

Socially Just Library Management in Conservative America

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ABSTRACT

This White Paper addresses how progressive public library directors, other administrators, and trustees can advance social justice in staffing and services while serving conservative Republican municipalities and counties. Such locales are not not limited to the states won by former President Trump in 2020. In reality, over 38 million of the more than 74 million votes Trump received were in states captured by President Biden (Bump, 2020). Unfortunately, during and after the election, critical race theory (CRT), an ascending philosophy that can spur overdue diversity, equity, and inclusion in progressive areas served by public libraries, became and remains demonized in many conservative communities. As such, its use can impede library social justice efforts when addressing staffing and services. This white paper offers alternative ways to advance social justice librarianship in conservative American contexts through developing interlanguages* and using pragmatic understandings and approaches.

North or South of Interstate 80 – An Illinois Story

Recently, a friend of the author described a meeting with a business associate in Springfield, Illinois. Considered part of “downstate,” Springfield is where President Barack Obama jump-started his political career in the state senate. This meeting took place at a local restaurant where the two businessmen were unexpectedly joined by another downstate resident. This newcomer immediately asked if the author’s friend was from “north or south of Interstate 80.” People living north of Interstate 80 are more likely to be Democratic “Chicagoland” progressives. Those from south of Interstate 80 may well be Republican conservatives. The author’s friend admitted he lived north of Interstate 80 and was from Oak Park, perhaps the state’s most liberal municipality. The interloper grimaced and immediately left the table.

Subsequent to the interloper's exit, the author’s friend and his colleague calmly and reasonably addressed the items they had met to discuss. Their differing political affiliations did not prevent jointly working together towards a common end.

This encounter reflected a disturbing development. Americans now exhibit strong “feelings of distrust, dislike and disdain for people who belong to the opposing political

* See p. 72 for definition.

party” (Luscombe, 2020). Although Bidden won the electoral votes of Illinois, Trump carried 88 of the Illinois’s 102 counties (Vestal, et al., 2021). Such localities often display perceptions of CRT that are polar opposites to the instruction increasingly offered in American Library Association-endorsed education for future public librarians (Leung, & Lopez-McKnight, 2021). This disjuncture between professional education and local realities will likely confront public library directors and boards of trustees in conservative communities for years to come.

Purposes of the White Paper

This essay was developed after the author received several requests from politically progressive library administrators seeking assistance for advancing inclusive public library service in conservative Republican communities. These library service locales had supported former President Donald Trump in the 2020 election. This white paper seeks to provide leaders of the library community with a relevant analysis of the implications of the conflict between the two mass movements, Social Justice and White Identity, currently vying for political control in a divided United States of America. Because this paper identifies the limits of CRT as a force for change in conservative America, it emphasizes the value of *neutrality*, *interlanguage*, and *pragmatism* to advance diversity, equity and inclusion in areas captured by former President Trump in 2020. The result is a demonstrated intellectual basis for pursuing social justice in library service, particularly by public libraries, when an approach openly grounded in CRT is not likely to be effective.

Name Calling and the Clash of the Social Movements

Any productive discussion of how to assist library administrators in pursuing social justice librarianship in conservative Republican or Red America will need to avoid falling into the trap of name-calling. We are experiencing what social psychologist Peter T. Colema, director of Columbia University’s Difficult Conversations Lab, believes is the worst political divide in the history of the United States of America. In such a context, negativity can be counterproductive in the search for solutions. As Coleman asserts, “we are in the grip of a more than fifty year escalating trend of political, cultural, and geographical polarization, and it is damaging our families, freindships, neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities to a degree not previously seen in our lifetime” (Coleman 2021, p. 4). When the consideration of this deep division in America is focused predominately on African-American-white relations, a strong argument can be made that a racial chasm has existed for more than four centuries (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021).

Regardless of the reality justifiably stimulating the effort, playing the “blame game” can alienate potential partners and has the problem of over-simplifying a complex reality. This arises, as Coleman observes, since causes of the deep divisions within American society are poorly understood.

None of the usual suspects cited for this pattern of divisiveness – our neural tribal tendencies, red-versus-blue moral differences, a loneliness epidemic, a blistering pace of technological and cultural change, sensationalist media, the business model of the major internet platforms, divisive political leadership, foreign interference, and so on is really the cause of our current crisis. *All of them are* [Emphasis added] (Coleman

2021, pp. 14-15).

It is crucial to avoid premature and erroneous suggestions addressing how progressive librarians can successfully lead socially responsive libraries in conservative contexts. Accordingly, this paper will consider the competing forces maneuvering for control over American culture as mass movements. To this end, the author accepts this definition of such a mass movement: "A persistent and organized effort involving the mobilization of large numbers of people to work together to either bring about what they believe to be beneficial social change or resist or reverse what they believe to be harmful social change" (DeFronzo & Gill, 2020, p. 27). In their analysis DeFronzo and Gill identify five types of social movements:

- Innovative (liberal) movement (add something new);
- Conservative movement (keep things as they are);
- Reactionary movement (return to the past);
- Reform movement (significant change);
- Revolutionary movement (great change and structural replacement in a progressive or conservative direction) (DeFronzo & Gill, 2020, pp. 27-28).

