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On the Political Nature of Library Leadership

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John Buschman

Abstract

This paper examines the political nature of library leadership and acknowledges consistent problems within the management and leadership literature. The political nature of leadership is offered as an insight versus the usual imitation of business management discourse. A critical theory of library leadership is offered. The paper proceeds by examining what we mean by “leadership” and “political” and how those concepts relate before analyzing what has changed to call forth a critical interpretation and framework for library leadership. It moves on to examine insights from political theory that are instructive within contemporary contexts.

Introduction

A recent editorial noted that “critically positioned research” and work “at the intersections of critical theory and library practice ... employing philosophical ... or historical inquiry” holds significant analytical value for the Library and Information Science (LIS) field (Elmberg & Walter, 2015, p.4). This article employs one such approach to better understand the changed political environment of library leadership and to a library’s publics and organization. It is also an attempt to redefine an overly-constricted understanding of the political nature of leadership within the field, and in the process to acknowledge perennial problems within the management, administrative, and leadership literature¹. Again, the political nature of leadership is offered as an insight into these problems versus the usual attempt to reflect those circumstances back into a theory that would inevitably be a simplified imitation of business management fads and fashions. “Replete with their careful styling and image intensity such initiatives are now widely characterized” as promotional fads within management literature itself (Clegg & Carter, 2007, p. 2715), and in turn it is widely asserted that somehow “libraries benefit from the same kind of leadership styles found in corporations” (Maloney in Jackson 2010, p. 85)². In short, this is a *critical*

theory of library leadership – critical in that it is “explanatory, practical, and normative” (Bohman, 1996, p.190). Prior to plunging into the circumstances of librarianship, some basic terminology needs to be established. Proceeding first by examining the meaning of “leadership” and “political” – and how those concepts relate – is necessary before analyzing what has changed to call forth a different, critical interpretation and framework for library leadership. The article then moves on to examine insights from political theory, which are instructive within contemporary contexts.

On “Leadership” and “Political”

What then do we mean by the terms “leadership” and “political?” This attempt to frame the concepts will not establish definitive benchmarks – both concepts have been the object of theoretical speculation for millennia. But they will be formulated to be practical – that is responsive to contemporary issues and to overcome some of the weaknesses of the management literature. The first step is acknowledging the distinction between managing and leading – an old and somewhat controversial one. Managing still largely tends to be based on “effectiveness and efficiency in reaching organizationally set goals” (Lowry, 1988, p. 23) and managers tend to focus on processes, rules, and conflict resolution to achieve them (Zaleznik, 1993, p. 174; Phillips, 2014, p.337). It is common to find institutions that are well managed but poorly led: the routines are performed well, but the question of whether they should be performed at all remains unasked (Bennis, 1993, p. 167). Leadership thus concerns broader frameworks: where one’s institution fits, integration of constituencies, vision and values, non-rational factors like commitment and loyalty within the organization and the evolution of goals and/or purposes (Gardner, 1993, p.160; Meyer and Zucker, 1993, p. 286). Leadership generally – and perhaps especially in libraries – is concerned with organizational culture: the “pattern of basic assumptions that a given group [holds] in learning to cope with its problems ... and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore are passed on to those who are new to the organization” (Schein, 1993, p. 46; Buschman, 2013). When the distinctive nature of leadership in non-profits generally – and libraries specifically – is factored in (Lowry 1988; Herman & Heimovics,

1. Hereinafter this will be referred to as the more common term “management literature”

2. On the influence of fads, fashion, imitation and cycles in the management literature see Hendry 2013, 79-81; on the derivative and imitative nature of the parallel library literature see Day 2002;1998.

1994; Mintzberg, 1996), it is little wonder that leadership is called a “liberal art” requiring not just knowledge, but self-knowledge (Drucker, 1993, p. 22). Leadership has been described as playing a “variety of roles in complex organizations...represent the [organization] to the outside world, liaise with external networks, monitor information about ... performance, disseminate information throughout the organization, initiate change, handle disturbances and settle conflicts, allocate resources and carry on negotiations” (Rondinelli, 2004, p. 951). Leadership is thus defined here as effectiveness in a variety of roles to produce positive organizational outcomes, *not* as so commonly cast a definable set of personal attributes, habits, qualities, or traits (detail-oriented, visionary, persuasive, charismatic, etc.). Interestingly, some prior definitions came close to these ideas before quickly lapsing into management skill sets, leadership traits, and behavior theories (Euster, 1984, p. 45) – a pattern repeated over and over in the management literature in librarianship (see Phillips, 2014; Lynch, 2004, p. 33).

