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Decolonize the libraries

A handful of notes



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By Edgardo Civalero

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Introduction

What do we talk about when we talk about "libraries"? And about their contents? What do we mean when we talk about "documents"? What is, from our perspective, the "why" and "what for" of our spaces for the conservation of knowledge and memories? What do we librarians, archivists, and museologists do?

During the years I studied Library and Information Science at the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities of the National University of Córdoba, in Argentina, I thought I had found the answers —if not all, at least a handful of them— to these questions. They were answers that came from the pages of the most prominent manuals in the disciplines of knowledge and memory. And from articles, and conferences, and international declarations, and recommendations, and guidelines — the world of libraries, archives and museums, we well know, is populated with definitions, concepts and tools, and everything is measured, controlled and normalized.

However, today I know that everything I had in my hands then was nothing more than the official version of events: a package of canned answers that only considered the realities of a small majority of libraries. And that, as always, left aside —consciously or unconsciously— the enormous minority.

It took me a few years to realize all this. To understand that there were small majorities and large minorities, and a hegemonic discourse that spoke about the former while ignoring the latter. To find out that what the sacred LIS handbooks told was not the truth, or at least not all of it, and that, as Subcomandante Marcos said when he wrote in Chiapas, there were many worlds, but they were in this one.

And many possible libraries within what, today, and despite everything, we insist on calling "libraries."

Uncomfortable questions

I got the first clue that my knowledge and my training were not as solid as I believed nor as monolithic as they seemed shortly after graduating, in an indigenous community in northeastern Argentina: a de-library-ed place to which I arrived precisely so that it would cease to be so. When I stood before the community members and announced the good news of the library's arrival to their lands and their lives, I received a series of cold looks and a single response. An answer in the form of a question.

"And what do we want a library for?"

That phrase hit me. How could someone not want a library?

I was lucky not to be held hostage to my own ideas: I gave myself permission to explore those of those who had decided to remain proudly un-library-ed. What position was that community in? Little by little I managed to understand that the library —or, at least, the most widespread and common version of "library"; that is, the one that I knew, defended and carried with me— not only did not respond to any of the needs of that community or solve any of its problems, but it also created additional inconveniences for them. It was a strange element, an invasive intruder, an external implant that was never going to take root in that territory, among those people who insisted on asking me why on earth they would want what I was going to offer them.

My reflections stripped me bare and put me in front of a cruel mirror. I faced my poor beliefs and constructs; my intellectual miseries, subjected by weak academic pins; my stereotypes and prejudices; my small and limited ideas about the universe in general and about my LIS world in particular... And it was then that I began to suspect that there were probably many potential forms of libraries: as many as human groups, as horizons, as stories and memories... At the same time, I began to sense that the handbooks I used to learn my profession showed only a part of reality, and they did so knowing that they were leaving aside many experiences, possibilities and paths. And I ended up assuming that that community's question —the one that had broken so many of my certainties— was not going to be the last one that had such an effect.

And so it was. Shortly afterward, in a town in northwestern Argentina where I was helping to create a local archive, a young man wanted to know if those shelves full of papers and photos could hold textile fragments. I remember shaking my head in a mute gesture of denial, and his surprised eyes, and the question leaving his lips quickly:

"And why not?"

I did not know what to say. Because guidelines and policies designed far from there, on the other side of the world, said so? Because it was ordered by the great archival authorities, who preferred to ignore realities other than their own — the dominant one, the "correct" one? Because the word, generally written, sometimes spoken, was the Queen within the disciplines of knowledge and memory management, and textiles were "something else"? None of the answers I tried convinced me. I stared at him, with a stupid look on my face, and shrugged my shoulders, even more stupidly.

It took me a long time to find an adequate answer to that question. By the time I finally did it, all I managed to do was further break the by-then flimsy foundations of what I thought I knew.

The final blow came a couple of years later, again in the northeast of my homeland, when I was explaining to a group of librarians the differences between a library, an archive, and a museum. An elderly woman, clearly indigenous and proud of being so, asked me why such atrocities were done to the memory of a people.

"Our memory, the memory of my people, is one and one only," she told me. "We don't break it up to put the pieces in separate boxes depending on their shape."

Her comment made all the sense in the world: in my professional life I had dedicated myself precisely to fragmenting heritage and placing those pieces in different spaces, and to applying labels, regulations, and organization and classification policies to them. All of this to later invest a similar amount of time and effort in putting those pieces back together so that they made sense — which, it must be said, rarely happened, or had a successful result. Why were we doing that?

As time went by, I ended up adding all my doubts — those that I accumulated in my many years of wanderings among libraries, archives and museums, large and small, in all corners of Latin America. Why were there no books on indigenous languages in libraries that operated in communities where indigenous languages were primarily spoken? Why is orality not recognized as a valid source of information if, today, the spoken word continues to be the main means of transmitting knowledge? Why is a movie poster considered a document, but an engraved pumpkin or a painted cloth is not? Why do we continue to place so much emphasis on reading and books when there are many other means to acquire and transfer knowledge and skills? Why are some books placed on shelves "a library," but the same books in a basket, a box or a backpack are no longer one? Why are some sheets sewn between two painted cardboard covers not respectable as a source of information, but the same sheets, stapled under an editorial seal, are?

