



**HAL**  
open science

# Is the Library a Political Institution?: French Libraries Today and the Social Conflict between Démocratie and République

Denis Merklen

► **To cite this version:**

Denis Merklen. Is the Library a Political Institution?: French Libraries Today and the Social Conflict between Démocratie and République. *Library Trends*, 2016, 65 (2), pp.143 - 153. 10.1353/lib.2016.0027 . halshs-01618515

**HAL Id: halshs-01618515**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01618515v1>**

Submitted on 18 Oct 2017

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

---

# Is the Library a Political Institution? French Libraries Today and the Social Conflict between *Démocratie* and *République*

DENIS MERKLEN

---

## ABSTRACT

Public libraries in the outlying suburbs of French cities, which are called *banlieues*, face many conflicts, occasionally violent. These conflicts take place within the context of important social, cultural, and political transformations that have accelerated during the last fifteen years. Librarians, faced with several competing conceptions of the political role of libraries, seem to waver among *démocratie* (democracy), *République* (French Republic), and aspects of libraries that feature in social conflicts in which the *classes populaires* (roughly translated as “working classes”) are protagonists. The author of this paper shifts from French (his usual language) to English to highlight the place of libraries in the political sphere of contemporary French society.

We hear and say that libraries are very important institutions for freedom and democracies. In France, both librarians and the authorities frequently acknowledge that libraries are political institutions, and they are. But what kind of political institution is a library? What is the nature of this political actor within its specific context? I will try to answer these questions from the point of view of French libraries. How do libraries fit into French political traditions? How do they project themselves into the future? What is the role that these libraries play in the current political situation, and how do they cope with the social conflicts that are found across French society?

I refer in general to European libraries, but will focus principally on the French situation. This paper is not written in French (as I do most of the time), but in English. It is beneficial to write about French libraries in English for an English-reading audience because if I think about this situation of the library as political institution in French, certain words and

expressions would be used that cannot be translated directly into English. The expression *classes populaires* is a good example. It does not mean “working class,” “lower classes,” “underclass,” nor “poor people,” but is situated somewhere among social classes, culture, and politics. It refers to several political traditions that date back to remote periods in French history.

When we write in French there are words and expressions easy to translate into English. At times there is a direct equivalent, such as translating *bibliothèque* as “library.” But even in these cases the meaning can change in the transition from one language to another. For example, the French *démocratie* is not the same as “democracy” in English, and the same applies to *république* and “republic.” We can speak about liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, and left-wingers and right-wingers, but it is not easy to convey the true French meaning of these terms to readers not familiar with French society.

The language in which we write sociology has a large influence on the way we think about society and its institutions, such as libraries, because the knowledge of culture and society is always a situated knowledge. Language sets or determines the place of the observer in the social space or the world (Merklen, 2015) because the sociologist, as well as the anthropologist for instance, is not only a researcher but also a writer (Geertz, 1988). Language sets or determines our reasoning in a political sphere of argumentation, discussion, and even conflict. If we use English as an international or a scientific language, as a lingua franca and not as the language of a specific human group, the language of a specific society, we risk simplifying or erasing the relationship between our observations and the political world in which we work. French *bibliothèques* exist in the French political world just as South African and British libraries exist within their respective political worlds. Thus it is important to bear in mind that a *bibliothèque* is not only a *library*.

In his 2012 book *Penser entre les langues* (Thinking between languages), philosopher, philologist, and translator Heinz Wismann invites us to consider the difficulties inherent in translation as an opportunity to “think between languages.” I will attempt this, to use the difficulties of expressing in English the reality of French libraries as a different way of thinking about these institutions. At the same time I will try, as Émile Durkheim recommended in 1895 in *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* [The rules of sociological method] to “look at what is behind the words” (1895/1960, *passim*).

