

British and French Libraries facing the economic crisis¹

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the economic crisis that we have experienced since the fall of 2008, culture did not appear to be a priority for the British and French leaders. Having started before the financial downturn, the phenomenon of precarious situations for employees of cultural institutions and the constant call for private funds have since become the norm, including across libraries. Although France has not yet engaged in brutal and massive library shutdowns as has the United Kingdom, important changes regarding the status of workers, directly inspired by the American and British liberal models, have been progressively altering these institutions. Does this mean that the French model has tended to imitate, for budget reasons, the British model? Undoubtedly, it has. Therefore, when it comes to libraries, although the concept of "Big Society" established by David Cameron has had dramatic consequences in the United Kingdom, France has not turned a deaf ear to what "Big Society" has implied for libraries: doing more with less.

Keywords:

Library
Budget Cuts
Close
Privately
Job Security

¹ This paper was selected and edited through the double-blind review process of the review. The author would like to thank Cécile Doustaly for the first feed-back on this paper given at the conference she organized in December 2011: The Arts In Times of Crisis: British and French Perspectives (with the generous support of the CICC-Université de Cergy-Pontoise, Fondation de l'université de Cergy-Pontoise, Centre for Cultural Policy Studies-Warwick University, Musée Rodin, Fondation Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent, Musée du Louvre, Courtauld Institute of Arts, The Henry Moore Foundation). The author wishes to thank Sharon Golec and Susan Pickford for translating parts of the article.

² Due to the current lack of consolidated data at the European level, it can only be stressed that there have been some sharp cuts in countries like Italy, Spain or the UK in recent years. So far, France enjoys a relatively more favorable situation with a limited decrease at the national level, but a more important one at the local level (cities, départements, regions).

“Libraries are a national service as well as a local facility – both aspects need recognition and the national dimension should not be lost in the Big Society or localism. They are part of England’s national heritage bequeathed to us by the Victorians and ours must not be the generation that destroys this heritage. The vision of the Victorians has enriched subsequent generations and, refocused and energised, public libraries will continue to be a dynamic and vibrant part of society enriching, challenging and meeting the needs and aspirations of individuals and communities. We must all work to ensure that we develop an exciting and innovative public library service which not only serves the information and cultural needs of current people but is equipped to help future generations in their discovery and use of knowledge.”²

Like the rest of the world, the French economy and the UK economy are facing an economic crisis that it is said to be “unparalleled”. In such a context of economic austerity, all budgets were brought down and the arts were not a priority anymore. Worse, the imperatives of profitability started taking over. The consequence was that libraries had to drastically reduce their costs (with librarians dismissed, opening hours reduced...). Thus, the situation of libraries in the UK appeared to be extremely worrying at the end of 2011. In France, if one did not expect mass closures as in the UK, more changes are to be expected in personnel status. So the main questions are: how has the liberal model been applied in the field of culture in those two countries? What are the forms of resistance against the closures and the cuts faced by British and French libraries? What are the new forms or the new possibilities to reinvent the library in times of economic crisis?

First of all, it’s important to have a brief overview on the history of libraries in the UK and then in France, especially as UK libraries have always been a model for French libraries.

English public libraries were created in 1850, but it was in the late nineteenth century that the revolutionary concept of free access by James Duff Brown, a librarian, after a trip to the United States. Around the same time, children libraries were opened. In the twentieth century, the 1929 crisis and World War II have had contrasted effects on libraries: drastic cuts associated with an increase in attendance. Then, there was a steady growth in the number of libraries until the middle of 1973 when the economic crisis led to spending restraint. The 1980s neoliberal policies introduced by the governments of Margaret Thatcher severely affected libraries.

In France, revolutionary seizures of 1789 were critical for French public libraries. Libraries were

oriented towards heritage, and very often inaccessible to the public. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that the Anglo-American view of the “public library” became increasingly influential.

