

November 5, 2024: Three Sources of Lessons for Libraries

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ABSTRACT

The CFP for this special issue is responding to a set of nested, documented phenomena, each of which is politically problematic and deserving of debunking. The effort being urged is to oppose or reverse these. But all this takes place in a context and forms a context, too. It is worth reminding ourselves that it has been a tumultuous decade since the election campaign of 2016, with reversals and re-reversals. Meanwhile, the United States has become more inequalitarian due to neoliberal policies over the last five decades, and the relationship between the public and democratic institutions like libraries has been reset, to the damage of democracy. Contemporary events are only accelerating these phenomena. Reciting and critiquing them again is comforting, but something different needs doing. By tying itself to democracy, modern librarianship is open to the deep currents to which democracy has always been subject. The paper explores them: 1) the Greeks, Democracy, Domination, and Rhetoric; 2) Anti-Intellectualism in American Life; and 3) Reaction to Progress or Revolution Never—Ever—Goes Away, followed by a conclusion.

Introduction

Schematized, the Call for Papers (CFP) of this special issue of *The Political Librarian* would look like this:

- The US federal government “*will be controlled by politicians who support book bans and other limitations on access to information.*”
- Politicians “*vilify many of the communities that libraries have long worked to support and empower.*”
- Those “*who crafted the laws that threaten to jail librarians faced no consequences from voters and those who pushed for even more regressive agendas were voted in ... to ban books, incarcerate library workers, and even shut down libraries.*”
- This special issue seeks to discuss and analyze what the “*results of the 2024 election may indicate for the future of libraries and library work,*” and the “*key ... is trying to determine and examine the political, policy, economic, legal, advocacy, and cultural lessons*” for the institution and profession to “*reestablish ... support ... and succeed in addressing future political challenges.*”

In other words, the CFP is responding to a set of nested, documented phenomena, each of which is politically problematic, rankly unjust, false in itself, clearly opposed to the

democratic values to which librarianship's core commitments are keyed, and deserving of debunking, opposition, and analytic energy in parts or as a bundle. The effort being urged is to oppose or reverse these.

All this takes place in a context and forms a context, too. It is worth reminding ourselves of the tumultuous and razor-thin 2016 election and its wake (Bump 2016), heavily influenced by the intertwined effects of fake news from varying sources and the technology enabling it (Buschman 2019, 2024b), followed by the equally razor-thin November 3, 2020, election, which went in the opposite direction (Fowers et al. 2020)—falsely declared “stolen” and the subject of the ginned-up insurrection on January 6, 2021 (Browning and Gold 2024)—and was followed by a re-reversal in the small-but-real majority for the winner “others” in 2016 (Buschman 2018) became “The people that came in, they’re eating the cats. They’re eating—they’re eating the pets of the people that live there” in 2024, playing on a fear of immigrants as well as gender anxiety and other differences (Ulloa 2024; Dowd 2024). And while these phenomena did not initially target libraries or the underrepresented people they service, they *were* consciously swept into the 2024 election campaign. The narrative of “problematic” reading materials for children begat library censorship—opposition to which equaled advocating for pornographic or pedophilic literature, which equaled grooming the very young—and widespread threats of violence, criminal penalties, and prison sentences for librarians’ distribution of obscene or harmful texts, along with a widespread war on “woke” in many institutions (Jaeger et al. 2022; Natanson 2022; 2023; Natanson and Kaur 2024; Fleishman 2023). As of this writing, federal agencies and cabinet members are directly restricting books on shelves in a widespread offensive against diversity, equity, and inclusion (“woke”) initiatives or perceived initiatives (Lamothe 2025).

Panning further out, the “United States has become noticeably more inegalitarian . . . from the turn of the twentieth century . . . [and] quantitatively as extreme as in old Europe in the first decade of the twentieth century” (Piketty 2014, 292–93). Why? Because neoliberal policies over the last five decades have fostered a re-redistribution of wealth upward through policy and sought to reset the relationship between the public and democratic institutions, like schools and libraries, to the damage of democracy (Piketty 2014; Buschman 2012; 2021). The very, *very* wealthy are, more than usual, publicly occupying seats of political administrative power and are directly involved in federal efforts to further these agendas (Stein et al. 2025; Bumiller 2025). Finally, while there were long-standing worries about media consolidation in book publishing, bookselling, media, and news outlets for decades (Miller 2001), social media “platformization” has further consolidated control without accompanying publisher-style responsibilities, e.g., liabilities for rank falsehoods on platforms (Habermas 2022). Illustrative is that the owner of Twitter-now-X has politically partnered with the winner of November 5, 2024 (Stein et al. 2025). The result? A closing of the circle: an explosion of fake news and political lies salting the communicative landscape, making it hostile to both democracy and libraries, generating an epistemic crisis (Buschman 2019; 2024b). An entire volume surveying contemporary political theory was written around this premise (Chambers 2023).

