

On My Mind

Libraries, Class, and the "Poor People's Policy"

By Sanford Berman

Some eight years ago, writer Benjamin DeMott observed:

"An immense weight of subsidized opinion has gathered on the side of social untruth, and the means available to those who try to contend against the untruth are fragile. Social wrong is accepted because substantive, as opposed to sitcom, knowledge about class has been habitually suppressed, and the key mode of suppression remains the promotion of the idea of classlessness.

"We shall not shake the monster in our midst until we take serious account of the idea of difference—between, for example, youngsters for whom opportunity means college and youngsters for whom opportunity can only mean the Army.

"The task is nothing less than that of laying bare the links between the perpetuation of the myth of social sameness and the perpetuation of social wrong. We have all too little time in which to get on with it."

That "sameness" myth that says anybody can make it with a little effort—coupled with a frequently fawning attitude toward wealth, property, and power—thrives in Libraryland. Homeless people are more often regarded as "problems" than as deserving citizens with an equal right to services and attention.

Typically, public libraries develop cozy relationships with local chambers of commerce but not with central labor councils, welfare rights groups, or anti-poverty advocates. A leading library director not long ago declared with obvious pride (and impunity) that his mission was to serve the middle class and only the middle class. Fines and fees have now become largely acceptable, not in order to retrieve borrowed materials or foster civic responsibility, but rather as a means of "revenue generation," with little or no regard to their impact on poor people and children (although that adverse impact has been amply documented).

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The United Nations declared 1996 as the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty, yet no one reading the library press or examining library displays and resource lists would have known it. To this day, the Library of Congress still does not recognize CLASSISM, CORPORATE POWER, CORPORATE WELFARE, or WORKING POOR PEOPLE in its subject-heading thesaurus, with the practical result that it appears from library catalogs that these topics don't exist and that libraries don't have anything about them.

Unequal access

The elemental truth is that poor people do not enjoy the same access to library resources and information that people with adequate incomes do. The basic cause, certainly, is poverty itself and a socioeconomic system that permits it. But that doesn't let librarians off the hook. There are many things we can do to serve poor people directly and to direct public attention to the continuing problem of poverty and how it can be lessened, if not eradicated. It is a lie to talk about "free public libraries" and "equality of service" when large parts of the population can't afford to get to the library, can't afford video and other fees, can't afford fines, and are often so ill-housed and fed and without health insurance (which translates into substandard, if any, medical care) that they cannot even exploit or enjoy library resources that are available to the same (or comparable) extent as people who do have adequate housing, food, and health care. This is not just unacceptable; it's scandalous!

Believing that this sorry situation demanded immediate action by the profession, ALA Membership and Council in

1990 approved a major new policy on "Service to Poor People" (which can be found on p. 48–49 of the 1997–98 *ALA Handbook of Organization*). Regrettably, there has been no major effort to either publicize or implement that policy.

Now, however, a subcommittee of ALA's Office for Literacy and Outreach Services and a Social Responsibilities

Round Table task force are committed to raising awareness about poverty issues and improving service to poor people. All of us involved in this campaign—convinced that working and low-income people have just as much a right to library service as the middle and upper classes, not to mention an arguably greater need—invite our colleagues to join

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us in making ALA's Poor People's Policy a living reality.

And watch for *Poor People and Library Service*, edited by Karen M. Venturella and Brian Kenny, due soon from McFarland. The volume profiles a host of effective library programs and provides practical tips on how libraries can make a difference for poor people, by, for example, supplying information on federal and state tax credits, actively seeking job applicants from organizations that serve low-income people, and helping activist groups and their clients get out their message.

For more information, contact the OLOS Subcommittee on Poor People's Policy, c/o Carol Liu, Queens Borough Public Library, 89-11 Merrick Blvd., Jamaica, NY 11432, 718-990-0890, cliu@queens.lib.ny.us; or the SRRT Poverty Task Force, c/o Sandy Berman, Hennepin County Library, 12601 Ridgedale Dr., Minnetonka, MN 55305, 612-694-8570 (sberman@sun.hennepin.lib.mn.us). ❖