

MI MANO, TU MANO, SU MANO... ¿NUESTRAS MANOS?¹

Reflections for socially responsible librarians

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To Tupaq Amaru³
Not even four horses silenced your voice

*If we want
we can write a new history.
We can invent the daylight.
We can make the sky to move.
We can build new things with poetry.
If we want, we can chat with our past.
If we want, we can transform this present.
If we want, we can shape our future.
If we want...*

“Si queremos” – Illapu (Chilean group)

Alexander the Great had a very peculiar habit. When he received someone who complained about another's actions and asked for punishment, he covered one of his ears with a hand and listened. He explained this practice by saying that the covered ear was the one which had to listen the other person's version of facts. If the socially responsible librarian takes Alexander's role, one ear hears his or her own story, the experience of one's own life, work and visions. In seeking to work in solidarity with others whose life experience and cultural history are different... how should the other ear be opened? How could others' needs and desires be understood if our own are all we hear, keeping us from making a real connection with those with whom we would make common cause? Closing one's own ear in order to fully hear another's is not, after all, an easy task. This text is offered as a guide for self-identified socially responsible librarians wishing to work in solidarity with colleagues and peoples in countries outside their own – in this specific instance, in Latin America.

The signs telling all the stories, discoveries, successes and failures of humankind have been kept in the shelves of libraries from the dawn of

historic ages. The written memories of men and women, all their most valuable information, have always been managed by the hands of librarians. All this knowledge is an immense power: the power for understanding the past, solving present problems and developing strategies for the future. Librarians' responsibility is as huge as the power they manage and preserve, as their actions and policies can provide whole societies with chances for empowerment and progress.

However, many librarians seem to sleep a sweet dream inside a safe, quiet, passive bubble, without noticing the dramatic reality surrounding them and the urgency of the necessary and strategic service they should provide. There is a whole world outside the walls of libraries in need of help, education, opportunity, information – a world full of critical situations – every day. But even the librarians who are aware of this reality seem to prefer to remain isolated from this harsh universe, safe behind protective institutional walls.

Latin America is a conflictive land, a continent full of beauties as well as serious deficiencies. Most of its large population need high-quality education and updated information resources in order to overcome the challenges they face. Latin American librarians cannot ignore this fact anymore: they must become involved in their society's struggles and efforts, supporting their users' search for information and knowledge. Foreign librarians who want to help Latin American colleagues must learn how to collaborate in a supportive way, creating bridges with their work, and avoiding deeply engrained "First World" attitudes and colonizing mentalities that for centuries have built divides between north and south, developed and developing countries, informed and ill-informed peoples.

To understand Latin American reality – and, therefore, to understand the role of librarians within it – it is necessary to understand the historical process that led this continent to its current situation... and what exactly is this situation. This essay is a little, completely personal and subjective view, written from a Latin American perspective. It will not deal with usual LIS issues, as far as they are sufficiently presented and widely discussed in specialized journals and papers everywhere. Instead of this, this essay gives a social approach to Latin American users' reality and needs. Such understanding is essential, because if this social and cultural context is not known and understood in the first place, librarians cannot expect to design useful services, collections, programs and activities. Without this context all the academic LIS literature and aid programs become completely useless.

People used to reading conventional Euro-North American points-of-view might find the contents of this text radical or unflattering. But sometimes it is wise to listen others' opinion before building one's own. This essay is aimed at providing thought for reflection, and to help uncover "the other ear."

Part 1. A foggy history

*My feathered brothers saw them arriving from the sea.
They were the bearded Gods announced by prophecies (...).
But Gods don't eat, and they don't enjoy stolen goods,
and when we realized this, everything was already finished.
We kept the curse of giving to foreigners
our faith, our culture, our bread and our money.*

“Maldición de Malinche.” Mexican song.⁴

Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano entitled one of his more famous books “The Open Veins of Latin America.” Only those who have seen Latin American social reality up close are able to understand that Galeano did not use a metaphor. The peoples of this huge continent hide, behind their natural happiness, passion and enthusiasm, hundreds of open wounds that never heal.

Before the arrival of Europeans to the western hemisphere, aboriginal societies – some of which were developing rich and highly sophisticated cultures – did not precisely live in peace and harmony. “Pink legends” spread by Latin American writers, historians and some social movements depict a romanticized life for indigenous peoples which is far from the hard, complex reality lived by those societies, a reality shared at various points in time by every human group in every corner of the planet. They killed and were killed for power, they conquered and were dominated, they invaded and were exploited. An opposing school of thought circulates the “black legends” which place responsibility for all suffering in Latin America on the Spanish conquest.

European invasion did, indeed, bring to what became the Americas a social, economic and political scheme that lasted through centuries and that immersed the whole continent in shadows: colonialism.

Rooted in military coercion, in cultural denial, in the violent elimination of whole populations, in the systematic destruction of pre-existent socio-environmental, economic, productive and political structures, the conquest and colonization of America subjected millions of people to an almost slavist regime, creating, at the same time, a powerful elite which controlled the destinies of peoples and territories according to the colonizers own material interests.

