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## **Equipped for resistance: an agonistic conceptualisation of the public library as a verb**

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### **Abstract**

A theoretical framework for understanding public library development is presented; plural agonistics is used in combination with an approach inspired by post-humanism. The framework is related to examples from a study of two Swedish public libraries. Antagonism is viewed as foundational, and democracy as an ongoing process, the task being to transform antagonism to agonism, with institutions like libraries postulated as important spaces for adversaries to meet in dialogue. Libraries are viewed here as constantly becoming institutions, and the librarian's identity as an ongoing enactment of the library. To underscore the crucial role the library fills in society, it is conceptualized as a verb and a new word is proposed: *to librarize*. Discussions about the content of libraries are critical for librarians to find ways to perform the library. The ongoing debate is part of the professional performance of librarians. Librarians should, while acknowledging that there may be no single right way, debate over what is the most beneficial way to facilitate libraries' vital role in democracy. Conceptualising of the library as a verb and its implications for librarianship as a possible active agent for radical change within society are offered as articulations of resistance.

**Keywords:** public libraries, ethnography, political science

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## **Introduction**

This paper presents a theoretical understanding of public library development that offers a fruitful and proactive approach to the challenges that the institution faces today. Basic tenets from the theory of plural agonistics (Mouffe, 2005a; 2005b; 2013) are combined with a post-humanist analysis of institutions in contemporary society (Gerolami, 2015; Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) to add to the existing body of research on public libraries that draws on institutional theory. The theoretical framework is positioned on the critical strand of research on public libraries, and contributes to it by emphasizing the proactive role that both the institution and the profession can have in society. Given the ontological stance, which directs our attention to the library as an ongoing performance, change is viewed as part of both what constitutes the library and what librarianship is about. This is contrary to the understanding of change as a response to threat, which is often presented in critical research on public libraries. Here, change is understood as inevitable. However, not all change is good; therefore, professional debate about the content of the change is necessary. The theoretical framework suggested here can help to understand change in a manner that renders initiative. It proposes a productive position to enable librarians and libraries to meet the complicated situations they face in contemporary society. It is a formulation of a response to present conditions (Leckie & Buschman, 2010, p. xi), and an argument for resistance, achieved by framing the roles of the institution and the staff as important in political life. A first draft of the framework was drawn up in an empirical study of initiatives to develop two public libraries in Sweden (Rivano Eckerdal, 2016). Here, the framework is further elaborated, and presented in English with examples given from the empirical study. Sweden has a Library Act (SFS 2013:801), stating that every municipality (the municipal unit below the County in Sweden's two-tier local-government system) should have at least one public library. Public libraries therefore exist all over the country. However, how public libraries are performed and organized is open for interpretation at municipal level. It is argued here that public libraries are main cultural institutions in society, and therefore that public libraries can be conceptualised as institutions

with a vital political role in strengthening democracy. A sketch of the problems that current social trends pose for libraries will be presented below. The theoretical framework suggested here is introduced stepwise, beginning with the theory of plural agonistics. Then, a short introduction to the post-humanist ideas that have been added to research on public library development from an institutional theoretic perspective will follow. The theoretical framework is then further expanded, starting with the section *A call for proactive resistance*, before describing the empirical setting in which the framework is exemplified. The following sections present an analysis of the library as an assemblage and the proposition of the library as a verb: to librarize. Aspects of librarizing are further discussed in the sections *To librarize is political* and *Librarizing as a professional performance*.

### **Criticising neoliberal tendencies in society**

In the neoliberal hegemony that we live under (Harvey, 2007; Mouffe, 2013), financial recession has led to a gradual dismantling of the welfare state. The Swedish welfare model has, like that of many other western countries (Goulding, 2013), undergone a change marked by budget constraints and cut-backs within the public sector. Many tax-funded institutions face shrinking economic resources and increasing demands to prove their societal relevance in relation to measurable outcomes. This New Public Management (NPM) trend, with ideas and forms of organising work imported from the industrial arena, has been implemented in public welfare sectors, such as education and health services. Previous studies show how NPM also affects what a library actually is, and what it should and could be, by means of demands and expectations for efficiency and goal-oriented management (Buschman, 2003; d'Angelo, 2006; Kann-Christensen & Andersen, 2009; Kann-Christensen & Balling, 2011; Hansson, 2015; Greene & McMenemy, 2012; McMenemy, 2009). Within cultural policy the shift towards NPM can be observed in the tendency to connect cultural to other political fields in what has been called aspect policy development (Johannisson, 2012). Cultural initiatives within a municipality, such as investments in public libraries, are then formulated as important initiatives for the benefit of the local economy, creative industries, and entrepreneurship (Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Jochumsen & Skot-Hansen, 2011; Carlsson, 2013). There has also been a tendency to consider cultural policy as a non-political area due to the consensus that prevails across the political spectrum, a situation altered by the rise of radical right parties (Lindsköld, 2015).