To write in English about French libraries I must remove myself from the French political context. This is an opportunity to think differently about the following words and categories used frequently in France: *démocratie*, *République*, *gauche*, *droite*, and *classes populaires*. These words and categories are essential to an understanding of French libraries today. As is

well-known, a language is inextricably intertwined with its culture. Walter Benjamin (1996) says that to translate the French *pain* to the German *Brot*, one has to describe how the French make bread and how it is eaten. Thus I cannot translate *bibliothèque* to simply “library” without describing what a French library is today, what its policies are, and what the French writing culture is. But the relationship between a language and its culture is not the point here; rather, it is a political question in that when we write or speak, it is done in a public sphere and political world. The *Library Trends* readers of this paper, for example, are not only students, researchers, and librarians, but at the same time are also citizens of various countries and work in fields that are not devoid of politics. When I delivered an earlier version of this paper in January 2016 at the BOBCATSSS symposium in Lyon, those in the audience came principally from European countries, and no doubt they regarded themselves as being European and were thought of as European by others despite that they were not speaking their native languages but English—the language of the symposium. But it needs to be asked: Are Spanish libraries in the same political world as German libraries? Do Italian libraries exist in the same political world as British libraries? We can approach libraries as political institutions within their respective contexts, and local words and categories are a way to do it. For this reason I will keep some French words in my text.

Indeed, when we say library, *bibliothèque*, or *biblioteca* we are not speaking about the same institution. Public libraries, *les bibliothèques publiques*, and *las bibliotecas públicas* are institutions that share the goal of providing access to written culture, information, and a diversity of opinions, literature, philosophy, humanities, and the arts. But if we look closely at what they do, we find that libraries are political institutions within different political contexts; we also see that librarians are political agents or actors in several ways.

A library situated in a city, in the center of Paris say, is not in the same social world as another library located in a suburb (*banlieue*). I would like to show that when the social situation of a library changes, its political situation changes as well. In order to understand its political role in our contemporary democracies, I focus on French libraries, and more precisely those in poorer areas, in the suburbs of the country’s major cities, including Paris, Marseille, Lyon, Toulouse, and Bordeaux. This paper focuses on librarians working in the *banlieues*. These libraries are different because of their particular political and social contexts.

The patrons of these libraries are from a small part of present-day *classes populaires*. On the one hand, the families in these neighborhoods often have low incomes; unemployment is high, especially among young people (occasionally comprising more than 30 percent of this group). Most inhabitants of these neighborhoods are French citizens, with all the political and civil rights that such citizenship entails, but many of these families immi-

grated to France only one or two generations ago from the former French colonies and are often victims of racism. A significant proportion of them, perhaps as many as a third, have no diploma, degree, or qualifications.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, on the other hand, a strong civil service helps people in their everyday lives. If we compare this situation with that in other countries, even in Europe, social protection remains strong in France: there is public education, a public health service, a modern and efficient public transport service, and a social housing service. Social protection is robust, as is the social system of retirement, and there is access to an important number of goods and services guaranteed by the state or public institutions (Bec, 2014). Libraries are a part of this presence of the state and its public institutions in these neighborhoods because in France there is an important tradition of cultural policy, ranging from the Louvre and the opera down to libraries and theatres in less affluent suburbs.<sup>2</sup> Libraries must negotiate this paradoxical and contradictory situation of, on the one hand, low-income neighborhoods with high unemployment and heavy discrimination, but on the other a strong *République* and efficient system of social protection.

Violence in France has been common in the *banlieues*, and for thirty years riots have been a form of social conflict (Kokoreff, 2008). It is not my purpose here to analyze the various forms and reasons for this violence, among which are racism, drug trafficking, and criminality. But conflicts with education and the school system, as well as unemployment, are the main causes of the inequalities and social segregation that lead to violence.<sup>3</sup> Since the outbreak of these riots during the 1980s, nearly always have they been sparked by conflicts with the police.

The phenomenon of riots in *banlieues* is global and not difficult to understand within the context of social conflicts. But recent research shows that libraries are also targets of violence in these kinds of neighborhoods, which is more difficult to explain. Since the mid-1990s, seventy-four libraries in France have been set ablaze. It is a fact that conflicts between local inhabitants and their libraries are frequent, including the stealing of computers, CDs, and DVDs, arson, windows broken by thrown rocks, graffiti, disturbances in reading rooms, and threats and insults. It is important to note, however, that there has never been any physical violence against librarians.

