

Farewell

At the end of my second term as AIB national president, I deem it useful to propose a refresh in the light of the reflections I had proposed, right after the 2017 election, in a column entitled *Let's start from the AIB*, published in issue 2/2017 of this very journal.

At the time, the world had not yet passed through the tragedy of Covid-19 pandemic and Europe had not yet been struck at the heart by the conflict, which threatens to become global, that followed the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Yet, the emergencies that plagued our sector at the time were not much different from those of today: calls for bids and recruitment often disrespectful of the prerequisite library skills and massive resorting to voluntary work, especially in Southern Italy; tacit or blatant forms of censorship on library acquisitions and/or on the decisions regarding the arrangement of books on shelves in public libraries; increasing marginality of State libraries as a result of the reforms in the organization of the Ministry of Culture and the meagre investment in hiring policies; disengagement from libraries of many municipalities and regions, especially after the 2014 local government reform failed to explicitly reallocate competences related to provincial libraries and cultural services; at various universities, a decrease in the staff of academic libraries and in the independence of library systems, whose tasks in many cases have been increased; lack of public policies for the sustainability of the digital licensing market and for the safeguarding of current and future access to digital products.

It would be a mistake to look at the strategies regarding libraries only from within our sector: libraries – which, unlike the systems of school, university and health, in Italy have never been granted a solid legislative recognition – are public services accessible free of charge and fostering knowledge. As such, they suffer from the long-term consequences of the progressive decrease in investment that affected all public welfare services, and in particular public knowledge services, at least since the mid-1990s of the past century (but with a sharp acceleration after the financial market crisis of 2008).

Like various national and international surveys have demonstrated, not to mention the multiple appeals by users, before and after the pandemic, aiming at obtaining an increase in the basic library services – e.g. up-to-date catalogues, on-site reading, reprographic services, local and interlibrary loan – it is quite clear that libraries are necessary for the progress of research and creativity, for lifelong learning, for people and community well-being, for the increase of the levels of civilization and social cohesion. Although there are no up-to-date economic analyses, it is also clear that libraries also directly generate significant economic by-products in terms of employment, purchases of goods and services and also technological innovation (there is in fact a flourishing industry of services to libraries, whose technologically advanced solutions arise precisely in response to qualified and demanding clients, the libraries).

Nevertheless, relying on the market and, if anything, supporting companies with contributions and solutions other than those that rely on public services, possibly

leaving most of the social policies to the third sector, has long been the predominant orientation of many governments, especially in the field of knowledge infrastructure, where the motto ‘you can’t eat culture’ – launched in the first decade of the current century by a minister of Economy – was in fact shared, before and after, by many other decision makers (like those who wanted to reduce the meaning of the study of history and geography in schools), and is second only to the other motto or cliché (‘... at any rate, there is the internet!’)

In this difficult scenario, AIB, with all of its branches – both based on localisation and on scholarly tracks – was summoned, as usual, to take a stand on varied and daily emergencies, but at the same time it committed to (re)build and (re)propose – through dialogues with policy makers and with many stakeholders in our communities – a strong and unitary vision of the library, that is of the essential elements that characterize it and of the peculiar social function that holds them together, to define abstractly the entity called ‘library’, differentiating it from other social constructs and from which we should move to recognize the value of its use in the present era and the concrete incarnations, the multiple characterizations and specializations of the various institutes, as well as the countless potential for interaction and cooperation between them and with other subjects, though this is only possible on the condition that qualified and continuously updated staff be available.

I was convinced at the beginning of my term and I am increasingly convinced after these six years’ experience, that it is the task of AIB to develop and promote this overall vision on Italian libraries, in the same way and for the same reasons that it is our task to attest the professional qualification of Italian librarians and define their code of conduct: if AIB has been the representative association of Italian librarians since 1930, it is because it has always been able to act as an independent, participatory and qualified observer on our sector, capable of understanding and uniting all the voices in the profession, to support the debate, collaboration and synthesis research on more advanced positions and shared goals and values.

With this strength, the strength of our community and its allies, in the past six years together we have, among the rest: provided support and advice to local and regional administrations engaged in the development of library services and the recruitment of staff, but also publicly criticized the anomalies in the calls for recruitment or in the service contracts, sometimes obtaining their withdrawal; we participated in multiple working groups on the professions of cultural heritage and to the Monitoring Commission established by Ministerial Decree 244/2019 implementing Article 9-bis of the *Codice dei beni culturali*¹, establishing that services relating to cultural heritage should be entrusted to the care of professionals; we accompanied and promoted the adoption of Law 15/2020, *Promozione e sostegno alla lettura*², the first legislative source of primary rank that recognizes the fundamental role of public libraries for democracy and cultural participation; we helped libraries to react to the pandemic by vouching for a reduction of the ‘quarantine’ on books and a fast and longer-hour library re-openings, also opposing the absurd and anti-historical representation of these institutions as appendices of museums and the attempts to blend them with the museum system; we produced ‘posters’, recommendations, guidelines and other work and research materials; we lobbied to enrich the National Recovery and Resilience Plan – which did not take into consideration libraries except for

