

Acquisitions in public libraries:

In relation to the problems experienced in four French towns these last years

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The public libraries in France have been in great favour with the professional library press these last years. This is due to their immense expansion since the 1980s where from a total area of some 800,000 sq. m open to the public (i.e. 1.6 sq. m per 100 inhabitants in 1981) their area has doubled. Now all towns of more than 10,000 inhabitants (or almost) have got a library, and this important feature of the life of the town is of some importance to the problems, which are debated in this article.

What are these problems? Brought into the light by the national press since 1995 they concern, very clearly at any rate, the control of library acquisitions by the elected members of the communities administering the libraries, i.e. the municipalities. Before presenting the issues concerning the constitution of the collections it is probably useful to those readers, who are only slightly familiar with the administrative system in France, briefly to outline the organisation of the public reading in our country.

Some important aspects of the French administrative organisation, and the public libraries

The public libraries, as they are called, as this is more a convenient denomination than the official one, are dependant on the local governments: either the municipalities (elected every 6 years by the inhabitants of the municipality) or the departments (the departmental councils elected every 6 years by indirect voting).

The municipal libraries serve the inhabitants of the municipality as well as the surrounding localities. They are funded by the State when established or when expanded (investing in or starting very important works), but the local government subsidises 97 % of the operational costs (staff, acquisitions, and maintenance of buildings...). Thus, the municipality (the mayor, the local council) has all the powers of decision concerning the appointments of officials, the budget and the decisions concerning expenses of all kinds (including the buying of books, disks, periodicals).

Since 1986, the departmental councils administer the libraries of the departments. Their mission is to serve the municipalities of the department having less than 10,000 inhabitants, to help constitute their collections, to lend out works and documents, which are made available by through municipal libraries (or their associates) in small communities to the inhabitants of rural areas.

In this way the elected decision-makers of the communities called 'territorial' have all the authority and all the power to run their institutions according to their own decisions. The State control is carried out in two ways:

1. As regards the legality of the administrative measures (in particular the legal form of the budget, the decisions taken in council) but never whether these decisions are desirable.
2. As regards the neutrality of the territorial local authorities towards the private business sector,

which ought not to be favoured when choosing providers of services (Codes concerning business agreements within the public sector).

As concerns the libraries, the State control is strictly 'technical'. It works through the General Inspection of the Libraries (l'Inspection générale des bibliothèques) at the request of the Minister of Culture. It concerns the administration of the collections, especially in relation to the national heritage, rare and ancient, regarding the disposals... A regulating clause of the ordinance establishing this control states that the libraries are to respect the 'pluralism'. Yet this text has been provided with no sanctions towards the communities which do not apply to it, rendering the clause somewhat ineffective. For a long time the ABF (Association of French Librarians) has been asking the Government to pass a regular library bill, which should state the missions, the procedures of operation as well as the responsibilities, and the means of the different communities to control their management. This bill has now been in preparation for 4 years and is not announced for discussion until the year 2000!

Thus, the librarians have been appointed and entrusted with the management of a public library by the authorities, which pay them, evaluate them, give them marks and recommend promotions. Yet statutes for the public sector, which offer guaranties to the public servants, do exist. For various reasons a number of librarians are appointed on a contractual basis and are therefore, without any fixed guarantee, even more than others subject to the sole power of their employer.

The acquisitions of books and other documents are stated in the written rules as being the domain of the local council. It decides itself whether or not to delegate the signing of orders to the librarian. In most cases the local council has faith in the librarians, and the signing of orders is made without any problem; the librarian is authorised to sign the orders. In many other cases the member of the council responsible for the department of culture has to sign the orders... and is then at the same time able supervise, and add titles or remove them.

Towns under the authority of the Front National

In 1995 the local government elections passed 4 towns, Orange, Toulon, Marignane, and a few months later Vitrolles, under the authority of Front National, a French right-wing extremist party, which actually obtains between 15 and 17 % of the votes at the general elections.