Any classification of the natures of the Social Justice Mass Movement and the White Identity Mass Movement can suffer from subjective factors. Nevertheless, the events of recent years suggest that the Social Justice Mass Movement is basically a Reform Movement with a number of participants seeking revolutionary and immediate substantial change. The White Identity Mass Movement, as evidenced by its resistance to accepting the results of the 2020 presidential election, appears to be moving from a traditional conservative stance to embrace a Reactionary mode. Additionally, the January 6, 2021 takeover of the the U.S. Capitol Building suggests a strongly retroactive Revolutionary component.

A complicating matter related to both movements is the decline in the perception of positive Black-White relations, as Gallup revealed:

For the second consecutive year, U.S. adults' positive ratings of relations between Black and White Americans are at their lowest point in more than two decades of measurement. Currently, 42% of Americans say relations between the two groups are "very" or "somewhat" good, while 57% say they are "somewhat" or "very" bad (Brennan 2021).

If the statistical majority of Americans perceive Black-White relations to be negative, it may well have a destructive influence on efforts to achieve socially just public library service, particularly in conservative Republican localities.

Social Justice Mass Movement Versus White Identity Mass Movement

The author spent several decades working in public, cooperative, and state library positions, rising from part time clerk to deputy state librarian. Twenty of these years were in three conservative states that voted for Donald Trump in 2020. This extended process of interacting with members of various races, social classes, and political affiliations has left this progressive author with concerns about falling into the trap of thinking in absolutes. Such an error ignores the possibility that one's conservative political opponents might have complex lives exhibiting what a progressive would see as both good and bad qualities and actions. In a report on a study of both left-wing and right-wing Americans, Jordan Moss

described a reality where those who embrace a “black-and-white” mindset

become less willing to question their views and become more extreme. When advocating for a political cause, this good-or-bad moral lens tends to frame people with different opinions as morally decrepit. This encourages the adoption of an us versus them worldview (Moss, 2020).

An “us versus them worldview” is precisely the wrong mental approach for progressive library staff and board members trying to champion socially just library services in a conservative Republican municipality or county. While it might be effective in Blue or Democratic contexts, it is self-defeating in Red or Republican America to argue the claim that “a gradual, liberal line of action toward justice is inadequate and that what is essential is a confrontation with a social hierarchy rooted in White Supremacy” (Leung & Lopez-McKnight 2021, p. 13). Librarians with experience in the political world learn quickly that all social movements contains adherents with differing commitments to the cause. Some are open to a level of compromise with their political opponents on issues of concern to both political camps. Others suffer from groupthink, namely a common desire not to upset the balance of a group of people, where cross boundary cooperation is impossible. The intensity of the intergroup conflict is such that group members “tend to refrain from expressing doubts and judgments or disagreeing with the [group’s] consensus” (Psychology Today Staff, n.d.).

In addressing the possibility of progress in library diversity, equity, and inclusion in the midst of the conflict between the Social Justice Mass Movement and the White Identity Mass Movement, the author will attempt to avoid such ineffective groupthink reasoning.

Understanding the Social Justice Mass Movement

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the interpretation of U.S. history advanced in Carol Anderson’s challenging *White Rage* or the provocative *1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, it behoves library administrators and trustees to acquire a broader knowledge of the racial animosity analyzed in both works (Anderson, 2017; Hannah-Jones et al., 2021). These powerful pieces in American history revision address cultural realities too little discussed in textbooks used in conservative states such as Texas (NPR All Things Considered, 2020). For all intents and purposes these works are seminal resources for a reform movement which demonstrates occasionally revolutionary rhetoric.

The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story details over four hundred years of enslavement, revolts, mass murders, governmental discrimination, economic deprivation, and pervasive racism. In so doing the work argues for a total societal transformation, as well as financial reparations for America’s African-American community (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021). With chapter and other contributions by historians, journalists, and poets, the work is a strong argument for change. Its contentions are perhaps best summarized by the scholar Ibram X. Kendi. In a chapter entitled “Progress” Kendi asserted, “the long sweep of America has been defined by two forward motions: one widening the embrace of Black Americans and another maintaining or widening their exclusion. The duel between these two forces represents the duel at the heart of America’s racial history” (Kendi 2021, 439).

It is of interest that the term *critical race theory*, a strong contemporary object of political division (see below), does not appear in the 2021 index of *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*.

Critical Race Theory

When published in the *New York Times*, *The 1619 Project's* journalism addressing the consequences of a history of Black enslavement in America attracted criticism from some historians (GZERO Staff, 2021). However, more recent attacks by the White Identity Mass Movement on aspects of the Social Justice Mass Movement have concentrated more on CRT.