The second definition is of the political – and it connects back directly to leadership. For purposes here, the political concerns what is shared or held in common (Wolin, 2004; Mara, 1997, p. 115). That is, in this case it is organizational: the good of the library and the good the library does for the institution and/or publics it serves. In other words, our definition of political is critical and normative (Warren, 1999b, p. 208-209): good leadership enfold a broader good – of the library, and its role in the goods of its community; bad leadership is the converse. The political-ness of an issue arises when there is an investment in the consequences of decisions and/or a broader good (Dewey, 1927, p. 15-16). It is further constituted by a time element – past decisions affect the present, and present decisions will bring future consequences, creating political space: the “locus [of] tensional forces” during the period of discussion and resolution (Wolin, 2004, p. 8). It is in this sense that both political and nonprofit management theorists recognize that the work of the state and governance is conducted through and in organizations and institutions (like nonprofits, schools, universities, and libraries) as well as traditional political venues; those institutions in turn exhibit many of the hallmarks of politics (Perlmutter and Gummer, 1994, p. 236; Wolin, 2004, p. 374-375). The political is thus not reducible to the merely social (the result of human association), nor to a set of behaviors (debate or voting), or a game (e.g. rational

choice theory), nor constituted by the mere presence or exercise of authority and/or power and/or conflict over “who gets what, when [and] how,” and it is not the equivalent of collective action (Lasswell in Warren 1999b, p. 212).

The exercise of power in leadership is taken seriously here: the loss of a job is on par with a birth, a death, a marriage, a divorce, or a serious illness (<https://benefits.stanford.edu/life-events-overview>), and allocating or cutting services or resources can transform (for good or ill) a portion of one’s community or a department at one’s institution. This is clearly political in nature, but to stop there is too restrictive. The political nature of leadership now routinely extends to the definition and interpretation of issues and problems within the organization since “the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power,” (Schattschneider in Lubienski 2001, p. 640). Further, a broad unwillingness “to accept without question ... traditions, routines, habits, and customs” is a hallmark of our current era, and again normative issues are at stake (Warren, 1999b, p. 209). Thus the political nature of library leadership emerges with the “pressures for collectively binding resolutions” under conditions of “groundlessness [when] forms of shared knowledge fray and become contestable [and] interactions are no longer predictable,” yet relationships and order and progress “must somehow be restored, adjusted, or established under pressure of needs for ... decision and action” in the political space of decisional tension (Warren, 1996, p. 244-245, 247). There is strong a tendency in our field to simplify and equate this merely to policy, funding, or technology changes, but two perspectives illustrate a deeper level of complexity. Postman (1988, p. 40) noted some time ago that our concepts of intellectual freedom were technologically outdated: “there is ... no such thing ... in the sense that everyone and everything benefits by their increase,” that is, our always-emerging new media “gives and takes away [aspects of intellectual freedom, but] not [always] in equal measure.” For instance, the gains in information access via smartphones come with a significant degradation of privacy. Further, Latour (2004, p. 227) notes that critical approaches have been lately turned on their head: the efforts to “detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements” has been co-opted by conservative anti-global warming forces as a tactic, and has led to a situation where we must “now ... reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden

behind the *illusion* of prejudices.” In other words, both authors argue that a simplistic approach to information provision, its relationship to truth and the advancement of democracy (Wiegand, 2015) is hopelessly naïve and will easily be outflanked in our complex and shifting environment. *Leadership* under these conditions is *political*. That is, decisions are made about the use of coercion, power, persuasion, compromise, deliberation, explanation, and so on, and what the solution will and should be for the common (library/institutional/community) good under highly unstable conditions.

What Has Changed?

