Durkheim and Weber in Wonderland; Or, Building Environmental Collections for the Real World

Several months after I had agreed, out of sheer vanity, to appear at this Institute on information resources in the environmental sciences, I realized that I would have to say something; not only would I have to appear, but I would have to make some contribution to the development of the theme. Indeed, the more I reflected on my contribution, the more I felt like Alice confronted by the King.

"What do you know about this business?" the King said to Alice.
"Nothing," said Alice.
"Nothing whatever?" persisted the King.
"Nothing whatever," said Alice.

Now it is apparent that "nothing whatever" is not a particularly useful contribution to any discussion, and perhaps I should have given it all up at that point. But again egoism, and a certain sense of responsibility to all those librarians who staff academic libraries throughout the country and who try to serve the general needs of their students, gripped me. Surely if we are doing anything worthwhile when we build our collections, it should be possible to verbalize it, and perhaps a reiteration of those concerns toward which we direct our efforts is always necessary.

As academic librarians we do not need to be reminded that we are engaged in an educational task—that we are indeed the custodians of a central agency in providing our students with a higher education. But, perhaps we sometimes take too narrow a view of what education is and what our role in the process can be. It is one thing to look at the statements of college catalogs with their sometimes too glib, and almost always unread proclamations of what is being attempted; it is quite another to attempt an analysis of the function of education in our society. It is relatively common-
place to view the function of education in terms of curriculum, to speak of
teaching mathematics, or English, or history as the function of education.
Sometimes, we state our educational task in more cognitive terms, as
instruction to develop clear thinking, or to learn ways to systematize data
and reach conclusions which are justified in terms of that data.

But we must turn to the sociologists if we wish to inquire into the
social function of education, and we may as well go directly to the source. It
is interesting to note that those two great founders of modern sociology,
Emile Durkheim in France and Max Weber in Germany, though they both
viewed education as a vital instrument in society, emphasized functions which
are at times in direct opposition to each other. Durkheim saw education in
terms of its ability to move society toward consensus; Weber was more
concerned with education as a force to differentiate roles within society.

In a sense, Durkheim was a product of his time and place. France, at
the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, was
undergoing a tremendous upheaval of the very foundations of its national
culture. The church was losing its central place in the culture, and nothing
seemed to be available which could replace its function. Apart from its
purely theological and liturgical activities, the Church had served as the central
pivot around which society organized itself. It had taught what was honorable
and good for a man to do. It had taught the limitations within which a man
was obedient to his state and to his ruler. It had formed the basis for family
and class relationships. In other words, it had served the function of cement-
ing French society, of developing a consensus of opinion and belief upon
which social activity could be based.

As French society became more secularized, and especially as the power
of the secular republican government entrenched itself by securing
ascendancy through the struggles surrounding the Dreyfus affair, French
society was left more and more without an agency which could teach the new
social doctrine. Durkheim, studying the French problem, saw that the schools
might replace the Church in promoting a national consensus out of which
political and social stability might arise. A society needs some agency through
which to secure the loyalty of its disparate units. The schools might be used
to propagandize for the republican form of government and for the system of
values which upheld it, and thereby to form a base of national opinion upon
which a new and different French national culture might develop. In order to
develop that culture, the educational system would have to be as open and
universal as possible. There could be few restrictions in entrance, and support
of the educational enterprise would have to be fixed and regularized to assure
continuing educational opportunity in order to insure continuing and universal
exposure to the approved point of view.

Much of this may seem to stray a long way from the matter of
collecting materials to support students' quests for information in the environmental sciences. However, I will argue that before the scientist and the technician can get to work on a problem, even before they can identify the many components of the problem, it will be necessary to create a climate which can support the radical changes that dealing with environmental problems will occasion in every area of life. The greatest difficulties which we will encounter in restructuring our role in our environment are not likely to come from designing the machines which will cleanse our atmosphere, but in creating the human culture which will allow the machines to be put to work. As Durkheim realized, there must be some mechanism in society which makes people want to do what they have to do. The observation is no less true in the area of reclaiming environmental purity than in any other area.

