

Edgardo Civallero

# The Southern libraries





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"Bibliotecario". <https://www.bibliotecario.org/>

## **The Southern libraries**

Libraries are quite invisible spaces in terms of public opinion. In this sense, and with the exception of a handful of institutions with striking architectures or really innovative services (which at one point may garner recognitions, Facebook likes and even some awards), the dense network of libraries that covers the Latin American geography from Tierra del Fuego to Rio Grande does not usually attract headlines or receive much attention, much less advertising. Cursed by a number of old stereotypes –some of them reflecting undeniable realities–, having a less-than-striking profile, and suffering from a "complicated" historical relationship with their users, Latin American libraries are not usually under the focus of any media outlet.

And yet, the work carried out by the members of this continental network is worthy of mention, support and dissemination. What they do may not always be visible and show short-term results – but it is a constant and sustained action, almost trench-based, aimed at obtaining a meager handful of medium and long-term achievements. Those libraries focus their actions on a limited number of urgent problems; their activities are intended to produce lasting changes or, at the very least, to sow the seeds of such changes. In short, these are libraries that, unlike the award-winning ones, with statistically unbeatable numbers and an outstanding media projection, probably would not pass an "excellence test": those quantitative quality evaluations "where everything that related to critical thinking, vital joy, democratic commitment

and emancipatory moral is missing", in the words of the Spanish professor of philosophy, essayist and poet Jorge Riechmann.

In Latin America, libraries were, for centuries, a resource transplanted from the Old World to which few had access. When they finally opened their doors to the public –to those who could read, it should be noted–, they were used as instruments "of culture" in contexts in which leaders and decision-makers used to speak about "civilization or barbarism" (civilization being the European model at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and principles of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and barbarism being the American indigenous and rural societies). It took several decades for a majority of the literate population to benefit from their services. During all that time –the Colony, the early Republican periods– local channels of knowledge transmission were maintained (sometimes, at a great cost); such channels were usually vilified, attacked or ignored by the dominant system –including libraries.

It could be said that the mistrust arising from such unequal relationship still exists in Latin America. Depending on the observer, libraries continue to be, to this day, an elitist, closed spaces, exclusive or reserved for a minority. And there is no doubt that, at times, they are. Fortunately, since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Latin American libraries (especially those that have a closer contact with society: public, popular, school, rural, mobile ones...) have tried to reduce this gap by doing a lot of hard work. They have been able to develop an intense grassroots work, collaborating with their users and their communities, addressing the problems that they identify around them within their possibilities and with the tools they have (including

information). And little by little, in addition to becoming a place for true militancy and cultural activism, they have been building important educational, social and political tools to face a number of adverse circumstances – poverty, unemployment, violence, displacement...

On the other hand, those libraries are increasingly aware that they grow on a territory: a land with ancient and plural traditions. They are understanding that, just as they must incorporate all possible technological advances taking on board a broad and global perspective, they must also include in their collections and services the oldest voices, the local popular knowledge and cultural diversity, the traditional formats used to transmit knowledge –from making baskets and weaving to facial paintings– and the many unique expressions found all along Latin America. They are understanding that "library" is a concept that cannot remain anchored in the past; that it must be deconstructed, decolonized and mixed, so that it can evolve, as well as their collections, their structure, and their activities. They are accepting that, to be true common and community spaces, they have to embrace all perspectives, all identities, all languages and thoughts in Abya Yala.

Those are the Southern libraries: amazing spaces, and the people maintaining their heartbeat. They exist beyond Latin America: in Africa, in Oceania, in Asia, even in Europe – for there are many "souths" in the global North. In the six directions of Abya Yala, they are called libraries, houses of knowledge, information centers, reading corners, living books, amoxcaltin... Places that do not receive media attention.

And yet, places where knowledge and memory nest.





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