In asserting a changed environment, we must first acknowledge the continuities in the field: “The technical and managerial skills required to run a library in 1876, the year that the American Library Association was founded, remained relatively unchanged for almost a century [and] the nature and rate of technological change ... had little impact on library operations” for a hundred years, give or take (Castiglione, 2006, p. 289). And while it is universally acknowledged that technology is changing libraries, “there is much that libraries do that they used not to do, but surprisingly little that they used to do that they don’t do now” (O’Donnell, 2011). In other words the new requirements of leadership are layered on to the old. In turn, “librarians have listed, debated, revised, and negotiated lists of [leadership] competencies ... since the beginnings of formal education for librarianship,” that is, for almost 130 years (Jordan, 2012, p. 38). So what is really new? To begin, there is a new dimension of political conflict within library leadership. A recent article noted that several high profile academic library leadership resignations, dismissals, and retirements have come about for a variety of seemingly local reasons (funding, space planning, digital initiatives and the resulting conflict with liberal arts faculty over the future of book collections, decision-making processes, and upper administration initiatives), but the commonality is the negotiation of change in an environment where “libraries are trying to figure out what they are and what their future is and what their role is,” (Straumsheim, 2014b; 2014a)³. The changes to be made, how those changes are decided –

3. In turn, these incidents generated a considerable amount of discussion among academic library directors. Such situations are in no way limited to academic libraries: see Berman, 2015; Rosenwald, 2015; Peet, 2015; Wade, 2013; Riley, 1997.

and by whom – and how they are communicated have become major political issues with significant career and institutional consequences, and the public nature of a conflict adds to the new dimension. It is not that this never happened in the past, but figuring out a future and a role now takes place within an environment that is highly unstable (groundless), and thus politically different. Libraries are “often told to run their organizations ‘like a business’ [but] when a library [leader] takes a risk and fails [like a business], the entire program can be seen as wasteful. Can the director of a library afford to don the black mock turtleneck of a visionary entrepreneur like Steve Jobs and still stay employed,” (Kander & Potter, 2015)? Probably not, but in turn, “much of the responsibility for adapting to a changing information environment seems to fall to library directors who forge ahead at their own risk” (Ward, 2015).

Many variables are now simply beyond the specific control of individual library leaders, and have been for some time: the parent government/school and its outside influences, the internal accounting system and structure, the demands of the variety of users, technological changes introduced by vendors and user technology expectations, interdependence among libraries and the vendors who sell to libraries in turn face many of the same issues, increasing complexity still further (Hayes & Brown, 1994). The description of the variety of roles within leadership captures this. A recent update of an academic library strategic plan illustrated this well: the “...29 remaining [action items] un-done...were deemed largely un-doable – many are related to the effects of [construction on campus], others...on continually delayed construction funding from [the state university system], and yet others appear to be impossible to attain in our current environment” (<http://potsdam.libguides.com/strategicplanning2014>), There are again strong parallels in public libraries (Hu, 2015). To add to this political complexity, there is now also the demand that library leaders operate democratically and in support of democratic society: “an institution cannot foster democracy without practicing it” (Buschman, 2007, p. 1493; 2012; 2003; Byrne, 2004; Ford, 2012; Jaeger, Bertot, & Gorham, 2013). This is partially an outgrowth of management changes in response to changing environments: restructured library workplaces that emphasize decentralization, work autonomy, and highly skilled and more interesting knowledge work more than implies a politically efficacious say in the direction

of the workplace (Day, 1997). The second demand is in response to common platitudes about the role of libraries and education in democracies (Wiegand, 2015; Buschman, 2007)⁴.

The Deeper Structures of Change

As compelling and interesting as these issues might be to current library leaders and those in LIS, they are essentially epiphenomena. Empirical descriptions indicating the deeper changes abound:

- My sense is that administrators look at libraries as something that is easy to cut or easy to subsume under an IT department, because it feels as though when library materials become electronic, they are best managed by, say, an IT department instead of being managed by the library (Tully in Straumsheim, 2014b).
- The shifting rhetoric has seen library funding receive serious cuts worldwide as the confluence of digital technologies, capitalism, and democracy creates a perceived sense that “traditional” libraries are hoary substitutes for the Internet (Ingraham, 2015, p. 153).
- The effort to modernize ... libraries has prompted one fiscal expert to question whether officials should also

be looking at whether they could, or should, downsize ... given the move toward a digital age (Hu, 2015).

These quotes come in an era and in the face of *increased* usage of, need for, and engagement with libraries by their campuses and communities (Fiels, 2011; Hu, 2015; Wiegand, 2015). So what exactly is going on? Hall (1994, p. 27) reviews the broad history of American nonprofits and notes a set of sea-changes:

Reagan ... who proclaimed himself a friend of private initiative, set about increasing the responsibilities of private sector initiatives by proposing cutbacks in federal spending and encouraging localities and voluntary groups to “take up the slack”... [T]hese efforts... were framed by a belief that the nation’s nonprofits were primarily supported by individual and corporate giving and by the labor of volunteers, [which] utterly failed to grasp... that by 1980, government itself was the largest single source of nonprofit revenues... Even organizations that had resembled traditional charities before the Reagan era were compelled by a combination of federal budget cuts, weakened tax incentives for giving, and economic uncertainties, to move away from dependence on donations and toward a variety of [entrepreneurial] strategies.

