

# Classism in the Stacks: Libraries and Poor People

A lecture by Sanford Berman

**Activist librarian Sanford Berman founded the Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty of the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table and co-authored the 1990 ALA Policy on "Library Services to Poor People." He delivered this talk, the ALA's sixth annual Jean E. Coleman Library Outreach Lecture, on June 27, 2005 at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago.**

ALA Council approved "Library Services for Poor People," Policy 61, in 1990, fifteen years ago. It should enjoy the same status as the "Library Bill of Rights," another ALA policy that establishes norms or standards for collection development and facilities use. But it doesn't. Unlike the immediately preceding policy on minority concerns, ALA units have never been canvassed on what they had done or would do to implement it. Hundreds of institutions have formally adopted LBR as their own policy and often frame and display it in the library itself. I know of no library that has similarly adopted and publicized the Poor People's Policy (PPP). Indeed, only weeks ago a library board candidate in Minneapolis pointedly asked the MPL director about such an adoption. The answer: the library's for everybody. Why focus on one particular group or demographic?

Right now, according to WorldCat, *Street Spirit* and *Mother Warriors Voice*, two outstanding vehicles for poor people's news, opinions, graphics, and poetry, are held by exactly four and eight libraries, respectively.

Within the past year or two:

In Denver, Colorado, an advocacy group for low-income communities charged that libraries in Denver's poorest areas are open fewer hours than those elsewhere, noting that fewer library hours contribute to learning gaps between low-income and more affluent students.

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, twenty branches were slated to become "express libraries," open only from one to five daily and staffed solely by clerks. That plan, conceived without consulting frontline staff, friends groups, or neighborhood associations, would—say critics—"underserve some of the city's poorest neighborhoods." (As a parenthetical aside: ALA Policy 61 advocates "equity in funding adequate library services for poor people in terms of materials, facilities, and equipment.")

Kansas City, Missouri, unveiled a new downtown library. It cost fifty million dollars to renovate a 98-year-old bank building. A *Kansas City Star* columnist applauded the attractive facility, but added:

"It should be just as open and inviting to homeless people as the old downtown library was. People on the street had always sought shelter, read books and periodicals, used computers and napped at the old library until it closed in January. . . .

"The main branch was a midway stop for people walking from shelters east of downtown to the Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral for a free midday meal. Now the city's neediest people may be 'poverty profiled' and kept from the new library. Officials also are proposing a 'compassion campus' near shelters to keep homeless people away from downtown's new library and upscale condominiums and loft apartments.

"The compassion campus could include a homeless day center and soup kitchen. But people I talked with were outraged by plans to limit their freedom. One homeless man said the irony is people like him would be excluded from the area they've helped rebuild. Homeless people often are picked up as day laborers rehabbing old buildings for new occupants."

That same writer does an annual trek to some twenty libraries, dressed in an old army coat, black knit cap, faded jeans, and a frayed shirt. During his latest investigation, he found that "many libraries aren't keeping up. Branches could use some of the wealth sunk into the new downtown library. There were never enough computers. Libraries help bridge the digital divide between rich and poor. I also found," he said, "that the downtown passersby should be the occupants of a 'compassion campus.' For yet another year, they treated me badly because of how I was dressed. They need to see everyone regardless of appearance as a human being. What's happening now adds to the misery of the homeless. 'Anybody can become homeless,' said Cindy Butler at the Grand Avenue Temple. 'Everybody falls down sometimes.' She's right. Everyone needs kindness and warmth, especially at libraries."

Shortly after that report, another columnist commented wryly on KCPL's "customer behavior expectations," brochures "handed out by library security at the entrance" intended "to thin the new library's down-and-out ranks." Said the writer: "Moses needed only ten

commandments. Downtown KC's trendy new library has 33."

In San Luis Obispo County, California, a new law explicitly bans "offensive body odor" and sleeping in the city-county library.

In Salt Lake City, Utah, a *Deseret News* report claims that "especially during the day, the library is filled with the homeless, who sometimes bother other library patrons with their odor, intoxication, or noise level. And while librarians stress they don't want to ban the homeless from the building, they also don't want leery residents to be fearful of enjoying the city's pristine new library.

"In search of a solution, the city library system is launching a new civility campaign designed to teach the homeless, children, and others how to behave while in the library."