To generalize is a mistake, of course, and to believe either the “pink” or the “black legends” as an absolute reality is erroneous. Hundreds of autochthonous cultures survive into present times, and, in several aspects, local and foreign systems blended in an amazing way, originating new regional identities, which expressed the best – as well as the worst – features of their predecessors.⁵ Over time, tens-of-thousands of people struggled for justice and for the welfare of their societies, and a lot of them sacrificed

their lives in honor of their ideals of freedom, equality and political and cultural autonomy.⁶

Setting aside myth and legend, the basis of what became a characteristic social structure in Latin America was established: European (or europeized) elites of educated and conservative landowners, traders, bureaucrats and politicians loomed over this immense continent of indigenous, black, mulatto and mestizo peasantry who worked the lands that, in old times, belonged to some of their ancestors.

Part 2. Independence?

*Listen, mortals, the sacred cry:
Freedom, freedom, freedom...*

Argentinean national anthem

The Andean miners, the Central American peasants, the gauchos in Argentinean pampas and the slaves in the plantations shared a common past and a common destiny: to extract benefits from land and industries, benefits that went directly to fill the chests of the upper classes. The absence of education, organization and basic instruction among the lower classes was remarkable, and thwarted their attempts to create a better future, and seek alternative paths, but they never stopped trying. In fact, during the first three centuries of Hispanic occupation, popular rebellions were extremely violent, and their results were sadly dramatic.

The first books printed in America were catechisms, published in the languages of indigenous groups, used in the evangelization of local peoples, as well as grammars and dictionaries of indigenous languages, mainly used for translating those catechisms. The sword dominated, the cross tamed, and “the Book” taught how to put other checks on peoples who were not considered human beings by Spanish laws until the middle of the sixteenth century.⁷ Several decades vanished before Latin American publishers produced a non-religious book.⁸ At the same time, texts arrived from Europe started spreading ideas in vogue on “the continent.” Scarce and precious goods, they were the tools that began the diffusion – during late eighteenth century – of revolutionary ideas among the educated layers of Latin American societies, eventually igniting a political fire that swept the whole continent during the first half of the nineteenth century and which ended in the birth of the current “independent” nations.⁹

Even though education, printing, and books spread, and with them were disseminated literacy, culture, development and recovery of regional traditions, the ever-oppressed masses of people remained in their place. After national independences,¹⁰ they might have been liberated from a number of yokes, for sure, but the newly formed societies – quickly forgetting their egalitarian and libertarian ideals and creating new foreign-like elites of power – kept them bound to the same basic situation of oppression.

Peasants and workers were scorned when compared with the refined European culture: traditional and popular traits became mere curiosities; peasant realities were rough and inferior; labor demands became rebellions of wretched poor people; and the lower classes' demands were treated as simple banditry hardly deserving notice.

Dozens of popular movements have arisen in Latin America since the late-nineteenth century and continue today, especially when political power – always faithful to European and North American interests – is taken into military hands. Peasants, have-nots, intellectuals, artists, idealists and priests, all have joined around great personalities many of whom became famous leaders, who slowly implemented changes. Great popular heroes arose: Zapata, Sandino, Torres, Preste, Guevara, Castro... and thousands of anonymous fighters who fell in combat or disappeared in the turbulent periods of dictatorship and dirty war.¹¹ There also arose those who fought with songs, words and ideas: writers, musicians, poets, artists – all reflecting the soul of the people, of a wounded people who never learnt to surrender. Throughout all this upheaval, education spread via books, schools and libraries, and they did not just spread culture, but again new ideas, cutting chains and handcuffs, uncovering eyes and ears, eliminating gags and liberating minds from their most recent bonds.

Today, new winds blow in Latin America, and even if foreign imperialistic powers still step with their boots on the continent's neck, and dominant classes try to keep alive their traditional forms of power, domination and oppression, popular and progressive movements – of an obvious left-wing tendency – are taking the reins of national destinies and slowly changing the social panorama and the course of events. Latin American social trends, their progressive political turn in socialist directions, the payment of external debts and the creation of regional alliances demonstrate a clear will to create strong, really independent political and social identities, based on the popular reality of the continent.

Part 3. About problems and solutions

*The [Spanish] dreams of swindle and sackery,
their love of gold, their desire of power
are the cancer who made their heirs ill,
are the history of a land condemned to suffer.*

“Carabelas.” Ricardo Arjona

Latin America – the protagonist of this history – is a vigorous land with important creative and intellectual capacity, industries and immense human and natural resources. But, socially speaking, it remains a strongly rural and peasant continent, even if most of its population is stacked around huge urban settlements, many living under precarious conditions, experiencing the same poverty and marginality they tried to escape when

they left their rural homelands. Latin American social reality is too complex to be described in a few lines, but, basically, cities teem with marginal populations barely surviving at alarming levels of poverty, and rural spaces are territories sparsely populated.

The problems of city and countryside are similar: cities are places of job shortages, social exclusion, lack of education and family planning, delinquency, addiction, identity loss and violence; rural areas suffer from sanitary problems, illiteracy, loss of local culture, poverty and malnutrition, labor exploitation, violation of rights and discrimination of minorities. The absence of literacy, education, labor formation, and legal and sanitary information programs are problems in both city and country, and are perhaps one of the main challenges for national governments. A new source of inequity in the form of information and communication technologies (ICT) is now widely spreading. In cities the digital divide is strongly felt in the face of a “knowledge and information society” that never stops its frantic race and that never waits for those left behind.

Can the book and the library contribute to solving problems arising from the timeless struggle for basic human needs and equally timeless yearning to fulfill human creative potential? But, of course! The question is – how?

