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Public Libraries in Spain

Present Situation and Future

The public libraries in Spain have long been neglected due to central governmental inertia resulting in patchwork legislation, meager resources and lack of a coordinated policy. With the restructuring of the Spanish government following the end of the dictatorship and the constitution of 1978, the jurisdiction for public libraries was passed to regional or local control. At the same time, new libraries were established. While benefitting some, a new division is developing between the wealthier and poorer regions. This article describes the historical context, the current situation and the outlook for the future.

Die Öffentlichen Bibliotheken in Spanien. Aktuelle Situation und Zukunftsperspektiven


Les bibliotheques publiques en Espagne. Situation actuelle et perspectives d’avenir

Les bibliothèques publiques en Espagne ont été longtemps délaisées par le gouvernement central, conséquence d’une inertie administrative qui a conduit à une législation fragmentaire, une mince dotation économique et au manque d’une politique coordonnée. Suite à la fin du régime dictatorial et à la Constitution de 1978, la juridiction en matière de bibliothèques publiques a été transférée aux gouvernements locaux ou régionaux. En même temps, de nouvelles bibliothèques ont été créées. Une nouvelle division se développait entre les régions pauvres et riches, ce qui rapportait des avantages à certaines régions. Cet article décrit le contexte historique, la situation actuelle et les perspectives d’avenir.

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1 Introduction

To write about the public libraries in Spain is to speak of a diverse number of realities, although there are several common elements such as the limited endowment of collections and personnel. A long history of neglect and a confusing legislative framework have left Spanish public libraries in a precarious situation, though there have been substantial changes within some segments of this community in the past decade. This article presents a general overview of the current situation of public libraries in Spain, including the recent trends toward modernization, and summarizes the problems which this sector of libraries still must confront.

2 Legislative Framework

2.1 Background to the Present Situation

In order to understand the situation of Spanish public libraries it is necessary to refer back to the legislative framework they are subject to. Along with the restoration of democracy, the 1978 constitution was approved, in which the 17 autonomous communities (therefore regions) were granted authority over the “museums, libraries and music conservatories which are of interest to the Community”. The areas over which the central government would exercise exclusive jurisdiction include “museums, libraries and archives belonging to the State”. Looking back, we find the first forerunners of the public libraries (they were called popular libraries then) date from the year after the revolution of 1868. In 1915, the first School of Library Science was founded in Barcelona and a modern plan for the creation of public libraries was put forth in Catalonia. This was, in any case, an isolated example and it was not until the year 1931 that a policy was formulated for all of Spain. At this time the Second Republic created the Association for the Loan and Acquisition of Books. The system of Municipal Libraries in which all the political and professional sectors of the population were to be represented was established by decree in 1932. It is also necessary to make reference to the Proyecto de Bases de un Plan de organización general de Bibliotecas del Estado by Maria Moliner, which was presented by the government during the Second Republic, after the Civil War had already begun. The spirit which gives life to this plan is particularly important since it stems from the principle that “any reader in any place can obtain the book he/she wishes [...]”.

1 Proyecto de bases de un plan de organización general de bibliotecas del Estado. Valencia 1939.
As was mentioned in a publication of the period, “we are in the midst of one of the most exciting and positive moments in the history of our public libraries” 2. The Civil War (1936-1939) cut this work short and afterward, up until the ratification of the Constitution, the public libraries experienced great stagnation. The National Reader Service was created in 1947 and later changed its name to the National Reading Center. The library structure which was created at the end of the war was conceived as a centralized system relying more on volunteers than on trained personnel and never reached the level of a true library system.

Even though policies were articulated from Madrid in an attempt to motivate the local governments, the latter remained for the most part distant from and uninterested in libraries. The reason may possibly be found in a legislation which was both vague and imprecise – a reflection of a governing body that did not consider good libraries, where the public could inform and educate itself, one of its highest priorities.

For years, the image of the public library has been that of a place where books are conserved, inventoried, catalogued and classified. The concept of a passive library warehousing books still pervades Spanish society today, in spite of the tremendous efforts made by professionals and several administrations to change it.

2.2 Present Situation

The public libraries have been submitted to a continual legislative push-pull. Until they were turned over to the Autonomous Communities they were only given orders and decrees, without any wide-ranging legal provisions. After the ratification of the Constitution of 1978 the jurisdiction for public reading was transferred to the autonomous governments as was the administration of the State Public Libraries 3.

In spite of their having jurisdiction, the Autonomous Communities have not acted swiftly enough in enacting legislation. The first to do so were Catalonia, Andalucía, The Basque Country, Valencia and Aragon. Eight more have done so in the past five years and, even today, 13 years after ratification of the Constitution, there are four autonomous communities that still lack specific legislation regarding public libraries.