Defining Critical Race Theory (CRT)

There have been continuing arguments over the meaning of CRT (Mungo, 2021). In consequence, it seems best to provide a definition of the term from a “neutral” source. Such a useful explanation has been provided by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

Critical race theory (CRT), intellectual movement and loosely organized framework of legal analysis based on the premise that race is not a natural, biologically grounded feature of physically distinct subgroups of human beings but a socially constructed (culturally invented) category that is used to oppress and exploit people of colour. Critical race theorists hold that the law and legal institutions in the United States are inherently racist insofar as they function to create and maintain social, economic, and political inequalities between whites and nonwhites, especially African Americans (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

Understanding the White Identity Mass Movement

In 2017 Deborah Schildkraut provided what can function as a definition for the white identity movement, “a nontrivial share of white Americans think of themselves racially and want to have white candidates on the ballot, perhaps because they fear that non-white officeholders would not understand or represent them effectively” (2017). On the surface this is a relatively non-controversial stance since “many Black Americans view political representation as a potential catalyst for increased racial equality” (Brown & Atske, 2021). How this representation is obtained is where more controversial attitudes are developed and actions undertaken.

Donald Trump and his supporters have been effective in defining contemporary training on appropriate racial relationships as a poisonous ideology within many contexts (Wallace-Wells, 2021). It was a belief that some conservatives thought required countering at the presidential level. On September 22, 2020, then President Trump issued his Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping “to promote unity in the Federal workforce, and to combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating” (U.S. President. Executive Order 13950, 2021). After providing a short and bowdlerized history of American progress towards equality, the Executive Order asserted that contemporary diversity training consists of promoting an ideology “rooted in the pernicious and false belief that America is an irredeemably racist and sexist country; that some people, simply on account of their race or sex, are oppressors; and that racial and sexual identities are more important than our common status as human beings and American” (U.S. President. Executive Order 13950, 2021).

Like most U.S. political controversies the matter of theorizing on race relations, whether

or not involving CRT, will end up being addressed in both voting booths and courtrooms. For now, refuting CRT is a political weapon used by conservative Republicans to boost fundraising and “win back independent and moderate white suburban voters uneasy with proposed changes to public schooling or the implication that they are to blame for the enduring inequity in American society - and must make sacrifices to rectify past wrongs” (Zurcher, 2021).

Attacks on critical race theory benefit from the fact that there is no agreed definition of what constitutes the theory. Consequently, opponents can define it in ways that are most easily attacked. Even so, there has also been a more thoughtful resistance to CRT as a legal and political lodestar for America. Former Louisiana governor and Rhodes scholar Bobby Jindal provided a non-vitriolic analysis of some of the aspects of progressive racial theorizing that are opposed by conservative Republicans. It appeared in the *National Review*, America’s leading journal of conservative thought. In his article he stressed that “liberals” had made microaggressions a racist issue even where those accused are not aware they are exhibiting “implicit” bias. For Jindal, an Indian American, it was a diversion from the more important issue of attacking the real and detrimental effects of individual explicit bias. Blaming society at large instead of actual racists was similarly detrimental. Attacking meritocracy, demanding reparations, pressing for mandatory corporate training, and enacting speech codes were seen as equally damaging to America (Jindal 2020). While such matters are not part of every definition of CRT, they can be made to seem so.

Unfortunately, the debate over race theory, specifically including CRT, appears to reflect the definitional confusion described by *In These Times* reporter Hamilton Nolan.

Much of the time that we think we are talking about “issues,” we are actually talking about words. One side will argue against one definition of a word, while the other side argues in favor of a different definition of a word. Each side can claim that the other is not addressing the issue, because the issue is defined differently on each side (Nolan, 2021).

Social Justice Mass Movement Reaction to Attacks on Race Theory

On September 9, 2020, Irene Mulvey President of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), responded to Trump’s attack on racial justice training. She termed it both an effort to politicize efforts to deal with racism and an attack on the knowledge of experts (Mulvey, 2020).

In response to President Trump’s Executive Order, the American Library Association issued an October 29, 2020 statement asserting that the association rejected his attack on diversity training as racism.

We are painfully aware that libraries and the profession of librarianship have been – and still are – complicit in systems that oppress, exclude, and harm Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, and deny equal opportunity to women. We assert that a commitment to learn from the painful and brutal legacies of our history is essential to the fulfillment of our promise as a country of equal rights and opportunities (ALA Statement, 2020).

Roadblocks on the Way to a Progressive America

The 2020 worldwide participation in the “Black Lives Matter” upheaval, where “never before had a Black rebellion been met with such widespread support by people of all colors, classes, and walks of life,” has reinforced the preception of many that the overdue time to achieve full equality has arrived (Alexander and Alexander 2021, p. 100). However, the nation remains divided over the true nature of the effort.