But French libraries budgeted carelessly, squandering premises, and were understaffed with scarcely trained employees. In 1946, for instance, only about one hundred people visited the public library of Bordeaux for a population of 253 000 inhabitants. After the WWII, the situation started to change and some large libraries were created in nationwide before blossoming between 1982-1988 as budgets were multiplied by three and the surface doubled.

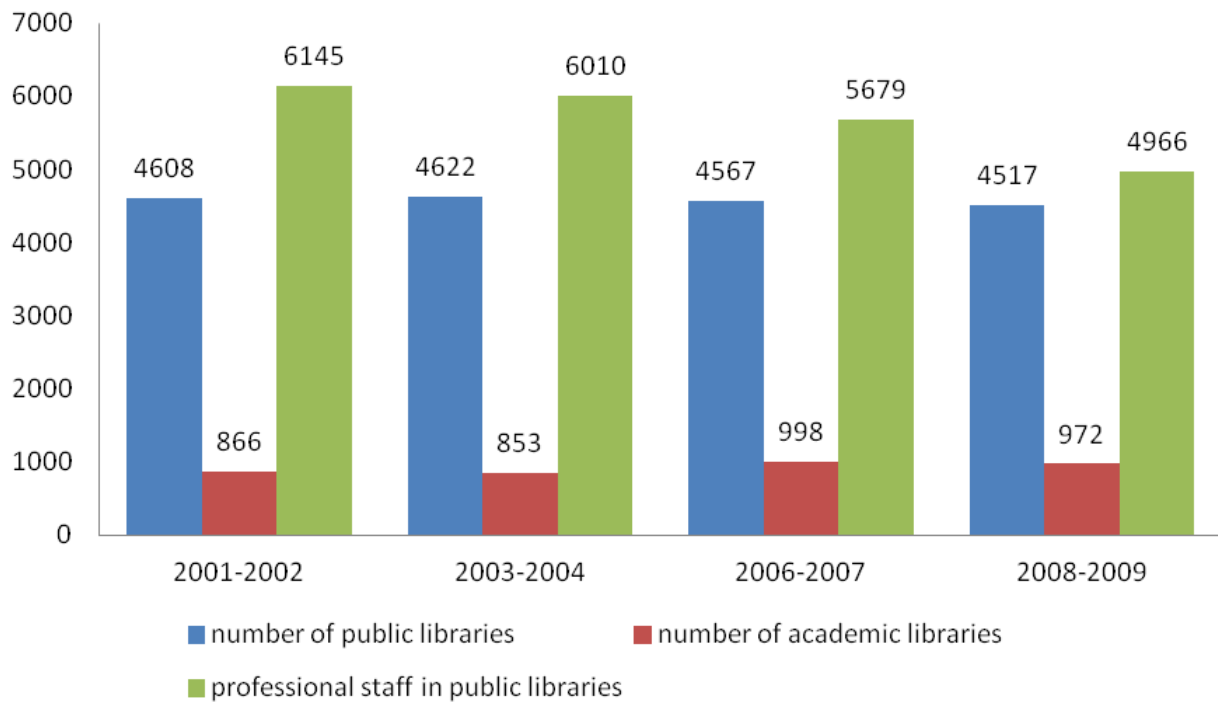
Nowadays, it should be noted that although the situation is very worrying in the U.K, in France it is less critical. While in France budgets for culture have been only marginally affected by the economic crisis, in the UK drastic cuts were made. Moreover, one can wonder whether the economic crisis is not just a convenient excuse to lower the budget allocated to culture in the UK. Indeed, the closing down of libraries had begun before the economic crisis of 2008:

“The Victorian ideal of the public library as a bastion of culture and learning providing universal access to knowledge is under threat after months of closures, chronic staff cuts and book shortages.”³

Margaret Hodge, the minister responsible for libraries, has conceded that a net 40 libraries have been closed in the past year. In the West Midlands, Dudley council revealed plans to shut five, prompting Ms Hodge to step in to ask how the needs of residents could be met, although she admitted there was little she could do to prevent the closures going ahead.”