### **Plural agonistics**

In her theory of *plural agonistics* Chantal Mouffe combines, in a sophisticated manner, the critical tradition (Leckie & Buschman, 2010) with an anti-essentialist ontology (Mouffe 2013, p.130; 2005b, p. 18). Mouffe (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 17) understands the social and the political as interlinked. Collective identities are established through differences that are often based on a hierarchy (ibid., p. 15). This is not a question of identity based on individual essential traits (ibid., p. 18) but on the idea of the “constitutive outside” (ibid., p. 15) where a ‘we’ is constituted by distinguishing it from a ‘they’ (ibid., p. 16): what we are not. When different collective identities are formed the differences may lead to conflicts; the distinctions “can always become the locus of an antagonism” (ibid., p. 16). This recognition, named by Mouffe *radical negativity* (2013, p. 1), is a basic tenet in her theory: there are conflicts with no rational solutions.

The social is constituted by “sedimented practices” (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 17), which makes these practices seemingly natural, hiding their political origin as a specific hegemonic order (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 18). Mouffe’s radical negativity leads to what she calls an extension of the field of social conflict, one that: “is extended rather than being concentrated in a ‘privileged agent’ such as the working class.” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 84). Therefore, several democratic struggles are taking place (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 53). In order to create a forceful collective ‘we’ across differences, a chain of equivalence between groups needs to be established (2005a., p. 53).

Mouffe opposes the deliberative forms of democracy, prominent in political theory nowadays, as they focus on the rational argument taking place in a dialogue which negates both the conflictual and the role that passion plays in politics (2013, p. 6; 2005a, 2005b, p. 129). Drawing on Mouffe’s theory of plural agonistics (Mouffe, 2013, p. 6), passion, not rational discourse (D’Angelo, 2006, p. 1), is crucial for the democratic process. Mouffe conceptualises our society as a pluriverse (Mouffe, 2005a, p.115), characterised by *agonistics*, a notion emphasizing that we will never arrive at a final stage of tranquillity and consensus (ibid., p. 16). According to the idea of radical negativity, there are conflicts to which there are no rational solutions. Hence “a prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs” (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 103). It is important to note that the roots of conflicts are often passionate and they need to be given a political shape to avoid violence (Mouffe, 2005a, p.21). The recognition that antagonism is inevitable is at heart

in Mouffe's theory as is her stress on addressing how to shape antagonism into agonism. The task for democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism (ibid., p. 20). However, agonism is possible only if opponents recognize each other as legitimate, which involves a transition from an opposition between enemies to that between adversaries (Mouffe, 2013, p. 7, 15). By proposing the adversarial model, Mouffe stresses the importance of the formal democratic institutions and practices where the agonistic debates unfold (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 20).

### **Contaminating plural agonistics with post-humanism**

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are main proponents of the post-humanist or ontological shift in which the focus is not on how the world is, but how it is constantly and unceasingly produced or enacted (Åsberg, Hultman, & Lee, 2012 p. 31-32). According to this theoretical position, and in contrast to much of the research within the critical tradition, change is inevitable. Change is how the world happens and how it is understood. Deleuze and Guattari (2004) criticize our culture and much of its philosophical tradition for understanding the world as binary, conveyed in representations of a subject describing objects in the real world (p. 3-4). This hierarchical understanding of the world as a tree (p. 18) is problematic as it differentiates between root and branches, between a distinct beginning and an end, between the low and the high. The authors suggest instead an understanding of the world as a rhizome (p. 5).

“We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 15).