From the sum of those questions, many others emerged. Many more. Especially about my profession. Why do we, as librarians, or archivists, or museologists, believe what we believe and do what we do? Do we ever doubt, or do we simply act like automatons, without asking questions? Have we been given the opportunity to think critically? Have we given it to ourselves? Or are we simple tool-applying machines, neutral and aseptic? Do we realize that what we do every day is something political, a social process that implies a lot of responsibility and commitment?

Since then, I have traveled the world with more doubts than certainties, and with my backpack full of questions that rarely receive answers. I have added some new terms to my vocabulary that have helped me understand a little better —but only a little— where I stand as a professional in the disciplines of knowledge and memory. I have discarded some preconceptions, although there are others that I have attached like caltrops, or adhered like tattoos to my skin. I understood a little about what we do, with whom, how, when, where...

But I'm still not clear about why. Or for what purpose.

It is when I approach these last questions that certain ideas begin to appear: resistance, trenches, rebellion, gaps, struggles, activism, militancy... And, above all, decolonization.

Colonized spaces

All knowledge and memory management spaces are very powerful places. It is not in vain that it has been repeated *ad nauseam* that "information is power."

And it is for that reason that such spaces have always been disputed territories.

This is how concepts such as "memoricide" and "epistemicide" have emerged — processes aimed at annihilating the knowledge and memories of the adversary, whoever it may be. Human history is rife with such destructive events, which may include documents and their containing buildings, but also people and their places of meeting and exchanging ideas. Either way, the end result is that knowledge and memory disappear. And with them, identity and history.

Libraries, archives, and museums are spaces that define what is known and what is remembered, what is said and what is thought, what is correct and permitted and what is not. Hence their importance. With honorable exceptions, they usually respond to the interests, agendas, speeches, and needs of those in power — those with resources to keep them active and protected and, at the same time, to control them and use them in their favor or for their benefit. National governments, regional systems, local authorities, and private organizations manage their information repositories according to their interests and their lines of action, which typically represent their own searches more than the needs of the communities they serve. In this way, acquisition policies or

collection development, for example, are often strongly influenced by the objectives and ideologies of the organizations that manage these spaces.

Taking such influences into account, it can be argued that libraries, archives, and museums can be —and often are— colonized spaces. They are subject to strict and limited guidelines on what stories to tell, what elements to show, what languages and cultures to reflect, what users to accept, and what elements to leave out. thus rendering them invisible or silenced.

Although it is not always a conscious or defined decision, colonized behavior is usually present in many spaces for managing knowledge and memories. Document collections typically reflect the dominant format (written or printed), the official language, the social sectors in power, and the ideas and opinions of certain socio-economic groups. Preponderance is often given to large publishers, academic content, "prominent" figures and dates, and hegemonic discourses — including "the voice of the victors." Everything else, the entire huge set of data that falls outside these parameters, may be included as minority elements or special collections.

Or it simply may not be there at all.

As they are relevant and generally influential spaces within a given community, these sites, colonized in this way, are transformed —generally without even seeking it— into places of colonization. They become colonizing institutions and forces. Their services and activities filter and establish a specific discourse and ideology, guiding interests and

decisions in a certain direction, and marking the playing field — the central one (what is interesting) and the marginal one (what is left out).

In the end, their contents and services impose a conception of "culture" that is sometimes not comprehensive and does not represent the interests, searches or reality of those they intend to serve. In fact, from the beginning of the 20th century until relatively recent times, libraries, archives, and museums served, in much of Latin America, as places of "high culture." The term "civilization" was even used in contrast to the "barbarism" that popular heritage represented. A clear example of this type of action occurred in Argentina under the presidency of Domingo F. Sarmiento, the creator of public schools and popular libraries in that country. Traditional knowledge was discarded, ignored, or minimized, while what was shown in libraries was given preponderance: literature, music, plastic arts and other "universal" elements.

That is, mainly Europeans.

Even at the end of the 20th century, a good part of the libraries operating in rural Latin American territories did not include, in their collections, contents that had even a minimal relationship with the communities they served. The contents were different, as they tried to "bring culture" to those corners.

Corners that, for centuries, had their own voices. Voices that were unknown, or even despised.

In this way, a series of strong acculturation processes were launched, which led to the abandonment of native languages, regional customs, and traditional artistic expressions. Local history, generally oral, was considered lost, and reading programs were implemented that ensured that Perrault's stories were read in the Amazon and Pinocchio was known in the Andes while many of the old traditional stories were forgotten.

Needless to say, opening libraries to universal culture —not European culture, but truly universal culture— is an excellent proposal. And the exhibition of international works of art in museums and the safeguarding of institutional memory in archives is something positive in all aspects. However, such tasks must be accompanied by an objective and unnuanced recognition of everything else: local realities, "alternative" discourses, and the possibilities and needs of the communities they intend to serve. If this comprehensive approach is not achieved, the actions of the knowledge and memory management spaces will be partial. Always partial.

