personal liberties to belong, and that the most practical contemporary place to enact a form of community is in institutions like libraries (Buschman, 2012a, pp. 134-135).<sup>8</sup> Institutions like libraries are prime sites to begin to build a sense of solidarity, trust, and efficacy: the building blocks of democratic practice that will stand at the center of any meaningful right to the city (Buschman, 2012a, p. 136).

The key point is that the target is not explicitly governmental arenas like boards – we know from the current (and historical) functioning of zoning or school or library boards, Congress or the Electoral College that such institutions can *formally* function, but in a perfectly undemocratic manner.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the goal for libraries in regards to a right to the city is to democratize *society* and its functioning (Warren, 2002, p. 692), “embodied in smaller groupings, which cohere because people talk to each other” (Eliasoph, 2002, p. 212). Conversations and participation in institutional venues *have* political and democratic content, even if the participants eschew the wider implications: people may “not necessarily debate foreign policy ... but do endlessly puzzle about what makes a good person, and what kinds of communities, institutions, and societies children need to become good people” when engaged with people and institutions they care about shaping (Eliasoph, 2002, p. 197). It is just this kind of content that democratic theory helps us uncover in the daily life of our institutions as we engage our publics: “within a deliberative context, the political goods of trust and judgment [– the building blocks of community –] are ... mutually reinforcing” and “healthy democratic institutions are privileged because they respect and are guided by the goods of deliberation” (Mara, 2008, pp. 93; 87). Formal governing may come about from such processes or may not, but a democratized society enacted through libraries is a practical possibility that can make the right to the city a nearer reality. The formulation of “no

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<sup>7</sup> Such maximal formulations have been strongly critiqued: communitarians argue that “when members of a society have settled roots and established traditions, they will tolerate the speech, religion, sexual, and associational preferences of minorities [but] history simply does not support [that] optimism (Gutmann, 2003, p. 189); they “often write as if the historical exclusion of certain groups ... was just arbitrary, so that we can now include them and proceed forward” (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 258; see also Mara, 2008, pp. 238-241; Connelly, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> This point specifically draws on the work of Gutmann (2003), Walzer (1984; 1990), Mara (2008), and Taylor (1992).

<sup>9</sup> As Habermas puts it, a situation “based on the rule of law but without democracy” (1992, p. 431). See also Dahl (2002) and Mara (2008, p. 91).

community, no democracy” is correct in this sense (Taylor, 2004), and libraries have a concrete role in fostering these capacities. This naturally leads to the considerations that follow.

## Democratic Voice

Harvey speaks of “‘participatory budgeting,’ in which ordinary city residents directly take part in allocating portions of municipal budgets through a democratic decision-making process” important to meaningful instantiation of the right to the city over against neoliberalism (2012, p. xii). This now gets us down to the *how* of democratizing society and fostering community. Whitney Maxi, a community organizer in the Liberty City section of Miami recently put a human face on the idea in an interview on the American Dream. The crash of 2008 was just a “deepening of the devastation” there. “The immediate goal,” she said, is to “create systems that are more humanizing to be in and having a say in what resources come in and out of the community. If there is an American Dream [here], it’s having a voice that’s heard and recognized as the authority for their area” (Hobson, 2013, January 24). Clearly Harvey and Maxi point us in directions that have immediate implications for the functioning of public library and school boards concerning openness and unpacking the opacity of budgeting and priority-setting processes. Just how many anguished publics must we encounter over school and library closings to learn this basic lesson of democracy?<sup>10</sup> But Harvey’s idea is not limited to these venues: there has been a substantial literature exploring and advocating student and user input in the shaping of institutional spaces, resources, and services. The problem with so many of these practices is that they simply reify market solutions thus reinforcing neoliberalism (Buschman, 2012a, pp. 4-5; 52). The much-publicized Rochester “lite ethnography” studies to shape library spaces are a classic example: “This is a type of consumer research, borrowed from the corporate world. [Instead of] hiring a designer to rework some of its Web sites ... a suggestion [came up]: Why not hire someone to study customers and their work environments, as [corporations do]? (Carlson, 2007; Buschman, 2012b).