At Orange, because of local conditions, mayor Bompard immediately turned his attention to the library and its acquisitions. From the end of 1995 titles were removed from the lists of acquisitions proposed by the librarian in charge, and new titles were imposed. A conflict had started in which the evident purpose of the local government was to remove all initiative of ordering from the professionals, to make the library a stake in the unmistakable political propaganda.

Thus, newspapers are considered in the light of votes at the election, children's stories in terms of place of origin (Why stories from the Mediterranean and not stories from Provence?). The periodical 'Le Métier de Bibliothécaire' is considered 'too specialised' (it's the professional book for training librarians) and is excluded. It is obvious that the mayor wants the collections primarily to reflect the ideas of his party before being representative of various trends and open to the world. Inevitably, there is an open conflict and the librarian is forced to seek another position. Very soon she is followed by all the qualified assistants of the library, which is left without any professional staff and soon after is placed under the management of one of the mayor's friends and fellow-partisans who has no certified professional qualifications.

The general inspection demanded by the Minister concludes its report with the appalling facts on the working methods and the impossibility of working professionally, but that is it. The many articles in the national newspapers 'Libération' and 'l'Express' (taken up in all the newspapers) only encourage the mayor. For four years now this library has been subject to acquisitions always showing a political tendency in the same direction, disregarding the representation of opposite

ideas and ideological currents.

The situation has been somewhat similar in Marignane. The local counsellor Simponpieri, acting with a little more discretion, has nevertheless imposed control of the acquisitions and terminated the contract of the professional in charge, in order to replace her by an unqualified political friend of his group.

In Vitrolles the librarian has anticipated her retirement confronted with the difficult working conditions, and the City Hall uses the library for conferences on 'Culture becoming absurd' where the only people attending are those close to the local government.

As a number of journalists have found out, silence has been imposed in all these libraries, the staff is not allowed to express their opinion, journalists are requested to stay out.

Libraries or conformist centres: A survey by Jean Yves Le Gallou

In the summer of 1996 we were informed that the national secretariat of the Front National council members were about to launch a great survey on the municipal libraries: Libraries or conformist centres. On lists made up in advance titles or authors are to be ticked off in order to see whether or not they can be found in the library. The purpose was to prove that the collections of the libraries are leftist oriented, or even to the extreme left, and that the right-wing national party (as the Front National calls itself in its ideological presentation) has not got the representation it ought to have.

It is a two-tiered text. For each type of document authors like Karl Marx are compared with Jean Marie le Pen (the leader of the Front National) in order to prove that the works of the one are more numerous in the library than those of the other. Inferior authors (but professed right-wing symphatizers) are compared with great authors (labelled as left-wing), as for example Sartre and Jean Cau.

Naturally, with about a hundred completed questionnaires (in fact, not always very well completed as the Front National councillors do not always know how to search in the library catalogues) there are priceless paragraphs, for example, where a local councillor declares 'I have never been to a library before. They have no newspapers, so no problem' or 'There is no European story' not knowing he had to search for 'stories from Europe'.

At a press conference on the November 7 1996 in Paris Jean Yves le Gallou, Front National delegate at the local councils, presented the results of this survey and the newspaper 'Présent's' headlines point out that 'undoubtedly, the libraries are biased, we need equilibration'.

What does the ABF do?

The activities of the ABF on a national level have been to contact first of all our colleagues involved with the utmost discretion as they ran the risk of a sanction, to guide them, to back them up, to 'get out' information. But also

- Drawing up and publishing
 - A petition in July 1996 which has been signed by a very large number of people in all of France.
 - An open letter to the elected representatives of the French Republic published in the newspapers 'Le Monde', 'Libération' and 'Le Figaro'.
 - A text published in September 1996, repeating the reflections of the Association on acquisitions.
 - Various motions adopted in 1996, 1997 and 1998 by a large majority at the annual conference of the Association in the support of the professionals exposed to this pressure.

