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The Social Life of Books: From a Librarian to Walter Benjamin's Unpacking My Library

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## The Social Life of Books: From a Librarian to Walter Benjamin's Unpacking My Library

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Aaron Austin Locke

I am sorting the school's library books. Yes, I am.<sup>1</sup> I am creating new spaces for the books so that they might be re-discovered. Yet, as with all libraries, public, private, academic or in a school, space is limited. The utilitarian task of deciding which books should remain in place, be moved to the library's new storeroom or removed altogether falls to me as the librarian. But how can I make such judgments? From over ten years of working in public libraries (and now school libraries), I'm familiar with the criteria that determine which books should remain in a collection: including the book's utility in that particular setting, the book's condition, the number of loans that book has had, and so on. But as I handle each book and open the first page, I am drawn to another question stemming from the series of dates stamped on the first page of the book. There are books that have not been loaned in a generation or more, and I consider how social relations between all those who have come into contact with that book are now embedded in that book's history, forming part of the object's fabric of identity. As I repeat my task, my mind wanders to Benjamin's essay 'Unpacking My Library'.<sup>2</sup>

As I sift through the books, I meditate on how they have transcended their utilitarian value. In becoming a library book, the object's social value has become greater than its economic value. It is no longer a commodity, and no single person can claim ownership of it as an object.<sup>3</sup> Now, as I consider which books are no longer of *value* to the setting they are in, I remove this object's special status. It will either become re-commodified or cast aside to the scrapheap of history. But wait! Benjamin was right—no moment is lost for history.<sup>4</sup> As my own social journey interacts with the social agency of the objects

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<sup>1</sup> The opening to Benjamin's 'Unpacking My Library' reads: 'I am unpacking my library. Yes, I am.' See: Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), pp.61–69.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library'.

<sup>3</sup> Processes of *decommodification* is explored, among others, by Igor Kopytoff, albeit in different contexts. See: Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditisation as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin says that: 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history'. See: Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), p. 246.

themselves, I consider whether the librarian is a gatekeeper of cultural and social memories. Assuming that due process has been followed, the librarian can recall who has borrowed a particular book, at what time, the duration of the loan and so on. But it is the book itself that has *experienced* those memories, and further questions arise from this thought that I am unable to answer or discover by means of archival research: Who has guarded the book before? Who has handled the book? Who has actually read the book? How did they interpret the words? And where are those people today; are they still living? How has the book changed them? In short, what is the book's social life? Is it a social actor in and of itself? And what of all the other social actors that have come into contact with it?

In my academic work, I often assess the problematic ways in which knowledge is organised, divided, and reduced into disciplines and sub-disciplines. As a historian, this means challenging narratives in which history is reduced to a linear line of supposed 'progress' and instead turning to non-linear methods. I also challenge the way in which power is executed and practiced by a claim to knowledge, both in political life and in academia. As Harold Laski observed, 'the man who seeks for knowledge is moved, not by a pointless curiosity, so much as the passionate conviction that knowledge is the key to power.'<sup>5</sup> That *truth* and *fact* are often conflated is merely part of the much larger issue of discourses that present themselves through an ideological prism and, in turn, claim that there is no alternative. This is particularly true of ideologies that misappropriate empirical methods of instrumental reason: neoliberalism is the most immediately pressing example, but there are others.

Throughout my academic journey, I have also progressed in my role as a librarian, first in a public library and now in a school library. Each of these settings has different demands: in terms of the day-to-day role, in terms of my interaction with readers and students, and in terms of the utilitarian evaluations I make on the book's intrinsic value to that institution. Common to both is the fact that part of my role is to organise and divide knowledge and literature in the name of accessibility and aesthetics; but that would mean that the ordering of the books is merely a technical aspect so that they might be more easily accessed. If we consider a book's temporal journey, it is not curious at all that I find my professional job should concern the books as objects, not of utility, but of social value.

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<sup>5</sup> Harold J. Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism: An Essay in Interpretation* (Delhi: Aakar, 2013), p. 113.