Democratic theory leads us away from shallow mimicking of the market and transcends simplistic “lessons” from bad board practices. *We* have a strong role to play in enabling democratic voice in a meaningful way to shape our institutions in ways both responsive to our publics that builds trust and shapes community practices. In order to conceptualize democratic voice within our institutions, think of its opposites:

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<sup>10</sup> These incidents are heartbreakingly routine in, for instance, Philadelphia (Rich & Hurdle, 2013; Berg, 2012), but such patterns are also reflected in decisions over (private) Catholic schools as well (A.P. 2012; Otterman 2013). This is a problem in search of a deeper solution than simply making highly structured time available for people to speak when an issue is substantively decided.

- The behind-the-scenes decisions based on unavailable data by putatively democratic boards on a school or a branch closing.
- A set of services or resources offered or aggressively pushed to students uninformed by their needs and learning gaps.
- An unsuccessful space design revealed by how users respond to it after the fact.
- Institutional hours not responsive to use patterns.
- Over-commercialized space in the library.

Each is different—two of them are driven by economics, the others by internal traditions of librarians knowing best and misfiring – but results are similar: the voices of the persons our institutions are meant to serve are not sufficiently present (or are excluded) in democratically guiding our decisions. Instead, other voices prevail: the market, efficiency, professional prerogatives, or simple guessing (Buschman, 2012a, pp.183-185). Democratic theory puts it this way:

- “Relationships of power in society can be, and are, reproduced through the medium of communicative interaction” (Dryzek, 1995, p. 106).
- If healthy, autonomous public- and life-choice are to be rational and deliberative, then institutions like libraries have a substantive role in fostering those baseline capacities (Mara, 2008, pp. 132, 141; Buschman, 2012a, p. 165).
- Institutions that foster “communicative powers should be protected and cultivated” in contrast to those “embedded within economic and political power relations [which] should be regulated and counterbalanced” (Warren, 2001, p. 223).

Democratic theory also holds out a specific role for us. Eliasoph ironically notes that bureaucrats are often more aware of the need for a culture change, democratic input, and voice for their institutions to be healthy, and they foster “grassroots participatory citizenship by encouraging ... citizens or ... families to gather in ongoing groups to discuss issues that are simultaneously deeply political and deeply personal” within these contexts (2002, p. 210). This need not happen just from the top: our professional autonomy should be used to give systematic, democratic voice to our users *inside* our decision making processes. Democratic theory suggests that we can do this: not only do we foster talk and input (voice) but also set the stage so that people “are capable of listening to one another” (Taylor, 2004, p. 31). A right to the city is as meaningful in our enabling of democratic voice in guiding

libraries as it is in the broader urban public sphere.

## Conclusion

Can a full-blown right to the city emerge from librarianship? I don't think so, but that does not mean we do not have an important role to play in helping the ethos of the right to the city emerge in a number of practical ways, informed by the kind of theoretical understanding I am advocating. First, a right to the city played out in libraries can and should not fall into the rights-as-trump trap, nor played out as a legalistic argument about who-gets-to-shape-what. That clearly falls back on the individual and property-based ethos of classical liberalism, and it will fail as an argument or a tactic. Second, libraries need to take seriously their role in embodying the public sphere in the form of the much-maligned open and balanced collections (always an elusive goal) and, despite pressures for foot traffic and other measures of use, as spaces of inquiry, fact-checking, and so on, the baseline practices of democratic and rational discourse. Finally, every library staff person has a role to play in enabling user's voices about the institution and its practices, bringing them forward and making practical suggestions. Whether it is a tell-the-librarian-what-you-think table once a week, more openness on a board, or simply laying bare some of the operating context of the library and basic facts behind decisions, these processes show a respect for our publics. In turn, our publics have reason to coalesce around our institutions, building and enacting a modern form of community and solidarity that is another baseline of democratic processes. I am in the end suggesting that a library version of the right to the city is embodied in democratizing our institutions.

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