

What is a library, who librarians are: diary of an intense three-year period

Almost three years have passed since the last elections for the renewal of AIB¹ positions, the National executive committee mandate is coming to an end and the time has come for a reflection that takes stock of where we have arrived and what the Association's leanings for the next few years could be.

The National executive committee, aware of the responsibility of leading an authoritative professional association, with an important history and equally important responsibilities for the future, started with very ambitious aims, but also aware of the difficulties, both within the profession and related to the context, with which should have been compared.

The aims were numerous, often complex, and it was inevitable that some of them have been fully achieved, others partially, others necessarily postponed.

It should always be remembered that, in the face of an almost unlimited range of issues to be addressed, the available strengths are really inadequate, being able to count on only four part-time people of the really precious National secretariat (who will never be thanked enough for the work they do and for the self-sacrifice to solve the thousand problems) and on the voluntary work of numerous colleagues: in addition to the National executive committee, the regional Presidents and the members of the Regional executive committees, there are also all the members of the various permanent commissions, study groups and observers, and all those who collaborate in the various, associative joints which are the soul and engine of our AIB.

This is a large number of people, who generously donate a part of their time to the Association, but who necessarily have to reconcile their volunteering activities with work and family commitments.

It is only thanks to the constant and highly qualified work of this community that AIB manages to obtain good results and to be recognized as an authoritative interlocutor by the librarians' community, institutional interlocutors and the various components of the book chain (publishers, booksellers etc.).

So I take this opportunity to thank them all, in a sincere and not at all formal way, on my personal behalf and for the whole National executive committee, for the work done and for what they will do in the future.

If now we should find the red thread that guided AIB over the past three years, in order to summarize all the activities carried out and all the policy choices for

¹ Translator's note: AIB stands for Associazione italiana biblioteche, which means Italian library association.

libraries, I think it could be an attempt to outline the library identity of the present era, an identity challenged by the fast change of society and the needs expressed by citizens related to knowledge and information.

To give an answer, or start at least a reflection that could put some firm point, the 2017 National congress was provocatively entitled “What is a library?”.

The aim was to get to propose, not only within the professional community, a shared definition of the library identity, identifying its specificities and characteristics, starting more from functions that libraries perform, identified through significant keywords, rather than by the typological characteristics.

All this in order to simplify the readability of the system on the part of citizens and political decision-makers, but also as a starting point for a new campaign for Italian libraries.

But the reflection on the identity of the library appeared incomplete without the other fundamental horn of the question, that is who the librarian is, what is his function today, in a different situation from the past and above all in rapid change.

For this reason, we have decided that the next AIB National congress will be entitled “The librarian: the most beautiful profession in the world. In Italy too?”, with a particular symbolic value, since in 2020, 90 years have passed since the AIB foundation.

The congress will address the evolution of professional contents and methodologies, at national and international level, but also the critical issues in which librarians find themselves operating in a job market which in Italy appears to be inconsistent with the high skills recognized as necessary to answer to social expectations with quality library service.

In a situation that sees the continuous reduction in the number of structured and adequately framed operators (librarians and others) who can ensure professional quality and continuity in library service, while the resumption of competitions, still too weak, is not enough in a very difficult situation (even though it is still good news), it is not always easy to give a convincing answer to the inevitable increase in the mistrust of librarians.

A good starting point, to begin to deal effectively with this delicate issue, is to reflect and remind not only to citizens and political decision-makers, but also to ourselves, that libraries are complex and flexible institutions, survived over the centuries thanks to these characteristics, adapting to the changes of the times (the evolution of document formats, for example) but always proposing a strong cultural project and keeping a clear idea of the final objectives they had to pursue, that is to organize, contextualize, protect and enhance knowledge registered in any format and support and guarantee free access to all.

Today’s library must therefore confront challenges of contemporary complexity, face the disintermediation’s issue and simplification’s risks by imposing its fundamental role in knowledge’s organization and dissemination and in the contextualization of information.

In this context it is certainly possible to imagine the widening of the library’s action field, but without chasing the chimera of ‘being good for all seasons’ in order to recover some visibility, thus losing sight of the specific of being librarians and placing instead in an indistinct ‘social’ universe where library would inevitably be destined to succumb, because other structures – more agile, less expensive and less constrained by specific objectives – are able to perform the same tasks better.

Instead, libraries have very important tasks, related to the dimension of learning, participation in cultural life, the fight against educational poverty, the safe-

guard, enhancement and fruition of bibliographic heritage, tasks they can carry out effectively, of course by relating to other cultural and educational services locally and nationally, but starting from librarian characteristic of 'doing the library well'.