It is necessary to point out that the relationship which should exist between the central government and the autonomous governments is not clearly defined. Because of this, no one knows exactly how the state public libraries and the local libraries should be coordinated. This means that coordination between the different public library systems does not exist in Spain and that there is no coherent policy among them.

In 1989 the Boletín Oficial del Estado announced the creation of the Spanish Library System 4 stating that “the Spanish Library System should make the services provided to the public by the different types of state libraries coherent and effective and that they should cooperate with the libraries of the respective autonomous communities interchanging information, coordinating acquisitions and interlibrary loans”. Although the text signals the need for cooperation between the different types of libraries, it does not give the concrete directives needed to carry it out.

The Spanish Library System, which includes neither the public libraries falling under the Autonomous Communities nor municipal governments, is composed of:

a) the National Library which is the head of the system,
b) the State Public Libraries,
c) the libraries under the jurisdiction of the ministries and autonomous organizations of the central government, excluding school libraries,
d) the libraries of the public universities,
e) the libraries of the royal academies,
f) the network or system of libraries of public or private institutions, or the special interest libraries which are incorporated through an agreement with the Ministry of Culture.

A Coordinating Council of Libraries is the organization responsible for the study, preparation and recommendations on how to carry out the technical guidelines for the formation of collective catalogs and the interconnection of the computerized services of the various libraries.

3 The Public Libraries in the Spanish Library System

There are two types of public libraries within the Spanish library system:

- the State Public Libraries or provincial libraries, administration of which has been passed over to the autonomous governments,
- public libraries which are not part of the State and which depend on the Autonomous Communities and local governments (Municipal administrations).

There exist as well individual libraries or networks of public libraries under the auspices of banks and savings institutions.

Of all of these, the most important nucleus consists of those public libraries which are not part of the state system, since the state libraries are only located in provincial capitals and number no more than 51. As regards the municipal governments, the La Ley de Bases de Regimen Local of 1985 5 recognizes the obligation to provide library services in municipalities of over 5 000 people. This means that many municipalities are getting involved in the creation of new libraries. There is a great lack of coordination among the different administrations (local, provincial, autonomous, state).

Even within the same Autonomous Community, when two or more library networks exist side by side, subordinate to different administrations, there is no coordination between them. Each administration does its own planning and it is not uncommon to find small towns endowed with two or three public libraries all with different administrations and a short distance away, other, sometimes larger towns which have no library service at all.

The libraries also lack access to bibliographic tools and services which could enable them to function more

efficiently: there are few computerized catalogs, the
national bibliography is not yet readily available in
machine readable format, the technical standardization
is disparate and confusing and there are no national
bibliographic services similar to those of many other
European countries.
It can be stated, unfortunately, that even up until the
present day, there does not exist nor has there ever existed, a properly functioning national public library
system in Spain.

3.1 Statistics
When initiating an analysis of the public libraries in
Spain, one turns to the statistical resources on the
subject.
The first thing which turns out to be true is that there exist
statistics from diverse bodies (Ministry of Culture, National Statistical Institute, etc.) which do not always
gather data in the same way and in the majority of cases,
the data is very incomplete. In Spain in general, statistics
gathering is viewed as an administrative task which must
be performed and not as an instrument to reveal existing
situations and study possible actions and needs.
The frequent time lags between the collection of data
and its publication make serious analysis even more
difficult.
Another difficult thing about Spanish statistics is that the
state public libraries and the public libraries of the
Autonomous Communities are often confused. Even a
yearbook as serious as the one published by the Spanish
daily “El País” makes reference to the state public
libraries (1989) in a paragraph on public libraries in Spain
in its 1991 edition6, even though the published data
actually includes references to those libraries of the
Autonomous Communities (though not all of them) as
well.
Whereas if the Anuario El País cites a total of 1 140 state
public libraries (1989), there are in fact a total of only 51.
The number of public libraries in Spain has doubled in
the last ten years. The Yearbook of the National
Statistical Institute7 for the year 1990, indicates that out
of the total 7 900 existing libraries in the entire country
2 982 are public libraries (according to data gathered in
1988). Of these, 51 are State Public Libraries and some
380 are private, the most of them dependent on banks
and savings institutions.
It is important to bear in mind when looking at these
figures that they often include facilities inappropriately
called “libraries”, of 50 square meters and with 2 000 or
3 000 volumes and annual acquisitions of 50 to 300 titles.

