

The public library in Italy: towards a new agenda

In our country, we cannot help but observe the persistence of a 'library issue'. Armando Petrucci and Giulia Barone had stated this, back in 1976, in their successful essay *Primo: non leggere. Biblioteche e pubblica lettura in Italia dal 1861 ai nostri giorni*¹.

Much has changed since then, though the figures on book reading – except for study and professional purposes – decreased to 40,5%² in 2016, and library use settled around 15,1% in 2015, as opposed to 33% in Spain and France and 47% in the UK³. «In fact, seven years ago the highest peak in the number of readers was registered at 46,8%, increasing if compared to 38,6% in 2000. Since 2010, though, there has been a constant decrease, and last year the percentage of individuals from six years on who had read, except for study or professional reasons, at least one book in the previous year, was 40,5%, the same as in 2001»⁴.

Undoubtedly, both the parameters and the goals used of statistic surveys need a revision: for instance, it is necessary to overcome the idea of measuring only leisure reading and overlooking reading for professional purposes. At the same time, it is crucial to change the fact that libraries merely fall under the category of 'expenses' in the indicators for fair and sustainable welfare that ISTAT (the Italian national statistics office) established in the domain *Landscape and cultural heritage*. It is necessary to take into account also the product and the impact on the general cultural growth of the population that libraries have, not to mention their effects on social inclusion and cohesion, the 'third mission' of universities, the scientific research process, and so on⁵.

1 «This book aims at tracing the history of the mistakes, of the delays, of the ancient and conservative attitude, that the Italian ruling class gave to the library issue in the time – over a century – between the Unity to nowadays, but it is also, and above all, the history of the notable absence of the potential public – qualifying, if not qualified – which could be ignored for so long precisely because it never could, was able to – or wanted to – make its voice heard» [the quote was translated on purpose for this article]. Cfr. Giulia Barone; Armando Petrucci, *Primo: Non leggere. Biblioteche e pubblica lettura in Italia dal 1861 ai nostri giorni*. Milano: Mazzotta, 1976, p. 10-11.

2 Istat, *Produzione e lettura di libri in Italia*. 2016, <<http://www.aib.it/aib/stor/testi/stan1965.htm>>.

3 Methodological information is available on <<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/5538>>. The results of the survey are available on <<http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/206752>>.

4 Cfr. *Gli Italiani leggono sempre meno: nel 2016 solo il 40,5% ha letto almeno un libro*, «La repubblica», 27 dicembre 2017, <http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2017/12/27/news/gli_italiani_leggono_sempre_meno_nel_2016_solo_il_40_5_ha_letto_almeno_un_libro-185303672/>.

5 The whole *Bes 2017* report is available at <<http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/207259>>. *Landscape and cultural heritage* is one of the 12 domains the report is subdivided into. For a reflection on the role of libraries in *Bes*, see Chiara Faggiolani, *Il rapporto Bes: benessere equo e sostenibile in Italia. Il posto delle biblioteche e il compito della biblioteconomia sociale*, «Biblioteche oggi», 34 (2016), n. 1/2, p.



Beyond the faults described above – clearly due to the absence of a statistical information system on Italian libraries to gather data on their activities, services, and so on⁶ – the irrefutable fact is that Italy ranks at the bottom of European statistics. This is due to the lack of a national policy to support public libraries as the basic infrastructure for the whole population to access knowledge.

The regional legislation provides an extensively cover from North to South, and the normative profiles envisage, also for local library systems, the respect of certain standards before they are eligible for funding⁷. Nevertheless, the Italian public libraries would definitely be boosted if draft bill entitled *Policies to spread of the book in any format and to foster reading* – which has not been enacted by the Parliament yet – were approved. This bill recognizes the vital function of the libraries: «Public libraries constitute an essential precondition for life-long learning, for the development of independent decisions and for the cultural progress of both individuals and social groups». Moreover, «the public library is a means to enact the Constitution in that it ensures substantial equality and fair opportunities to gain access to information, education, knowledge, culture and to the freedom of scientific research»⁸. In addition, these statements would reinforce the role of the libraries in their relations with the other book stakeholders, i.e. schools, publishers and bookstores.

Nevertheless, some innovations in the field occurred in the past two years, for example the campaign *Città che legge*, initiated in 2017 by the *Centro per il libro e la lettura*⁹: the Italian cities that were admitted were able to apply for public funds to support local projects for the promotion of reading. The selections for the first three calls have already taken place: they regarded, respectively, cities up to 5.000 inhabitants, from 5.001 to 15.000 and up to 100.000 inhabitants.