² http://www.cilip.org.uk/get-involved/advocacy/public-libraries/Documents/cilip-statement-revd-0211%20_2_.pdf, accessed July 15th, 2013.

³ “Anger at library cuts as ministers admit 40 have closed this year”, December 31st, 2007, The Independent.



Source: These figures are taken from LISU's UK Statistics: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/infosci/lisu/lisu-statistics/lisu-uk-library-statistics.pdf>

Moreover, in an article "Living on borrowed time" published in 2004 in *The Guardian*, the author Will Hutton summed up his view on Tim Coates's report (for the library charity Libri):

"[Coates] wants expenditure on books trebled and libraries to become welcoming places, increasing the number of hours they are open by half; he would rather have fewer expensive professional librarians and cheaper semi-skilled staff so libraries can stay open longer. He wants performance management introduced into libraries, with libraries run by a single manager - rather than management being split many ways, as at present - accountable to local councilors dedicated to overseeing library improvement. He calls for a revolution in library design; everything about them should be about access and pleasure. And because he recognises change is difficult for those at the receiving end, he wants a major investment in human resources management to ease the transition."⁴

Similarly, for the well-known novelist Will Self, who campaigned against cuts to his local library in Lambeth, south London, "Libraries are the bedrock of

literate culture. It's bad the way libraries are forced to compete with Waterstones and Borders with cafes and DVD rentals. The internet has become a stick to beat library loans with"⁵. The economic crisis has affected cultural budgets significantly (50% drop in arts budget in 2011). Nowadays, because of budget cuts within municipal councils, more than 500 libraries will close over the next four years in Great Britain in an attempt to save 400 million Euros. In other words, 1 out of 10 British Library is threatened with closure because of austerity measures and 6,000 librarian positions will be eliminated by 2015 (1,000 workers have already been laid off between 2009 and 2010 and will be replaced by volunteers). Even the prestigious British Library has been impacted by austerity measures, although it has still been quite largely spared as it is seen as a national showcase.

It is then worth asking what the philosophy behind these decisions is. First of all, KPMG's report⁶ proposes new ways of managing public services in Britain which can be summarized in three words: outsourcing, privatization and volunteerism. This text is very clear on the new ways to follow:

"A "local big state" is no more desirable than a "central big state". Local government should seek to devolve to the most local level possible and to encourage communities to take over

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/may/02/museums.news>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

⁵ "Anger at library cuts as ministers admit 40 have closed this year", December 31st, 2007, *The Independent*.

⁶ KPMG is a global network of professional firms providing Audit, Advisory and Tax services.

services. One example would be libraries. Libraries face funding challenges – in that they are more discretionary than other services, usage has declined, the unit cost of lending a book can be more expensive than the wholesale price of a book and customers have new book and information media and services (e.g. Amazon, social networking sites, etc). The level of community resistance to closing a library is usually disproportionate to the level of local usage, because communities believe that a local library belongs to them, not the council, and they believe in the future potential of the library to do great things. Devolution can allow new ideas to develop. For example – in North America libraries are often run by volunteers not paid council staff, whilst in the UK charity shops often have waiting lists of volunteers wanting to help them with book sales; much of the public space in a library is badly used storing infrequently used books; e-government has put libraries on line, but they still focus on a buildings based service; too many community groups are spending scarce resource on premises; where some councils have handed the library back to the community, they have often turned it into a much more vibrant community organisation and space. Giving councils total freedom on libraries could mean that they create huge social value from engaging a community in running its own library, backed up with some modern technology, whilst also saving large amounts of money on over-skilled paid staff, poor use of space and unnecessary stock.”⁷

Replacing librarians with volunteers directly inspired the concept of "Big Society" that David Cameron developed a few weeks later. What KPMG was missing, however, was that it being reduced the valuable work of librarians to book-lending whereas the actual lending of books has been a very small part of their work.