Part of what a library does when it builds collections is to provide the nourishment and stimulus from which users can restructure for themselves the basic presuppositions upon which their social culture is based. So long as the society and its problems are relatively static, a library, or any other educational agency, can confine itself to replicating the past, to reinforcing the status quo. But when problems confront a society which are not readily solved by reference to past achievements, the library must become an "opinion leader." At least it must furnish the materials from which a new view and new solutions more appropriate to new problems can be fashioned. In other words, people will not begin to act until they believe they have a problem, and they will not begin to solve the problem until they feel they want to make the necessary adjustments and sacrifices.

It is not difficult to find evidence that we do, indeed, have a problem. Everyone from former Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant, to the neighbor next door has made some remark about the problem which confronts us. However, let us hear from one of the earliest and most vocal of all presentday prophets, Barry Commoner:

"The ecological facts of life are grim. The survival of all living things— including man—depends on the integrity of the complex web of biological processes which comprise the earth's ecosystems. However, what man is now doing on the earth violates this fundamental requisite of human existence. For modern technologies act on the ecosystem which supports us in ways that threaten its stability; with tragic perversity we have linked much of our productive economy to precisely those features of technology which are ecologically destructive. These powerful, deeply entrenched relationships have locked us into a self-destructive course. If we are to break out of this suicidal track we must begin by learning the ecological facts of life."

We must not assume that because Commoner uses terms like "biological processes" and "ecosystems," that the problem is scientifically or technologically rooted. The problem lies not in technology, but in the use of technology, and the use of technology is based upon the consensus of opinion in society of what is the "right" or "proper" or perhaps "most progressive"
use of technology. In order to develop different technical tools or to redirect existing ones, it will require a redirection of our thinking about how our inventiveness ought to be used. A library, together with other educational agencies, must provide the ideas and the basic informational data out of which a new ideal can arise. The task is not limited to providing technical data on the basis of which our scientists can fashion a nonpolluting engine, although that is an important matter.

Here, however, I wish to emphasize the important role librarians play in restructuring thinking concerning our problem. I do so because I think this is the point in collection building where librarians will be left most alone. We will probably have no end of help from the social and natural scientists when we begin to build collections of hard data. But helpers are not as likely to step forward when we attempt to build collections of ideas out of which to build new social values. Even on a liberal arts college campus, faculty are likely to think of themselves in terms of their specialties rather than to think of themselves as agents for the promotion of social cohesion. The problem we set ourselves, that of providing the grist for a new set of priorities concerning our environment, is a highly complex one. I would like to illustrate some of the complexities of the issue. In doing so, perhaps we will clarify the nature of the collections we must build to do the job.

Generally speaking, the nature of the environmental problem is stated in terms of disregarding the cyclical relationships in ecology. Barbara Ward speaks of spaceship earth; Barry Commoner of the ecosphere, but in each case the idea is the same. Briefly, our environment is self-contained. We cannot escape it nor can we replace it. Human and animal life on the planet earth is like that on a lone spaceship journeying far and long from a home base. There is not enough room for unlimited supplies of food, air and water. Unless those precious commodities are somehow recycled there will not be enough for the return flight. Furthermore, even if there were once enough water, for example, for a round trip, the waste from human consumption could not be stored in the fresh water tanks. In a sense, of course, that is what we have done. Since the abundance of supply seemed unlimited, we have dumped our garbage upon our natural resources. And for a long, long time it made no difference. Now, however, we are reaching a point where our own waste threatens to replace natural resources—or at least to poison them—and to kill us.

While the idea of the ecosystem is not so hard to understand, it will be difficult to implement. Indeed Kenneth Boulding says:

What is clear in the midst of all this uncertainty is that in the light of the enormous intellectual and moral task which lies ahead of mankind the political revolutions of the last 200 years fade into relative insignificance. Neither the American, the French, nor the Russian revolutions created fundamental changes in the state of man. The ideologies which supported them are
quite inadequate to bear the weight of this enormous transition which man faces.\(^2\)

Just why the adjustment would be so enormous may become evident if we follow a few interesting byways.