Attacks against libraries often occur at the night while votes are being counted after an election, such as in 2007 at the time of the presidential election of Nicolas Sarkozy. In a northern *banlieue* of Paris, a young person warned a librarian, "If Sarko wins the election, we're going to burn your library down" (Merklen & Murard, 2013, p. 1), despite the paradox of the threat being directed against a facility provided by the communist city council of this municipality, which was located in the district of Seine-Saint-Denis.

I have been engaged in an extensive field study to try to understand these events (Merklen, 2013; Merklen & Murard, 2013). How can we overcome the perplexity we feel when we are faced with a library that has been set on fire? How can we understand these actions? What is the *real* target here? A public institution? A building representing power, authority, or the *République*? A library . . . but what is a library? What is a library to them, to the agents of this violence? To “them,” meaning the people who are not the same as us, people who belong to another social class? The first step we need to take toward clarification is to keep in mind that we ourselves—librarians, teachers, journalists, sociologists—are all part of a specific social group, earning our living and asserting our social status in connection with a written culture and the world of books. Most importantly, politicians belong to the same social group that depends on a written culture.

Books and libraries are presented as invaluable to the individual, a means of increasing one’s knowledge and self-reflection. From this point of view, books and libraries are democratic institutions, helping individuals gain access to information, culture, and the diversity of opinions in the public sphere. Libraries play an important role in promoting a critical, participatory citizenry. At the same time, however, within the current political and social contexts of conflicts in France, books and libraries have also become contested, used to define limits among groups and categories. Libraries are institutions that contribute to establishing boundaries among social groups and are used by people to make social distinctions regarding *classes populaires*, to divide people with lower incomes into “good” and “bad.” In a simplistic way, those who read (meaning those who read books) are viewed as “better” citizens.

Within this context, French libraries in the *banlieues* are oriented toward three political values. The French library is an ambiguous symbol, subjected to the tensions among three different orientations: *démocratie*, *République*, and the social classes. Below, these tensions will be briefly explained, thereby shedding light on the library as a political institution in today’s France.

Usually, librarians and administrators, as well as teachers, professors, journalists, and politicians, speak of libraries as “political institutions.” They understand that libraries play an important role in promoting reading, as well as in helping citizens gain access to information, a variety of opinions, and written culture in general. This means that the tasks of librarians are political. However, we cannot take these tasks for granted. It is important to understand what the term *political institution* means within the contexts of social conflicts and political changes in both France and Europe. The conflicts that libraries have been experiencing for two decades and the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in January 2015 call the political role of this institution into question.

To understand the political nature of libraries, we first have to consider

other factors. Libraries in Europe, and in particular those in France, are public institutions and funded by taxes. Consequently, they belong to the state. The French say that a library has a mission of public, or civil, service (*une mission de service public*), which means that it is a public institution charged with ensuring free access to books, the press, and the internet.

Second, librarians are public employees who belong to the civil service. Most of the time, individuals who work in libraries earn their positions after academic training, and often, in the case of public libraries, after a career in the civil service system. These may seem obvious, but they are important, and I would like to emphasize them.<sup>4</sup> In the library *as a public service* and the librarian *as a professional*, we have two coordinates to use to gauge the library's political situation. These coordinates determine the possibilities of the library's future evolution. Even if its autonomy is guaranteed, even if librarians are really free about their choices, the library depends on political support.