- Compilation of a dossier for the press with the articles published on the subject since 1996.
- Posters and stickers with an illustration and a slogan by the great cartoonist, F'Murr, who has offered this without charge in order to help the Association: "Les idées brunes censurent les grandes idées, je ne veux pas qu'on ait le Front de choisir à ma place" (= The brown ideas censor the great ideas, I don't want the Front to choose for me). They have been distributed widely during the book fair 'le Salon du Livre' in Paris and on every other professional occasion. Other stickers have been made by the ABF Midi Pyrénées.
- Participation in the antifascist Salon du Livre organised at Gardanne in November through a commitment made in 1997 by unanimous voting of the regional and national committees of the ABF. The Salon included a round table 'the professions of the book against the fascism' in which our president Claudine Belayche took part.
- Going to court introducing a supplementary memorandum in support of the complaint lodged by the inhabitants of Marignane about the cessation of subscriptions (complaint about abuse of authority with a request for suspended execution).
- Information to numerous journalists and other professionals interested in the situation. At a local level, nationally as well as internationally, particularly our Swedish colleagues.

Debates have been organised at a national level by the ABF and by the periodical Livres Hebdo, by Mémoires Vives, at the Salon du Livre in Paris in 1997 and 1998, at Montreuil in 1998. They have permitted many professional book-people to participate in the deliberations in addition to the activities carried out in the Association by the Law and Acquisitions Committees, and in the different sections of the ABF (Public Reading, Study and Research, Art Libraries, etc.).

Several radio and television broadcasts have been devoted to these issues: a great many colleagues have spoken, chiefly to inform, to explain the facts of choosing books for the libraries, the management of those libraries, their supervising authorities. It has often been a question of going against the accepted ideas (Who buys the books? Who appoints the librarians? What does the State do?)

The question, which the librarians have been asked, is dual

1. What is the responsibility of the professionals in the constitution of the collections?
2. What are the limits to the expression of opinions which in certain cases come under the antiracist laws, or the revisionist theories supported by many hack journalists / authors of 'letters to the editor' close to the Front National.

The answers are of course not simple. It has not been an object for our association to state that the professionals should have all the power of administration of their acquisitions without any control. This would be contrary to the common law and the librarians, as well as other professionals, owe it to themselves to submit to a job evaluation. The question asked is about evaluation, but by whom, on which basis, and with what objective? The factors of work quality and of professionalizing the staff should here be taken into account. Therefore, the ABF has set up a special working committee concerning acquisitions. The committee has published a leaflet-guide for grammar schools, and why not for council members too, about the recommended practice within the field of book-acquisitions.

As regards the expression of opinions, which are prosecuted according to French law, racism, instigation to racial hatred, they are obviously not acceptable in a public library. It is an institution open to everybody, and therefore an institution, which should not exclude any citizen because of his or her colour, religion or 'race'. Naturally, these criteria will have to be revised in the case of libraries developing a specialisation in the field of politics, history, or any other subject.

It remains that at present the situation is rather serious, as there is no development towards giving the librarians more responsibility. The announced law is deferred every day!

More and more of our colleagues inform us - having been promised anonymity and confidentiality, and coming from towns politically both left-wing and right-wing - that their acquisitions are being controlled. That this and this councillor finds the works on Islam undesirable or that such a rap record is an unnecessary waste of money in the municipal budget.

Today it is essential to reform the principles of public reading in France, to finally define how a library open to all and to all currents of ideas should be, on the condition that those ideas do not exclude all other ideas. It is a fight for tolerance, for openness and curiosity, and against intolerance and the abusive propaganda of one ideology against another.

It is also a question of knowing whether to trust the librarians in charge to constitute the collections, or whether a committee close to the local council is more competent. We do not think so, because a librarian is a professional, and this implies performing well, even extremely well, in order to be above criticism: The criticism awaiting us from those who would like to make the public library a library serving their own opinions only.

Summary bibliography

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3. *Main basse sur Orange* / Roger Martin. - Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1998
A long and very detailed chapter deals with the municipal library in Orange.