4. The focus on leadership here is not a step back from democratic commitments in social or workplace terms. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall thinking theoretically about politics now means an acceptance of democratic principles (Mara 2008, 1). Leadership is itself not automatically un-democratic. Some in fact argue it is a necessary component to a functioning democracy – both as a political system and organizationally (Sartori 1962, 118-120). This perspective is captured in a blog comment:

[A]s much as I’m all for democratic decision-making, I’ve rarely seen it work at my library. ... [O]ur director wants ... buy-in [and] pushes committee decision-making reflect[ing] the diversity of the library ... (i.e. ... assign[ing] persons from multiple departments rather than just those with hands-on knowledge). This means that a committee [on] redesign of the library website might include persons who have no knowledge of web design or the principles of site architecture. Those who have a better grasp of design principles often end up locking horns with those who think it’s as simple as formatting a Word document [and] decision-making ... drags on.... I would prefer that a very small group of people (2-3 people) with hands-on knowledge of the issue come up with recommendations that can be pitched to a larger group rather than making decisions within a larger group/committee (in Ford 2012)

As a result of broader economic changes (the decline in the manufacturing sector and the shift to a service economy, global off-shoring, the rise of the financial sector), nonprofit governance also changed in character, “tend[ing] to alter the standards by which nonprofits were managed and their degree of commitment to communities and their traditions ... [and] at the same time, the financial pressures on states and municipalities produced a decreasing willingness to accept nonprofit’s claims of devotion to public service at face value,” (Hall, 1994, p. 29-30). In short, nonprofits were steered into the neo-liberal era with its concomitant assumptions – a series of assertions about human nature and the best social, political, and economic arrangements for that nature: that people are rationally motivated by self-interest, that the market is the best mechanism to channel those interests, that the state’s hierarchical and bureaucratic restraints thwart the market and/or privilege certain groups or activities, that state action in the name of the public good is therefore ineffective or does harm, that the state should therefore be weak in the name market choice and ideally itself subject to market discipline in its budgets, and that at

the same time the state must exercise its power to bring about these economic and social policies (Dunleavy, 1992, p. 3-4; Apple, 2005, p. 271-293; Halsey et al., 1997, p. 254-262, 356-362; Clarke, et al., 2007). Library leaders have formulated responses that frequently mimic and reinforce these broad patterns and assumptions by simply imitating business management practices and fads: adopting accountability/social capital/return-on-investment analyses of the institution, outsourcing core functions like collections and management, renovating spaces to mimic retail environments, and investing in faddish technology and eroding core functions (Buschman, 2012; 2003). As a result, many libraries now bear the classic hallmarks of transformational changes in their legitimacy: in (seemingly) their sector (formerly clearly nonprofit), in the nature of its professionalism, in technology, in mission, in structure, in funding, and in societal values (Perlmutter and Gummer, 1994, p. 232-234.). It is this environment that poses those new political challenges and dangers to library leadership: navigating (or not) between extremely diverse visions – each with its own vocal public – of how libraries should operate, and for what purpose⁵.

The Shortcomings of the Management Literature and the Narrow Definition of “Political”

Thirty years ago Bennis (in Lowry, 1988, p. 1) wrote that “Decades of academic analysis have given us more than 350 definitions of leadership ... but no clear and unequivocal understanding exists as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders, and ... what distinguishes *effective* leaders from *ineffective* leaders.... Never have so many labored so long to say so little.” This basic perspective has been expressed time and again in reviews of the literature: ten years prior to Bennis (Stogdill in Euster 1984, p. 46), a decade ago (Mullins & Linehan, 2006, p. 239-240), and in a very recent ten-year review of the literature within librarianship (Phillips, 2014, p. 337). Current estimates state that there are 140,000 books on the topic for sale on the web, and 400 million websites

5. Libraries are not particularly alone in this. The former president of Cornell University notes that “With college replacing high school as the required ticket for a career, what used to be a quiet corner is now a favorite target of policymakers and pundits [and] there is a cottage industry build around such [analyses]. ... [M]ost public discussion of higher ed today pretends that students simply receive their education ... the way a person walks out of Best Buy with a television (Rawlings 2015).