As Benjamin expressed, the book's social life is as much part of the identity of the object as what is actually printed within the book itself.<sup>6</sup> The entanglement of human and non-human entities in constructing social relations is established well in Actor-Network-Theory: non-human actors play a crucial role in assembling social and economic relations through their own agency and intrinsic value.<sup>7</sup> As I sort the books, I think of Benjamin's private collection, and thus I bring his collection in contact with my own moment in time and my relationship to that moment. I begin to consider the previous borrowers of the books themselves, particularly those that have remained on the shelf, in some cases for decades. Whether they were aware at the time or not, or whether they even remember holding the book, their social life has become part of the book's identity. Those who deface the text with obscure notes or excessive underlining/highlighting become *active* participants in that social identity rather than *passive* ones, even if it is an irritation to new readers who desire to read the text unannotated. It can also reveal something about the person themselves—for example, one can tell how far into the book the person read; whether they gave up halfway through. The individual responsible for these tell-tale annotations no longer owns their notes. They belong to the book and its newly acquired unique identity.

Also, the act of reading *that* particular book may, in itself, be an expression of identity. But what does it *actually* reveal about the person? Possibly their social class, according to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of expressive consumption.<sup>8</sup> Then again, this is a somewhat reductionist argument. It would be like attributing the reading of a particular book to intelligence, ability or ambition—none of which are revealed simply by the act of reading the book or indeed being able to read and understand it. Possibly, too, it is an expression of that person's creativity, as the media we consume often reflects our own creative impulses. But let us return to the social life of the books themselves: for the acts of creative consumption and of consuming knowledge both have a tendency to leave their marks on the books.

Ominous black crates are allocated for books withdrawn from the library collection. These are books that have outlived their functional value at this particular institution, as have the memories that

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library'.

<sup>7</sup> Here, I am drawing on one of the more basic premises of Actor-Network-Theory, which suggests that all human and non-human entities are *actors* in the construction of social networks. See: Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2010).

they contain. The memories become part of my own as I place them inside the crates. Depending on its condition, this may not be the end of the book's social journey. It may simply be entering a new form of social life. However, it has still lost a special status, for it is about to become commodified once more. Second-hand books initially contain a two-fold monetary value. First, in the knowledge, they convey and second in their social journey, which might include attributes such as the book's age, the material it is made from, notes written by a particular person, and so on. Particular owners of particular books may also increase, or indeed decrease, that book's value. Like the shells that pass through the Kula Ring,<sup>9</sup> the book's previous life and possessor leave their mark. But the book's *true* value rests in the mind of its new owner or borrower. As Benjamin suggests, 'to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth.'<sup>10</sup> However, Benjamin also had difficulty procuring particular texts because their price tag was too high.

As Marx considered, the meaning of an object is distorted when it becomes a fetishised commodity,<sup>11</sup> and hence its social agency is also affected. But for Benjamin, even if the book is acquired through capitalist relations, the acquisition of that book is still important for that particular object's social history. As Benjamin suggests:

'The acquisition of books is by no means a matter of money or expert knowledge alone... Dates, place names, formats, previous owners, bindings, and the like: all these details must tell him something—not as dry, isolated facts, but as a harmonious whole...'<sup>12</sup>

In turn, the process of acquisition also becomes part of the memory of the collector and is also embedded into the object itself. Both actors (the book and the collector) are needed to rekindle the memory, just as Benjamin is transported back to moments of acquisition when handling his books. As this process of acquisition unfolds, the social and temporal journey of the object is similarly expanded by the actions of the collector themselves, which have the potential to increase or decrease the object's social or monetary value. Library books begin life as a commodity and are usually purchased new. Yet, as soon as

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<sup>9</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library', p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol 1, trans. by Ben Fowkes, Penguin Classics (London and New York: Penguin Books in Association with New Left Review, 1981), chap. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library', p. 65.

they are catalogued and classified as ‘a library book’, they cease to be ‘owned’ by anyone in particular. This process contributes to the book’s social journey, whether or not that specific copy of that book is indeed ever borrowed or read. Alas, it eventually falls on the librarian to decide whether a book’s fate is for it to be returned to that of a mere commodity.