Obviously, books and education alone cannot solve present hunger, but they are indispensable instruments if a nation expects to solve the future hunger of its people. In principle, they can also recover local identities that are vanishing, they can preserve the memory of destroyed minority cultures, and can record oral traditions that are being lost daily. They can provide two basic instruments for every community or people that wishes to thrive: reading and writing. They can inform about how to solve basic problems concerning health, nutrition and environment, or how to defend rights and assume responsibilities. They can support basic and higher education, and provide instruments for the creation of small industries and work skills. They can offer opportunities for development that most people have not experienced in five centuries of history. They can especially continue cutting chains and liberating minds. They are not a miraculous cure for all human problems, but they are an essential element in the cure – if they are correctly used, if their use is guided by the spirit of social responsibility.¹²

The social responsibilities of librarians are precisely based on this “correct use”. The explosive development of library and information sciences, of books and of ICTs on an international level has demonstrated that human beings can manage their knowledge in a tremendously efficient way, obtaining great benefits. But, for several reasons, many of these benefits have not been reaped in the “developing” countries.

Why? Probably, because of the absence of “correct use.”

First, the distribution of resources and goods in Latin America is terribly unequal. Second, it is common to import, from “advanced” or “developed”

countries, tools and work models that never fit the needs and features of the final users. And it is, of course, just as common that these strange imports are refused by the recipients. And third, the very idea of social responsibility within librarianship is not fully developed yet, even if there are, everywhere, examples of social responsibility that are almost heroic.

As evidence of the underdeveloped state of social responsibility as a central component of librarianship, LIS education – with rare exceptions – deals very poorly with popular and social aspects of libraries within society. This is not only a shortcoming just in Latin America, but here there is some urgency for every region to address social needs and, therefore, its absence within librarianship is more striking. LIS education does not even show an awareness of what we in Latin America call “trench” libraries – rural, popular, community libraries that are cared for by professionals who feel (and sometimes actually are) isolated, and who bravely struggle to complete or continue their education, and to provide, with almost nonexistent resources, services that address the imperative needs of their communities.

Part 4. Where brilliance is brightest, the shadows are deepest

*In my country, yearly, 5000 children take flight
like little angels, with their wings over the good airs...
They have the good luck and the quietness of ignoring everything..
Maybe God stole these souls for keeping them as good beings.*

“Mensajes del alma” León Gieco

Latin America is a world full of light and brilliance. But, in keeping with a very simple physical law, everything in this world having a bright side also has a shadow. And shadows, in this continent, can be terrible, and make up the daily world of librarians “in the trenches.” Babies and children die in the cold of Susques (Jujuy, in northwest Argentina), a little village where 35% of children die before reaching 5 years of life. This is not an isolated problem happening just in this little Andean village. It also happens in other spots in Latin America. It happens in the whole continent.

Susques is one of the thousand places in Latin America where children have to travel from six to eight hours, riding a mule or walking, to reach the nearest school and attend classes. In order to provide an effective and realistic educational service in areas such as this, schools usually become places where children live, sleep and eat a great part of the year. But, due to the lack of resources, most of schools are forced to close their doors during the hard winters. Some of them cannot afford the gas, oil or firewood for their stoves. The luckiest ones can take care of all the children almost the entire year. But they are a minority. Even when such hardships are overcome, a high number of children from 8 to 12 years old have to forget classes and start working to help their families survive. Children gather

crops in the fields or take care of flocks when – in other parts of the world – others of their same age are studying.

In Misiones, in Tucuman, children still die of starvation, as well as in a good number of other important Argentinean provinces, and in places, large and small, all throughout the continent. Here and there, newspapers reflect this reality, but sensationalistic waves in print are easily forgotten or avoided, as people prefer not to know (or to forget) this unpleasant news. Children suffer hunger as well as old people. An old Qom woman from Chaco (in northeast Argentina) declared during an interview several years ago, when asked what she ate: “I can’t eat”. And, showing her mouth, empty of teeth, she ended her sentence. “Even if I had teeth, I wouldn’t be able to eat anything. National government stole our lands, so I can’t grow and harvest my food.”

Children also die because of diseases like dengue fever or cholera. In 2002, Analía, a three-year-old Qom girl, with lovely dark eyes and long black hair – a pretty, really pretty little girl – died in this author’s arms, from simple diarrhea. Can it be imagined? She slowly lost all the water in her small body, and she died, literally dehydrated. Can this picture be imagined? The little child’s life just vanishing between my hands, and I could not stop the process, a process which started when the parents didn’t get the necessary information about what diarrhea is. Can it be just imagined? The little, beautiful girl closing her eyes forever, and one standing there, totally useless, just caressing her face and wondering what was happening there, thinking that it was a bloody nightmare and not a part of reality. Can it be imagined, a life going away between one’s own arms? No, it’s difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine. People who speak of poverty and disease in Latin America (or wherever) should have this kind of experience. They would surely stop speaking and they would start acting.

After watching little Analía die in one’s arms, the only thing a person can feel is hatred, rage and an infinite anger against this world... a world that didn’t stop to tell Analía’s parents that dehydration can be treated with water, salt and sugar, things that the family had in their kitchen. The author arrived too late, and Analía went away in his arms, smiling softly before flying to a sky where the star-women of her people’s tales look down every night, crying in front of these terrible facts.