offering advice (Burkhart, 2015, 14). The theories have long described a “narrow, stylized process that ... has ... little connection with what effective [leaders] actually do” according to Mintzberg (1996, p. 78). In assessing the management literature and its application to librarianship, authors in LIS find “no significant correlation ... between specific traits and effective leadership,” (Lowry, 1988, p. 7) and the “contentious, fragmented nature of contemporary ... knowledge [and] conflicting research paradigms for the study of organizations and management [which] presents serious difficulties ... to use them to improve the practice of library administration,” (Day, 2002, p. 231; Fagan, 2012). A little context sums up and illustrates these points: an annual management literature review within librarianship for three years running covered an average selection of over 250 management and leadership articles in or relevant to the field per year, one of which included an article about animal leadership metaphors – as in the “lion [who] dominates without a great deal of effort, eating others when it needs to, but relaxed for the rest of the time” – and two of which included glosses on business literature reviews that themselves concluded that there was substantial “weakness in the literature” and it “fail[s] to provide a method to translate theory into action” (Ward, 2000; 2001; 2002)⁶.

There *are* sensible and interpretively flexible volumes within librarianship that demonstrate a more mature approach to the subject. They are not purely imitative of business management trends and acknowledge approaches with long theoretical histories, current variations, and blending: a “contingency theory” of leadership to basically “beg and borrow from [various theories] that seem most relevant to a given situation,” and in the end, to “realize that the true test of [one’s] efforts ... will be in your people, your performance, and the results ... regardless of what – if any – theory underlies your actions” (Gordon, 2005, p. 263, 285; Hussey 2013a; 2013b). They acknowledge the fundamental problems in the literature on leadership ranging from the recognition that theories fade and resurge and that new ones arise all the time but do not always acknowledge their debt to classic approaches (Gordon, p. 2005; Velasquez, 2013; Lowry, 1988). In addressing these difficulties, many sources in the business, non-profit, and library management litera-

6. It must also be noted that this literature is wearisomely repetitive.

ture acknowledge its political facet, a “neglected aspect of organizational functioning” (Tushman, 1977, p. 207)⁷. The first two of these literatures tend to focus on allocation, the exercise of or struggles over power, resolution of conflicts, and negotiating compromise. The literature in LIS does acknowledge politics, but in the reduced perspective of emphasizing the complexity of the policy environment. Further, there is an explicit reference in all of these literatures to concepts that are deeply political in character⁸. However, they tend to deploy them in naïve and/or instrumental manners: “Every time your library promotes something, it is making a withdrawal [from its social capital]. If your withdrawals exceed your deposits, your library effectively becomes a community leech” (Solomon, 2013, p. 36). The simple fact of change in technological or fiscal terms or in professional practices and skills is reductively cast as the extent of library leadership’s political challenges (Phillips, 2014, p. 341; Weiner, 2003, p. 6). This is the organizing principle of an entire annual review volume on “librarianship in times of crisis” (Woodsworth, 2011, p. xi-xvii), itself illustrating the crisis culture in library leadership: “a fundamentally shallow analysis of the nature of events buffeting the profession, and the continual naming of and responding to crisis,” essentially “inventing ideologies to justify acting ideologies out” (Buschman, 2003, 1 p. 12).

Given the interrelated definitions put forward near the beginning of this article and the nature of the complexity of roles within circumstances of groundlessness, I am suggesting that library leadership must become more politically mature, less politically naïve. And furthermore, that maturity can be rooted in some of the longstanding insights of political theory. The logic is almost inexorable: if the management literature itself – spanning a number of fields – consistently acknowledges its own faddishness, lack of rigor, lack of replicability, repetition, internal inconsistencies, and shallowness, then a fresh look at the insights of a differing intellectual perspective on the subject is called for. This analysis will not slip back into the heroic or trait characterization of leaders or leadership,

7. See also Friedland and Palmer 1984 in the business field; Herman and Heimovics 1994; Perlmutter and Gummer 1994 – both in the non-profit field; Budd 2007; Jordan 2012; Jaeger, Bertot, and Gorham 2013 – in LIS.

8. For instance, concepts such as community, justice, and social capital. See for example Davenport and Snyder 2006; Mintzberg 2009; Clegg and Carter 2007.

merely deploying a political stage setting. Nor is this a call to read pop titles that categorize political leaders as types of animals or analyze the “management style” of political leaders in history. Rather, this attempt at a critical theory is practical: to “compose a coherent network of concepts and abstractions in order to analyze what is going on” around one (Wolin, 2004, p. 504).