Within another political context, some libraries, are (and have been historically) independent of local government. They are institutions of civil society, described as *populaires* in France. They are occasionally assisted by the government, of course, but they do not receive municipal funding and librarians are not the salaried employees of local administrations. This is how it is in some places in the south of Europe. In Spain, for example, we find independent libraries that have been recently established by social movements after crises and the withdrawal of the state. The political nature of a public library changes depending on the status of its staff and also on those who make the decisions regarding its collections, its cultural and social activities, and its rules and other regulations. The most important factor is that when a library is a public institution, it cannot participate in social, political, or religious strife. The public library must remain neutral.<sup>5</sup>

Local libraries in France have a singular historical trajectory. They have gone from being *bibliothèques populaires* (now meaning "working-class library") to agencies for promoting reading among the general public (*la lecture publique* [Sagnas, 2014]), and from being controlled by the state to that of the municipality. Local libraries now belong to cities and local governments. Because of this evolution, libraries are now strong institutions, with established budgets, rich collections, and qualified staff members. As a result of this evolution, librarians are no longer activists, but professionals. Previously, they were activists who belonged to several social or political organizations, unions, political parties, associations of the civil society, or the Church; they were radicals, socialists, communists, Catholics. Today, most librarians are state employees, professionals of *la lecture publique* (public reading). Librarians became a specialized category with its own training from particular schools for specific qualifications. They

have their own professional organizations, such as the *Association de Bibliothécaires de France* (Association of French librarians), and their own ethical codes, which include their requirement of neutrality.

Naturally, the relationship between neighborhood libraries and *classes populaires* changes when a library transforms from being a library for the latter to a public institution. Librarians no longer consider their patrons as members of *classes populaires* or workers, but only as a specific reading public—specific users. The library has ceased to be an institution belonging to a specific social class that wanted to help workers. Indeed, even when library activists did not specifically embrace workers' causes, the library still was regarded as helping the social groups that did not have access to reading, books, knowledge, and written expression. Has this political orientation of libraries entirely disappeared today? Is it an anachronism to think of them in those terms? Are patrons citizens only, or are they also members of a social group? What is the nature of this group? Is it a social class as the French expression *classes populaires* suggests, even if it is no longer thought of in terms of a working class? What then is the context of these libraries? Is this a *culture populaire*, as is said in French, meaning the culture of a social class? This refers to a culture that does not come from cultural elites nor dominant economic and political groups, but one that is removed from the schools and away from the seats of power.

The nature of French libraries is largely defined by its social position (as a public agency promoting reading controlled by professionals) and political trajectory: the fact that they have transitioned from a working-class organization and civic association to a public institution belonging to the *République* as part of its civil service apparatus. These political determinations, however, are not without ambiguity. French libraries alternate between *démocratie* and the *République*. First, their democratic orientation.

As a public institution the library operates according to established procedures. Librarians must defend the institution as a cosmopolitan place and provide the widest possible range of cultural, social, economic, historical, political, religious, and sexual information. They must welcome all kind of readers, including the low-income, religious minorities, unruly youth, and the elderly. The library cannot endorse a specific position, nor can it belong to a particular group or category. It must never adopt a singular point of view, such as an aesthetic, ideology, or religious belief. The perspective of French librarians is determined in accordance with another French term, *laïcité*, which does not have precisely the same meaning as the English *secularism*. As an institution belonging to the civil service, the library must be welcoming to all, neutral, and plural or diverse in what it offers.

In this way, as a political institution, the library is beyond social conflicts and operates as a democratic institution. Within the contemporary



contexts of the European Union, globalization, mass communications and access to the internet, access to instruction and education, and, most importantly, of social mobility and migration, this political mandate of the library as a democratic institution is renewed and takes on new meanings. In fact, when people assert that the library is a *democratic institution*, they think it is a *cosmopolitan institution*, its responsibility being to foster the possibility of cohabitation by groups that are different, diverse, but want to live together. Cosmopolitanism is represented in contemporary France by diversity as a political value. Because librarians are forbidden to classify groups, therefore they cannot classify their cultural productions. But then, how do librarians decide on what to include in their collections?