The rhizome is not presented as a metaphor, which would entail that the representation is carried further, but as a metamorphose (Colebrook, 2002, p. 67; Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 22). The rhizome can “be connected to anything other, and must be” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 5), it always has multiple entryways, and it has to do with performance (ibid., p. 12). “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo” (ibid., p. 26). The world is an ongoing flow of becoming. We should therefore move from an interest in what we are to an interest in becoming (Colebrook, 2002, p. xx-xxi).

The way in which Deleuze and Guattari encourage readers to carry their concepts further (2004, p. 26), and how they portray flight lines (p. 252) and treason as productive, is an invitation that I acknowledge. The odd coupling of theories implied in the title of this section is suggested. The combination is not unproblematic. Mouffe has objected to how Deleuzian vocabulary has been adopted (2005a, p. 109-115; 2013, p. 66-71). But it is not the vocabulary itself that she opposes (2005a, p. 112).

An agonistic perspective strongly emphasizes the power relations that shape the social.

“Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. The frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agents. Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities” (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 18).

Rather than stressing power, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize desire, understood in a positive way, as productive and creative energy (Colebrook, 2002, p. xv). In spite of their *positive* presentation of life as desire, “a flow of forces that produces relations” (ibid., p. xvii), and Mouffe’s phrasing her understanding of plurality as radical *negativity*, I would argue that their combination is both possible and fruitful. Mouffe (2013, p.130; 2005b, p. 18) shares the anti-essentialist ontological position found in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, and all three also share an insistence on and awareness of how language contributes to shaping the world.

### **Institutional theoretical perspectives on public library development**

Changes in and the development of public libraries have been analysed by means of institutional theory in several studies (e.g., Audunson, 1999; Hansson, 2006; Kann-Christensen, 2009; Evjen, 2015; Schultz Nybacka, 2013). Institutional theory allows for understanding changes in a profession, such as librarianship, in relation to the surrounding community. Joacim Hansson suggests that the theory can be used to analyse the mutual influence exerted by society and public libraries (2006, p. 551). In response to pressures or forces, professions adapt to meet challenges and retain legitimacy in relation to other institutions and professions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Norms and regulations are necessary for understanding how professional practices are to be enacted and how professional conceptions within a profession stabilize.

Ragnar Audunson (1999) discusses how norms within the librarian profession work in relation to internally or externally originated changes. He shows that changes are often externally driven and depend on shifts in the environment. Furthermore, whether changes are understood or not by staff depend on how well the changes are considered to fit with key norms and values in the profession. Thus, professional norms serve as a filter. Changes in the environment need to be adapted to a language consistent with established norms in the field so that their presentations do not lead to major conflicts (ibid., p. 547). Differing understandings need not be negative. To the contrary, they can be valuable, and even viewed as a part of the profession (Schultz Nybacka, 2013). Pamela Schultz Nybacka, in her study of a competence development project at the county library in Stockholm, Sweden, puts it like this: "libraries act in a dynamic field of force and handle dual realities simultaneously. It is therefore not a question of a movement from tradition to innovation, but about a parallel development of tradition and innovation" (ibid. p. 81 [Author's translation]). In his discussion of the future of libraries and librarianship, Hansson states: "public libraries have gone from being value-based professionally driven institutions to service institutions legitimized by the demands and perceived expectations of clients and users" (2015, p. 11). In Hansson's analysis, the dynamics are not emphasized, but instead the values are regarded as having shifted in one direction, i.e., towards change. NPM has been a driving force in that change.

### **A call for proactive resistance**

These earlier studies provide valuable knowledge for understanding change in organizations and the people working in them. Hansson raises the possibility of adopting institutional theory to analyse not only how libraries respond to changes in society, but also how libraries can influence them (2006, p. 551). Nevertheless, in the analysis put forward there is often an emphasis on how libraries and librarians face pressures forcing them to adapt, and a focus on changes in the societal climate that make it increasingly difficult for culture to play a role except in relation to financial gain. The library is conveyed as a solid institution, changing only when threatened. Libraries and librarians risk being described both by others and themselves as an organization and a profession constantly defending themselves against external threats. The work can then come across as defensive, a response whenever a large external pressure is identified. Emphasis is then put on expressing oneself in relation to, and acting against, these external pressures. The external pressures are nowadays typically the effects of market economy tendencies of various kinds. Not to diminish the challenges that