(Lightly) Deploying the Insights of Political Theory

We are clearly in a more complex environment than is captured by the epiphenomena of mere policy changes, budget conundrums or the introduction of new technologies. Leading a library is now clearly more complex than the imposition of order, organization, and rewards on the interactions of a group of autonomous individuals each rationally pursuing their own preferences and maximizing rewards (classic business management and rational choice assumptions). A system of rational rewards and punishments can’t really be constructed in such a way to effectively lead an organization of actual people, and in fact conceptually flattens them and their institutions because people operate on many normative, altruistic, and communal levels and bases (Sen, 1977; Olsen, 2008; Schwartz, 2015). We also know that organizations (like libraries) are now some of the most important contemporary sites where political issues such as fairness, cooperation, trust-building, and community are worked out in society (Wolin, 2004, p. 603-604; Buschman, 2012; Pawley, 2009; Paulsen, 2003; Eliasoph, 2002). Knowing all of this and facing conditions of groundlessness, it is little wonder that the more sensible among library leadership and management consultants advise that their skills are as “detectives, not fortune tellers,” and that good leaders are “luck makers, not risk-takers,” progress being best made through “small bets” (Kander & Potter, 2015). In other words, library leadership is now operating in multiple roles, in political and unstable circumstances that present challenges that the fault lines of the various leadership and management literatures are inadequate to address. It is time to deploy other resources.

The claim here is not that political theory has discovered or invented wholly new categories of leadership analysis – the same topics have been debated over time and in other fields that tend to borrow or “discover” their relevance at some point. Rather, the point is that political theory tends to emphasize some topics more, and deploys a perspec-

tive that looks at situations and organizations differently than the management literature in LIS and beyond. This analysis deploys some of the insights and critical themes from another disciplinary perspective for a different view of the new circumstances of library leadership. Toward that end, three persistent themes from political theory will be briefly reviewed, followed by a conclusion that attempts to draw these strands together.

1) *Community*

Put plainly, community has been in decline for some time. Putnam's (1995a; 1995b) extensive data on the decline of sociability and people's rootedness in their communities is an example. Politically and socially the fallout ranges from diminished trust and cooperation to a lack of shared values as the basis of debate and communication, and ultimately, to failing political and economic arrangements (Mara, 2008, p.93-95; Putnam, 1995a; 1995b). As alluded to previously, political theory tells us that institutions can be the carriers of a meaningful form of community (Bellah, 1998; Paulsen, 2003; Cohen, 1986) – “sites at which individuals actually encounter the structures of the wider society” (Pawley, 2009, p. 81) and places of “social and legal relationships which will best promote a mature and responsible neighborliness appropriate to an urban, bureaucratized, and rational (rather than local and patriarchal) social order” (Baltzell 1968, p. 11). That is all well and good, but what have we really lost and what is the point of relevance to libraries? Thinking through a description of a (very) much older workplace helps us to capture some of the answers. Though it was still clearly a place of work and of business, people who inhabited those workplaces encountered them as a community or a quasi-family with a clear sociology – a demarcation of who-works-where-on-what and how they relate to other clearly defined areas. There were hierarchical divisions, and they were sometimes unfair, even exploitative, but they were experienced as stable, knowable, and durable. Work relationships were personal, and personal relationships often encompassed work: “in a [place] organized like this, everyone belongs, everyone has his [or her] circle of affection, every relationship can be seen as a ... relationship” in fact; people who work “very close together and for a very long time ... generate ... emotional power” in the form of attachments or dislikes; the workplace was of human scale, negotiable, quite tactile, familiar, and the sexes and different ages of people freely mixed together

in “balanced” and “healthy” interdependent social units (Laslett, 1962, p. 86-90)⁹.