A 2021 report of a national survey of 1,500 respondents by the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) showed race politics remains a substantial roadblock to rapid social equality. The survey included “1,000 white and 500 Black participants” and was led by Alexandra Filindra, UIC associate professor of political science. Among other findings the survey disclosed the following:

Fifty-three percent of respondents do not think that the Black Lives Matter movement is anti-democratic and only cares about power, but 33% do. While race, education and gun ownership status largely shape how people think of Black Lives Matter, the deepest divide is along party lines with only 8% of Democrats and 81% of Republicans sharing a negative view [emphasis added] (Filindra et al., 2021, p. 4).

This division over the political purpose of Black Lives Matter (BLM) may reflect Hamilton’s previously noted analysis of the confusion over words and their meaning (above). Nonetheless, the UIC survey documents an enormous Democratic-Republican difference over whether BLM is primarily an effort to secure either justice or power.

In considering the practical results of this UIC survey for library administrators and trustees, the implications for action on socially just library service are crucial in conservative America. With 81% of Republicans having “a negative view” of BLM, an open adherence by librarians to both BLM and CRT is not always going to be helpful in the advancement of social justice librarianship. It may even serve to generate resistance and thereby frustrate efforts to provide excellent and relevant public library service to all racial, ethnic, and gender segments of a conservative Republican community. As Hamilton suggests, proponents and opponents may have radically different understandings of the meaning of the shorthand definitions of anti-racist movements.

What Is Today’s Climate for Achieving Social Justice Soon?

Bluntly put, public support for change in the direction of social justice is currently problematic, as David Leonhardt reported in *The New York Times* on November 30, 2021:

When activists try to combat racism by calling it out, they often struggle to accomplish their goals. Focusing on Trump’s racist behavior did not keep him from winning the presidency. The Black Lives Matter movement has mostly failed to implement its policy agenda on policing. Affirmative-action programs generally lose when they appear on the ballot — including a landslide loss in California last year, helped by opposition from many Latino and Asian voters.

Race-based strategies are especially challenging in a country where living standards have stagnated in recent decades: Working-class families of all races have reason to distrust the notion that they enjoy a privileged lifestyle. No

wonder that Steve Bannon, the far-right political figure, once said that he wanted liberals “to talk about racism every day.” When they do, Bannon said, “I got ‘em” (Leonhardt, 2021).

It cannot be sufficiently stressed that the reality of a intensifying national division that mirrors voting patterns has forcefully impacted both the body politic and academic researchers. Cynthia S. Wang, Director of Northwestern University’s Dispute Resolution and Research Center, describes a Blue (Democrat) – Red (Republican) divide where “they’re contemptuous of the other side, whom they see as ‘other’ and less moral – an existential threat. This rise in out-group hate is what we find so alarming” (Calvert, 2020).

For progressives the contemporary American divide is complicated by the reality that the nation also leans conservative. A 2021 Gallup Poll found “37% of Americans described their political views as moderate, 36% as conservative and 25% as liberal (Saad 2022). Additionally, party identification is now a “more meaningful source of difference than race or religion in the minds of many Americans today – particularly for Democrats” (Gest et al., 2021).

Progressive library directors and board members seeking to advance social justice in library staffing and programs in conservative America need to face the reality that total success is not likely to be achieved in the short run. In their analysis of social movements, Zwerman and Schwartz underscored that solving large social problems such as racism is a long term process, even extending over an activist’s lifetime (Zwerman & Schwartz, 2021).

Advancing Library Social Justice in Conservative America

The now inevitable search on Amazon will reveal numerous works on critical race theory and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Unfortunately few, if any, of the academics and other authors have extensive professional experience as a library director in conservative Republican communities. The most relevant such anti-racist work, one that is based on public library management experience, is a first-rate pamphlet entitled *Leadership Brief: Anti-Racist Executive Leadership for Public Libraries*. Unfortunately, this document is less likely to be effective outside of progressive America. A close reading of *the Leadership Brief* reveals that its “Library Executives Leading Anti-Racism” section seems to list achievements only in Democratic-leaning locales or in increasingly progressive Canadian cities (Urban Libraries Council, n.d.).

The Urban Libraries Council advice includes instructing library directors to “call it what it is – race and racism” in efforts to overcome historic roadblocks and achieve progress in advancing DEI (Urban Libraries Council, n.d.). In conservative Republican municipalities and counties such terminology might be viewed by local leaders as signaling that library directors and boards were embracing leftist activism. It is likely to be far from the truth. Nevertheless, as with many things, human perceptions inevitably tend to overshadow realities (Taylor 2019).

Unfortunately, the potential for such incorrect accusations does exist in contexts that yet deny the validity of the 2020 presidential election. In 2021 one such attack on librarian engagement with community needs appeared in the very conservative *Alaska Watchman*. It used the planned sessions of the Alaska Library Association’s annual conference to launch attacks on library neutrality at both state and national levels:

If the topics and speakers for the upcoming Alaska Library Association Conference are any indication, local librarians are being strategically trained and recruited to advance a litany of hard-left cultural and political aims.