Of course, these massive library closures do not go without any objection from the local population who use all means at their disposal to protest against the dismantling of public services (events, media...). For example, on the 5th and 6th February 2011, worried opponents to the project took part in a "read-in" at several libraries across South London: "At one library in south London the event has turned into an all

-night sit-in involving about 35 protesters"⁸. A few authors like Philip Pullman or Mark Haddon were present during these sit-ins. These demonstrations have continued along with the announcement of more libraries closure: for example, on the 4th April 2011, protesters marched to save Suffolk Libraries⁹. By 2013, the CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) entitled an article "Public Libraries – Is the worst yet to come?"

"Over 2,000 staff posts have been removed and 3,000 opening hours a week cut from public library services, the Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals estimates in a new report. The survey of local authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland for the financial year 2011-12 gives the most up to date picture of the state of public library services. CILIP estimates that this financial year 2,159 posts will be deleted from a total of 20,924 staff, a 10% cut in staffing. Twenty-five per cent of the lost posts are at a professional level."

Phil Bradley, President of CILIP, considered that the situation was extremely serious:

"We understand that public libraries cannot be immune from cuts but we are seriously concerned that in some local authorities these are disproportionate and that the local communities will suffer. Libraries provide a unique local service and the people who work in them are part of the community, supporting local families and children, learners and students, older and disadvantaged people. Where changes are implemented on a disproportionate scale and without a plan for continued support, those communities."¹⁰

In order to defend the English libraries, best-selling author Philip Pullman wrote a text entitled "Leave the libraries alone. You don't understand their value":

"Market fundamentalism, this madness that's infected the human race, is like a greedy ghost that haunts the boardrooms and council chambers and committee rooms from which the world is run these days [...] The greedy ghost is everywhere. That office block isn't making enough money: tear it down and put up a block of flats. The flats

⁷ <http://www.kpmg.co.uk/pubs/204000%20Payment%20For%20Success%20Access.pdf> , accessed July 15th, 2013.

⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-12367392>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-12959834>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

¹⁰ <http://www.cilip.org.uk/news-media/pages/news120316.aspx>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

aren't making enough money: rip them apart and put up a hotel. The hotel isn't making enough money: smash it to the ground and put up a multiplex cinema. The cinema isn't making enough money: demolish it and put up a shopping mall."

Few lines below, he added:

"One final memory, this time from just a couple of years ago: I was trying to find out where all the rivers and streams ran in Oxford, for a book I'm writing called *The Book of Dust*. I went to the Central Library and there, with the help of a clever member of staff, I managed to find some old maps that showed me exactly what I wanted to know, and I photocopied them, and now they are pinned to my wall where I can see exactly what I want to know."¹¹

Of course, there are also people who support the austerity measures taken by the government. For example the conservative newspaper "The Telegraph" published an article entitled "Philip Pullman's defence of public libraries is a perfect example of what's wrong with Left-wing politics" (January 31st, 2011) in which journalist Daniel Knowles arguing that austerity measures affecting libraries were necessary:

"Philip Pullman is an excellent novelist and I can understand his emotional desire to leap to the defence of public libraries. But unfortunately, when it comes to spending taxpayers' money, an emotional defence is not enough. Every penny of public money spent matters to someone – but we still need to make cuts. As Dan Hannan argued last month, being opposed to public spending on libraries is not the same as being opposed to libraries. Similarly, civic decency is not the same thing as getting the taxpayer to pay for what you think is decent. Philip Pullman and his Left-wing cheerleaders need to realise that."¹²

Before talking about French libraries, it's very important to say a word on university libraries because their situation is not good either. Indeed, the shrinking university budgets have had a negative impact on university libraries:

"The news for British universities is particularly bad: excluding research support, which will remain flat, the amount of money going to higher education in England will decline by 40 percent over the next four years, from 7.1 billion pounds (about \$11-billion) to 4.2 billion pounds (about \$6.6-billion). Universities in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, which are financed from different budgets, are also likely to face significant cuts.