(As another parenthetical aside, ALA Policy 61 specifically suggests seeking advice from poor people and antipoverty advocates, as well as sensitizing staff to issues affecting poor people and to attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people's use of libraries.)

To continue on the smelly theme, the *Washington Times* recently quoted an ALA official who reputedly said: "Body odor is an enormous problem." And a branch manager in Maryland allegedly confirmed: "We have trouble with poor hygiene."

In Houston, Texas, the city council passed a series of new library regulations that prohibit "sleeping on tables, eating packaged food, using rest rooms for bathing, and 'offensive bodily hygiene that constitutes a nuisance to others.'" It also bans "large amounts of personal possessions."

In Elgin, Illinois, on the four tables in the library concession room, a notice reads: "In consideration of all who may wish to use these tables, use is limited to one hour per day." There is no 24-hour shelter where homeless people can gather in Elgin.

And in Wheeling, West Virginia, the Ohio County Public Library complained bitterly when an old social security building—coveted by the library for more parking space—was instead transferred to an agency that provides treatment and support for homeless people. (Federal law required that homeless support agencies get first priority on vacant federal buildings.)

As an editorial gloss to this dismal litany: how can an ALA official proclaim "body odor" an enormous problem when the director of the San Luis Obispo Library himself has declared: "In twelve years, I can think of less than half a dozen incidents where people smell so bad that you can't get within ten feet of them."? And in calculating "enormity," isn't homelessness itself an "enormous problem," perhaps greater even than body odor? Why, instead of declaiming against lost parking space and people coming into the library without first stopping at the spa, hairdresser, manicurist, and couture clothing boutique—people perhaps coming with bags and maybe kids, people who may not have anyplace else to go (in Minneapolis, for instance, shelters are only allowed to open overnight), people who possibly don't look,

smell, or "behave" like us, like folks with money, like solid middle-class persons, but who nonetheless pay taxes and even work (though not earning enough to afford housing), people who often need the library not solely for sanctuary, but also for job searching, education, entertainment reading, and emailing—why aren't poverty, homelessness, and hunger the primary objects of our wrath, our discomfort? Lest the foregoing seem like an absolutely unmitigated tsunami of insensitivity, stereotyping, callousness, and bourgeois arrogance, here are some mitigating items:

In San Luis Obispo, a county government watchdog declared: "I think that rather than smelling bad and having no other place to go, we should look into shower facilities." He urged supervisors to approach the issue in a "kind and compassionate" instead of a punitive way. Subsequently, Cal Poly and local community service providers announced a forum and resource workshop on homelessness to be held at the library. The Salt Lake City library director not long ago joined the mayor and a low-income advocate on a panel titled "Helping Each Other: What Our Homeless Friends Teach Us." Said the director: "Dozens of homeless people frequent the library daily. Some come to escape the heat or cold, and others to read, access e-mail, or socialize. You see someone who appears to be a street person and they head for the *Wall Street Journal* and you learn something. These folks are not completely disconnected, and like most people want to be left in peace." Noting that the safety net is getting weaker, she mentioned the need for more psychological care and other services. If nothing else, she said, the homeless have taught her: "When we treat people with respect, it comes back two fold."

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Remember Houston? One city council member voted against the new repressive rules, saying, "When we have heat waves, they encourage people, including the homeless, to go into public buildings, including libraries. What is the plan now?" And some library users criticized the prohibitions, one observing that "when you're tired and do your work, of course you want to rest your head on the table, or you have a headache and just want to let go." A DC Public Library spokesperson reported that "body odor is something we cannot regulate as a library." (A judge had earlier ruled that DCPL's "offensive body odor" policy was unconstitutional and could not be applied uniformly, stating that the smell of a heavily perfumed woman or a painter in overalls could also be considered offensive.) The DCPLer also remarked that many homeless people in the library are using computers to email family members or doing research to find jobs.

In Elgin, Illinois, a local columnist and library board member stated that homeless people have always gathered at the library, but the board has not had to address any problems due to it. "They're there every day," he said. "I'm there regularly and I see them reading, not just hanging out." He continued: "Our library is made up of people from all walks of life and it's open to everyone. That's what a public library is all about." (Commenting on the one-hour table limit, Michael Stoops from the National Coalition for

the Homeless wondered: "If a rich person in a three-piece suit were there, would he or she be allowed to stay in the vending machine area for more than an hour?")