These phenomena are undoubtedly familiar to readers of this journal. Reciting and critiquing them again is comforting, but something different needs doing. By tying itself to democracy, modern librarianship is open to the deep currents to which democracy has always been subject. This is not an exercise in “seen it all” or “this too shall pass.” The dangers are real and persistent, with far-reaching consequences (e.g., Yourish et al. 2025). After all, the November 3, 2020, elections were a sweep for the *other* side—presumably against book bans,

harassing minority communities, and for capacious understandings of reading and inquiry. But simply winning an election did not end the currents operating beside, behind, and inside the democracy that won a majority on November 5, 2024. What has been happening before and since November 5, 2024, are durable currents that we must recognize in order to adjust our approaches accordingly. This paper seeks to reset our outlook and identify three of those currents. The remainder of this paper will explore them.

Current One: The Greeks, Democracy, Domination, and Rhetoric

I know. It makes me sigh, too, when I pick up a promising title, and I am immediately thrust into a scene of tunics, agoras, temples, symposia, and festivals to ground an idea, often at length—a tic among many authors that seek to bridge the scholarly-popular divide. Circumstances then were, of course, quite different: Ancient Greece was a direct democracy (when it was a democracy); slaves, women, and non-Greeks were excluded; and Greek identity, war, and the fate of the vanquished were frequent examples of weighty decisional topics (Harris 2017). But excellent modern scholarship has plumbed Greek texts (drama and comedy as well as philosophical) for subtle ironies, lessons, and paradoxes, as well as different authors in dialogue with one another about the same events, persons, or issues for contemporary democratic insights (e.g., Mara 2018; 1997, 249–50; 2008; Euben et al. 1994). For instance, Plato may be highly critical of democracy, but he has Socrates dismantle many arguments deleterious to good democratic citizenship and speak to civic virtues needed for it (Mara 2008, *passim*). But in plain terms, the Greeks (and their modern interlocutors) tell us that, from the beginning, democracy will be prey to phenomena we are now experiencing: oligarchy and misleading/self-serving/false rhetoric.

Oligarchy: Domination by the Rich

This warning is highly relevant to us now: “Men of business” will exploit the poorer populace and, as “governors, induced by the motives which I have named, treat their subjects badly [and] care only for making money,” bringing about political instability and/or violence (Plato 1947, 558–59). That is, “oligarchy’s practice reveals a city divided between the self-indulgent rich and the vengeful poor”—certainly a version of our contemporary circumstance (Mara 1997, 142). It is not that *only* democracy has fundamental weaknesses but that *all* political arrangements have them, and an unjust and unwise oligarchy can rise from democracy’s decline (Mara 1997, 137–45). The rich—of which we have a plethora today—absent sound democratic checks will use their wealth to dominate: to accrue power to accrue more wealth, and then more power, undermining democracy. This has been a concern of contemporary democratic theorists who observed this pattern in the present day (Dahl 2006). This is not a phenomenon that just now jumped three thousand years to the present but rather a recurring theme:

- Elites (Martin Luther among them) undermined the social revolution of the German Peasants’ War in the 1500s (Meany 2025).
- There has long been an active interpretation of the American Revolution that argues elites compromised only just enough for public support to retain political control—and slavery (Dunn 2006, 80–84).

- Elites (e.g., lawyers and the wealthy) abandoned professional ethics and actively helped to dismantle democracy and individual rights in 1930s Nazi Germany (Snyder 2017, 38–41).
- The wealthy vehemently opposed New Deal progressive reforms to protect and assist the economically struggling (Lepore 2018, 444–48), and elites have long sought—and often captured—the quintessentially democratic experiment of American public education for their purposes (Apple 1987).

The varying forms of equality that libraries pursue fly directly in the face of this current (Buschman 2024a)—and may be an underappreciated generative factor in the blowback libraries are now receiving.