And, therefore, absolutely devoid of balance.

The colonizing processes led, in very generic terms, to libraries being understood as silent spaces, delimited by walls and inhabited by shelves. Shelves on which the library contents slept, organized and clean: books and other written or printed materials, all produced by reliable authors and published by respected publishers. Something similar happened with archives and museums. All knowledge and all memory that did not fall within the parameters of the managing institutions was discarded as useless.

The library was, thus, the "temple of knowledge," a temple populated by neutral priests and priestesses, where the normative, the monolithically homogeneous, and the hegemonic dominated: the national language in its cultured version, the strongest and most respectable opinions, the respected [male] authors, the official history, the acceptable narratives...

In this way, a stereotyped space was created that excluded those who did not accept its rules, although... why wouldn't they accept them? The finest and noblest of human intellectual production was there. What's more: the "real thing" was there. And if it wasn't there, it was because it didn't deserve a place on those sacrosanct shelves.

The library discourse, centered on such a vision of the world, was perpetuated through academic careers, texts and conferences that were equally hegemonic and equally normative. There was no need to question, think critically, or ask why or what for anything was done. All hints of independence, reflection, and politics were put aside.

Fortunately, many everyday library, archival and museological practices —especially those developed in the margins and peripheries— raised strong doubts about the model described so far and ended up demonstrating that another management of knowledge and memory is possible. That there are many potential libraries within what we continue to call "libraries." That those spaces of culture are also spaces of resistance, rebellion, and struggle. That the knowledge handled in those places can be —and, in fact, is— a ferment of social, cultural, economic, political, identity, and environmental activism and militancy...

It was something to be expected, after all: the custodians of those spaces, and their users and visitors, aware of the power they had at their disposal, ended up appropriating them, re-signifying and adapting them to their needs, visions, contexts, and characteristics. They stripped them of walls and shelves, made them breathe, and gave them reasons and tasks.

And, little by little, through a grassroots and action-research process totally based on evidence, they began to decolonize them.

Let's decolonize

Decolonizing the spaces for managing knowledge and memories does not mean giving up all the achievements and advances made by libraries, archives, and museums to date. It means putting their structures, ideologies, and actions under a magnifying glass in an open and collective process of critical thinking. It means subjecting them to two essential questions: "Why?" and "What for?" It involves questioning, challenging, taking them apart, and putting them back together, eliminating those traits that may appear or appear to be colonized and / or colonizing.

One of the first steps to achieving true decolonization of all these spaces, whatever they may be called, is to convert them into collective places — truly collective. After all, they manage a good that is not for consumption and that belongs *to* everyone. They must be open, plural, and inclusive sites and must support human rights, social responsibility and justice, equality, and commitment to the benefit of all.

To achieve such an objective, libraries, archives and museums must be appropriated by the community. The collective of actual and potential users must make these places theirs — both physically and conceptually.

And in every process of appropriation, there is an implicit one of subversion. A change of meanings.

Decolonizing libraries, in short, means putting them in the hands of their communities to critically review and reformulate their meanings, both internal and external. Do the contents and services represent the community and its characteristics, or do they respond to external guidelines and interests? Do the structure, the way of working, the organization of tasks and the proposed activities provide genuine service to the community, or are they simply "canned" elements, arrived from outside and disconnected from the concerns of the community? Is the library ready to evolve and adapt to the community, or is it seeking the community to adapt —forcefully— to its proposals?

This process will involve asking uncomfortable questions and confronting even more uncomfortable realities: a status quo, a hegemonic system, which sometimes wants libraries, archives, and museums, along with their groups of users and visitors, exactly where they want them to be and not where they should or would like to be.

This series of actions requires a deep commitment to collective well-being. Long-range actions will involve numerous stages that represent a real challenge in terms of thinking, analysis, and construction.

However, it is an absolutely necessary process — at least, if we want to stop seeing empty libraries, unread books, and entire populations that turn their backs on their spaces for knowledge and memory management, choosing other paths that are not always the best to access knowledge and memories.

This will also be a process not exempt from discussions, clashes, and conflicts. As mentioned, libraries, archives, and museums are strongly contested territories and, therefore, spaces of direct and raw confrontation.

Nonetheless, the results obtained by the many places of knowledge and memory that have entered into decolonizing processes —especially those working at the margins— present a hopeful message. Beyond the expected and logical frictions and discussions, the open and traveled paths lead to new, interesting, intriguing horizons: horizons of discovery, integration, and diversity, plurality and respect, freedom and recognition. Horizons that are all ours.

And on those horizons, there are many innovative answers to the questions I posed at the beginning of this conference. What do we talk about when we talk about "libraries"? And about their contents? What do we mean when we talk about "documents"? What is, from our perspective, the "why" and "what for" of our spaces

for the conservation of knowledge and memories? What do we librarians, archivists, and museologists do?

And probably for all those questions that I have asked myself, and that I have received, throughout my twenty-five years of career walking Latin American trails — questions for which, even today, I still do not have definitive answers.

Although, trust me, I'm already getting some basic ideas.