The Alaska Library Association is a statewide nonprofit professional group that advocates for school and community libraries around the state. In recent years, however, this advocacy has taken a decidedly leftist turn – a trend seen in libraries across the nation (Davidson, 2021).

Complex realities are often simplified in the midst of intense disputations. Assertions of universally equal white privilege, for example, can be contested. Jennifer Heller reminds that members of the white population can “use their own experience to judge the validity of scholarly claims of racial privilege, because not all manifestations of racial privilege are universally accessible to whites.” Membership in a well-off social class may be required to “activate certain kinds of white privilege” (Heller, 2010, p. 118).

To use a high status example, a recent study of public records revealed that “43 percent of white students admitted to Harvard University were recruited athletes, legacy students, children of faculty and staff, or on the dean’s interest list – applicants whose parents or relatives have donated to Harvard.” The study further noted that 75% of these white students would *not* have been admitted without falling into one of these privileged categories (NBC, 2019). As a result of such unequal white privilege, fully qualified potential students, possibly including applicants with a variety of self-acknowledged racial identities, may have lost out on a Harvard education.

How Have Library Managers Traditionally Secured Useful Advice?

Directors and trustees can regularly attend meetings of state, provincial, or national library associations. There they may routinely join informal small meetings to discuss common management, governance, and service issues. Such meetings, which often occur over meals or with liquid refreshments, are of particular value. The participants may find themselves sharing similar personnel or service problems, sometimes even involving public libraries of more or less comparable size and with similar budgets. On several occasions the author heard those involved assert that such gatherings alone were worth the conference registration fee. These off-the-record meetings, usually practical and not confined to the latest library theories, may be considered to be the best approach to sharing ideas and solutions for addressing how to achieve progress in promoting DEI in many public library contexts.

Short of a network of secret listeners, it would be difficult to determine if and where table discussions have been taking place over promoting library social justice in conservative locales. As is usually the case with unofficial discussions on potentially incendiary issues, no transcripts or detailed reports of such exchanges, particularly if naming names, later surface in the library and information media. It is understandably so. To avoid local blowback, accounts of currently serving directors and trustees who are working to achieve progressive ends in conservative communities would need to be published anonymously. If published in the literature, even successes might draw sideline criticism in the library profession when directors did not employ theories being advocated by well-compensated consultants. Unfortunately, not all consultants bring a developed public library understanding of the

sometimes complex conditions that impact progress in library social justice at the local level.

What Is Second Best? And Why Use It?

In 1852 the first edition of a fundamentally important book on academic matters entitled *The Idea of a University* appeared (Newman & Svaglic, 1982). In this legendary work, John Henry Newman provided advice useful to contemporary library directors and trustees in challenging times. According to Newman, “in a particular instance, it might easily happen, that what is only second best is best practically, because what is actually best is out of the question” (Newman & Svaglic, 1982, p. 8). Although published long before the work of such pragmatic philosophers as William James and John Dewey this advice is a particularly pragmatic response to our current circumstances.

With CRT under attack by conservative Republicans, supporters of it and DEI may choose not to publish anything short of total support lest it be labeled as an attack on social justice librarianship itself. Consequently, readers will find little in the English language literature and web sites on how to justify, design, and secure support for non-CRT socially just library efforts. For reasons already noted above, valuable, relevant, and needed advice from still serving public library heads and trustees in conservative America is understandably missing at this time. Such may become available as directors and move on to take positions in more progressive locales, or retire.

Among the difficult to find advice is a resource developed for Symposium 1: Post-Neutrality Librarianship of the *New Librarianship Symposium Series 2021* entitled “Progressive Librarianship in ‘Red’ America” (Crowley, 2021a). In this symposium paper the author addresses the continuing value of developing a shared language for discussing needed change, supporting library neutrality, and employing pragmatism as a planning method (Crowley, 2021a). The aim of such an approach was to improve inclusive services when CRT and other openly race-based approaches would generate resistance in conservative municipalities and counties. More recently, in “Allies, Cobelligerents, and the Political Realities of Pursuing Social Justice Librarianship in Conservative Republican Communities” (Crowley, 2023), the author addressed a progressive definition of the term “ally.” This definition demands that allies must support the full spectrum of progressive demands, thereby raising a barrier to cooperation with those who might support only a part of the overdue efforts to achieve necessary change.

This essay has already noted the author’s experience of serving for twenty years in increasingly responsible library positions in conservative Republican states. His claim to “second best” credentials to write on library political matters on conservative Republican local levels also includes volunteer work as a state legislative committee member and chair, as well as Federal Relations Coordinator. In both offices the author helped build coalitions that transcended political differences in their support for libraries (Crowley, 2021a, p. 4). In this political work for libraries the author found it useful to register as a Independent in order to assert the claim to both Democratic and Republican office holders that he was a member of the “Library Party.” It is an approach that may no longer be feasible in what has been termed a longstanding take-no-prisoners political environment (Moss, 2012).