such tendencies mean for, e.g., public libraries, but in order to offer another form of resistance, I propose an addition to the analysis: a combination of agonistic theory and a post-humanistic approach. Agonistic theory has been proposed by Hansson (2010) as fruitful for library and information studies, and used in one study to suggest a more prominent political role for public libraries (2011). John M. Budd includes Mouffe's agonistic democracy in his discussion of various understandings of democracy, but disagrees with her on her critique of deliberative democracy (2008, p. 165-6). The combination suggested here provides a frame for an analysis that involves the political role of libraries and sharpens the ability proactively to be a part of and influence society.

Agonistic theory entails a radical understanding of democracy in which institutions like libraries are important in offering spaces for adversaries to meet in dialogue (Mouffe, 2013). Social order offers some people the possibility to be in power at the expense of others. The order could always be different (Mouffe 2005a., p. 18; 2013, p. 131). Difference and conflict are fundamental – *the ineradicability of antagonism* (2005a, p. 19; 2013, p. 130) – which makes the ordering of conflicts into debates between adversaries the way to make democracy (2013, p.7; 2005a, p. 52) perceived as an ongoing process (2013, p. 132).

As a philosopher, Deleuze views himself as an active participant in the transforming of life (Colebrook, 2002, p. xvii). A philosopher's task, for him, is to problematize our-taken-for-granted ideas of the world, not least by finding new concepts to expand our "thinking". Thinking is not separate from but part of life (ibid., p. xix). His ideas are therefore compatible with agonistic pluralism through their shared insistence on the force that articulations exert on us, and the urge to challenge them in what Mouffe calls *counter-hegemonic articulations*. The proposed combination enables a critical but not dystopian analysis. I would therefore suggest that actions and articulations aimed at provoking or challenging the existing order could be labelled *radical change*.

Natasha Gerolami (2015) suggests that Deleuze's understanding of institutions is valuable to library and information studies, as it highlights the library's social role and its importance. Institutions are creative and positive instances, and therefore libraries should be understood as productive places where subjects are created (Gerolami, p. 168). The proposal presents an opportunity to understand a development of libraries, focused on creativity, not one linked to economy. Libraries are formulated as creative and productive institutions (cf. Carlsson, 2013),

but not in a monetary sense. This, I argue, provides a way to resist the neoliberal hegemony of our times by attempting to formulate a counter-hegemony.

### **The development of two public libraries in Scania**

As already mentioned, a draft of the presented framework was presented in an analysis of an empirical study about improvement projects in two public libraries in Sweden (Rivano Eckerdal, 2016). The projects are briefly described here, and examples from the study are given to elucidate how the framework may contribute to understand the present situation faced by the public libraries and librarians working there. The two projects are in no way extraordinary or innovative. But what was salient in the study was a strongly felt and even troublesome ambivalence, expressed by many of the librarians towards change in the library and hence in their own profession. The framework is a proposal for understanding change as creative and productive. The situations presented are therefore expected to be familiar to many librarians. The suggestion about how to conceptualize them is, on the other hand, innovative and literally extraordinary.

In Scania, the southernmost region of Sweden, the regional Culture Committee announced a call for promoting public libraries to develop into culture centres. Two of the libraries that got funding for projects on responding to this call, Arlöv and Ängelholm, have been subjected to study by the author during two time periods (2012-2013; 2014-2016). (1) The examples are taken from the second period, the aim being to look into whether and how experiences and implications from the projects (initiated during the first period) lived on in ordinary activities at the libraries. The studies followed an ethnographic approach, and included a variety of methods. The analysis is based on conversations, interviews, observations, email correspondence, field notes and questionnaires (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Czarniawska, 2007; Hahn & Inhorn, 2009).

Arlöv is a municipality in Scania, close to Malmö, the third largest city in Sweden. Arlöv's library sought funding for the project *The library as a cultural centre for all*. The project was conducted at the main library in the municipality. The objective of the project was to address a problem identified by the staff, namely that the activities in their program reached too few of the large number of immigrants residing in the municipality. The staff wanted to reach a larger part of the community by creating new programs relevant to these groups and to find new forms to market the programs. A reference group was formed by contacting visitors from

different language groups. To reach people of various ages, including families with small children, the *Saturdays at the library* project was developed. *Saturdays at the library* has been kept in the regular program since then. It is a combination of programs on one and the same Saturday – an opening of an exhibition, a concert or show, and an activity for children – and it is held five to six times a year. Two librarians worked with various parts of the project as a part of their regular work tasks and, once the project was over, all of the staff were involved.