So—returning to my main theme: Why this pronounced failure to adopt and promote ALA's Poor People's Policy? And why the rush to further burden and even criminalize people who already have next to nothing and certainly don't enjoy a level playing field? Why the cascading efforts to exclude them from public spaces, deny them fair access to library resources, and treat them as "problems," as pariahs?

I don't think there's a single, pat answer. Rather, it seems to result from a mix of factors, among them the reality of living in a plutocracy (incidentally, not yet a Library of Congress subject heading) where money and wealth not only rule, but also determine status and social worth; the widespread, almost religious grip of the "American dream," that myth of unlimited mobility and opportunity and luxury; and an ingredient or aspect of the dream: oldtime Calvinist predestination, which posits a divine, holy basis for owning property and being rich. Poor people don't have the dollars to make influential campaign contributions. They can't afford memberships in politically powerful organizations. They have no access to the mainstream media, no way to tell their stories. And given the thesis of the American dream, if they're not prosperous, it must be their own fault, hardly the consequence of bad luck, racism, sexism, disability, downsizing, outsourcing, corporate greed, union busting, or an inadequate safety net. Worse, from the deeply ingrained Calvinist perspective, it's God's will. If they're poor, that's the way the deity wants it.

The hostility—or at least lack of sympathy—toward low-income people manifests in various barriers and kinds of discrimination. All together, the prejudice and what flows from it—the belief and the acts—can be called "classism": favoring one class over another, valuing middle and upper classes more highly than people at or below the poverty level.

If librarians and others can first recognize their own attitudinal hangups, understanding what makes them view welfare mothers and homeless people, for example, unfavorably, and ultimately grasping that poverty—not poor people—is the problem, that poverty can be reduced if not ended, and that the most vulnerable and dispossessed among us are citizens and neighbors who deserve compassion, support, and respect—if we can do these things in our heads and hearts, then there's a real chance to overcome classism. These are a few words of poor people themselves, culled from the pages of *Street Spirit* and welfare warriors' songs from the Mamas Movement:

**Why Can't We Raise Our Families Up**

*(To the tune of "America the Beautiful")*

Moms go to school to lift ourselves  
Our "leaders" block our way  
We're s'posed to work and go to school  
But work they give don't pay  
Why can't we raise our families up  
This scapegoating's a lie  
They blame the poor for poverty  
Our "leaders" must be high

**Bloated Big Business Has No Shame**

*(To the tune of "Old Mcdonald Had a Farm")*

Old Sam Walton had a store  
Ee ay ee ay o  
And in this store he robbed the poor  
Ee ay ee ay o  
With a low wage here, no benefits there  
Part time here, and no time there  
Old Sam Walton robbed the poor  
Ee ay ee ay o  
General Motors built some cars,  
Ee ay ee ay o  
Yet many workers didn't get far  
Ee ay ee ay o  
With a lay-off here, and a downsize there,  
Jobs gone south, the bosses don't care  
General Motors built some cars  
Ee ay ee ay o

**Away in the Shelter**

*(To the tune of "Away in the Manger")*

Away in a shelter no crib and no bed  
My family is homeless  
Cries ring through my head  
I look at my family I try to protect  
Remembering home that state ignorance wrecked  
It's income we need and not "self-esteem"  
Their jobs are at stake so they're not what they seem  
It costs more to feed us and house us I know  
They offer us "services" but money? Hell no!

**Why?**

*By Joan Clair*

In the bookstore's bathroom,  
A woman has just washed herself and  
Stoops down to get her possessions,  
Enclosed in plastic garbage bags.  
I don't look at her directly,  
but what I see is an aura of beauty  
Emanating from her face.  
And the question is why?  
How can the radiant sun  
Be enclosed in a lotus of clouds?

**A Wet One**

*By Michael Creedon*

In the early morning light  
Elmo rolls up his blanket  
And climbs out of the bush  
He slept under. He needs  
A cup of coffee.  
Elmo can see his breath  
In front of his face; last night  
Was a cold one. Today he has to  
Try to get into the shelter.  
The pain in his bones  
Is getting to be too much.  
He has 75 cents in his pocket  
But he'll need more than that  
For a cup of coffee.  
He heads up to

40th and Broadway to hit  
 Someone up for a quarter.  
 An hour later  
 He's standing in front of 7-11  
 And he still doesn't have  
 His coffee. To top things off  
 It's starting to rain.  
 Finally a lady in a new car  
 Gives him a quarter,  
 Mostly out of embarrassment,  
 He thinks.  
 Now he can start his day.  
 It's going to be a wet one.