Religion is an area we may have thought we could put safely aside when we consider building our collections concerning environmental sciences. There may be a few theologians among us who understand that religion was once considered the queen of the sciences, particularly because it tied everything together. But by and large our minds do not immediately turn to God when we consider the problems of cleaning a polluted stream. However, Lynn White, in an article published in *Science* some years ago, recounted the role which religion has played in creating a view, commonly held in Western society, which supports our exploitive attitude toward the earth. What people do about their environment depends upon what they think of themselves. "Human ecology is," White says, "deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."\(^3\) The Western branch of the Church has built an extremely anthropocentric—man-centered—religion in which human beings stand against natural environment. Man is the center of God’s creation, and he views all of nature as planned for his benefit. No item in the physical creation has any purpose except to serve mankind. One may contrast this view with that of the pagan religions which Christianity replaced. Generally, the pagan religions were animistic. To them natural objects possessed guardian spirits whom men consulted out of respect and fear before attempting to utilize their resources. There is no such inhibition in Christianity where man has a monopoly on spirit in this world. What is best for man’s immediate needs must therefore be best for nature.

Moreover, in the Latin West, the religious study of nature became a way of revealing the mind of God. However, Western man did not hold nature in awe because God spoke through it. Instead, he examined it, took it apart, manipulated it, and sought mastery over it. Technology expressed in a very practical way the Christian dogma of man’s rightful mastery over nature. White does pay tribute to Saint Francis of Assisi who attempted to reorient the Church’s thinking about nature. “With him,” White says, “the ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy, flames a sign of the thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are Brother Ant and Sister Fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his.”\(^4\) But St. Francis was an exception whose example did not prevail. Today technology and science are “so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone.” Despite St. Francis, the prevailing contemporary view is that we are not “in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.”\(^4\)
To change our ways in our own environment will require that we change some preconceptions about our relationship to the things about us, preconceptions which have been a part of Western tradition for nearly 2,000 years. All our literature, our nursery rhymes, our folktales contain traces of our basic arrogance toward natural phenomena. To change our basic attitudes in spite of these constant supports for a now outmoded world view will be a difficult, perhaps impossible task.

The point is that if our environmental crisis is as close at hand as most commentators claim, then we in the libraries, together with all other agencies of public education must find ways to provide the knowledge which a large portion of our public needs to promote the appropriate evolution of a new view.

It is not only our historic roots which lead us to an understanding of the great difficulty of our task. We might look at some of the more immediate difficulties even if we are inclined to change basic attitudes. How can we create a strong enough sense of public concern to persuade people to sacrifice private gratification for the public good? What are some of the problems which will attend the development of a political and economic order which can advance the public good? Kenneth Boulding calls this a classic example of the “freeloading” problem. The individual interest is to go on polluting as long as the rest of society picks up the tab. To avoid such behavior, a sense of political awareness and of political community must be developed. Unfortunately, political action is often replaced by rhetoric whenever there is a strong conflict between public and private good. And is not this in itself a preconception about the way things “have” to be? Individuals, we believe, have an innate right to press for their own advancement even in the face of potential damage to someone else. “He” has to take care of himself. But if the individual cannot exist apart from the rest of his society, does not the society have a right to restrain the individual?

And will that individual be happier if the restraint is something he applies upon himself because he “wants” to do it that way rather than if it is something he is legally required to do? Can we indeed find restraints which are effective upon individuals? Or are legal restraints unlikely to suffice because individual transgressions taken separately are so small and so difficult to detect? It is a relatively simple matter to enforce pollution control upon large factories, but it is next to impossible to control the individual polluter who may throw something into his sewer undetected. In this regard, note the way in which we have, to date, dealt with automobile pollution. To the degree that we have been successful in cleaning auto emissions, we have done it by requiring the large manufacturer to alter his standards. We have not, in any real sense, made the individual motorer responsible for his own pollution. This may be an inadequate example because there is probably little that the
individual could do to alter his automobile, even if he were so inclined, unless the auto manufacturers developed the technology—the antipollution device which the individual could attach to his car. But it has been much simpler to place controls upon a few, large firms, than to require every auto owner to furnish proof of maintaining his auto at optimum performance levels to prevent polluting exhaust. Notice how we get around, once more, to the necessity for a consensus which will make the individual want to do what he ought to do.