Another important project for the public libraries was *Biblioraising*, supported, in the last two years, by *Anci* and *Cepell*, and aiming at training librarians, supporting some local pilot projects, disseminating good practices and sensitizing the library field to fundraising and to the so-called *Art bonus*¹⁰.

Though the amount allocated was small, it is worth pointing out the institution of a specific fund to support local library systems, started in 2018 through the conversion in

19-26; *Ead.*, *Ciò che misuriamo influenza ciò che facciamo: una nuova stagione per la valutazione in biblioteca pensando al BES*. In: *La biblioteca pubblica nelle politiche di welfare: nuovi criteri di valutazione dell' impatto sociale*. Milano: Editrice bibliografica, 2017, p. 21-34.

⁶ Incidentally, we remind that the *Programma statistico nazionale (PSN)* – that is the National statistical plan – recently added a design plan for the statistical representation of the Italian library network whose aim is to draw a census survey model to collect data on the libraries in the country and the description of their structure, services, activities and use by the community.

⁷ See, as an example, the *Regional Law in Emilia Romagna Norme in materia di biblioteche, archivi storici, musei e beni culturali*: <<http://demetra.regione.emilia-romagna.it/al/articolo?urn=er:assemblea legislativa:legge:2000%3B18>>.

⁸ *Disposizioni per la diffusione del libro su qualsiasi supporto e per la promozione della lettura*: <http://www.camera.it/_dati/leg17/lavori/stampati/pdf/17PDL0015190.pdf>.

⁹ Literally, *The reading city*, initiated by the *Center for Book and Reading*: <<http://www.cepell.it/it/citta-che-legge/>>.

¹⁰ *Anci* is the national association of Italian cities, bringing together over 90% of Italian city governments. *Cepell* is the National center for book and reading initiated by the Ministry for cultural heritage and activities and tourism (*MiBACT*). The *'Art bonus'* is a national initiative allowing private investors to deduct

Law of the Decree-Law of 24 April 2017, n. 50. The latter concerned the local authorities of the areas recently affected by the earthquake¹¹. «In order to empower the work of local library systems, the Ministry for cultural heritage, cultural activities and tourism institutes a specific annual fund of EUR 1 million, effective from the year 2018 on, aimed at the promotion of reading, at the safeguard and enhancement of the book patrimony, at the reorganization and increase in efficiency of library systems. The fund is annually subdivided according to the methods established by a dedicated decree of the Minister for cultural heritage, cultural activities and tourism, in agreement with the Minister for Economics and Finance, to be issued within 90 days from the date of promulgation of the law converting the present decree»¹².

New public libraries were planned and opened in 2017 as well, thanks to the joint action of the local governments of regions and towns¹³. The action taken in Apulia is worth highlighting: the regional government invested EUR 20 million (subsequently raising the investment to EUR 100 million) in the *Community library* call, as part of the SMART-IN regional strategy which aimed at promoting and relaunching the cultural heritage by making provisions for the valorisation, use and restoration of the cultural heritage in Apulia¹⁴. Associazione italiana biblioteche (AIB – that is the Italian library association) started a working group to monitor the carrying out of the enactment of the call previously mentioned.

However, the professional debate on the public library in Italy is still polarised on dichotomous positions: the social library vs. the reference library, the valorisation and preservation of the patrimony vs. the advancement of reading, conventional vs. complimentary services, analogic vs. digital services.

All of this needs to be recomposed within a unitary vision, at the same time valorising the connections with the other library types and their functions, and even with the archives, museum and with all the book stakeholders, that is to say, the book chain.

For this reason, the AIB Commission on public libraries meant to start a shared reflection on the present and the future of public libraries, with the aim of preparing a document which will not simply constitute a working tool for AIB, but also a reference point for the decision-makers and the local stakeholders. This document will necessarily reflect the actual historical and cultural specificities of our country, in a perspective aware of the European context. The aim is not only to revive the debate on Italian public libraries, but also to open new working perspectives which, respectful of local differences, may offer new directions for the future of libraries in our country, at the same time reinforcing and widening the net-

from taxes the money they spend to finance artistic and cultural initiatives. See “Fundraising per le biblioteche? Si può fare! Due anni di esperienza di Biblioraising: formazione e start up del fundraising per le biblioteche” (Roma, 7 dicembre 2017): <<http://www.biblioraising.it/notizie/incontro-pubblico-fundraising-per-le-biblioteche-si-puo-fare/>>.