Ängelholm is a municipality in the northeast part of Scania. In Ängelholm municipality the idea of a culture centre had existed for some years, when the local council in spring 2012 decided to rebuild the main library into a culture centre. Project funding was sought from the county to develop the library in this direction. Shortly thereafter, the local council made a new decision, which implied changes to the project. The former courthouse, next door to the library, was rented out to house the Municipal Art School for Children. The political decision led to a reformulation of the culture centre. Now the culture centre was reformulated as a Culture Zone (2) that would include the two adjacent buildings as well as another house with a café for young people. The Culture Zone would give culture of various forms a central place in the city, focussing on cooperation, both with staff from the Recreation Department and also with external parties and cultural practitioners. The library building was planned to house a large stage and a smaller, more flexible stage on the lower floor. The book and other collections were to be moved to the second floor. The part of the project that got funding from the county focused on developing and anchoring the Culture Zone internally. After the 2014 election, political representation in the local council changed, one consequence being that the proposition to remodel the library as a Culture Zone was never adopted by the council.

### **The library as an assemblage**

In order to view libraries as creative and productive institutions, Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *assemblage* can be applied (Gerolami 2015, p. 168). If an institution is understood as an assemblage, the different elements in the assemblage are determined not by their relations to the whole of the assemblage but by their relationships to the exterior. Thus, an element can be detached from the whole and moved to a different assemblage. An assemblage is more than the sum of its parts, and something new can emerge from the assemblage (ibid., p. 168). If the library is understood as an assemblage, it can be linked to other institutions and contexts, without its relations being predetermined by economic or political factors or

financial connections (ibid., p. 169). Relations with different actors should be established within the library (ibid., p. 171).

An assemblage has several elements, both human and nonhuman. In a library-assemblage, elements include the librarians, library assistants, the patrons, the physical space, furniture, objects including books, journals and computers, digital resources, inter alia OPAC, search engines and social media platforms, and the articulations that are produced and used within the assemblage. All these elements make up the assemblage and librarians are not assigned any specific position or legitimacy.

The collaborations and efforts to increase participation in and cooperation with the community, made in both Arlöv, when engaging with a reference group to develop their programs, and in Ängelholm, when inviting the community to a public dialogue about the Culture Zone, can be analysed as examples of connections made from the library-assemblage. By formulating it as an assemblage, the library is judged in relation to the connections made to other assemblages. Since the connections change over time the focus, or rather the several focuses, will change from time to time, and the risk of being dominated by a few strong external voices will lessen.

Each assemblage contains norms and rules. In Deleuze's analysis of assemblages, we are not to be limited by the ones that already exist – and the rules and laws that prevail there. We have the ability to manoeuvre around the regulations that are set up, the ability to be creative. This ability paves the way for change (Gerolami, 2015, p. 169). Ronald Day and Andrew Lau argue that, from a Deleuzian perspective, one of the tasks of an information provider is to foster personal and social change (2010, p.110). Thus, the ability to effect radical change lies within the library institution. I find the readiness for radical change and creativity within the existing limits refreshing in this theoretical approach. For libraries, it is important to create new projects and concepts, or to use old concepts in new ways (Gerolami, 2015, p. 170). Next, a newly created word, with potential for radical change from within, is formulated. Furthermore, there is a presentation of how it can gain legitimacy within the profession.

### **To librarize**

Deleuze and Guattari construct many new concepts in order to change and develop our understanding of the world, and to indicate how we can contribute to making it different.