“Campesinos” are killed in Latin America, here and there, and their lands are stolen by rich people, and nobody says a word, because those who speak might finish their days with a bullet in the head, sleeping somewhere under two feet of Latin American soil. The author of this essay has been openly menaced by political activists for teaching “indians” to read (so they can read their rights, the unfair contracts, the newspapers, etc.). His life (is this clearly understood? life, my life!) has been openly menaced with a gun, just for providing information and basic education. In Latin America (and in a lot of spots all around this world) people die for land, for money, for politics, for power. And nobody stops it. Nobody. Sometimes, things

are changed. But the reforms last just a couple of months, and then the whole thing is forgotten, newspapers and journalists stop speaking about it (excepting independent websites like Indymedia), and again and again things start going wrong... “Campesinos” go on dying, and landowners go on getting richer and richer... In my province of Argentina, in northern Cordoba, which is one of the biggest and most developed of the country, this problem of theft and death is terribly common, and a good number of people are struggling to avoid both. But people live constantly under menace. Some of them just vanish from this world, and nobody knows what happened to them.

In Patagonia, in southern Argentina, rich foreigners – like Mr. Bennetton – possess thousands of square miles of aboriginal lands. They extract oil from the sacred lands of Mapuche and Tehuelche peoples, poisoning their waters, burning their air and their sky, killing their animals and plants. Indigenous activists who bravely fight against these violations – in totally democratic and legal ways – are jailed or silently murdered and forgotten. In Formosa province (in northeast Argentina), a wide area of rainforest belonging to native communities (Wichí, Nivaklé and Yofwaja) has been bought by an Australian company (for \$3.50 per square mile) to cut precious trees and sell the wood to rich Asians. In Chile, North American companies are extracting water from the mountains and drying up native communities. In Colombia, in Peru, in Ecuador, in Guatemala, in Mexico, in Panama, in Brazil, foreign companies are devastating local environments and economies, “campesinos” are still massacred, indigenous populations are persecuted... Perhaps everybody knows all these facts. They should. However, it seems that nobody moves a single finger to stop these abuses against basic human rights.

Children are used almost as slaves, even in Argentina. Women are used as sexual slaves, men are used as work slaves. The hands of a man, a woman or a child after gathering the cotton used for our T-shirts is an image that cannot be described or forgotten. I worked with the pickers of cotton for a year, in Chaco, in northeast Argentina. Cotton has thorns, and these thorns cut the hands if the white fibers are not taken very carefully. But when the boss pays 0.80 Argentinean pesos (around \$0.30) for every kilo of cotton (and a real mountain of cotton is needed to make a kilo), people don't mind about being careful: they need to hurry if they want to pick enough kilos, to make enough money to pay for food to eat that night. Young boys and women are preferred as workers in cotton fields, because their hands are little and they can take the cotton easily, without cutting their hands so badly. I have seen their hands covered by new and old scars, and my own have been cut by the cotton thorns as well. The pain felt, and the humiliation of being paid with such a little wage for such strenuous work, is nearly indescribable. It feels like slavery. There's not another word for it. But workers know that they cannot do anything else, at least if they want their families and themselves to have some dinner.

This humiliation and exploitation is experienced by people harvesting cotton, but workers cutting sugar cane, harvesting yerba mate, collecting

apples and grapes, all experience it, as do people sewing cheap clothes in illegal factories, women selling their bodies in illegal bars... This happens everywhere.

All I describe is a part of the reality of this great continent, a part lived and witnessed by many, if not most, Latin Americans, myself included. This is our reality, a reality that is seen by foreigners in the safety of movie theaters, on living room televisions, or if experienced directly is known to be only temporary. A foreigner, after all, can get on an airplane and return to the safety and comfort of home if the realities of Latin America become too difficult.

Maybe things cannot be fully understood if they are not lived or experienced in a direct, personal way. It's very difficult to understand a point-of-view or a problem if it's not felt inside one's bones, if the pain, the rage, the shame and the humiliation are not lived, if they seem to be so far, far away. As an Argentinean song says, "ningún dolor se siente mientras le toque al vecino" ("pain is not felt if it hits our neighbor").

Maybe these words seem like a cruel form of presenting problems and reality. But if human beings continue using euphemisms, metaphors and indirect ways of speaking about urgent and painful problems, we will never realize that they are actually urgent, that there are people suffering, that a solution is needed. The first step in knowing about a problem is identifying it, knowing it, facing it in a direct way, naming it with all the letters of the word: murder, slavery, misery, poverty, starvation, hunger... These images of pain must work as an alarm clock inside the mind of the sleeping ones. These images must help the sleeping to awake, to notice the situation, to realize that a great deal of help is needed, that positions must be taken in a proper – but fast – manner. If human beings go on looking in the opposite direction when they see bad things instead of facing them, they will never exorcize their ghosts, they will never fight against their fears, they will never be able to overcome challenges. And they'll never be able to help.

Social responsibility needs to be based on realistic information, because realistic solutions must be provided, realistic policies must be designed and implemented. There's no other useful way. Tears will be cried and rage will be howled. But, from these broken mirrors of an artificial reality, from these labyrinths of information and words, a useful, practical work can be organized. Not words. Just action.

Part 5. Enter the foreigner – Welcome comrade, or arrogant do-gooder?

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love.