The second political orientation of libraries is as a republican institution, an institution of the *République*. The library is a political institution; as mandated by the *République*, it belongs to the state and thus its responsibility is not to give preference to any specific group over others. The role of the state is to create a separate sphere that does not naturally exist in civic society, a place that the latter cannot create or produce alone. Therefore the state invokes *laïcité* as a sphere or place separate from religion, creating a new dimension to the social life of its citizens. The state also created the institution of the public school, which hitherto had not existed when education was the exclusive responsibility of families and religious institutions. Additionally, the state promulgated social welfare provisions, which could not exist during the era of conflicts between labor and capital in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently, public institutions in France now defend against gender inequalities and racial discrimination. The promotion of social equality is an important foundation of the French conception of the *République*, because equality is a necessary condition of *démocratie*. The roles of education and political/cultural institutions are to integrate individuals as citizens of the *République*. Public institutions must educate groups about the responsibilities of citizenship, as opposed to those owed to social affiliations, and promote the opportunities available to them. As a political institution of the *République*, the library has two objectives: the promotion of the equality of access to culture of all citizens, and the creating and maintaining of public spaces in order to accomplish this.

The commonweal, in the sense of *res publica* (*la chose publique*), is a fundamental pillar of modern French politics. It takes the form of a civil service comprised of public professionals, including librarians. The promotion of reading is a public service implemented by these professionals, who present to their patrons the latest currents in the world of culture. This is what librarians mean when they say that they strive to offer a safe haven for reading and written culture, a place that does not follow the laws of commercial publishing and the book market and is able to resist the power of the cultural industries. Thus librarians do not establish their libraries'

collections by following the bestseller lists, the top box-office movie ratings, and the most popular songs. No longer dictated by the preferences of their patrons as the only criteria, librarians often choose and promote materials with which people are not familiar.

We can see now why it is important to think of the difference between a popular song and *une chanson populaire*. As a political institution of the *République*, the library must offer those items that are not in the popular marketplace and are not often highlighted in the media nor at the tops of lists created by algorithms. Librarians have many tools at their disposal by which to help them build the best collections for their libraries, such as forums, professional organizations, journals, and so on. But it needs to be asked: Can they be trusted to accomplish this? Should librarians focus exclusively on professional criteria, or do they also need to be politically oriented?

This political role of libraries is paramount today. In a country like France and in most of those of Europe, the barrier to access to written culture is no longer a material or economic one. Cheap editions, paperbacks, progress in schooling and education, the rise of the internet, and the digitization of the written word are changing the scope of the library. Because most individuals now have access to written content, whether hardcopy or digital, the roles of libraries, more now than in the past, are of orientation and the promotion of a cultural place. Because of the bewildering array of published works, libraries can play an important role in suggesting, recommending, selecting, or promoting the ones they think their patrons would most enjoy. Librarians, as civil servants, are entrusted with these tasks, but the question is how to do them in a particular neighborhood? (*Comment le faire dans un quartier populaire?*)

French librarians assert that they are not “cultural prescribers,” that this is the role of teachers. But in practice they do prescribe and choose for readers, and they should not be ashamed of it! It is fortunate that they are there to serve. They are neither censors, teachers, religious authorities, nor political activists. However, the library is a political actor that aims at social transformation; it cannot be limited to being an open space. There are two areas in which we can see French librarians in lower-income *banlieues* playing active roles: racism and sexism. Librarians are often in opposition to local inhabitants holding racist or sexist beliefs. Concerning other issues such as global conflicts, the Western viewpoint generally prevails. This is also the case in current debates regarding the freedom of expression, *laïcité*, and religious beliefs. In these, libraries find themselves attempting to balance between two conflicting possibilities: whether to serve as a democratic or as a republican institution.

French society is fraught with intense social conflicts. From the standpoint of its citizens, French institutions are either with them or against them. Are libraries aligned with its citizens, or are they aligned with the

schools, the police, the press, and/or the politicians? Librarians frequently labor in a world divided by strife and conflicts. When a librarian advocates in a given neighborhood, does this mean that the library belongs to the people and consequently has to assume particular points of view about culture, society, and politics? Is the library an institution of the *République*, and if so does it represent a cultural/societal/political space that is beyond conflicts? Or is the library a democratic, open, and diverse institution in which everyone, all citizens, can find their place?

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is a revised version of one presented by the author at the 24th BOBCATSSS international conference in Lyon, France, on January 29, 2016.