The research budget will be frozen at 4.6 billion pounds (about \$7.3-billion), "to ensure the UK remains a world leader in science and research," the review said."¹³

In France, the situation for culture is less tense than in the UK but theatres are finding it hard to complete their season, museums and libraries resort to the massive use of insecure and precarious jobs. So, in France, the impact of budget tightening is different from the UK. First of all, private financing has been developing fast in France since 2008 (notably in institutions like the National Library of France (BnF), the Louvre Museum...), when it was marginal before the economic crisis. The French model closely follows its British counterpart when it comes to the dismantling of the status of library staff, resulting in an increasingly precarious situation. This implies that the directors of DDS (Document Delivery Service: Common Documentation for Universities) are no longer necessarily curators who have received specialist training. At the same time, student employment is growing quickly in academic and public libraries wishing to extend their opening hours at a lower cost, but providing readers with lower quality services.

If the brutality of the British austerity leading to massive library closures is still unseen in France, we can notice that the liberal spirit increasingly guides policy making in the field of culture. The "Books Treasure", a resource centre for children's literature (80 000 books) located in Seine Saint-Denis closed its doors in December 2010. Originally co-financed by the city of Bobigny and by the General Council of Seine Saint-Denis, it stands as an early victim of the austerity period that we are living. On the website of "Books Treasure", the following message was posted on December 2010: "After 22 years serving the public reading in Seine-Saint-Denis and development of children's literature, Books Treasure ceases operation at the end of this month"¹⁴. The protestations against this closure (exemplified by a blog of support against

¹¹ <http://falseeconomy.org.uk/blog/save-oxfordshire-libraries-speech-philip-pullman>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

¹² <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/danielknowles/100074070/philip-pullmans-defence-of-public-libraries-is-a-perfect-example-of-whats-wrong-with-left-wing-politics/>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

¹³ Article entitled *British Universities Will See Budget Cuts of 40% Under National Austerity Plan*, by Aisha Labi and Beth McMurtrie, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 22nd, 2010.

¹⁴ This blog doesn't exist anymore.

the closure of the resource center¹⁵) were numerous but it was not enough. Another case is Morland's library in Paris. This library was dedicated to municipal officials and it closed in January 2012. The main reason given by the town hall was the weak activity of this library. While figures may support this, it was also an opportunity to cut corners easily as closing a library dedicated to municipal officials is easier, because it gets less public exposure, than closing a public library.¹⁶

Luckily, in France, more and more libraries are opening. For example, the Louise Michel library in the twentieth arrondissement of Paris opened at the beginning of 2011. This library is 6500 sq. ft. and opens 35 hours a week. Moreover, it is located in the heart of a working-class neighbourhood. It has won the sought-after library award given by "Livres Hebdo", the most important French librarian magazine. Another example is the new library in La Duchère, Lyon¹⁷. Integrated into the life of the borough with regular entertainment and the provision of an audio-video room, it offers a digital space that provides access to Internet and allows the access of number bases by all. The classic rooms and youth rooms are also equipped with computers and free Internet access. As for the Louise Michel library, La Duchère library is also in a working-class neighbourhood. This illustrates how nowadays a library is both a tool for social diversity and for economic revitalization. Consequently, it seems that closing numerous libraries in times of economic crisis were counter-productive.

A lot of things are changing in the field of university libraries where the economic crisis seems to have had a boosting effect. Indeed, politicians have decided that the best way to fight the economic crisis was to invest in higher education and consequently in university libraries! The most important example is the opening of the BULAC (civilisations and languages university library) in the Parisian's thirteenth district at the end of 2011:

"With its prime setting and half a million documents in 350 languages, the three levels totaling 6,000 square meters and its hundreds of employees, he may claim the third largest library in France, behind the National and University Library of Strasbourg (UNSO) and the neighboring national Library of France (BNF) (...) the Bulac is also the largest university site led by the Regional Council of Ile de France, which has invested 55 million euros, or 68% of the amount necessary to complete the project construction."¹⁸

So in university libraries, innovations are very important as the concept of "Learning Center" is changing their identity. The best example is the "Rolex Learning Center" in Lausanne. In France, the university library of Angers received the Innovation Award by "Livre Hebdo" in 2011 for the quality of its spaces and presence in digital networks. This library created "in the box", a collection of screencasts which scripted the tool operations and the online environment (databases, electronic journals, OPAC...).