While this represents a stylized and somewhat idealized account, a moment's reflection on the history, culture and sociology of libraries reveals a not-entirely-dissimilar form of community that users and library workers would naturally want to retain. Work groups of about two dozen to one hundred people are, by today's standards, quite intimate and knowable. The institution is still satisfyingly tactile. The stability and know-ability of encountering a library as a user and/or the library workplace *is* a pleasant thing. Libraries are mixed and often balanced social units – both as workplaces and as users experience them. It is not wrong for people to want – even expect – a modest amount of predictability in their daily existence and a library with familiar personal connections and artifacts is not one they are likely to give up happily for good reason. As the breakup of these kind social and economic arrangements proceeds (that is, as we lose community), the ability to draw on familiar sources of assistance, stable routines, relationships, resources and tools “seem[s] a distinctly hard bargain” for a very uncertain set of outcomes (Hobsbawm, 1962, p. 191). People value the communal aspects of a library for reasons that are not irrational, and political theory tells us that these kinds of social interdependencies and solidities can help to bridge competing purposes and centrifugal force on and within institutions (Wolin, 2004, p. 258). Again, a moment's reflection on the examples of leadership changes (and conflicts previously discussed and documented) suggests that particular visions of space and collections were being pursued without shared and common purposes. Particular administrative knowledge about or perspective on the library “cannot be at one and the same time accessible to the few and yet serve as the vital bond holding [a] community together,” the “satisfaction of fresh demands” seemingly are being met “at the expense of less-favored groups” (Wolin, 2004, p. 60-61). Political problems simply converted into administrative ones seemingly unmask the nature of power wielded by and through institutions “in an organizational age which longs for community” (Wolin, 2004, p. 153, p. 282, p. 319). These situations have

9. The author was not overly-sentimental: this “was no paradise, no golden age of equality, tolerance, and loving-kindness” and the exploitation could be every bit as brutal as the unregulated capitalism of 19th century.

consequent and distinct forms of political fallout. Hence we see the volatility in transforming the institution or its services or collections when publics push back or when library leaders resist higher administration visions and initiatives. Those longing for community in a situation of groundlessness are not going to be easily convinced by arguments for a library's transformation that rely on leadership styles or organizational theories that are cast as "timeless logic [and] 'technical question[s]', irrespective of the purpose[s] of the enterprise, the personnel composing it, or any[thing] underlying its creation" (Wolin, 2004, p. 343).

2) *Trust*

We have lived in a neoliberal age for some time. Much of our public discourse has been centered around those principles and a related skewed "concept of liberty ... [with] ideas ready-to-hand about the danger[s] posed to personal freedom ... and the value that lies in autonomy and self-creation" (Allen, 2014, p. 22). This directly tends to undercut trust, which is important for the functioning of democracy and the everyday work of institutions in a democratic society (Buschman, 2012; Warren, 1999b). But the situation in library leadership demonstrates a more fundamental issue articulated by political theory: "the need for trust is generated not simply by discrepancies in power positions but by the controversies over the good" (Mara, 2008, p. 108) – that is, differing visions of what a library is for and whom it serves in one's community. Again, political theory teaches us that sites like libraries are highly appropriate spaces for discursive exchange, buy-in, and participatory practices that lead to trust in the institution and social capital for effective working/co-operative relationships. Ignoring those factors (lack of discursive exchange, treating stakeholders instrumentally) is highly destructive of political trust in the institution: "the practical need to engage questions about the good helps to explain why individuals are willing to place themselves under the power of others if the resulting collective action will help contribute to [a] greater [good]. Political trust is thus an ongoing condition accompanying deliberative practices" (Mara, 2001, p. 840-841; Newton, 1997, p. 577, 579, 583). This is an insight far from an eye-rolling leadership response to calls for consultation, explanation, discussion, and revision of library plans. Political theory explains their value. In the face of competing demands that themselves are inherently political, serious pressure

and influence on the library makes the exercise of decisional power under those circumstances seem opaque, the library merely acting as an aggregation and channel of power (Wolin 2004, p. 208, 600, 153, 376). In the process the basis of trust within one's community – that is, one's political capital to act in concert and effectively as a leader – is obviated. As noted previously, the classic hallmarks of transformational change in legitimacy, sector, professionalism, technology, mission, structure, funding, and values are indicative of new political challenges for library leadership. It is politically possible to establish a truth and change a library's practices and circumstances linguistically (Wolin 2004, p. 224), but political theory tells us that discursive exchange, as a basis of political trust is a key to those processes.