No moment is lost to history, it is true, but the actors that interact with one another to form social networks do forget those relations, despite having become embedded within the book. They may have left their mark on the object, and they may have become a part of that object’s fabric of identity, but what if that object is never again handled? What memories are lost through the re-commodification of books, art or any other form of knowledge? Foucault describes how history can give new meaning and life to social objects that might otherwise have become forgotten.<sup>13</sup> As I carry out my task, I hope that I am giving a new life to books both held in and expelled from libraries in which I have worked. The librarian is as much part of the book’s social journey as other actors that have come into contact with the object, and although I may not be able to recall each and every book that has found its way into one of those black boxes, they have not been entirely forgotten. I hope that by recording my thoughts here, the moment will not be forgotten either. The vast majority of those who handled the books are unlikely to consider such questions. The leisure, the privilege, and the power to untangle such social interactions of a particular book’s social life and journey are part of the job role of a librarian.

The social life of the book is also determined, of course, by the words printed in it; by the knowledge, it imparts (or fails to impart) upon its reader. We must therefore consider the book’s materiality in conjunction with its possibilities of imparting particular forms of knowledge, theories or even ideologies. Books that remain contained within the library itself, or even books I personally own, I might passionately disagree with or fail to grasp their significance, yet for another person, it will be a work of inspiration, spawning new thoughts and/or actions. While the author of the book is, of course, always part of that social interaction, they cannot fully control how their work will be interpreted.<sup>14</sup> Many of the greatest philosophers and political theorists might very well have ceased writing were they to

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<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 7–8.

<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1987), pp. 142–48.

know the atrocities that would eventually be committed in their name, simply from a misreading (either consciously or unconsciously) of their writings. Books have the power to bring themselves alive, to alter the social sphere in numerous ways, and the power of the written word must not be forgotten, nor the contributions made by those that interpret and misinterpret the book; both as a source of knowledge, but also in its own social journey.

Finally, I am transported to my own private book collection, and I consider the social value of the books that I own. The question I ask myself is: Are they replaceable? If the answer is yes, then even though the words themselves might have had an immense influence on me, the book itself has not transcended into that special status of de-commodification. Perhaps I purchased them as new for their utility in assisting me with my research or writing a particular essay. Technology has de-personalised this process further still. By ordering the book online, the memory of purchasing the book becomes lost. I recall books that I have purchased from physical locations far more than those bought online, and because of that, they are of greater social value to me personally. And the eBook? While the knowledge conveyed may be the same, the ‘memories’ of an eBook can be represented only as data: they are not part of the book’s fabric, for example, you do not see the material traces of another’s hand on the page. Thus, as an object, they are non-existent, incapable of absorbing social histories and memories in the same way that physical books do.

If the answer is no, and a book in my collection is not replaceable, there are three reasons why that might be the case. One, the book is rare or out of print, and it is thus unlikely I would find a replacement. Two, it is a second-hand book (including second-hand library books), and therefore, it has a social journey embedded into its physicality, as outlined above. But the third is something reserved for private libraries—that they have a particular status of irreplaceability. The book was a gift. It is not only the content of the gift and the book’s subject but the social value of ‘the spirit of the thing given’<sup>15</sup> combined with the social context and its corresponding personal value. It may well be that an inscription has rendered the book monetarily worthless—even the rarest of books—yet for the individual, they are priceless, and no amount of money could compensate for the loss of either the memories contained within

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<sup>15</sup> Mauss, *The Gift*, 13.

the object itself nor in some cases the inscription written by the giver. In my own collection, there are numerous copies of books that cannot be replaced and have, for me at least, permanently transcended into a de-commodified state. Just two examples of this are my copy of 'the Gift' by Marcel Mauss, given to me by my brother and a copy of 'History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union', which once belonged to my grandfather, whom I never met. Both books have very different social journeys in their own right, yet both similarly transport me back in time, just as Benjamin's books did for him.

Am I imparting human emotion into a non-human entity, giving agency to something that is only part of a social network because we [humans] attribute to them a social value? Or is the book's social history embedded within a unique social network, one where the book, as a material object, connects all the social actors that have come into contact with it? That is for the reader to decide.

My task of sifting through books is now paused for the day. I drive home, returning to my own collection of books, ready to organise my own thoughts.



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