### NOTES

1. On contemporary neighborhoods, see Dubet (1985) and, more recently, Lapeyronnie (2008).
2. On cultural politics, see Fleury (2014, 2015); for libraries and cultural politics, see Bertrand (2004).
3. In this kind of neighborhood, unemployment statistics for young people are sometimes as high as 40 percent, and 35 percent of adults leave school before they obtain a diploma or another kind of qualification (Kokoreff & Lapeyronnie, 2013).
4. Raphaëlle Bats, a coeditor of this special issue, notes that in France, librarians have to compete successfully in a national competition to become librarians, and only then do they receive their professional training. They already have academic training, but not specifically in librarianship. Only the head librarians are educated and trained at the École Nationale Supérieure des Sciences de l'Information et des Bibliothèques (ENSSIB); all others receive in-house training.
5. *Neutrality* is a basic value of civil service expressed in the notion of the “*laïcité*,” which is underwritten by the first article of the French Constitution.

### REFERENCES

- Bec, C. (2014). *La sécurité sociale: Une institution de la démocratie* [Social security: An institution of democracy]. Paris: Gallimard.
- Benjamin, W. (1996). The task of the translator. In M. Bullock & M. W. Jennings (Eds.), *Selected writings* (Vol. 1). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bertrand, A.-M. (2004). *Les bibliothèques* [Libraries]. Paris: La Dispute.
- Dubet, F. (1985). *La galère: Jeunes en survie* [Hard times: Young people struggling to survive]. Paris: Fayard.
- Durkheim, E. (1960). *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* [The rules of sociological method]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. (Original work published 1895)
- Fleury, L. (2014). *Sociology of culture and cultural practices: The transformative power of institutions*. Chicago: Lexington Books.
- Fleury, L. (2015). L'Etat et la culture à l'épreuve du néo-libéralisme: Bouleversement historique, retournement axiologique? [State and culture under the test of neoliberalism: Historic upheaval, axiological reversal]. In S. Dayan-Herzbrun, N. Murard, & E. Tassin (Eds.), *Tumultes: L'État: Concepts et politiques* [Tumult: The state: Concepts and policy] (Vol. 44) (pp. 145–157). Paris: Editions Kimé.
- Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kokoreff, M. (2008). *Sociologie des émeutes* [The sociology of riots]. Paris: Payot-Rivages.
- Kokoreff, M., & Lapeyronnie, D. (2013). *Refaire la cité: L'avenir des banlieues* [Reviving the city: The future of suburbs]. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

- Lapeyronnie, D. (2008). *Ghetto urbain: Ségrégation, violence, pauvreté en France aujourd'hui* [Urban ghetto: Segregation, violence, poverty in France today]. Paris: Robert Laffont.
- Merklen, D. (2013). *Pourquoi brûle-t-on des bibliothèques?* [Why did they burn libraries?]. Villeurbanne, France: Presses de l'ENSSIB.
- Merklen, D. (2015, February). En alguna parte del mundo: Montevideo, Buenos Aires y París [Somewhere in the world: Montevideo, Buenos Aires, and Paris]. *Papeles del CEIC: International Journal on Collective Identity Research*, 1, 1–21. Retrieved from <http://www.ehu.es/ojs/index.php/papelesCEIC/articulo/view/13104>
- Merklen, D., & Murard, N. (2013, November 7). Why are people setting fire to libraries? (K. McNaughton, Trans.). Retrieved from <http://www.booksandideas.net/Why-are-people-setting-fire-to.html>
- Sagnas, A. (2014). *Des bibliothèques populaires à la lecture publique* [Popular libraries for public reading]. Villeurbanne, France: Presses de l'ENSSIB.
- Wismann, H. (2012). *Penser entre les langues* [Thinking between languages]. Paris: Albin Michel.

---

Denis Merklen is a sociologist. He teaches at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and is the author of several articles. In his latest book, *Pourquoi brûle-t-on des bibliothèques?* (Why are people setting fire to libraries?), published in 2013, he explores the different forms of violent conflict between public libraries and the inhabitants of low-income *banlieues* in France.