11 The full title, in Italian, reads as follows: *Conversione in legge, con modificazioni, del decreto-legge 24 aprile 2017, n. 50, recante disposizioni urgenti in materia finanziaria, iniziative a favore degli enti territoriali, ulteriori interventi per le zone colpite da eventi sismici e misure per lo sviluppo*.

12 L. 21/6/2017, n. 96: <<http://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2017;96>>.

13 Among the others, we pinpoint the Cuneo 0-18 Library, opened in 2017: <<http://www.comune.cuneo.gov.it/cultura/bibliotecazerodiciotto.html>>, and the re-opening of the Monopoli Public library: <<http://www.bibliotecacivicamonopoli.it>>.

14 Regione Puglia, *Bando Community library*: <http://por.regione.puglia.it/bandi-aperti/-/asset_publisher/kaAoKKdCiRfa/content/avviso-pubblico-smart-in?categoryName=Avviso+Pubblico+Smart-In&area-Tematica=>>.

work of subjects involved in the discussion – that is the book chain, the reading chain, schools, bookstores and publishers – opening up to the new scenarios offered by the digital administration as well.

In the connected and participatory society, the methods to define contents will aim at a wide participation, also through social networks. In the triennium, the Association will organise both internal and public meetings, involving also professionals and experiences from other countries. The preparation of a programmatic paper will offer to national and local decision-makers a scenario to refer to, and to librarians an action tool to propose proactively in the various operating contexts.

The AIB already published similar documents in the past. Among the others, we remind *La biblioteca pubblica in Italia: compiti istituzionali e principi generali di ordinamento e funzionamento*¹⁵, prepared by a national commission among whose members were Virginia Carini Dainotti and Giorgio De Gregori. To this paper credit must be given for giving shape to a model of public library which, in the Italian context, emphasized the functions and mission of the Anglo-American public library, and which laid the foundation for a territorial organisation in library systems¹⁶. In the seventies, the document was strategic for the writing of the regional laws on libraries. Besides, we must not forget the *Ipotesi di legge quadro sulle biblioteche e sui servizi di accesso alla conoscenza, al pensiero, alla cultura e all'informazione*¹⁷, a text prepared by AIB in 1998 «for the legislative department of the Ministry for Cultural heritage, in order to contribute to the writing of a modern framework law on libraries and information and documentation services»¹⁸.

But we will also need to take into consideration the 2011 agenda *Rilanciare le biblioteche pubbliche italiane*¹⁹, which in five main points meant to offer a working basis for the Association, that is: 1) the definition of a model for public library service; 2) the definition of the functions legitimating the public library in the contemporary context, which determine its social role; 3) the necessity for the libraries of local administrations to embrace library cooperation as a method and school of thought, in order to reach higher working standards and to contain the costs; 4) the presence of qualified librarians to guarantee quality management; 5) the necessity to re-finance the public library system as a pre-requisite to realize the stated goals.

Beyond the self-evident contemporariness of the aims reminded above, the 2011 document underlined the necessity to resume the work started in 2004 by Anci, Upi and the Conference of Regions, synthesized in the *Linee di politica bibliotecaria per le autonomie*²⁰ (*The library policy guidelines for self-government*), and unfortunately interrupted. It also underlined the necessity to rethink the relation between the public libraries of local administrations and the large public libraries under the rule of the central government.

15 In English: *The public library in Italy: institutional tasks and general working and organizational principles*.

16 Associazione italiana biblioteche, *La biblioteca pubblica in Italia: compiti istituzionali e principi generali di ordinamento e funzionamento*: <<http://www.aib.it/aib/stor/testi/stan1965.htm>>.

17 In English: *Project for a framework law on libraries and services for access to knowledge, thought, culture and information*.

18 See <<http://www.aib.it/aib/editoria/n10/98-04ipot.htm>>.

19 Associazione italiana biblioteche, *Rilanciare le biblioteche pubbliche italiane: documento programmatico*: <<http://www.aib.it/attivita/campagne/2012/12818-rilanciare-le-biblioteche-pubbliche-italiane-documento-programmatico/>>.

20 Associazione nazionale comuni italiani, *Linee di politica bibliotecaria per le autonomie*: <<http://www.anci.it/index.cfm?layout=detttaglio&IdSez=2535&IdDett=10725>>.

We must start over from here in order to look forward with the intention of defining a theoretical scenario, which could at the same time constitute a working space – if we are aware of the changes under way – and available as a platform to the diverse public library stakeholders for a participated and dialectical confrontation.

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[Associazione italiana biblioteche – Commissione biblioteche pubbliche, *Le biblioteche pubbliche in Italia: verso un nuovo documento programmatico*.

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