Such a focus on the force of language fits well, as mentioned above, with Mouffe's, who values the production of counter-hegemonic articulations. A new word is proposed here: in order to explore what happens when, instead of talking about the library as a noun, we speak of it as a verb, *to librarize*. This proposition was first formulated in Swedish where the noun, with latin and greek etymology, is "bibliotek", and when transformed into a verb "at biblioteka". (3) Understanding of library as a verb is also in line with Mouffe's proposition that democracy is a never-ending process (2013, p. 132): The proposal involves moving our attention from a constant state, which may be threatened and must be defended, to a continuous production, enactment and becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 279). Some consequences of this understanding will be elaborated further. It is suggested here that this proposition opens up possibilities to grasp the many times difficult circumstances that libraries and librarians are facing and approach these in a creative and proactive way. However, it is not assumed that difficulties are easily overcome. Neither is it suggested that solving difficulties depends on how individuals grasp them. On the contrary as a counter-hegemonic articulation the verbification of the library recognizes the power that lies in words. This counter-hegemonic articulation may be a way for librarians to, while recognizing change as part of their professional identity, focus on the debate of which change is most beneficial for the institution.

If the library is seen as an institution and activities in constant production, performing, enactment or becoming; i.e., as a verb, it means that the librarian's identity is understood as an ongoing enactment or as a doing of the library. The change that the librarians expressed as problematic is then recast as constitutive. If the institution is understood as a continuous doing, it is assumed that there are various participants in the performance, i.e., the elements already described above. The institution requires a diversified range of elements, including but not limited to humans. On such an understanding, it seems that the difference between professional and non-professional practitioners, "users", is lost or might even be rejected. In librarizing, the practitioners enact the library whether they get paid for it or not and no matter what education they have. Thus, what I understand as one of the problems emanating from understanding the libraries as a noun lives on. When adopting a post-humanistic perspective, two questions arise: Can it be argued that it is just librarians who have the right knowledge and skills to perform a library, to librarize? And if so, how?

A shortcoming in Gerolami's (2015) analysis is that she does not discuss how to deal with situations in which different views collide on how the performance should be enacted or what connections are crucial for libraries and librarians to work with. I argue that, with an emphasis on the performance of a library, there follows an equally important aspect of this performance that is a crucial part of doing a library, *librarizing*. What should be the content of librarizing? Here we can turn to plural agonistics and the emphasis that Mouffe puts on the role that democratic institutions play, and how they contribute to democracy by transforming enemies into adversaries who can engage in agonistic struggles within the institutions. How the public library should be performed is an example of an important debate for democracy. In the study of Ängelholm referred to above, the planned but not implemented organizational change at the library shook several employees' understanding of the library, and thus the librarian profession, to their foundations. One of the librarians speaks about libraries and their role, and how working on the project has led to struggling with how to deal with the twin faces of librarianship (the extrovert and the more traditional, with a focus on preservation):

“And that is perhaps what I have been thinking about a little: How to unite those two. And perhaps modernise a library. My dream about a library, or this workplace or the library idea, is that it should be so attractive that people want to come here. I don't mean this particular building, but what we stand for.”

(Conversation 4/9 2015)

I argue that the different conceptualizations of how the library should be performed, as expressed by this librarian, are central. In this study, it emerged that, over time, or in relation to different tasks, conceptualizations differ both between and within librarians. One librarian in Ängelholm changed view on the project during the process, making the reflection that: “Yes, I think that I'm actually quite open to the changes!” Instead of understanding this ambivalence as negative, the proposed framework provides a way to view it as part of the professional performance in which change is a constant.

Conceptions about libraries and librarianship concern organizational and professional identities. In the study, it was observed that the staff held a variety of understandings about their profession and the institution they worked in. Schultz Nybacka discusses this as a parallel development of tradition and innovation (2013, p. 81). One of the librarians in Ängelholm expressed how important it was to be forced to think in new ways, and then put

into words the dynamic between tradition and renewal in the profession; that is, you are not forced to do something that you embrace. There was an initial resistance but once the threshold was crossed, this librarian appreciated the changes that it had led to. To work in this dynamic and to change your understanding, or perhaps to accommodate several understandings simultaneously, causes strain. On the other hand, the changes were also appreciated as rewarding by several members of the staff that I met. There is a paradox related to their work, to which they need to relate, a process that can be both painful and full of joy. The framework is proposed as a way for librarians involved in this constant struggle to view it in a productive way.