1 The Code for Cultural Heritage.

2 Promotion and support to reading.

their museum-like and ‘tourist’ aspects or as containers of valuable heritage to be digitized – with calls and initiatives that provided opportunities for the participation of libraries; we obtained the inclusion of SBN among the databases of national interest envisaged by the *Codice dell’amministrazione digitale*³ (and this was a first, though small, step towards the recognition of the role of libraries and their national infrastructures in the public policies for the digital transformation of services to citizens); we made a significant contribution to the investigation into the issue of the European Directive 790/2019 and to its subsequent national transposition in 2021, which introduced the first mandatory exceptions and restrictions to copyright in favour of research, training, libraries and other cultural institutions and provided, thanks to the fundamental work of Eblida, the association of European library associations, an important opportunity to bring libraries back to the centre of the European agenda; we obtained amendments and additions to the National Plan for digitisation, among which the inclusion of the system of digital legal deposit *Magazzini digitali*⁴ as the recipient of digital or digitised products intended for public use; we celebrated, in 2019, the twentieth anniversary of *Nati per leggere*⁵, the national program recognized as one of the best practices in the promotion of reading from early childhood, the result of the alliance between AIB, the *Associazione culturale pediatri*⁶ and the *Centro per la salute del bambino*⁷; we brought the program *Mamma lingua. Storie per tutti, nessuno escluso*⁸ to all the twenty Italian regions, with the support of the *Centro per il libro*⁹; we organised, thanks to the work of the AIB Monitor on professional development, courses to update our members in a wide range of subjects and we offered Ministry-of-Education-recognized professional training to librarians and teachers for the development of school libraries.

At the same time, by sharing the challenges of reconfiguring libraries as places and services ‘for all’, with all that ensues in terms of community involvement in service development and inclusion strategies, we meant to call attention on some priorities, to anchor this idea on less ephemeral bases than a slogan or a declaration of principle.

Our first priority concerned, in fact, the very definition of the library and the social expectations to which this institution responds, to which we dedicated our 60th congress in 2018, and that of digital library, according to the principles, models and values highlighted in the *Nuovo manifesto per le biblioteche digitali*¹⁰, developed by the dedicated working group, which we commented during the conference “Biblioteche per il welfare digitale”¹¹ in November 2020. This work would be incomplete without a specific focus on the conditions for the widest and full participation

3 The Code of Digital Administration.

4 Digital warehouses.

5 Born to read.

6 Cultural Association of paediatricians.

7 Center for children’s health.

8 Mom’s language (but also “mother tongue” or “language, my mother”). Stories for everyone, no one left out.

9 Center for the book.

10 New Manifesto for Digital Libraries

11 Libraries for digital welfare.

of people with special needs, on which the Inclusion Study Group and the Prison Libraries Study Group are working, the latter also in support of the activities of the working group envisaged by the convention AIB-Ministry of Justice, ANCI and Conference of the Regions, which we hope will be soon renewed. Also the establishment of the Maria A. Abenante Prize, in memory of our dear colleague who passed away in 2019, to the most inclusive library or librarian aims at highlighting and enhancing good practices in this field as a source of inspiration.

The second priority concerned the conditions for the professional qualification of the librarian's job, the requirements defined by the UNI standard, which is currently being updated, to which AIB participates through its own representative, and the length to be bridged in training, in the system for professional recognition and in the market, to which we dedicated the 61st congress in 2021, "Bibliotecari, il lavoro più bello del mondo. Anche in Italia?"¹². To this end, the AIB Monitor on professional development produced many tools, part of which need to be updated, and conducted a survey on the state of employment in the library before and during the pandemic.

The third priority regarded the ethical dimension in our profession, linked to the defence of freedom of expression, the access to information and the right to bibliodiversity. To underline this, we set up the Monitor on Censorship in Italian Libraries, which works in close contact with IFLA FAIFE, and we promoted the annual Saved Books festival, in memory of the burning of books in Nazi Germany in 1933. In the same vein and for the same goals we framed the commitment of AIB for a reform in the field of copyright and for the access and the reuse of information and documents in the public domain (the Study Group has produced useful FAQs on these topics), proceeding from the documentation for the public sector (see the *Manifesto per la documentazione del settore pubblico*)¹³.

The fourth priority, which includes all the previous ones, regards the role of libraries for the future of humanity so that – after joining the *Alleanza italiana per lo sviluppo sostenibile*¹⁴ – we founded the Monitor on libraries and sustainable development goals, which replaced the Monitor on Italian Libraries and, last but not least, the Study Group on Inclusion.

