

Visibility and perspectives for libraries and librarians

The transition from the 2011-2014 term to the present one (2014-2017) is the right moment to take stock of where we are. The assessment of the previous term will be made by the previous National Board (CEN), but it is obviously useful to compare the present situation with the goals set back in 2011 and confirmed in the mid-term paper. Thus, the framework for 2014-2017 policy guidelines becomes clearer.

The most relevant novelty issue we facing nowadays is probably visibility. Italian librarians and our Association are, directly or indirectly, present everywhere in the profession-related areas. The efforts AIB exerted over the years have borne fruit: we are sitting at the main tables discussing libraries, books and reading issues and we are trying to make libraries heard, to bring to the forefront their characteristics, their potential, the contribution they can give to the battle against the economic crisis and towards development. The alliance with other non-regulated professions (first of all, but not exclusively, those connected to the cultural assets) brings about new tables and new perspectives for action. The BiblioPride initiative is somehow the landmark for the new course, which leads us to be more proactive, to dare, to come out of our shell of feeling different, misunderstood and passive victims of the events. True, a persuasive narration for libraries is still lacking, as Stefano Parise pointed out in a column¹ on the *Bullettin*, but a new narration must be probably preceded by a collective consciousness-raising which up to here seems to have touched insiders only, and not all of them.

We are determinedly struggling to avoid that the cuts to budget and staff in libraries diminish their real and potential power, while we are maintaining – and we are not alone here – that libraries are a powerful weapon to get out of the recession and facilitate widespread development. In fact, it is difficult to maintain the central role of libraries in universities and research institutions while subscriptions to journals and databases are being reduced, exactly as difficult as developing the great potential of the large Italian historical libraries - also as a tourist resource – when hundreds of thousands of their books, pamphlets, documents have not been catalogued yet: we know cataloguing is the necessary prerequisite for any effective project envisioning digitization and promotion. Public libraries (which – let's point this out – are absent in a large part of the country) suffer from scarcity of acquisitions' funds, are understaffed and the little staff they have is sometimes unprepared to meet the community's needs. School libraries (to speak only of the functioning ones) are suffering the consequences of disgraceful decisions like entrusting the librarians with administrative tasks and allocating funds irregularly and erratically.

All these critical points confirm that the problem is not linked to the cultural sector, but to the overall strategic policy in the country. If in Italy research is not considered a strategic element, if kids' education and adults' life-long education are not the axes of individual and

¹ Stefano Parise, *Fare politica bibliotecaria nell' epoca del post benessere*, «Bollettino AIB», 51 (2011), n.1/2, p. 7-11.



collective development, if the Italian welfare remains at the start line, struggling with the costs of health and social services, if the soundest economic powers neglect the industry of culture, tourism and environment, there is no hope for libraries.

Therefore, this is not simply about defending our sector, even if we cannot afford to lower our guard, at least until we manage to clarify the situation at all governmental levels (local, national and international) and will have received tangible answers and recognitions.

This engaging and complex political initiative is above all responsibility of the Italian Libraries Association (AIB). We are at the first stage, the one where, as we said before, we have become visible. We must absolutely exploit this new condition, which is nevertheless not without dangers. Peter Lor, from the University of Pretoria, in an interesting speech at IFLA 2014 WLIC², gave an accurate description of the risks and the potential hidden in such visibility. According to Lor, the maximum social visibility of libraries can contribute to making them a cohesive symbol for the Nation, whereas a scarce visibility confines them to a marginal role, and will eventually lead to the absence of structures and services at the basis of the social organization, and, in perspective, exposes them to the risk of extinction. Conversely, high visibility implies the risk of aggression against libraries and their collections (and we have a lot of examples, above all outside Italy).

In this framework, librarians could at the highest point become activists for social rights and exercise a sort of critical librarianship, at their lowest they could turn into apathetic and demoralised bureaucrats. Exactly what we do not need.

AIB is nowadays aiming at leading the upsurge of libraries and librarians, and to this aim the association will exert the maximum effort, being yet aware that contextual difficulties and the lack of available resources will make the task very hard.

If we can count on the contribution of our members and on the help of the subjects who have at heart a sound development for our country, we are certain that we will achieve important results, even in the short/medium run.

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² Peter Lor, *Risk and benefit of visibility: librarians navigating social and political turbulence*, paper presented at the IFLA World Libraries and Information Congress (Lyon, 16-22 August 2014), available at <<http://library.ifla.org/836/1/200-lor-en.pdf>>.