Differences in understandings can be viewed as advantages and assets, and should be given space in discussions among librarians. These differences can be framed in agonistic terms as expressions of how librarians are also part of other collective identities, things that allow them to adopt different stances from which to engage in dialogue. Conversations between adversaries are an important part of democracy as a process. Such agonistic struggles are “the very condition of a vibrant democracy” (Mouffe, 2013, p.7). The suggestion to understand library as a verb is proposed as one strategy to be used as part of a counter hegemonic approach. The preamble to the Swedish Library Act states that the libraries in the public library system shall promote the development of a democratic society by contributing to the transfer of knowledge and the free formation of opinions (SFS 2013:801, Section 2). Librarians have therefore a particularly important societal role to play in providing opportunities for agonistic struggles (Rivano Eckerdal, 2017).

### **To librarize is political**

The Swedish Library Act provides a clear collective perspective; libraries in the public library system are intended for everyone (SFS 2013: 801, Section 2). Public libraries are therefore neither run for the librarians’ own sake nor for that of politicians. Public libraries are driven for the benefit of the community and for society's survival. Those interpreting and implementing the law are the employees at the library, who are (still) mostly librarians. This situation can be viewed as paradoxical. It might be that political decisions are judged by librarians as not in the best interests of good library performance, which affects the librarians’ own performance. Librarians in team leadership positions in Ängelholm talked about the experience of having two chairs to sit on. This remark is actually valid at all levels of the organization. Managers are closest to the politicians, and research has shed light on the

complexity of this relation (Evjen, 2015; Michnik, 2014). It is not surprising that research has shown that library managers emphasise “the importance of effective engagement with key decisions makers” (Goulding, Walton, & Stephens, 2012, p.114).

Based on their knowledge, library employees interpret their mission to perform the library in the best way for the common good. In order to do so, employees need to maintain an ongoing debate about the interpretations of their varying understandings. By acknowledging that there are a variety of understandings of how to perform the library, an agonistic relation is established. Instead of a confrontation between, on one side, our friends and ourselves, and on the other, our enemies, a debate between adversaries unfolds. In their performance, they need to relate to the varying norms and values that concern professional practice, the tension already mentioned between tradition and innovation. This tension, as one librarian points to when talking about the different opinions that exist with regard to the Culture Zone in Ängelholm can be positive and creative. I ask if it is important that all staff share the same view on the Culture Zone and the librarian replies:

Librarian: It is almost impossible to reach some kind of consensus.

Interviewer: Mm; but is it something that you should strive towards?

Librarian: I don't think that it is possible really.

And, later on in the conversation, the librarian says:

Librarian: It is another kind of dynamic when you disagree. Because that is when the interesting discussions start. If everyone agrees then it doesn't get as creative perhaps.

(Conversation 24/6 2015)

To engage in debate and keep different views alive are important issues in an agonistic struggle, possibly aiming at a compromise, but then the debates are “seen as temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation” (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 102). To perform libraries in the best possible way, librarians need politicians' mission and support, the community's support, and confidence of their own in their ability to do the job. This requires a continuous questioning of the role libraries have in society and a balancing act between the needs of the surrounding community and the responsiveness of the library to be faithful to its role in and for society as



the creative and productive force it can be. It also requires reflection over the extent to which political decisions are the best ones to ensure everyone's right to the library. Budd, from a different perspective, discusses the future of librarianship, arguing that the profession needs to connect not to the traditional information society but to what he calls a moral information society, which includes taking a specific stance (2008, p. 222). Neutrality is not an option if the profession is to have a role in and for democracy.

### **Librarizing as a professional performance**

For librarians, as for other professionals, a main challenge lies in training for and working in a profession that they understand in a certain way, and later on having to deal with the profession's development during their work-life. They should relate to these developments in ways that foster a continued interest in and support for the libraries' mission, including both tradition and renewal. Nowadays, challenging questions are raised about how much the library can change, whom the library is for, and who will thrive there. To promote development is a professional task, but also one not to be lent out to support the missions of others. With an understanding of the library as a verb, I argue that a debate on these issues needs to be conducted in both words and deeds, in relation to the continuous performance of the library, the librarizing. Balancing between various positions needs to be performed continuously, and it is not just an expression of an individual's ability to adapt. The debate is part of the professional performance of librarians.