3) *Virtue*

Though a seemingly an old-fashioned word with an aura of moral restriction, virtue has a long, varied and vigorous history within political theory. As initially used by the Greeks, the concept developed within small and nearly-closed social and political systems where the character of citizens was a vital concern; as this concept developed, it became clear that it could "be sustained only under the supervision of essentializing metaphysics and coercive authority," – that is, within ancient or medieval societies and their politics were concerned with the cultivation of souls and/or firm ideas about forms human excellence (Mara, 2008, p. 239; Sunstein, 1997, p. 156). At the other end of the spectrum was the modern argument to completely abandon this project: government should take people as they are and "self-interest, not virtue, is understood to be the usual motivating force of political behavior. Politics is typically ... an effort to aggregate private interests" (Sunstein, 1997, p. 156). Toggling between these was a theory of self-sufficiency and self-discipline often pursued through (increasingly public forms of) education in recognition of the need for civic/republican virtue for democratic institutions to operate effectively (Pangle & Pangle, 2000, p. 24-33; Wood, 1991, p. 190-192). But there is another vein of thought concerning virtue, which contributes to an understanding of leadership. It can be constructed thus: 1) bureaucrats who guide organizations are often deeply aware of and willing to address the political issues inherent in an organization's interactions with its public in productive and humane ways (Eliasoph, 2002, p. 2) "virtues are developed in the

context of practices” (Mara, 1989, p. 30) – and the crafting of a good library organization is done through the crafting of virtuous organizational practices and characteristics modeled by leadership (Mara, 1993, p. 180; Buschman, 2013, p. 3) this is best captured through an “ethics of practice,” that is, situations faced by an library organization “may be infinitely variable, but the range of preferred” and ethical responses is not (Mara, 1989, p. 28, 41, 4) which culminates in a call for political judgment in situations “without a permanent basis for action, without the comforting presence of some underlying norm of reality ...from which [to] draw firm rules of conduct” and avoiding being misguided by one’s own prejudices and beliefs or the illusions or well-pitched plans/beliefs of others (Wolin, 2004, p. 190-191; Mara, 1989), guided positively through an ethics of practice.

Conclusion

This analysis by no means covers political theory as a field. It is a slice of it – one that takes a critical and normative perspective and attempts to make it of use to our field. It is also worth noting that the literature deployed here contains notes of deep skepticism. For instance, it is an age-old question whether the virtues can be defined and taught, and if they can be they may well be too constricting of individual character – even for those who wish to be leaders (Mara, 2001, p. 835-842; Mara, 1989; Connelly, 1990). As another example, that an organization or its political context can be productively described in political language is not the same as real politics. Politics consists of the contest over and discursive shaping of arrangements to foster the good life in the good society (Wolin, 2004, p. 73) and organizations like libraries after all often have defined ends that are far more limited. To the extent that the more general questions like “citizenship, obligation, general authority [are] denied to the political order [and] assimilated to the organizational order,” that undermines the meaning of democratic politics; no matter how “statesman-like” an executive or leader is, nor how important to community interests the organization they lead is, they do not constitute the commonwealth or the basis of a common life, and often undermine it by displacing it in reductive and privatized terms (Wolin,

2004, p. 374-375, p. 316-317). We must not confuse the analytical tool and its larger implications with this adaptation for our purposes here.

Nevertheless it is productive to think through the current context of library leadership and its challenges utilizing and adapting this tool. It is not difficult to let leadership and see the definition given earlier emerge through these themes within political theory. Essentially: in a situation of flux (groundlessness), library leadership must simultaneously politically master situations by “getting on ‘top’ of events by...creating reliable instruments of action ... [and] by a sensitive and discriminating intelligence... imaginatively projecting possible consequences” of various decisions, actions, and inactions because “wisdom [is] a knowledge not of facts but of the consequences of facts”; to “rediscover...[one’s] identity in the role cast... by the changing times,” and finding and articulating a vision of action and common/communal good for one’s organization through discourse (Wolin, 2004, p. 190, 194, 226, 201, 224). Critically informed by political theory, modern *methods* – human resources, communication channels, management styles, and so on – look far *less* like leadership than the deployment of common tools. It is how they are deployed and for what ends – and with what level of political skill and judgment – that is the key. A very recent article explicitly acknowledged this trend in the hires of university leaders (Woodhouse, 2015). Whether the particular hires noted in the article are good ones or not is beside the point: this perspective gives us the tools to *judge* based on an articulation of what is good for the institution and why, how leaders help (or not) a broader set of purposes. Virtue and leadership *may* not be able to be taught or fully defined, but political theory can help us recognize and/or judge them as they occur (or not). In the end, this slice of political theory just gathers key political ideas that have been part of a long debate and examines them not as mere historical artifacts, but as a way to analytically approach current situations. If it expands and makes more supple our ideas, if it makes more realistic our context, and if it gives us tools to judge means and ends, then it is well worth our intelligent consideration. That is what a *critical* theory is about.

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