Let me cite just one more example of the difficulties encountered in creating a social agreement which differs from one held in the past. It seems that no matter what course we may take in solving environmental problems, we will have to alter the distribution of income and wealth. Economically speaking, most of our pollution problems have occurred because more people have become wealthier. The more wealth people have, the more of the world’s resources they tend to use, and more importantly, the more refuse they tend to slough off. It is this refuse that threatens to engulf us. The most obvious way to reduce the strain on the environment, therefore, is to stop the poor getting richer—that is, to redistribute income back towards the rich again. As Boulding points out, “We will tend to solve the problem of the automobile by taxing it heavily so as to support electrically powered public transportation which would push us back to about 1900, when automobiles were the privilege of the rich and public transportation was the much less convenient privilege of the poor.” Needless to say, the rising middle class is not likely to take kindly to becoming the falling middle class, especially if the rich get the benefit of their sacrifice. Before long such a solution would create a whole chain of new problems which would probably be as devastating as the environmental problem it attempted to solve. Once again, the question is how do you get people to see their responsibilities to one another in a view sophisticated enough to alleviate one problem without creating another. Once again it is a matter of developing a consensus of public opinion which will encourage individuals to do what they must do.

I am not suggesting that the librarian should advocate the particular social understanding which our society should adopt. As librarians (that is, in our public capacity as educator/librarian) we are constrained from proselytizing for a particular attitude. What we must do is to provide the materials for the debates which must occur in what John Stuart Mill has called the marketplace of ideas. We would not be living according to our own sense of mission if we did not do everything within our power to assure that the exchange of ideas in that marketplace was as free, open and informed as possible.

Let us look for a moment at where we have gotten. We have argued that to be a librarian is to be an educator, and that one of the important
social functions of education is to make people want to do what they have to
do. In dealing with our environmental problems, wanting to do what we have
to do will require people to change their attitudes about a whole range of
things from their religious conceptions to their political and economic notions.
The librarian can contribute to that change, not by advancing a particular
notion of what values must replace the old, but by providing the information
upon which the public discussion can be based.

There are several implications in all this that I would like to highlight:

1. I believe it is the librarian's responsibility to discover those areas where
public debate is necessary and to provide collections in those areas so
that the new notions which replace the old will be based upon as
complete a knowledge base as possible.

2. I do not believe that a librarian can be true to his professional responsi-
bilities if he ignores or fails to build collections in these developing areas
because they may be controversial or because the debate will be pro-
tracted and heated. For a librarian at least, promoting ignorance is not
bliss, it is an avoidance of responsibility.

3. Because the goal we seek is a new society-wide understanding, the
collections we build must be open.

They must be open in at least three ways. The collection must be
physically open and available to our constituency. That is, all legitimate
inquiries must be welcome, and the mechanisms for informing the user—
catalogs, bibliographies, or other finding guides—must be adequate to the task.
The collection must also be intellectually available to our users. In other
words, we must seek to reach all our legitimate constituents at the level of
their ability to understand. Let us admit that we have undergraduates who
cannot follow a technical economic study of the implications of our behavior
within our environment. For them we must seek out the popularizer. Finally,
the collection must be constitutionally open. That is, it must be really
comprehensive in the sense that it attempts to provide all the materials in all
subject areas which bear upon the problem regardless of whether those
materials fall in the Dewey decimal classification we would anticipate for
environmental studies or not. We must beware of interpreting our task too
narrowly. As we have seen, the environmental problem may be less a technical
problem than a philosophic or human one. Finally, the undertaking is
enormous. A society does not change its mores overnight. We must not
become discouraged by the length or complexity of the task. We, too, as
librarians will have to change our attitudes and we may well feel like Alice in
Wonderland.
“Well, in our country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time as we’ve been doing.”

“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.”