A recent Istat² survey, referring to 2018 and published in December 2019, returns a situation in which only 15,3% of Italians aged three and over go to library, but with a gap that sees North-East affirming itself with the 21,7%, compared to the Islands with 9,1% and South with 8,6% (dramatically at the very bottom Sicily, with 6,9%).

Paradoxically, it is precisely this enormous weakness that can give hope for ample room for improvement, perhaps using weakness elements of to 'bounce forward' rather than going backwards, according to that principle of 'transformative resilience' used by Enrico Giovannini on the 2030 Agenda,

Which is not simply a list of completely unachievable aspirations, but can represent an articulated and coherent reference frame to read reality, anticipating the coming shocks, preparing the system to absorb them, to adjust or transform as appropriate, through integrated policies and other processes capable of taking world on a path of truly sustainable development, capable of satisfying human beings' aspirations, respecting planet's limits and the ecosystems' delicate balances entrusted to us³.

Does not seem excessive the comparison between the 2030 Agenda policies and those for libraries, nor do we think that ecosystem's protection and planet's protection have nothing to do with the promotion of libraries and their services.

On the contrary it is true that precisely free access to information and knowledge can play a strategic role in achieving sustainable development's objectives for (Sustainable development goals, SDGs) and that, consequently, libraries play a central role, for example with regard to information literacy activities and to combat social inequalities and educational poverty, health and environmental education etc.

For this reason, in this three-year period, AIB has been strongly committed to sustainable development, both through the creation and activity of the AIB Group for the implementation of the sustainable development objectives of the UN Agenda (SDGs), and through the joining the Italian alliance for sustainable development (Asvis), in particular by collaborating closely with the Asvis Culture Group.

AIB has also continued to pursue its commitment for libraries and profession enhancement in many areas, through dialogue with institutions, other professional associations and reference communities (think of the realization, in 2019, of the 4th MAB National congress), but also through a constant battle for freedom of expression, which unfortunately is made necessary by the continuous censorship episodes to libraries, especially for children, by local administrations.

In addition to intervening whenever we become aware of censorious behaviors, the celebration of freedom of expression as the foundation of democracy found a symbolically important moment on May 6, 2019 in Rome, during the conference "The banality of censorship", carried out in collaboration with the Italian association of

2 Istat, *La produzione e la lettura di libri in Italia – Anno 2018*, 3 dicembre 2019, <<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/236320>>.

3 Enrico Giovannini, *L'utopia sostenibile*. Roma, Bari: Laterza, 2018, p. 72.

public history and hosted by the Modern and contemporary history library, with the aim of remembering and reflecting on the anniversary of May 10, 1933, the historical date of the *Bücherverbrennungen*, the burning of books by authors considered not conforming to regime ideologies, which took place in Berlin and in main German cities.

AIB therefore strongly sides with librarians, convinced that a strong identity of the library, felt by citizens as a safeguard for culture and democracy, is the best antidote to the spread of episodes of censorship more or less hidden by part of administrations against libraries.

From the legislative point of view, then, AIB worked to support those laws and measures that, even if not fully responding to what we considered the best solution, still constituted a step forward for citizens' rights.

An example in this sense is the approval of the *Copyright directive in the digital single market*, to which AIB has made a significant contribution. This is a rule that, if it is not the best possible and does not solve the problems entirely, has certainly improved the situation, facilitating digital preservation, digitalization projects and enhancement of cultural heritage of libraries, archives and museums, introducing new exceptions to protect public rights, research, freedom of expression.

And again, AIB has supported and strongly supports the draft law for initiative of Flavia Piccoli Nardelli and others, *Provisions for the promotion and support of reading*, already approved by the Chamber of deputies with a broad consensus of a transversal nature. Even if it is not the desired 'library law', it affirms important principles in favor of the promotion of reading.

As for the profession, it is important to report the issuance by the Mibact of the Ministerial decree of 20/5/2019, n. 244⁴ for the formation of national lists of librarians and other professionals of cultural heritage.

This is another step forward for the recognition of profession and the enhancement of professional librarians⁵, which AIB greets as good news, while it is organizing to define the procedure for adapting the AIB certificate with the insertion of categories, after comparison with the technical table specially set up by Mibact.

On the academic training front, then, AIB collaborated, among other things, with the Italian society of bibliographic and library sciences (Sisbb), expressing its opin-

⁴ Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, *Decreto 20 maggio 2019: Procedura per la formazione degli elenchi nazionali di archeologi, archivisti, bibliotecari, demoetnoantropologi, antropologi fisici, esperti di diagnostica e di scienza e tecnologia applicate ai beni culturali e storici dell' arte, in possesso dei requisiti individuati ai sensi della legge 22 luglio 2014, n. 110*, «Gazzetta ufficiale della Repubblica italiana. Serie generale», 160 (2019), n. 124, p. 64-68.