The Nature of the Contemporary Political Gulf

Those who have studied the incredible gulf that now separates progressive Democrats and conservative Republicans note that its contemporary political development required three critical components. According to Cynthia Wang of Northwestern University:

The first [component] is “othering,” or the tendency to view opponents as fundamentally different or alien from oneself. The second, “aversion,” involves intense dislike and distrust of this other. The third is “moralization,” or the perception that one’s political opponents are wicked or even criminal.

“It’s the combination of all three that makes political sectarianism so corrosive,” Wang says. “Each on its own has adverse effects, but it is the coexistence of all three that creates the poisonous cocktail of political sectarianism” (Calvert, 2020).

Even when involved in such a potentially toxic context, library heads in Red communities might achieve some degree of success in advancing social justice through a pragmatic approach based on a mutually acceptable interlanguage for discussion of how to achieve positive library change. The essential condition for library directors and boards in Republican environments for developing such an interlanguage is a willingness to create a vocabulary for negotiating progress with those on the other side of the local chasm. To do so requires an understanding of perceptions and their impact on the understanding of facts.

Subjectivity Versus Facts

The author has published a review of the literature addressing the limited role played by facts and factual arguments over political matters (Crowley, 2021b). That inquiry revealed that facts are significantly less important in political life than such “subjective means as party loyalty, self-interest, mental models, heuristics [lessons from experience or rules of thumb], and perceptions” (Crowley, 2021b, p. 79). Such dissonance strongly influences the exploding conflict between the Social Justice and White Identify Mass Movements. In consequence, the facts contained in such a well-developed work as *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* are unlikely to influence members of the White Identity Mass Movement (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021).

Taylor On the Role of Perceptions

In considering reactions to CRT it is necessary to address the issue of human perceptions. The psychologist Jim Taylor has pointed out that

“our perceptions influence how we focus on, process, remember, interpret, understand, synthesize, decide about, and act on reality The problem is that the lens through which we perceive is often warped in the first place by our genetic predispositions, past experiences, prior knowledge, emotions, preconceived notions, self-interest, and cognitive distortions” (Taylor, 2019).

Restating Taylor’s observations, it is possible that library directors and trustees in Republican locales can name a number of local public library staff and community members, both progressive and conservative, whose perceptions clearly influence how they view objective facts about the “other side” in this dispute. This reality would be a local illustration

of the mega dispute that is tearing at the seams holding the American national culture together.

Political Culture Versus Library Management

While serving as a deputy state librarian in a Midwestern Republican state the author was informed about a totally unexpected occurrence. A department head in his division described to him how one of the state's relatively well-funded public libraries had hired a new library director. She came to her position from out of state with an unmatched reputation for effectiveness. Yet, she then served in her new position for a remarkably short time.

Shortly after her arrival, the new director thoroughly reviewed her library's current budget as well as its past budgets. In the process she found that the library's fiscal officer was making a salary that was immensely larger than the salary of any other staff member, including herself. While this situation was not illegal the director thought it sufficiently out of line to reflect a problem with the library's personnel and compensation policies.

At the next meeting of the library board the new director suggested that the salary of the fiscal officer be frozen until raises and cost of living increases made the salaries of other library personnel more comparable. Shortly after this proposal was put to the board, the director was no longer employed by the library. No specific reason was given for her termination. It was at this point that the now-former library director learned that the fiscal officer had spent much of her life as a Republican party activist, credited with keeping the county both conservative and Republican.

Inasmuch as the library director served at the pleasure of the board of trustees and no state laws appeared to have been broken, the state library was advised to do nothing. Following this incident the head of library development at the state library resolved to remind his staff to advise new library directors to study and comprehend the role politics plays in their library and its service community. Failure to do so could result in unintended negative consequences, particularly when taking action involving library personnel and their services.

The author has never forgotten this account of the power of some local political parties over the actions of public library boards. Now, as a tenured faculty member, he keeps it in mind while reflecting on the responsibility of faculty members in ALA-accredited programs when advising both experienced professionals and new graduates seeking employment in conservative America. When jobs could be at stake, such advice might very well stress the value of understanding one's service community before using theories and language that might not be well received locally. In particular, the intensity of the clash between the Social Justice Mass Movement and the White Identity Mass Movement should not be underestimated. The role of identity politics, which influences both social justice and white identity, is too little understood by those embracing slogans without a consideration of consequences. This was noted in a recent review:

Criticisms of identity politics tend to center not so much on the idea that people's group identity should be important in their politics, but on ways in which identity politics has been positioned by its advocates. This includes criticism of the rigid norms of verbal behavior that are

supposed to be used in reference to identity groups, and criticism of the assumptions that people not in particular identity groups are responsible for the negative situation of those who are (Newport, 2021).

Restated, people can resent being criticized for unintentionally using the “wrong” terminology in discussions. They can be equally annoyed at being held responsible for negative situations in which they see themselves as having had no role.