Ernesto "Che" Guevara

A large number of foreign organizations and individuals develop professional activities in Latin America. Generally speaking, the presence of these groups in the countries of the continent can be considered as a useful benefit for both sides, considering the magnitude of the tasks developed, the importance of the skills taught, the valuable information transmitted, the know-how implemented in practical actions, and the excellent outcomes obtained in a daily basis, at a regional level.

The international presence in Latin America includes Spanish governmental organizations collaborating in the recovery of material cultural heritage, French and Canadian professors providing educational instruments, USA and German engineers facilitating information literacy and tools for telecommunications, Australian and Asian technicians implementing plans for sustainable management of natural resources, and a long list of individuals and institutions investigating ways to apply their knowledge in the improvement of life conditions for the huge Latin American human mosaic.¹⁴

The “dark side” of the foreign presence is represented by the actions of multinational companies and others, which exploit (or even loot) the natural and human resources of the region in a totally irresponsible way – usually protected by national governments, which don’t care very much about environmental and social impacts as long as they get a share of the profits.

A special situation – more linked to the human arena than to the economic one – are the religious missions arriving from Europe and North America, a phenomenon which has greatly increased in recent decades. Even if their work cannot always be criticized (Franciscan and Anabaptist missions in northern Argentina are doing a very good work in indigenous communities), some of these religious volunteers have become instruments of blind cultural change and massive conversion, collecting lambs for increasing their flocks.

Between the two ends of this range – the excellent works and the deplorable actions – are foreign professionals, students and workers who visit Latin America to have contact with a different reality: to have an “experience” in a “developing” country. They are usually motivated by a sincere wish to help and collaborate. As individuals, or organized in groups or NGOs, these professionals (among them, a good number of librarians) try to link themselves to the host societies, to become a part of regional structures, to recognize problems and to use their knowledge and resources to pursue, at least, partial solutions. Sometimes the results of such activities are positive and useful, and even successful, but in a high number of cases, their interventions are self-defeating: the expected or desired outcomes are not obtained, and the actions produce discomfort – and even rage – among the final recipients of their aid. Discomfort and rage arising from foreigners’ unexamined, sometimes unconscious, sense of superiority, from their mindlessness of the need to close one ear in order to listen.

What follows is a short ensemble of general suggestions provided to orient professionals who hope to work in Latin American societies, in a manner respectful of the cultures within which the foreigner is a guest. These suggestions are based on observations within large organizations, as well as in the experiences and opinions of local people who have witnessed the negative behavior of many foreign visitors. These suggestions are intended to facilitate the contact with societies in the continent, in order to improve relationships and to help in the implementation of programs rooted in a true spirit of solidarity, social responsibility, and an open-minded framework.

1. *Avoid comparisons.* Social, economic and political differences between Latin America and other regions of the world are evident, and might be extreme in several aspects. It is highly recommended that the foreign visitor accept, from the very beginning, that the continent is a new world, with new rules and customs with which to become familiar, and features that should be known, accepted and respected. Many visitors think nothing of making and openly expressing comparisons between their own countries and the place they are visiting: “In my country we don’t have this poverty...” “The city where I live is cleaner and more modern than yours.” “In my library we have high-speed Internet connection... How can you live without it?” Such comparisons usually put the local population in a negative light, and are not only unhelpful, meaningless actually – even if they are true – but they generate distances, divides and walls that undermine building the solidarity necessary for cooperative projects. Such comparisons do not bring about substantial change or advancement.

As comparative information of this sort is completely useless, its expression should be avoided. Comparisons can be made and expressed in other, respectful ways: “How do you develop this service in the library, working with low-speed Internet? In my country we work with X and Y... Maybe with some of these tools and techniques used in my country we could improve your work, if you consider it possible...” This is a good example of positive comparisons, where help is offered and valuable information is provided, and a respectful non-condescending relationship between professional colleagues is developed.

2. *Accept the local culture.* Latin American customs and regional cultural traits are the fruit of centuries of evolution, adaptation, development and community life. It’s necessary to recognize and to know this culture, to adapt and become a part of it, to explore it and to enjoy it. Even if a lot of features look funny or ridiculous to visitors, they should be respected like natural and proper facts. By understanding culture, problems can be understood as well, from a broad and open-minded perspective. And, if people visiting Latin America want to help they must make efforts to become deeply familiar with the culture. Questions like “Why do you eat this?” “Why do you do that?” “You call this noise ‘music’?” “Why do people have 5 children when they are 23?” “Don’t you think that your behavior is silly?” are completely useless: they show a close-minded person asking for answers that cannot be provided, because it’s very difficult to

explain every aspect of one's own culture (and the visitor will not accept the answer anyway). Facts that seem incredible or curious can be remarked upon in a friendly manner, and they'll surely be explained and shared.

An important point is the knowledge of the local language (Spanish or Portuguese, and even Guarani, Quechua, Aymara and other regional – and widely extended – idioms). Maybe English or French (or even German) seem “international” languages to their speakers. But this is an arrogant point-of-view: after a couple of days walking the streets of the biggest cities of Latin America, a visitor will understand that this “rule” doesn't work in the continent. In difficult or isolated areas, just local dialects of Spanish are spoken, or native languages. So, a good advice is to have a good command on these idioms. Don't expect to have translators: visitors' daily life cannot depend on the help of a translating person. This can be of help in working areas, but not in normal, common activities. Knowledge of the language is indispensable in establishing relationships with people, and in understanding the local culture, as such knowledge demonstrates clearly the extent to which the intentions of visitors are to truly help.