3.2 Economic Resources
It is practically impossible to know just how much is
invested in public libraries in Spain. We have already
seen that the various libraries are under different legal
and administrative jurisdictions. Frequently the upkeep
is shared with the municipal government supplying the
facilities and janitorial services and the autonomous
government providing the books and personnel.
In addition, different networks can coexist within the
same Community: municipal, provincial, state, etc.
It should also be stated that funds are seldom given to the
library for direct allocation for overall operation:
personnel, facilities, library collections, etc. There are a
few exceptions, such as the Community of Madrid
whose regional library plan budgets and allocates 6 500
million pesetas (832 000 ecus) for the collection and
acquisition of bibliographical collections from 1989 to
19968.
In the specific case of the Ministry of Culture, the year
1991 will see an increase of 10 to 13 % in the budget for
libraries, to a total of 7 062 million pesetas (903 936
ecus)9.

3.3 Library Collections and Documents
The library and document collections in the Spanish
public libraries are extremely limited. The Yearbook of
the National Institute of Statistics cites a total of
23 274 031 volumes10 in the Spanish public libraries
(data from 1988). These numbers have little meaning
unless accompanied by a few explanations.
One of the principal functions of the library has always
been understood, and is still understood today, to be the
conservation of collections. This means that the practice
of weeding books is practically nonexistent, which in
turn means that a large number of the above cited
volumes are obsolete. In many cases, the public libraries
have the library collections of religious orders which,
due to their disestablishment in the 19th century, passed
over to the civil sector. These collections may have an
historical value, but they are not the most appropriate
collections for the reading public. The shortages,
obsolescence and in some cases inappropriate historical
value for public libraries are characteristic traits of the
majority of the public libraries in Spain.
Furthermore, the introduction of other aids, especially
audio visual material like records and videos, is still very
timid and restricted.
There are obviously exceptions to this rule. The County
Council of Barcelona, the Community of La Rioja and the
newest State Public Libraries are already introducing
these informational aids and they compose a major part
of their collections11.

3.4 Human Resources
One of the most serious problems affecting public
libraries in Spain is the scarceness and lack of training of
the staff who work in them. With the exception of the
School for Library Science of Barcelona, founded in
1915, the other four schools specifically dedicated to the
training of library personnel are all from the 80’s. Up until
a few years ago, the most qualified librarians came from
university graduates and Phd’s without specific edu-
cation in the profession.

S. 838.
8 Comunidad de Madrid. Servicio de Bibliotecas y del Libro:
Plan regional de bibliotecas: 1a fase: Madrid capital. Madrid
9 El Gobierno reduce en los presupuestos los fondos para
investigación y se apoya en la iniciativa privada. In: El País (5
debre de 1991).
10 Anuario (Anm. 7) S. 358.
11 Vinent, Magdalena: Costos, financiacion y gestion en las
bibliotecas publicas espanolas. In: Seminario Hispano-
The establishment of the university schools of Library Science and Documentation marks a decisive step towards better trained personnel. However, even today, the majority of the personnel in the public libraries has no special training and in small towns it is not unusual to find a retired policeman performing the task of librarian. Sometimes a non grato government official is sent to the library as a punishment.

The number of people who work in public libraries is insufficient and libraries are often closed for lack of personnel. The total figure is estimated at 3 500 persons which, put in terms of full time workers, drops to 2 000. This figure is lower than that which is found in the majority of developed countries given the personnel/population ratio and four times less than that recommended by the IFLA.

3.5 Library Users

Children and students are the principal users of the public libraries. This results in a great distortion of the normal workings of a library. Many users go to the library exclusively to do schoolwork and never use the existing collections. This is due to the practical nonexistence of school libraries. This state of affairs detracts from the importance public libraries must possess in order to stimulate reading in the broad population, since it alienates the adult reading public.

The endemic infrautilization of libraries in Spain can be seen in a survey carried out by the Ministry of Culture in January 1991. The results showed that only 11 % of the population uses the library at one time or another during the year. The study found that those who do use it, do so to read their own books. Not more than 10 % make use of borrowing privileges.

In spite of these pessimistic statistics, there is a sector of the Spanish population that recognizes the need for more and better libraries. In a survey conducted in 1985, one fourth of those surveyed placed libraries among three most requested services.

3.6 Facilities and Equipment

Very few of the public libraries have been specifically designed to serve as such. In general, the majority are located in already existing facilities and have to adapt themselves to the space they inherit.

The great majority of public libraries are located in facilities of limited dimensions (many are no larger than 50 or 60 m²) and do not have any separate sections within the library. The worst problem lies in the lack of division between the juvenile and adult sections which effectively converts the whole library into a juvenile section.