**Breakfast on 4th Street**

*By Randy Fingland*

It was the usual group  
 Awaiting the day-olds  
 At the back door  
 To the bakery  
 'Cept for this new guy  
 Who gave us all  
 A lot of free advice  
 About sharing street bounty  
 Then he got the two biggest  
 Pastries & took off  
 With not so much  
 As a glance back.

Okay. If we finally acknowledge poor people to be human—like us—and dedicate ourselves to evening that playing field, what can we actually do? These are four or five ideas:

- Support with time and resources the agenda or shopping list developed by John Gehner for the SRRT Poverty Task Force, including an ALA-wide survey on PPP implementation; fact-finding on what libraries are actually doing to service poor people throughout the country; creation of a curriculum and toolkit to aid in humanizing and extending poor people's services; and establishment of an online library/poverty clearinghouse for news and information, and of awards to help publicize and encourage outstanding individual and institutional efforts to seriously address poverty issues.

- As individuals or organizations, support antipoverty legislation like BAHA (the Bringing America Home Act), living wage laws, national health insurance, and welfare payments sufficient to sustain persons and families in dire need.

- Get local library systems to adopt and implement PPP.

- Collaborate with community shelter providers, food shelf operators, affordable housing groups, welfare rights organizations, and interfaith social justice networks with respect to library programming, producing bibliographies & webliographies, stocking resources useful to poor people, and effecting local public policy changes (e.g., decriminalizing sparechanging and "camping," and permitting shelters to remain open during daytime hours).

- Recommend authentic books, magazines, and videos for the library collection in order to provide poor people with a voice and sensitize the "comfortable" to

poverty as a critical issue.

- Examine internal policies to determine whether they contribute to excluding or stigmatizing poor people: for instance, can library cards be issued on the basis of a shelter or the library's own address? What about fines and fees? (Although they unduly discriminate against low-income people, fines—especially—will continue to seem attractive, even essential, revenue sources in the absence of stable, adequate public funding. Everyone's priority should be getting public libraries financed more generously and continuously, perhaps through the formation of special taxing districts. Once achieved, better funding might permit libraries to abandon their dependence on fines and fees.)

- Library school teachers and students can follow the stellar models of Mary Lee Bundy in Maryland, Fay Blake in California, Julie Hersberger in North Carolina, and Kathleen de la Peña McCook in Florida; researching and critiquing local library and information services, as well as intervening in public policy debates and interning with antipoverty groups and service providers.

Lastly, here are a few passages from a profile of Danette, or Dee, Cornelius, a 48-year-old homeless woman in Oakland who sells street spirit on sidewalks to make a few bucks:

Dee was homeless for the first time back in 1997. She had been working at various temp jobs and acquired a variety of skills, but then she had a stroke. "Once I had that stroke, that kind of threw me for a loop," she explains. Dee describes how becoming homeless changed her life. "What a lot of people don't realize is that homelessness is getting a stigma. Everybody thinks that they can't get there. You just don't know. Some people are one or two paychecks away. When illness happens, especially if you (don't have) medical coverage, the rent man, your landlord, does not want to hear 'bout (why) you can't pay rent." In spite of her poor health, Dee would like to have a regular job. She has experience and marketable skills. But, as she points out, "when you have nowhere to stay, it's hard to get a job because, first of all, you have to find somewhere that you're able to have hygiene, and a telephone, and somewhere to stay and somewhere to be able to iron your clothes."

She had a car at one time but it blew a head gasket so she couldn't move it and eventually it was towed. "Once my car was towed, I wasn't living out of that any more," she says "I really was out of luck. It's hard. It's hard being homeless, it really is hard. Some people think it's a choice."

"Even standing here," she says, "I find a lot of people are nice to me, but then you're going to have some people that act like it's going to rub off. You don't have to give me money. Not everybody is able to give. But, you know, the acknowledgement, the smile, the speaking, being courteous, doesn't hurt anyone."

"Because whether you give to me or not, I'm always going to tell you, 'Have a nice day,' and they're telling you, 'No, not today.' That's because they've already preconceived that you're about to ask for something so they're not listening to what you're actually saying. Or even saying hello, or good morning."

Well, it's time for libraries to listen and to say "Hello."