A knowledge of and participation in the hosts' culture allows a visitor to create and reinforce links with the local population, enriching one's perspectives, broadening and deepening one's life-style, and providing valuable information about regional conditions, points-of-view, needs and beliefs. Qualitative research techniques like “participant observation,” “life stories” or “action-research” strongly encourage researchers to become deeply linked with communities and people.

3. *Visitors are not saviors.* Even if some professionals working in Latin America are providing essential education and information, useful for the solution of urgent problems, they shouldn't act like “saviors” or “heroes.” This, unfortunately, is a very common attitude in some foreigner visitors. Often a person who, in their own community in their own country, couldn't make any changes believes, merely because they are a “developed” person in an “undeveloped” country, that they have greater influence and more important ideas than they actually do. Even if sometimes they might think the contrary (either consciously or subconsciously), Latin American is not a continent of savage, underdeveloped people: it's just a land that lacks widespread access to many technological and infrastructural advances or has been neglected because of historic processes, corrupt governments, mismanagement, or social problems. The old image of “third world” countries should be erased from visitors' minds, at least if they expect to work in true solidarity and friendship with local collaborators.

4. *Avoid hypocrisy.* The same people who condemn Latin American sexual behaviors as “disordered habits” are the ones who enjoy orgies with local wo/men (Cuban, Brazilian, Colombian or Argentinean examples are well-known). The same people who condemn drugs are the first looking for spirits and exotic herbs. The same people who speak against racism and discrimination are the ones who don't want to travel in cheap buses

because of “the smell of the people.” The same people who speak about the value of culture are the same who leave a country without knowing the name of its best writer, singer or artist. The same visitor who speak about their perfect societies – high wages, ordered structures, perfect lives, technology, resources, high education, high-quality and high-level things in a highly-developed country – are the same who confess that they would love to stay forever in Latin America (and sometimes do it). It’s better to keep an intelligent silence in order to avoid disgusting situations.

Most visitors who travel to Latin America hoping to engage in projects that become expressions of their social responsibility find thousands of opportunities for working and helping. They learn to give the best of their knowledge in a manner of human solidarity and respect, obtaining, in return, a huge amount of information and experience from local professionals, collaborators and the general population. As a result of this process, both sides win. But a good number of foreign travelers seem to believe that, because they come from wealthy and powerful nations, they are ‘superiors.’ This arrogant attitude is openly rejected by Latin Americans, and creates a sad stereotype of the “new conqueror.”

Latin Americans are a friendly, warm, passionate people, who always open the doors of their homes to strangers with a smile. Those who have understood this fact have fallen in love with this marvelous land (as a matter of fact, a lot of them remain in Latin American countries, getting married and creating families there). Maybe the best way of understanding a people is to fall in love with them. Even if it sounds funny, utopian or romantic, from a love-perspective, a deeper understanding of persons and situations can be gained, and a greater, more sincere, willingly helpful and collaborative relationship can sometimes grow from love.

And, anyway...what’s solidarity, but love?

Part 6. Social responsibility

*One percent [of the country] want to change all this,
nine percent have the power.
Of the rest, the fifty percent just eat,
and the rest just die without even knowing why.*

“Los Salieris de Charly” León Gieco

The actualization of social responsibility by librarians (in Latin America as well as in the rest of the world) neither starts nor finishes with the expression of magnificent opinions, in writing long papers (like this one), or in attending international meetings and conferences on rights and duties in the “Knowledge Society.” These activities are a good start and might help, in the long run, to clarify ideas or arouse desires, but they are really not more than an infinite collection of words, sounding and sounding, while across the planet, pain goes on.

Social responsibility does not mean the investment of great amounts of money and technology in countries that do not have much of either. This sort of “goodwill” normally serves to clean the conscience (and the closets) of the powerful, a convenient dispensation for feelings of guilt. Goodwill and charity, in reality, often change the situations of recipients only slightly, or not at all, or even negatively. It is like building a luxury skyscraper for homeless people... on a swamp. The building is beautiful and expensive, indeed, and the ones who funded it want to be photographed stretching their hands in front of it, but... everybody knows the structure’s fate when the pompous speeches, applauses, toasts and welcomes of inauguration are finished.

From the point of view of any country – but especially of Latin American nations – the assumption of social responsibilities implies self-determination, the taking of decisions into a nation’s own hands, without waiting for foreign “gurus” who tell us what to do and how to act. For, usually, these brilliant minds – in spite of their good intentions – know only their own ideas of our reality, and base their plans and projects in some theoretical knowledge learned in comfortable classrooms in comfortable universities, far, far away from problems. And such theoretical knowledge does not get along very well with reality.

Social responsibility starts by recognizing that our work starts at home. Each professional has an ethical duty within society, wherever he or she works, wherever they want to help. Foreign help, theories, long articles and good ideas are useful for collaboration, but the real point of departure must be the acknowledgement of one fundamental obligation of every professional: namely to recognize and feel that each one of us must work in our own community, our own region, country, and culture and with our own people. And we must feel that change – each little, tiny change – is possible, and that this possibility is in our hands.