The Sway of Rhetoric: Greek Fake News

Oligarchy does not simply bull rush democracy to take over. There were and are techniques of rhetoric to sway opinions and political decisions. The Greeks wrote much on rhetoric and made many distinctions between types—such as for public occasions (festivals), the courts, and in political venues (the assembly) with differing audiences for each (Harris 2017). Following Mara (2018), we will “treat rhetoric as the language of politics, particularly ... as the language of democratic politics ... extend[ing] the scope of rhetoric beyond the technical skills” here.* Plato thought rhetoric the “art of enchanting the soul” (Plato n.d.)—that is, though it could be used to reach virtue, just as or more often, it is deployed to deceive or sway toward destructive or unvirtuous ends. “Rhetoric’s ... psychic effects reinforce the sovereignty of experiences of pleasure (gratification) and pain (deprivation) and thus the status of power as the most significant primary good ... all too easily aggregated into the powerful moves of an appetitive and aggressive society” (Mara 2008, 133). For example, while Pericles’ famous funeral oration is widely considered an encomium to democracy, it is also “crafted to combat ... dissenting voices” of grieving families or those in Athens opposing the war and seeking peace (Mara 2008, 115) or even as simple flattery and a power move (Mara 2018). Implied in that, rhetoric can be a technique of “mastery over others”—the ability to persuade “whatever it may be” or a striving “to gratify ... fellow-citizens and ... seeking their own private interests”—a particular weakness of democracies (Raaflaub 1994, 122).

Democracy’s decisions are ever-changing because of a passion for novel speeches. Those in the assembly are often “simply overcome by the pleasures of hearing ... and [are] like those who sit by and watch the displays of sophists” rather than taking seriously political matters of the city (Mara 2001, 825). Technical decisions in democracies (e.g., for the Greeks, maintaining a navy) “are inevitably politicized ... heavily compromised by rhetorical appeals to the passions eclips[ing] both expertise and deliberation” (Mara 2001, 835). That is, rhetoric can persuade “without teaching” and can simply rely on outright deception or fail to persuade those “devoted to power and rule” (Mara 2018; 2001, 830). Finally, rhetoric deployed “with a view to the best” and most virtuous behaviors—the didactic goal of much Greek writing on the topic—can “replace crass manipulation with [a] haughty paternalism of non-democratic or aristocratic eloquence” (Mara 1993, 169). That is, like Pericles, the wealthy and powerful were often in position to deploy rhetoric toward their desired ends (Mara 2001, 833; 2018). Like today’s fake news, Greek rhetoric came as many different wolves disguised as many different kinds of sheep. The subtleties of defending platform-amplified fake news as free inquiry

* This is a particular take on Greek use of rhetoric, which was more rounded than this account—hence the variety of moves and countermoves implied in rhetorical strategies.

(Habermas 2022) were matched by the Greeks' "misleading and manipulative speeches that distort reality with devastating consequences for civic life" (Mara 2008, 23, see also 42, 140). This, it can reasonably be concluded, is baked into democracy.

Current Two: Anti-Intellectualism in American Life

The section title is taken from Richard Hofstadter's 1963 book, quite famous in its time. Hofstadter—a distinguished mid-century American historian—probed the rootstock of American anti-intellectualism throughout his published writings. But we must first start with the question of anti-intellectual vs. what? The "classical and early modern thinkers ... took revolution to be a simple upsetting and reordering of society on new principles. But the French Revolution was taken by its partisans and critics alike to have revealed a principle of historical unfolding, and not necessarily a progressive one" (Lilla 1998). As a result, "overcoming monarchism and the Catholic Church ... and then ... Marxist challenges to ... legitimacy in [the 20th] century" was a live, vital and persistent struggle; consequently "writers and thinkers [we]re held in an esteem unimaginable in the States" (Lilla 1989, 261, 264). France led the way: Their patterns were, more or less, those of intellectuals and intellectualism throughout Europe up until the twenty-first century. In contrast, Hofstadter "stress[ed] the lack of serious ideological conflict in American society" in its history, directly challenging historians prone to a more dramatic narrative (Lasch 1973, xiii; Hofstadter 1973, xxxvii). For instance, in the late nineteenth century, the US "saw its own image in the tooth-and-claw version of natural selection and ... its dominant groups were therefore able to dramatize this vision of competition [and] ruthless business rivalry" (Hofstadter 1955, 201). Hofstadter (1955, 5) argued that the era was characterized by a conservative settlement and widespread consensus "that the time had now come for acquiescence and acquisition, for the development of ... the continent ... and the immense new industries."