Regarding infrastructure, we find ourselves in another discomfiting situation in which most libraries are poorly equipped: without photocopiers or telephones, some barely have a manual typewriter. Only the newest libraries have been designed to meet professional criteria, have adequate dimensions (3 000-7 000 m²), are properly equipped and have been built with an eye towards the possible expansion of services and collections.

3.7 Services

A large number of Spanish libraries are open only 3 or 4 hours a day and the service they offer is normally limited to reading in the reading room and loaning books. Without photocopying equipment, telephone or fax, it is impossible to do much more.

Perhaps the greatest problem is the virtual inexistence of information and reference services in the libraries. The fundamental idea of a public library – to provide information – is unknown in the majority of Spanish libraries, due to the lack of means and the shortage of personnel and complicated in some cases by the lack of professionalism on the part of the staff.

On a positive note, some administrations and several private organizations have dedicated efforts towards modernizing the network of libraries. This modernization has generally been concentrated on improving facilities, expanding collections and increasing personnel.

Along these lines, the General Administration of Books and Libraries has as one of its objectives the renovation of the public libraries now in use since many are in inadequate and insufficient facilities. In the last 6 years 12 new libraries have opened up and another 20 are on the drawing boards in various provinces. In fact, the newly opened libraries in the provincial capitals have facilities of 3 000-8 000 m² with space for 75 000-300 000 volumes. As is expected with modern facilities, the majority of these new libraries have audiovisual rooms, reading rooms for both adults and children, newspaper reading rooms and a public conference room in many cases.

Another area in which Spain is particularly behind is in the area of computerization. Currently, very few of the library networks have been computerized, although this is understandable in light of the small number of volumes. When the Lib-2 report was undertaken in 1986, the public libraries had not even started computerization. In the update to the report, carried out in 1991, a number of libraries and library networks had begun the process. The Ministry of Culture recently reported that it will soon be able to distribute the database of the 27 automated libraries in its system.

Other tools for accessing information such as videotext or CD-ROM databases are virtually unknown in the public libraries.

4 Outlook for the Future and Conclusions

Although there has been a growing awareness of the importance of libraries and increasing financial support on the part of governmental agencies, there is much
work to be done to bring Spanish libraries to the level of the other European countries.

Some difficult problems that remain to be solved are:

The existing inequalities between libraries.
It turns out that the public libraries, which are called upon to act as organizations which promote equality among different social sectors in terms of access to culture, actually exacerbate the inequalities. The wealthiest Communities, or those with the greatest cultural tradition create more libraries than the poorest Communities. Some of them, such as Catalonia or the Basque Country have more of a tradition of libraries; as such the regional governments are making further effort to improve and promote libraries. Other Communities have neither a tradition of libraries nor are they putting much effort into promoting reading among the public.

The coordination between libraries is practically nonexistent. They do not share resources nor is there coordination in technical aspects. What this entails is that in the future, any sort of information exchange, particularly by computer, will be extremely difficult.

The legislative framework is not defined clearly enough and as it is now stated does not facilitate coordination between the different networks of libraries and Communities.

Essential bibliographical tools and services do not exist or are not made available: National bibliographies are not updated frequently, interlibrary loan services are virtually non-existent for public libraries17 and the situation is unlikely to change in the near future.

Unfortunately the concept of passive library will remain in force in the majority of the libraries for some time to come. If indeed the opening of the public library of Alcudía (Bertelsmann Foundation) caused such a sensation, it was because of the concept it expressed of dynamic library service adjusted to the community's needs. The concept of the public library is changing in Spain, albeit slowly. At the end of 1991, for example, a seminar was held in one Autonomous Community on such previously unheard of topics as “the library as a service” and “marketing in the public library”, etc. In such activities we get a glimpse of changing trends. Spain has begun to have libraries which will be more suited to the new informational demands, but these are still isolated examples which cannot do much to alter the present general picture. In some cases, we librarians have recommended that small libraries with poor collections and insufficient personnel should be closed so that fewer but better libraries could be opened. These proposals have never met with much success because it is politically more profitable for the administration to open up and maintain small libraries although they are handicapped from the beginning by a lack of resources which actually prevents them from performing their stated task and detracts from the positive image of the library as a service to the community.

A global design in library structures is what is needed, with the National Library as hub of the system providing national bibliographic services coordinating policy and procedures, and facilitating cooperative activities between libraries. There is also a need to rethink the principal function of the library as a public service which should be able to reply to any question, from any person, using any type of information technology so that the situation of public reading in Spain can truly improve18.

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