From this point of departure, it is necessary to get immersed in the problems of the people with whom and for whom we work, to know these people, their needs, and their expectations and desires for the future. What are their reasons and their possibilities, and which is the best way for them... according to their own understanding? This work is not about becoming heroes with great answers and salvations – the missionary approach will be refused or will fail. This is about forgetting catechisms and statistics, it is about learning the human side of the story. This is about using methods like participant observation, action-research, thick description and life stories, and forgetting the number-crunching. This is about blending oneself with the problem, feeling it on one’s own skin, inside one’s own bones. And then, it is about giving solutions from a grassroots development perspective: what do these people need? what do they want to do? what future do they want to build? how can I help them to achieve it? What expertise do I have that they can use in whatever fashion they think best?

And the solutions? They will never change the entire reality. They will change little parts, pieces, fragments... And that will already be a miracle.

It is useful to accept this idea from the beginning: great solutions do not exist, they do not work... A historic reality cannot be modified in a few months. Maybe not even in years. The problem is placed in the very origin of the history of these peoples, in their foundations. And, unfortunately, it is impossible to change foundations quickly without destroying the entire building.

Solutions must be patient and constructive. The task of the professional is to provide the community with the tools they need; it is about teaching them how to use these tools (and here is the “correct use”) according to their values, necessities, background and ideas; and it is about accompanying the users of the tools provided on their path toward development, so the given instruments will be able to work properly and reap benefits. Then, it is just about helping in a soft, friendly way. It can be a work of years, but this is the only way of making it work, of changing something, of making the real difference. Thousands of little experiences all over Latin America confirm this idea.

And foreign help should also assume other forms: to support specific projects, especially those of grassroots development; to send work groups interested in getting involved – in a personal way, in the field – with real proposals; or to provide academic, technological or ideological solidarity to help with popular initiatives. Funding is not always useful: money imitates happiness very well... but it does not make it. In the long run, funds vanish and the problem survives. Money is not a satisfactory solution. Donations either: they look like charity (sometimes that’s what they are) when they are not realized in a definite way, to an specific situation. Even if sometimes funding can work, external help must be respectful, realistic and a sign of solidarity... or not exist.

Part 7. A kind of conclusion

*Do not stay motionless in the border of the road.
Do not freeze gladness, do not love without passion.
Do not save yourself now; never save yourself.
Do not fill yourself with quietness.
Do not reserve a quiet corner of the world for you.
Do not close your eyes, heavy as judgments.*

“Entre estatuas” Mario Benedetti

Every word said about the social responsibility of librarians (or any other professional) are beautiful, but if they are not based in a sound knowledge on situation at hand, and linked with practice, they are totally meaningless and, therefore, useless beyond their emotive or spiritual intention. Progressive and leftwing ideas have good objectives, but they are better fulfilled with facts instead of words, and especially, with a true open mind, which can go further than simple talk, and get involved in the real action.

There is a lot to do, and it is not so difficult. Just let's do it. The proposal is hard and complicated: we'll probably be involved in painful and unpleasant social situations; we'll witness sadness and problems; maybe we'll travel miles and miles with no other help but our own free will; we will have to change our beliefs, ideas and mental, ethical and social structures; and we'll have to learn again, completely, our profession, all the theories, methods and tools learnt in classes.

All this, for a change that perhaps will never arrive, for a result that maybe we'll never live to see. But we'll be improving our lives, our knowledge... We'll be growing as professionals and human beings... We'll be learning new things all the time... We'll be becoming new persons, good teachers, wise researchers... We'll witness how our hands become really useful.

We'll discover that our words can become hammers for smashing walls and for filling divides... We'll discover that our acts can clean waters dirtied by history... We'll understand that the real "weapons" in this "battle" are ideas and knowledge, and that they can shake our reality harder than bombs... And we'll learn that the intelligent people are not those who keep a lot of information in their brain, but those who use this information in order to achieve the welfare of their society.

And, at least, we'll be supporting a people who has been struggling for a long time, who never forgets, who needs hands for raising again and for recognizing itself free and independent – for once in its history – of all the hands that have oppressed it for centuries. A people who dreamt and spilled its blood for this ever-delayed freedom. A people that still remembers these heroes who moved it with their ideals and their acts. A hectic and passionate people, who desires progress but who seldom finds the way or the doors opened. A people with projects that, like every human group, also fails and falls... A people who is a prisoner of its own history and its own reality, owner of a rich culture, of an ancestral heritage and of a lot of resources, those resources which have fed and are feeding the development of other countries.

It is worth the pain to try it. It is just necessary to give the first step and to stretch out the hand: a whole, huge continent needs it and waits for it.

ENDNOTES

1. My hand, your hand, his / her hand... our hands?
2. A CV of Edgardo Civallero can be found in www.thelogofalibrarian.blogspot.com.
3. Tupaq Amaru. Born José Gabriel Condorcanqui in 1740. He led one of the strongest and most famous insurrections of Andean indigenous peoples (1780-1) against the Spanish colonial power settled in the city of Cuzco (current Peru). He used the name of the last Inca emperor (Tupaq Amaru, meaning "royal serpent"). He was finally captured by Spaniards in 1783, and, after witnessing the torture and execution of his whole family in the "Plaza de Armas" (Central Square) of Cuzco, he was tortured himself by the traditional Spanish way

of tying the arms and legs to four horses to be torn apart. He resisted it, and was decapitated, and his head and limbs were sent to the four corners of the old Inca Empire, as a warning for future rebels. His name was used in the 70's by the famous Uruguayan rebel movement "Tupamaros."