If today the sustainable development goals set by the UN Agenda for 2030 seem to most an indispensable reference framework for libraries, this is also due to the farsightedness of their associations (first of all IFLA, which had participated in the preliminary investigation for the adoption of the UN Agenda). Here, AIB can boast a small record in Europe, in fact we were among the first library associations to promote this approach, just like it is for us a source of pride that we stimulated – by means of the conference organized in Ravello on 9-10 June 2022 in collaboration with the European University Centre for Cultural Heritage – a first reading of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development integrated with the Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage, adopted by the Council of Europe in 2005 and introduced in Italy by Law 133/2020. Indeed, while there is a sufficient consensus that the culture of sustainability is an enabling precondition for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, this vision can only be reinvigorated and strengthened by the implementation of the Faro Convention, which recalls the right to cultural heritage

12 Librarians, the most beautiful job in the world. Also in Italy?

13 Manifesto for Documentation of the Public Sector.

14 Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development.

– defined (Article 2) as « a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify [...] as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions [...]» – and affirms the inherent importance of participation in cultural life and the value of building cohesive, democratic, sustainable societies that promote human development and quality of life.

A further aspect for interest on the Faro Convention for libraries – on which we trust we managed to open not just a research track, but also a track of work – is the recommendation therein provided for an integrated and informed approach of all public institutions, so that they manage to involve social actors and individuals in the processes of identification, study, interpretation, protection, preservation and communication of cultural heritage. This recommendation seems to us to be particularly useful in the context of the construction of a national library system based on the cooperation among different institutions at various levels, with the goal of increasing the opportunities for protection, development, use and enhancement of collections, services and expertise offered by individual institutions and local and sectorial library networks. For a long time, AIB has been calling for a law on libraries and the Italian library system that, moving from people's rights, may establish principles, goals, responsibilities and areas of cooperation. We have repeated this request on several occasions, together with the request to quickly issuing the MiC¹⁵ decree on the uniform minimum quality levels of libraries, a tool envisaged by the *Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio*¹⁶, expected since 2014, which would help to provide policies to all library institutions and their funders.

There are many issues on which we need to strengthen our commitment, but those we managed to do (including a reform of the statute and membership regulations, the result of extensive consultation and sharing with all members) and the alliances that we were able to build along the way – demonstrating a high degree of resilience to lockdown and managing in a short time to reorganize all our activities by enhancing the use of digital platforms – would not have been possible, in an association based on voluntary participation and made up of colleagues already very busy in the libraries where they work or in their search for job opportunities, without a secretary general (those who took turns in this task were Agnese Cargini, Giovanna De Pascale, Palmira Maria Barbini and Francesca Cadeddu, a former member of the National Executive Committee for two consecutive terms and our contact person in COLAP and in the Coordination Group for the implementation of the protocol on prison libraries) and a national secretariat made up of people not only skilled and reliable, but also members of and deeply linked to AIB, fully sharing its values and statutory objectives.

To them, to the vice-president Vittorio Ponzani, to Giovanni Bergamin, Enzo Borio, Claudio Leombroni, Francesco Langella, Patrizia Luperi, Milena Tancredi, and again to Francesca Cadeddu, members of the outgoing or former CEN¹⁷, regional presidents who have participated in the work of the National Council of Presidents and members of their regional executive committees, coordinators and members of monitoring and study groups and of committees, managers and editorial staff (from AIB-Web onwards) and of the periodical publications, to the Scientific Committee

15 The Italian Ministry of Culture.

16 Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape.

17 National Executive Committee.

and the editorial staff of AIB Editions, the Director and staff of the library, the Presidents and members who alternated in the Board of statutory auditors, the Audit board and the Professional validation commission to those who represented and represent us in IFLA and Eblida, to all the associates and friends who participated in the life of the association, my deepest gratitude goes to the partners we found along the way for the wonderful human and professional experience they allowed me to live, for the enthusiasm they transmitted me and for the countless things I learned from them. If I have managed to return at least a small part of these gifts, or to motivate some colleagues to engage more with the association, I can be satisfied.

In these years, I have had the honour of celebrating birthdays and anniversaries of great personalities who have contributed to writing our long history. I also had the burden and regret of announcing the loss of other high figures, such as Carlo Revelli, who have enlightened us with their intelligence.

In the wake of their testimonies and of this long tradition, we tried to sow new prospects for development, and we began to reap some small result, also in terms of the growth in the reputation of AIB and of Italian librarians.

But there are many things still to be done and no partial result can be said to have been achieved in these difficult times; therefore, I wish the colleagues who will lead the association for the next three years that they will be able to draw energy and reasons for optimism, in their demanding work, from the perception that they will be able to lean on an increasingly mature and cohesive professional community, willing to grow together.

Rosa Maiello

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