Beware of Stereotyping

Analysis conducted by the Pew Research Center for its latest political typology underscores a too little discussed reality. Data show that “the gulf that separates Republicans and Democrats sometimes obscures the divisions and diversity of views that exist within both partisan coalitions – and the fact that many Americans do not fit easily into either one” (Pew Research Center, 2021, p. 5).

The Pew typology categories explore the divergences among groups within the Democratic and Republican political parties. Setting aside independents who occasionally vote Republican, that party’s coalition includes: “Faith and Flag Conservatives, Committed Conservatives, Populist Right, and Ambivalent Right categories” (Pew Research Center, 2021, p. 10). It is quite foreseeable that progressive librarians can find support for some aspects of locally defined DEI in public library services within one or more of these Republican groupings. With luck, they will have influence with, or even be, government officials and other opinion leaders in a library’s municipal or county service area.

In the conflicted nation that is the current U.S., acting to advance DEI without sufficient prior planning, or simply being unaware of local political currents, can leave a public library open to budget cuts and even changes in the nature of the board of trustees (Bader, 2021). For advancing social justice, the process of understanding one’s local community should provide information on how well a publicized commitment to CRT would be received. If CRT is an obstacle in a community, use another critical theory. As pointed out by Roberto Frega, “pragmatism shares the main features that have made Critical Theory the most promising tool for sustaining processes of emancipation, while avoiding some of its controversial theoretical assumptions” (Frega, 2014. p. 76).

You Can Think Critically But Do Communicate Pragmatically A Pragmatic Consideration

One of the better definitions of the practical nature of pragmatism is quite short and found in the online *Cambridge Dictionary*: “the quality of dealing with a problem in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist, rather than following fixed theories, ideas, or rules” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Why Pragmatism?

The author’s past considerations of the value of pragmatism in advancing social justice librarianship have drawn on the valuable work of European researchers (Crowley, 2021a; Crowley, 2021b). In the process he relied heavily on the valuable analyses of Roberto Frega, a faculty member with the French National Centre for Scientific Research. Frega has summarized much of the American pragmatic tradition, particularly that of the theoretical

giant John Dewey, with the short exhortation “*don’t ask for the causes, ask for the consequences* (italics in original)” (Frega, 2014, p. 68).

Certain illusionary claims made against CRT now hamper its ability to promote positive change in some conservative Republican communities. The opposition to CRT has even reached the point where state legislatures are voting to outlaw its use in education (Rashawn & Gibbons, 2021).

Rejection of the reality of systemic racism is likely to continue in much of Red America. Research now reveals that people are “putting much less time and energy into seeking accurate information about the people on the other side of the divide or on the many different challenges facing our world, choosing instead to think and feel in ways that are consistent and conforming with our tribes” (Coleman, 2021, p. 24). In such contexts, library heads and boards in conservative Republican communities might achieve some degree of success in advancing social justice librarianship through a pragmatically sensible way based on actual conditions. Such successes will require avoiding deal-killer disputes over theories and terminology that may be unacceptable to the other parties in the discussion.

Interlanguages

The first meaning provided for interlanguage in the *Encyclopedia.com* is “a language created for international communication” (Encyclopedia.com, n.d.). For his part, the author recently restated his definition of interlanguage for the information and library professions, “a negotiated, evolving, mutually acceptable repertoire of common understandings about the world or aspects of the world viewed as important by humans seeking to communicate in a given context” (Crowley, 2021b, p. 77).

The process of developing a working interlanguage must begin with the understanding that all involved ought to be respected. If conservatives or progressives demand the other side use their terminology for talking about any library problems, everyone might as well stay home. It simply will not work.

The author recently provided a problems-based approach to developing a higher, more inclusive, level of public library service in a community:

Service pluses or minuses are likely to vary by Red [conservative Republican] communities. One proven approach to identifying local service consequences and any necessary changes would be for community planners to develop a listing of which programs the planners believe local taxpayers can reasonably expect their library to provide. The listing should allow for the use of different delivery systems in providing such services. This approach, which is designed to minimize finger-pointing and a subsequent planning breakdown, can be effective in determining if certain community segments, specifically including BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), are being adequately served (Crowley, 2021a, p. 21).

In preparing for this sort of effort the author recommends a reading of Peter T. Coleman’s *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization* (2021). This well-researched work uses more of a popular than academic style as it addresses such factors as effective outside assistance in the necessary discussions for change, the complexity of major community

problems that take time to address, and the worth of smaller groups sharing an interest in community betterment to problem solving (Coleman, 2021).

Library Neutrality

Openly proclaiming that the public library is not neutral without expecting negative blowback in conservative America is potentially self-defeating. It represents an invitation to obstruct efforts to advance socially responsible public library staffing and service. In a time of intense national division, members of the White Identity Mass Movement might see such a declaration as demonstrating that a community or county's valued library has been taken over by radicals seeking to spread a negatively defined version of CRT. In certain locales, that could lead to the appointment or election of a more conservative board of trustees and the hiring of a less progressive library director. Such developments would not bode well for achieving overdue diversity, equity, and inclusion via library reforms.