Given Hofstadter's (1963) bent of looking for stabilizing and persistent elements in American society, it is unsurprising that he finds a variety of sources of anti-intellectualism. For example, the emotionalism of American Protestantism—prizing religious enthusiasm over institutional or analytical approaches—fostered "a society [un]likely to produce poets or artists or savants" (Hofstadter 1963, 80). Second, the highly practical ethos of business—"the more thoroughly business dominated American society, the less it felt the need to justify its existence by reference to values outside its own domain"—was also a wellspring (Hofstadter 1963, 251). Third, the tradition of the educated, reforming gentleman farmers quickly subsided in America, giving way to a population of dirt farmers gobbling up surplus land and a consequent class "opposition to science and book farming, ... there was great reluctance ... to accept the idea that education ... could do much for their children" (Hofstadter 1963, 277–78). Finally, intellectual wit was simply unpopular with the public, held against a then-recent notably intellectual candidate for president (Hofstadter 1963, 225). His book was written largely in response to McCarthyism and its aftermath, and Hofstadter (1964) went on in later work to point out that American anti-intellectualism was highly congenial to the right wing, contributing to a "paranoid style in American politics" (again, quoting the title of the piece) that conjured an ever-present enemy, perfect in his malice and methods, sapping the vitality and morality of American society. Persistent similarities to the present cannot be missed.

Current Three: Reaction to Progress or Revolution Never—Ever—Goes Away

“The revolutionary spirit that inspired political movements across the world for two centuries may have died out, but the spirit of reaction that rose to meet it has survived and is proving just as potent” (Lilla 2016, ix). Mark Lilla has made a scholarly career of pointing out that substantial scholarly attention is paid to revolutions and their sources, but “we have no such theories about reaction” (2016, ix). His work and that of others set out to correct that. For instance, in the face of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church simply reacted (slowly) with condemnation/excommunication, leaving the intellectual fields it formerly dominated untended and open to secular and Protestant thinkers and a residual of simmering reactionary discontent that is still present (Lilla 2016, 71; 2024). Religion—the organized belief in and worship of God—and its decline has been a point of contention for centuries, fueling reaction from the Islamic world (Lilla 2007) to fundamentalist Christians (Fleishman 2023) to opposition to secularized Judaism (Lilla 2016, 3–23) to name three instances. The French Revolution has long been the Ur-generator of reactionaryism—the term was conceptualized then and led to two centuries of conflict over the combination of its political and (anti)religious legacy, among other issues (Brown 2011; Lilla 1998; 2016). Finally, as a contemporary example, there were the cultural transformations of the sixties: of the family, personal morality, and public authority, bringing sustained reactionary responses we still experience (Lilla 1998; 2016, 92–95). The “political discourse of reaction is ... pervasive, ... formed by an earlier cultural and political situation [now] ingrained” (Lilla 1998). In other words, and in our terms, many of our assumptions about cultural change and progress in our field have been blinkered (Wiegand 2020), perhaps overinformed by the 2008 election of Obama. What overtook us in 2024 has always been there.

Conclusion

To recap: Democracy has been prey to domination by the rich and slippery/devious oratory from the beginning, and that continues to the present day. American culture has a strong and persistent anti-intellectual streak that shrugs at rampant political mendacity in favor of a constant sifting for simple, pragmatic solutions amid distrust of many forms of learning. And the reactionary impulse to oppose progress and revolutions never goes away—it only fades from view at times and temporarily at that. So what? What possible practical outcomes can come from this brief examination of verities? I would argue that there are benefits to this exercise. The first is that librarianship is not now facing something wholly new. If we are caught flat-footed, it is because we ignore lessons *we urge on our library publics all the time*: that libraries are windows to past experiences and other perspectives that can provide guideposts. Second, if the headwinds have always been there, it is intuitively obvious that, as they are prevailing now, they’ve been overcome before. Progress is possible because it has happened in the past, most probably aided by persistence. Third, if nothing else, political judgment and skill should be valued by and cultivated in the profession, especially at leadership levels—right now (Buschman 2016). Fourth, we are reminded that librarians are not alone. Those in political opposition to the winners of 2024 are floundering, unable to process or cope with their unexpected losses in 2016 and 2024 and the policy defeats along the way (Balz 2025). Finally, one more verity: The price of liberty is constant vigilance. That rights, freedoms, and liberties have been won on library and other fronts does not mean they are permanent. These three historical lessons and their ancillaries are unsatisfying, but unlike

12-Step Programs or the Six Pillars of Success, the likes of which so many motivational and self-help consultants pitch, they have the virtue of being durable and true. True is a solid first step to grappling with November 5, 2024.

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