

Why critical librarianship is important for LIS?

By Edgardo Civallero

We are not politicians, but citizens. We have no office to hold on to, only our consciences, which insist on telling the truth. That, history suggests, is the most realistic thing a citizen can do.

Howard Zinn. Are we Politicians or Citizens? *The Progressive* (May 2007)

One of the most important elements within any social structure is a critical and dissonant but consistent voice. A non-conformist, non-submissive, disobedient voice. A rebel one. It does not matter whether it is the naïve voice of the child who told everyone in the village that the king of the tale was naked, or the unrestrained voice of the famous buffoon Bertoldo, who told his master the most painful truths in an unsweetened way, or even the tricky, acid voices of Hershele and Nasreddin, popular characters from oral tradition who always delivered truth as a fatal blow, covered with sarcasm or irony.

History and stories are full of these critical voices. Because the system –the hegemonic, dominant structure, whatever its name or definition may be– and its boundaries need to always be challenged, called into question, kept in check. Something, someone, somehow has to keep us awake. By any means – be it a satirical way, a soft, naïve way, or a hard, harsh way.

Critical voices are the ones focusing our attention on the bleeding realities. They urge us not to walk away, not to look away but deeply at the world we live in. Critical voices are the ones telling us to get ready to get our hands rough and our feet dirty because there is too much to do in the continuous struggle to advance social justice, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all: starting in our own backyards, and moving on into our local and global communities.

They expose the inequalities, the violence and the environmental problems manufactured by capitalist exploitation and accumulation. Critical voices are the ones

that unravel the lies, half-truths and distortions spread to justify the statu quo. They untangle the contradictions and address the gaps in our society.

Critical voices are the ones that instead of telling us what to think, teach us to think for ourselves, and provide us the tools to embark on a terrible, wonderful voyage of discovery through the world and through life. Critical voices are the ones which do not conceal reality under empty, disguised words; which are not afraid of naming the evil around us by its own name; which do not need to use long, complicated, artificial, unnecessary labels... They speak after thinking, and think while acting, and walking, and working, and studying, and struggling in the real world, with real experiences.

Critical voices can stand for every syllable they pronounce, every fight they fight, every small thing they love; and, by the same token, they recognize and remain accountable for their mistakes. They try to build a safe ground to proceed on, a lighthouse to never lose reference and perspective, a community inside the trench they defend, and a compass showing the many courses that exist besides "north".

Critical librarianship has to be one of these voices for LIS. A voice with many voices inside, and with a common goal: providing understanding of the dynamics of injustice and oppressions in 21st century society and helping to develop the skills and tools required to challenge and confront them. A voice determined to awake people to critical consciousness.

The future will not bring about the bright utopia depicted by some dreamy sci-fi authors of the past century and the contemporary masters of the wishful thinking, but a much darker scenario. There are many important issues that need to be addressed: from racism and hatred to endangered cultures and languages; from intersecting systems and forms of oppression, domination and discrimination to continued human rights violations and impunity; from global warming and resources depletion to techno-fundamentalism; from increasing specialization and fragmentation of knowledge to its commoditization... The list is too long, and nobody can (or even should) handle all this alone. Critical librarianship should create bonds of solidarity, keep ideas flowing, encourage thoughtful discussion, promote informed decisions and foster committed action.

LIS will not be free of upcoming problems. Placed exactly in the eye of the storm, in the center of a troublesome, unsettled "Information Society" full of biases and conflicts, LIS needs to adopt critical approaches and perspectives, to renounce to its "neutrality"

mantra, and to challenge many untouchable facts and discourses. LIS needs to question rules and paradigms, to struggle against the many attempts to silence, control and distance librarians from issues that affect them and/or their communities, and to recover the diversity of a rich profession which has adapted to so many physical and human realities throughout time.

In short: LIS workers all around the world need critical voices to remind us who we are, and to keep us sharp and ready. And critical librarianship should be part of this global community and move on to inspire others – as did the buffoons, and the kids, and the heroes and tricksters of the classic tales. There is much to do, and we will need all the hands-on-deck.