From a pragmatic stance the story of the development of public library neutrality can be told differently. It can be seen, particularly in the last half-century, as a tale of fault correction and increasing achievement in the effort to provide all segments of a community with the neutral goal of excellent services. As with all things human it is an incomplete story. However, library history has demonstrated how public libraries, cognizant of past failures and present needs, increasingly demonstrate a willingness to change in positive directions. They add branches, put bookmobiles on the road, offer books by mail or electronically, create hotspot lending programs, hire teachers to help with homework assignments, and even provide evening story hours for the children of working adults.

Money can be an indicator of support for public libraries. The fact that public libraries won 90% of the elections in both Blue and Red states on funding during the incredibly divisive 2020 presidential election demonstrates that much of the American public, regardless of political affiliation, currently trusts its public libraries (Ford, 2020).

The New Rules Are the Old Rules Restated for Public Library Directors and Trustees in Conservative Republican America

The new rules for public library directors in communities predominately influenced by the Social Justice Mass Movement or the White Identity Mass Movement are very much like the old rules, only more so. The need to understand a community's culture, even if one strongly disagrees with it, is fundamentally important.

As already noted, the fundamental difference between progressive and conservative locales becomes clear when one understands how the same words are interpreted differently. For example, in progressive communities the concept of "library neutrality" can be a negative to be either openly doubted or even attacked. In conservative locales it is more likely to be defined as a reasonable ideal, since the public library is supported by all taxpayers in the community. Library directors need to understand which definition applies in their service areas. The matter of critical race theory or CRT can be defined as truth in progressive areas while being characterized as false and even unAmerican in conservative environments.

All public library directors and trustees need to know how effective openly embracing CRT would be in their service areas in the necessary effort to advance social justice in library services. If use of the theory would be counterproductive, a library director will

want to take another approach that would avoid language a dominant local culture would find as a trigger for negative reaction. Adopting the pragmatic “don’t ask for the causes, ask for the consequences” could highlight what needs to be done without attempting to name and shame influential individuals and groups. While this could be less emotionally satisfying, it could result in better long run outcomes for library social justice.

The necessary effort to advance DEI in public library services is not going to be easy. As observed by the psychologist Peter Coleman, who also directs Columbia University’s Difficult Conversation Lab:

When faced with a high degree of intergroup (red versus blue) threat, frustration, and enmity, most of us fall back on some of the deeper rules we have developed to cope with spikes of risk and uncertainty. Under these conditions, we automatically move to simplify, essentialize, close ranks, defend, blame, and attack. In other words we move from relatively more open, curious, nuanced, and accessible modes of experience and action to more closed, certain, and defensive modes. We are virtually hardwired to do so (Coleman, 2021, p. 213).

To minimize the likelihood of negative developments, public library programs on challenging or emerging local issues should avoid simplistic “pro or con” debates. Such types of public programs are likely to be a barrier to solving very complex issues. They tend only to reinforce the existing beliefs of both participants and their audiences (Coleman, 2021). Instead, libraries should consider roundtables communicating along the lines of “What Are the Necessary Components of Inclusive Library Service for Our Community?” or “Our Homeschooling Numbers Are Growing. What Do the Parents of these Students Need from Their Public Library?”

Avoiders, Martyrs, or Achievers

In the end, public library directors and trustees in conservative Republican areas dominated by the White Identity Mass Movement have three choices for future action.

The first choice was identified by pragmatic researcher Patricia M. Shields. It is the route most often taken by administrators in the public sector when facing change —duck and hope to avoid attacks by “powerful interest groups, employees, clients, politicians” (Shields, 1993, p. 34).

The second choice is to publicly stress that one’s library has never really been neutral. Instead, it has operated in a manner that has been inherently discriminatory in hiring staff, developing collections, and providing services. This approach may succeed in transforming the direction of a community’s library program where its Red status is only slightly Pink. Alternatively, the results may resemble what happened when that new director (see above p. 70) discerned that the high salary paid to her library’s fiscal head was out of step with best personnel policies.

The third approach is to reread and act upon the definition of pragmatism offered in this paper — “the quality of dealing with a problem in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist, rather than following fixed theories, ideas, or rules” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Inherent in this approach would be the need to identify and recruit as library planners, local conservative Republicans, progressive Democrats, and undecided Independents who believe in the aphorism “You have to pay your civic rent.” Such individuals

are seeking ways to pay back their community for its past personal and professional support. As such, to some degree they may be willing to join in the work to make possible quality and individually relevant library service open to all community members through a variety of means.

Such an approach would obviously need to develop an interlanguage where planners with different political commitments agree on the meaning of the terms used in their discussions of the goals and aims of their public library service. This effort would have to be strongly pragmatic. Participants would need to be willing to throw away every theory, including the author's pragmatism, that gets in the way of a collaborative approach towards socially just library staffing and service improvement.

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