Discussions about the content of libraries are crucial for librarians jointly to find ways to perform the library. The material cited in this paper shows that there are a variety of understandings of the library and the librarian profession among library staff. The changes at the library in Arlöv did not lead to any major conflicts among the staff, but there seems to be an ongoing conversation about the content of the work they perform and how it should be understood in relation to what they perceive as a public library's role and content. In discussions about which activities to include in the program, these questions arise at regular intervals. The staff need to decide about what they judge as appropriate activities in a library in order not to lose focus. Without the idea of librarizing, we might understand the case in Arlöv to indicate that the librarians had been faced with change, figured out how to address it, and then achieved a point of stability and consensus. With the idea of librarizing, we might instead understand the case in Arlöv to indicate that the librarians had integrated the idea of change into their performance of the library. When librarizing they perform the library as an

ongoing set of activities with a strong focus of collaboration with the community. In relation to the proposed Culture Zone in Ängelholm, there are varied conceptions connected to different views on how a renovated library might function as a culture centre. Opinions differ; they are not polarized, but ambiguous over a wide range of issues. The delay in the pertinent political decisions has perhaps been an advantage in allowing for reflection and discussion about the roles of librarians and the library. Without the idea of librarizing this situation could be understood as totally unnecessary and as a failure. But with the idea of librarizing this sort of discussion is viewed as central for librarians' performance of the library.

From a post-humanist understanding of the public library, questions can be rephrased. Instead of *"Do we need to change?"* the question might be: *"How do we move forward in a way that strengthens the role of the library in society?"* Instead of *"Who is for or against change?"* the question could be: *"How can we contribute to developing the library in a direction that is positive for democracy?"* The rephrasings reveal that an ongoing debate discussing the enactment of the library is central to its performance.

Libraries, taking a post-humanist approach, can be understood as an ongoing performance in interplay with the surrounding community in an assemblage-like way, a creative and productive part of society. To coordinate the work, keeping the debate about the performance alive in a way that is perceived as meaningful for the participants is a challenging task. The actual direction and speed of the process must be calibrated, with the employees playing an important role in that. To understand the library as a verb means that librarians in their performances need to relate to the development of the institution and their own positions. To discuss and participate in the debate and performance of the library is how the professional role is fulfilled.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, I present a theoretical framework that I suggest is relevant for both research and practice within the field of library and information studies. The basic tenets of agonistic theory combined with an ontological focus on becoming provide an extension of critical research into public libraries. When understanding the library as an assemblage, its connections to the surrounding world are emphasized without imposing a threat on the core values of the institution. By understanding the library as a verb, change is inevitable and always present. Several elements, human and nonhuman, take part in the becoming of the

library. To actively engage in shaping the development is then part of the professional performance of librarians.

Change is neither good nor bad. It is inevitable. But the direction can be steered, and it is important to keep a debate going about what that direction should be. Librarians should engage in such a debate, acknowledging that there is no one single right way, but a variety of ways. In debate, they should consider which one is most beneficial for allowing the library to play a vital role for democracy.

Theoretically, the suggested framework aims at further previous critical research on public library development by adding a more prominent proactive role to the institution and the profession. Adopting an ontological positioning of the library as a verb, as an ongoing performance, change is constant and not, as in previous critical research, a reaction to an external pressure. With regard to practice, the presented conceptualising of libraries as a verb and its implications for librarianship as a possible active agent for radical democracy within society are offered as articulations of resistance. In the paper, examples from two public libraries are presented and viewed through the lens provided by the theoretical framework. I encourage further elaboration of how librarianship may play out in practical library activities to explore its transforming potential. In many ways, the future of libraries and librarianship is a serious issue. A certain playfulness can be a way to approach it, not to reduce the severity of the issue, but as a way to gather strength and practice resistance against currents that tend to reduce public libraries and public librarians' societal role.

## Footnotes

1. The studies have resulted in two reports in Swedish (Rivano Eckerdal, 2013; 2016). The studies received funding from Skåne Regional Council/Region Skåne. This paper is a further development of the analysis presented in the second report (2016).
2. My translation of the Swedish name *Kulturstråket*.
3. The Swedish word for library is *bibliotek*, thus the verb "to librarianship" is a translation from the Swedish *att biblioteka*, a proposition I presented in the second report mentioned above (Rivano Eckerdal 2016).

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