

**Humanism and Libraries: An Essay on the Philosophy of Librarianship** by André Cossette, translated by Rory Litwin. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2009. 102 pp. ISBN 9781936117178.

The 2009 translation of André Cossette's *Humanism and Libraries: An Essay on the Philosophy of Librarianship* into English from the original French was timely. Written in accordance with the curriculum of the Graduate School of Library Science at the Université de Montréal, it was first published by L'Association pour l'avancement des sciences et des techniques de la documentation (ASTED) in 1976, under the title *Humanisme et bibliothèques: essais sur la philosophie de la bibliothéconomie* (Montréal). It is a short polemic, intense in its ability to be thought provoking while addressing central issues of the field, such as the roles that libraries fundamentally serve in terms of education, democracy, and society. Cossette's main argument wavers from a position that celebrates a liberal progressivism, affirmative of the benefits of the empirical, to one that flirts with critical theory. I will elaborate on this last position more fully.

Cossette begins with a call to a "philosophy of librarianship" in order to draw out a moral imperative defined by the field as having a sense of purpose in order to better serve the benefit of society. This, as noted in the introduction of the book, seems to be tied more to a critical understanding of philosophy than the *logos*-driven pragmatism of American information science. He goes as far as to place Dr. Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan's writings neatly in the camp of positivism, but "expressed in a philosophical language" (p. 13). This has the reader thinking the essay will be a polemic that argues for the reduction of the more scientifically oriented research in the theoretical division of the library science profession, implying that the current state of empirical methodology in the profession carries the potential to stifle the field, particularly in terms of its ability to establish a higher purpose.

This impression is particularly strong in Cossette's own reductive presentation of the fundamental divisions between science and philosophy. It is here that Cossette creates a binary. He describes the positivistic aspects of the experimental or scientific method and phenomenological interpretations that place a disproportionate amount of dependence upon the causal, or the "how" of "facts" and "events," and hence, those based solely upon the "evidentiary." He contrasts this with the philosophical, in which a more "reflective method" allows for the human as the subject and its capacity for the semantic creation of meaning (pp. 6-10). In this, he describes a move away from a scenario where the human subject is treated as an object of study by an objective observer. However, Cossette, in

drawing heavily upon the research of D.J. Foskett and Jesse H. Shera, takes us back into a consequentialist modality which is essentially teleological, and thus, we remain embedded within a structure of a foundationalist epistemology. In other words, the basis for claims to knowledge is ascertained through a logical chain of evidentiary linkages that build upon each other. In doing so, Cossette is able to justifiably contradict some of the earlier implications of his suspicions against the positivistic by celebrating the yield of scientific pragmatism in library science, particularly where “information” is concerned. Granted, there is a theoretical momentum here that is headed, concentrically, towards the systematic in the sense that the library is seen as continually seeking its ideal type through technological and human agency.

It is important, I think, that Cossette, in and throughout the latter half the text, outlines a brief intellectual history of the field before beginning a discussion of the increasing importance of information management and the role this played in transforming the profession as a whole. These days, it seems almost obligatory for students to address the issue of the proliferation of information in their work at the professional level, but it is rarer to encounter a discussion that deals with the philosophical underpinnings and implications of this now globally recognized phenomenon. Cossette’s work, originally published in 1976, anticipates this and underscores its relevance for current library students and professionals, all the more in line with his original position stressing the importance of philosophy in librarianship. But what is truly fascinating about this portion of the book is that it suggests that librarianship is both dynamic and subjectively situated and can be described as relational points of paradigmatic consensus expressed in various temporally-dependent constructions. This is opposed to simply seeing librarianship as an embodiment of an intangible state of fixity undergoing gradual, yet progressive motion under the direction of its most notable innovators (e.g., Anthony Panizzi, Charles Cutter, Melvil Dewey, etc.) towards its “possible aims of preservation, education, and information” (p. 42).

The controversy unleashed in Cossette’s call to philosophy lies not only in the lack of questioning the potentially discursive, or even coercive motivations and/or unintended consequences of his imperative of establishing purpose, but also in his retroactive repositioning of an apparent move towards the critical with the democratizing, or liberalizing qualities of a humanistic librarianship. Ultimately, Cossette’s contradiction lies in the fact that while he initially takes a declarative stance in setting up a binary between philosophy and science, he concomitantly establishes causality with a utopian teleology upon which the reader progressively moves towards an immovable “object”—in this case, the goal of a shared society which assumes a transcendent liberal-democratic model. This is contentious because the “immovable” assumes a stance of moral superiority that, at its core, reflects a Western understanding of knowledge.

However, regardless of this controversial contradiction, overall, I consider it to be an effective tool of argumentation; that is to say that the reader gets a strong sense of being in agreement with the imperative by the conclusion of the text. And why not? It is one thing to be able to both outline and discern the philosophical fundamentals of librarianship, it is another thing to critically deconstruct those fundamentals and expose them for their delusions of essentiality or reveal their shrouded discursive natures. But, even in doing so with the intent of positive reconstruction, it can still leave behind a Durkheimian anomie in the would-be librarian. More often than not, desires for economic gain trump any justifications associated with dominance through education known to the ancient Greeks as παιδεία (paedeia). I would not cast the librarian firmly in a role of being the oppressive colonist of the “savage mind” as much as I would hesitate celebrating the same as being, squarely, the cultivator of knowledge and literary discourse.

### **Reviewer**

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