If the overall state of libraries is not altogether dark, it is essential to examine opportunities for the public libraries to overcome financial difficulties, especially as these may outlive the economic crisis. So, what are the other options for these libraries in difficult times? Are the Idea Stores, created in order to change the perception of libraries, a solution? The first Idea Store opened in 2002 in Towers Hamlets, one of the most disadvantaged areas in London. An Idea Store has several characteristics. First, the concept of the Idea Store is to break the codes of public-service corporation and adopt those which belong to marketing. Secondly, in an Idea Store the customer is king, that is to say that books are chosen according to the different communities who live in the area. Lastly, multimedia is very important. The following web page presentation of the Whitechapel Idea Store presenting the different services typically offered in an Idea Store:

"Idea Store Whitechapel - the borough's flagship library, learning and information service - opened on Thursday 22 September 2005. The store offers the fullest range of services:

- A large collection of books, CDs and DVDs
- An extensive range of newspapers and magazines
- A dedicated reference and information library
- A children's library
- A café
- Free Internet access
- A range of state-of-the-art learning spaces and classrooms
- A daycare for the children of learners
- Specialist spaces for teaching dance and complementary therapies"¹⁹

However, for French people, one question remains: are Idea Stores still libraries? Then, is the use of private funds for libraries a good solution? In

¹⁵ <http://soutienlivresautresor.over-blog.com/>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

¹⁶ <http://www.actualitte.com/actualite/monde-edition/bibliotheques/fin-de-partie-pour-la-bibliotheque-de-morland-30581.htm>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

¹⁷ <http://www.bm-lyon.fr/pratique/bibliotheques/bib9duchere.htm>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

¹⁸ <http://www.iledefrance.fr/fil-actus-region/bulac-autre-bibliotheque-du-13e-arrondissement>, accessed July 15th, 2013.

¹⁹ http://www.ideastore.co.uk/en/articles/libraries_your_local_idea_store_library_idea_store_whitechapel, accessed July 15th, 2013.

fact, this type of financing is quite common in the United States and seems to develop in France (6% of the budget of the National French Library (BNF) is already derived from sponsorship). However, in times of austerity, resorting to private companies or individuals may not be very wise, as donations will drop if company budgets are tightened.

French and British contexts are therefore similar, but policies differ. The cultural political action of the British government has been generally harmful to British libraries. In France, the situation is more and more worrying but not as much as in the UK. Whether in the UK or France, libraries are nowadays at the crossroads. Even if the economic crisis has stopped library growth, it is not the only factor in the equation. Indeed, libraries are facing an identity crisis, as is shown by the decline in library loans (-10% between 2005 and 2010 in the UK). In France, the study of Olivier Donnat "French Cultural Practices in the Era of Digital" published in 2010 showed a halt in the French libraries attendance. For a big part, this halt is due to the competition from other media like internet (with the web 2.0), Ipad, EBooks... This disaffection is a vital reason for this identity crisis.

So the main question is: what will the book world be like in the medium term? Are new technologies making libraries useless? Nowadays, everyone considers that a smart phone amounts to having a library in the pocket. But, it is more a fantasy than a reality. Consequently, the most important action has to be in educating the population because if an EBook is useful, the most important is to be able to use it properly. For example, to be able to find some good information, to be able to use one's critical thinking or being able to make the difference between quality or poor blogs or articles. Nowadays the mediation is becoming the most important part of the role of librarians. Without this mediation and with the increasing competition of new media, libraries are doomed to disappear. This disappearance would be tragic because it would mean the death of a free public space where people can search and exchange freely.

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