Now if we may return to our second sociologist, Max Weber, I would like to illustrate, very briefly, a second responsibility we must understand in collection building. Weber assumed the sort of social consensus which Durkheim believed the schools could help promote; but then, the situation in Germany was considerably different. For Germans, the period following the war with Napoleon was a period of consolidation. The German empire was consolidated under William I and, of course, Bismarck was instrumental in creating a national unity of spirit out of the political union of north and south Germany. As the Germans made rapid cultural, scientific and technological strides, their use of education was somewhat different from what Durkheim suggested in France. They rapidly realized that no advanced, technologically sophisticated society could function if all members of society were educated in the same way. There must be some mechanism to differentiate roles, to apportion people into specialized areas where the social need is greatest. To do so, the Germans rapidly developed their universities as institutions of pure research, and, of course, they had had a tradition of that persuasion anyway. They also rapidly expanded educational programs in technical and scientific areas. The nation’s educational system was directed at leading the student who was capable toward increasingly specialized training. We, in America, did the same sort of thing after Sputnik. Even though our tradition is that of the comprehensive high school, we rapidly developed funding for increased scientific education in our schools. NDEA funds were made available to libraries for the purchase of scientifically oriented materials. Since, for a change, we realized that we were part of a world community, opportunities and funds were also enlarged in foreign language study.

All of the furor which developed around the Russian space probe seems a bit curious fifteen years later. However, from this distance we can see both the Durkheim and the Weber effect in operation. It did not take Americans long to reach the consensus necessary to promote rapid expansion of scientific programs. That is probably because the adjustment did not require a wide shift in public opinion. American nationalistic thought already provided the base. We wanted to be the best in everything. Once we discovered an area where we might not be the best, we rapidly shifted our attention to it and provided both the social and financial support necessary to produce more scientists.

It is interesting to note that once the programs exist, they continue to deliver graduates with regularity until a new national priority comes along to
shift resources away from them. In a sense, we have a cyclical relationship, the new consensus shifts attention toward new specialties, but once the specialties exist, they contribute to maintaining the consensus because of the vested interests of those who have been trained in those specialties. Also, the mere existence of special programs attracts people to the specialty. The phenomenon can be seen to operate on a college campus as well. If there are courses in, for example, geography or geophysics, some students will be attracted to them by contact with other students and faculty who are studying in those areas, even though the student may not have intended to pursue that specialty when he entered college. The library and its collection plays an important part in directing students toward specialties which they may not have considered previously, if the library holds collections in those areas. The library can help to determine how students will differentiate themselves according to subject specialties by purchasing collections in areas where the student is free to study at his own rate even though the college may offer no formal courses in those areas. Our primary responsibility as librarians in a liberal arts college is probably to support the curriculum which the college does offer; nevertheless, we have a responsibility to open up the vast world of subject specialization to the student.

I do not intend to spend anymore time discussing the library's responsibility toward promoting specialization, because, as I have mentioned earlier, I believe the librarian is likely to have all the help he can use from the faculty. There will certainly be special areas, especially those outside the college curriculum, where the librarian will have to use his own discretion about what he will purchase. But usually a well-trained librarian will have no difficulty in identifying the appropriate booklists and buying guides to put together a basic collection in the area.

While I will not spend any more time describing how we built and are continuing to build our collection, I cannot resist making just two more observations. First we are sometimes too concerned about selecting the right book rather than about building the best collection. It is, of course, easier to concentrate upon an individual book and to inquire whether the author wrote well, or whether the book has a sturdy binding. However, I doubt whether it is usually the one book which is decisive in helping a student arrange his personal system of priorities. Often it has more to do with the depth of the collection, the importance it is given by the librarian who interprets it to him, and the significance it is given by his faculty and friends. I believe this speaks to the absolutely imperative task we have of making the collection known through whatever public relations schemes we can devise.

Finally, I believe we librarians have a tendency to consider ourselves a thing apart and to concentrate upon those activities which do, indeed, occupy most of our time. While circulation routines, and all the other systems we may
devise are terribly important, they are only a means toward accomplishing our basically educational task. I believe it does make a difference if we ask, "How can we best educate our students through the library's collection?" rather than "How can we best circulate our books?" And if we are to be educators as well as librarians, our understanding of the educational task must keep pace with the progress of educational researchers and theorists who will probably not be aware of the library's teaching potential. Our specialty is the library, but part of the responsibility of the specialist is to fit his work into the larger task of which it is a part. I think the Cheshire Cat summed it all up nicely:

"Cheshire-Puss," [Alice began] ... "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

REFERENCES

4. Ibid., p. 1206.