

Introduction

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was written in 1948, the drafters made sure to include cultural rights in the final document, “placing them on the same level as civil and political [individual] rights.”¹ All of the rights outlined in the UDHR are, as Elsa Stamatopoulou writes, “interdependent and indivisible,”² which means that group rights—including cultural rights—are no less important than individual rights. Given this, it should follow that librarianship, as a profession concerned with the individual rights of access, inquiry, and speech, should thus also be concerned with cultural rights. If all rights are related, moving beyond individual rights to consider how to incorporate cultural rights into the profession is a new and exciting prospect.

The purpose of this book is to explore the ways in which librarians can think about and incorporate aspects of human rights into their professional practice and philosophy. In the summer of 2008, we began thinking about how libraries and cultural rights intersect. What are cultural rights? What do cultural rights mean for libraries? What can librarians do to promote cultural rights? The book you are now holding is the result of those questions. This collection of essays is an exploratory project. Written, by-and-large, by librarians and for librarians, the following chapters examine the ways in which cultural rights can inform library practice and philosophy. It is important to approach the book from the perspective

¹ Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 236.

² Elsa Stamatopoulou, *Cultural Rights in International Law: Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Beyond* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2007), 143.

of librarianship—this is not a work of human rights scholarship. Rather, it is a book about librarianship, using human rights (particularly cultural rights) as a lens through which we might consider our work in new ways.

Each of the essays presented here examines cultural rights and libraries using the specific language of Article 27 of the UDHR, which establishes the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community and is one of several articles dealing with cultural rights. Janusz Symonides argues that cultural rights are a “neglected category of human rights,”³ and this collection attempts to address that, at least within the profession of librarianship. The essays that follow explore the relationship between libraries and Article 27 in a variety of ways and encourage readers to consider librarianship in the context of group rights, not just individual rights. The book, which suggests looking beyond the individual rights of opinion, expression, and inquiry as codified in Article 19 and towards the rights codified in Article 27, is philosophical and theoretical in scope. In the first essay, I focus on the symbolic possibilities of libraries and argue that libraries are the institutions best capable of embodying the right to participate in the cultural life of the community. Frans Albarillo argues for a consideration of language rights as group rights and asserts that libraries must adjust their philosophies of practice in order to promote cultural rights through the support of language rights. Natalia Taylor Poppeliers explores the development and evolution of library services in Sub-Saharan Africa and questions whether or not current rhetoric and practice engages and aligns with the principles set forth in Article 27. Finally, Loriene Roy and Kristen Hogan close out the collection with their examination of library services and indigenous rights, uncovering both the strengths and the weaknesses of Article 27 in addressing the rights of indigenous peoples.

This is a broad collection, and each essay is different in both its philosophy and approach. At the center of all, though, is Article 27,

³ Janusz Symonides, “Cultural Rights: A Neglected Category of Human Rights,” *International Social Science Journal* 50:158 (December 1998): 559.

and together these essays provide a starting point for thinking about libraries, community, and cultural rights. As you will see, not all of the essays necessarily agree on the definitions of cultural and group rights, or on the best ways to implement those rights. Rather than seeing this as a problem, however, we embrace it as an example of the complexity of these topics and encourage readers to consider what these different interpretations mean for themselves, for their communities, for the profession, and for library services.

The intention of this collection is to look at and think about cultural rights and their place in librarianship. It is absolutely essential to note, however, that while this book advocates for an exploration of librarianship beyond Article 19, we understand that a focus on promoting, protecting, and supporting the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community may be a luxury for many librarians. Librarians in the United States and across the world deal daily with issues of privacy, censorship, government filtering or government monitoring. There are libraries that are underfunded and ill equipped. There are places around the globe where issues of free access and inquiry and expression take precedence over cultural rights. These violations of human rights are immediately pressing, and this collection in no way diminishes or ignores the challenges that many librarians, their patrons, and their communities face each day. Wherever such injustice exists, the struggle for basic human rights must never be abandoned. I do believe, though, that for librarians who are fortunate enough to be able to look beyond Article 19, there is room to start thinking about cultural rights and community life. This collection will hopefully provide some initial insights.

The UDHR is an imperfect tool, to be sure—it neglects to explicitly mention the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, for example. It is best read in conjunction with its sister documents, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and it is better understood through the many international declarations and covenants which have followed in the years since 1948. However imperfect a tool, though, it is a tool nonetheless. The UDHR does provide a way for librarians to “plug into” human

rights, so to speak. It provides a foundation from which to think about and develop services and policies. Often, when talking or thinking about human rights, it is easy to think about what has gone wrong—what is going wrong—in the world. Human rights violations are real. Sometimes, though, it is as useful to think about where we can succeed as it is to acknowledge where we fail; it is as important to consider not only what is wrong, but what could be right.

Though the UDHR has holes, it is also holistic, as indicated earlier by Stamatopoulou. Despite the intended indivisibility of the articles in the UDHR, however, some do prove to be more pertinent to librarians than others. Recently, librarians, authors, and activists have been writing more on libraries and human rights. Toni Samek and Kathleen de la Peña McCook and Katharine Phenix have all highlighted some of the articles in the UDHR that are more germane to librarians, including Articles 3, 7, 12, and 27, among others.⁴ This is the first collection, to our knowledge, that intentionally looks at Article 27 (or any other article) and its relation to librarianship. This collection, though the first in English on this subject, will hopefully not be the last. It is our hope that librarians, authors, and activists will consider cultural rights in ways that we cannot yet imagine. The work presented in this collection is just the start—eventually we'd love to see an entire series of books exploring the relationship between libraries and the various articles that most pertain to the profession.

⁴ See Toni Samek, *Librarianship and Human Rights: A Twenty-First Century Guide* (Oxford: Chandos, 2007); Toni Samek and Kevin Rioux, "Apologies, Boycotts & Law Reform: Why and How Library and Information Workers Talk and Walk Human Rights" in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Libraries from a Human Rights Perspective, 31 March – 2 April, 2008*, ed. Nabil Alawi (Ramallah, Palestine: Ramallah Center for Human Rights Studies, 2008): 84-97, and Kathleen de la Peña McCook and Katharine J. Phenix, "Human Rights, Democracy and Librarians," in *The Portable MLIS: Insights from the Experts*, ed. Ken Haycock and Brooke Sheldon (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2008).

As with any book, this one has limitations. An author can only write from his or her own perspective—his or her individual place in the world and in history. I write from my own place and perspective—that of a white woman with experience in rural and urban public libraries, in primarily English-speaking (though ethnically and racially diverse) communities. The authors represented here write from their own perspectives as well, and the perspectives are broad and varied. While the essays here explore both international and indigenous issues, the majority of the sources consulted are in English. And, while there is no doubt that much more can be written about Article 27 and libraries, in the meantime we hope that this book will spark or expand the interest of librarians concerned with issues of culture and community.

All books are acts of optimism, and I am optimistic that this collection will generate further inquiry and writing, and that librarians will embrace an obligation not only to individual and cultural rights, but to human rights of all kinds. Paul Gordon Lauren has written that human rights are born first out of the visions of “men and women who possess a capacity to go beyond the confines of what is or what has been, and to creatively dream or imagine what might be.”⁵ I see no reason why librarians cannot be amongst those men and women.

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⁵ Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights*, 1.