⁵ Moreover this promotes the implementation of Article 9-bis of the *Code of cultural heritage*, whereby libraries must be managed by recognized professionals, certified and «the operational interventions for protection and conservation of cultural heritage as well as those relating to the enhancement and use of the assets themselves are entrusted to the responsibility and implementation, according to their respective skills, of archaeologists, archivists, librarians, demo-ethno-anthropologists, physical anthropologists, restorers of cultural heritage and collaborators restorers of assets cultural, diagnostic and science and technology experts applied to cultural and art historical heritage, with adequate training and professional experience».

ion for the definition of some university study paths. We participated, for example, in the hearing organized by the National university council (CUN), the Minister of education, university and research's advisory body, on the proposal for the establishment of new master's degree courses (Management and enhancement of cultural heritage and Data science) expressing a negative opinion, similarly to what has been done by Italian society of bibliographic and library sciences and by the Italian association of archival teachers (Aidusa). In our opinion, these two new courses would have fragmented and at the same time made more generic and less meaningful the training of those who are instead called to the correct management of the cultural and information heritage: we observed that managerial skills cannot be separated from their object, i.e. the skills specifications necessary according to the type of cultural heritage and services to be managed (a library is different from an archive or an art gallery, or from an archaeological site and requires different management methodologies), and consequently, on the one hand it is in the existing master's degree courses that the managerial approach to heritage must be taught and, on the other, the further qualification in management can be subject to third level courses after having acquired a solid specific library, archival, etc. training; with regard to the proposed 'data science' degree program, we have observed that librarians and archivists specifically trained as such are and cannot be among the main experts in the field of data science, if library science is, as it has always been and regardless of technological evolution, science of the organization of registered memory, whose protection is the task of librarians and archivists and whose elaboration and analysis requires transversal skills or more effectively the commitment of teams of experts in various disciplines.

If much work has been done, much remains to be done: at the external lobbying level, efforts must be made to approve the rules on minimum levels for the enhancement of libraries, an indispensable tool for administrators to understand what a library really is and what a library must do to ensure citizens of qualified services.

On the other hand, it will be necessary to evaluate the consequences of the latest and umpteenth Mibact reform, which has a strong impact on state libraries, not solving the long-standing problems that have been affecting these prestigious institutions for many years, but rather questioning their role, removing competences from Directorate-general of libraries and moving the ICCU to another Directorate-general (DG Education and research). AIB will monitor carefully in view of the enactment of the implementing decrees.

Regarding the internal association front, the Statute revision process is coming to an end, thanks to the work of the Statute commission, albeit with some slowness due to the need to reconcile partially divergent positions and the desire to share to the greatest extent, with the regional assemblies of associates, the common 'rules of the game', but also to the belief that internal association rules should not focus our attention more than external activities in favor of libraries.

I close on a melancholy note, which also wants to be – perhaps with some effort – a positive and hopeful element for the future.

This three-year period was also marked by the disappearance of colleagues who have given so much to libraries, to the profession and our Association: I think of Eugenio Pintore, manager of the Piedmont Region and historic President of the AIB Piedmont section, intelligent and passionate promoter of many initiatives to favoring the promotion of reading and a recent regional law which is perhaps the best in Italy for our sector. I think of Cristina Borgonovo, who worked with extraordinary

expertise in public libraries of the Province of Milan, and then at the Culture Directorate of the Lombardy Region, but who was also very active in the life of AIB, having also been Vice president of AIB Lombardia and member of the National commission for public libraries.

And above all I think of Maria A. Abenante, who did so much for the Association, holding important positions (I only remember, among other things, that she was National Vice president, Coordinator of the Job and profession observatory, President of AIB Puglia): for all those who knew her, Maria was a reference point for her professional competence, combined with a rare ability to listen and a generosity that still make her absence lacerating today.

For this reason, AIB, also supported by the desire of friends and colleagues to remember her, organized a seminar named after her in Bari on April 12, 2019, just over a month after her death, pledging to carry it out every year in spring, while a miscellaneous study is being published in his memory.

AIB has also promoted the “Maria A. Abenante” Award, which aims to promote the inclusive dimension, in its various forms, attributing recognition to those libraries that, through innovative activities and services, have played an important social and cultural role.

I believe that Maria’s vision of libraries, of the profession and of the relationship with others, strongly marked by library ethics and inclusion, can and should constitute an example and a model for AIB and for all of us, a strong motivation to continue working for the development of increasingly collaborative and inclusive libraries, and also constitute the best way to remember and honor his memory in the fullest way.

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