4. The complete translated text of the song is the following:

My feathered brothers saw them arriving from the sea.
They were the bearded Gods announced by prophecies.
The voice of the monarch was heard, saying that Gods had arrived,
and we opened all our doors, with fear to ignored things.
They came riding beasts, like demons of the Evil.
They came with fire in their hands, and covered by shields of metal.
Just the courage of a few ones opposed resistance,
And we, we saw the blood being spilled, we felt shame [of our Gods].
But Gods don't eat, and they don't enjoy stolen goods,
and when we realized this [that they weren't Gods], everything was already finished.
And, with this mistake, we gave the greatness of our past.
And, with this mistake, we were kept as slaves for 300 years.
We kept the curse of giving to foreigners
our faith, our culture, our bread and our money.
And we still go on, changing our gold for their glass beads
and all our treasures for their mirrors with bright.
Today, in XXth century, we go on receiving blonde people,
opening our doors and calling them "friends."
But when an indian arrives, tired of walking the mountains,
we humiliate him, and we treat him like a stranger in his own homeland.
You hypocrite, showing your humble face to the foreigner...
Why do you become arrogant with your own brothers?
Malinche's curse, disease of the present times...
When you will leave my land? When you will free my people?

5. This is recognized in the Peruvian notion of *compenetrado*, the "mutual penetration" of indigenous Andean religious ritual and belief with those of Catholicism.

6. Good examples are the Quechua rebellion of Tupaq Amaru, quoted before; the Aymara rebellion of Tomás Apasa (called Tupaq Khatari, "the royal rebel," in Quechua), in 1780, who almost seized the old city of La Paz, in Bolivia, and followed the same destiny of Tupaq Amaru; the rebellion of Guarani peoples in Paraguay, against the slavist Portuguese and Spanish forces, after 1787 (when Jesuits were expelled from America); the great Calchaquí rebellion, which harassed for years (1561-3, 1630-1637, 1655-1667) the Spanish cities of northwestern Argentina and had a terrible bloody end; or the long rebellion of the Araucanians in Chile, who were never totally defeated.

7. The "Disputa de Valladolid" (Valladolid Debate, 1450-1) was a famous public discussion between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (and their followers). Las Casas, a famous defender of American native peoples, claimed that indigenous inhabitants were human beings with human souls and human rights; Sepúlveda -following a religious belief based in Aristotle's ideas - claimed that they were savages without soul that could be used as animals and made slaves, and that war (and slavery) against them was fair. Nobody "won" the discussion, but the outcome of this interesting Debate were the "Leyes Nuevas" ("New Laws"), Spanish laws which gave the American aboriginal nations the same rights of Spanish citizens, avoiding, by this way, suffering and excesses from conquerors and colonists. Even if they weren't respected (colonists felt them unfair), the Debate gave birth to the analysis and creation of the "Derecho de Gentes" ("People's Rights," an old term for "Human Rights") and was the basis of later struggles for human rights.

8. The first American press started working in Mexico, probably in 1532; the oldest book conserved from this print is a catechism in Nahuatl language (1539) as well as grammars of several Mexican languages. In 1541 it printed the first "non-religious" pamphlet, a description of the earthquake of Guatemala, which happened the same year. In South America, the press

started working in Lima (Perú) in 1584, with a catechism in Quechua and Aymara languages, as well as dictionaries and vocabularies (“Artes”) of these Andean idioms. In 1705 started working the first Jesuit press, in the middle of the rain forests, in Paraguay, printing catechisms in Guarani, as well as grammars of all the local languages. Even if some works were produced about “non-religious” subjects, the presses were controlled by religious authorities. The first “religiously-independent” books started appearing after the independence of the colonial territories, in 1810-1820.

9. The books written by French and English philosophers and thinkers, after the French Revolution, with their ideas about freedom and liberalism, were the basis for revolutionary independence movements in Latin America. In some Spanish territories, these books were forbidden, and, anyway, obtaining them was a very difficult process.

10. Argentina was independent in 1810; Paraguay, in 1811; Perú and Mexico, in 1821; Bolivia, in 1825; Uruguay, in 1828; Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela in 1830. Haití was the first independent nation in the region (1804), and Cuba, the last one (1898).

11. Mexican revolution in 1910 (Zapata, Morelos, Carranza); Pancho Villa’s movement in Mexico in 1914; Guatemalan revolution in 1944-54; Nicaraguan problems during 1981-87; Cuba revolution, 1959-60; Problems in El Salvador, Panamá and Venezuela; Guerrilla in Colombia; Peruvian guerrillas in 1980 (“Sendero Luminoso”); Dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile, 1973-88; Argentinean dictatorship, 1976-83; Uruguayan dictatorship, 1973-1985; Dictatorship of Stroessner in Paraguay, 1954-89.

12. Some great examples are the Colombian (<http://www.senderos.gov.co/>) and Mexican systems of Public Libraries, the Chilean DIBAM (<http://www.dibam.cl/>) (whose program of mobile libraries is one of the best in the whole continent), the rural libraries in Perú and Bolivia, and the indigenous libraries in Brazil... as well as all the university libraries and the highly-specialized research-centers.

13. <http://argentina.indymedia.org/features/pueblos/>

14. For example, the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation (<http://www.aeci.es/02exterior/americaS.asp>).

15. The end of Benedetti’s poem says:

“But if you can avoid it, and you do it...
Then, don’t stay by my side.”

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