

E NSSIB AND THE PRESERVATION OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS IN FRANCE

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Institutional Context

Among the elements of context necessary to assess the French situation, one of the most peculiar is the very existence of an institution such as Enssib, the *Ecole nationale des sciences de l'information et des bibliothèques*. In a higher education system that is rapidly changing to conform to a competitive pattern, most senior civil servants, in France, are still trained in selective schools, the *grandes écoles*, where you enter by competitive exam, immediately acquiring the status of civil servant. This means, among other things, that students receive a salary instead of paying to study. The best known are *Ecole polytechnique*, *Ecole nationale d'administration*, or the *Ecole normale supérieure*. After completing their courses there, students enter a *corps*, a body literally, meaning a profession in the civil service, over which most of these schools have a training monopoly. The diplomas students receive are not university degrees but rather professional certificates attesting to their entering one of the *corps*.

Enssib is one of those *grandes écoles*, although more recent than most, having been founded in 1992. Students who want to become librarians are selected after at least three years at the university, whatever their initial background. They study at the school for 18 months that are divided into three periods of fundamental courses from January to June, an internship that leads to the writing of a dissertation from July to December, and specialized courses from January of the second year to June. After that they will either be appointed by a national commission in libraries depending from the state, that is all university libraries, plus the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* and the *Bibliothèque publique d'information* in Paris, or they will have to look for a job in a library depending from a local

authority. Continuing education is also mostly provided by Enssib, with programs negotiated annually between the school and the ministries of Culture and Education. A librarian in France, special collections specialist or not, cannot escape Enssib.

A second element of institutional context, opposed to the hyper-centralization of training, is the dispersion of special collections. Collections of ancient books, traditionally defined as books published before 1810, represent a total of circa 10 million copies: 3 million in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, 6 million in the local libraries, 1 million in the university libraries. Similar figures would apply to manuscripts and non-book material. Institutions responsible for special collections are therefore mostly outside the university, outside the educational world. On one hand we have the BNF, with its special collection specialists and its tradition of high-level scholarship, on the other more than 300 local libraries with special collections whose origin stems from the revolutionary confiscations of the period 1789-1795. The revolutionary origin of the ancient part of most special collections owned by local libraries explains that these collections still belong to the central state. They are called “*fonds d’Etat*”, state collections, and explain the presence of a limited number of state librarians in local libraries.

Beyond that aspect of things the role of the central state in a country where decentralisation laws are only a quarter of a century old is still pivotal in cultural policy in general and in library policy in particular. “Taking the fat from the mammoth”, as has been graphically called by a former minister of education the transfer of responsibility from central government to local authorities, is a process that is indeed taking place, but at a slow pace. Regarding special collections the state represented by the ministries of culture and education, and by the Center for scientific research (*Centre national de la recherché scientifique*) plays a leading part in national programs for conservation, cataloguing and digitising, such as the recently completed databases of illuminated manuscripts *Enluminures* and *Liber floridus*, freely accessible on the internet, or the Catalogue *collectif de France*, opened to the public in 2001, on the internet as well, with its 16 million records of printed books and periodicals coming from the BNF, the university libraries, and the municipal libraries.

Heritage versus information?

Nevertheless, responsibility for these collections is now clearly a shared burden between the state and local authorities, which brings into question their very nature. The term special collections is seldom used in France outside the *Bibliothèque nationale* and its *départements spécialisés*. The most common term used to qualify what, in libraries, is not strictly speaking information, is “*le patrimoine*”, the heritage. Regardless of their con-

tent or their relevance, library collections are now part and parcel of a general movement for the preservation of heritage that has often been ironically dubbed “*la fièvre patrimoniale*”, heritage fever. Anything can be heritage, and all collections can, in a way, be called special.

Heritage policy does correspond to a general taste, or whim, of the public, and has for decades the advantage of being politically correct. Who would dare to be against heritage? But how does that translate in real life? The paradox of the present situation is that librarians are strongly invited on one hand to provide content, digitised content of contemporary relevance – realizing in the digital world the XVIIIth century utopia of the library as an encyclopaedia of useful knowledge –, and on the other hand to organize access to collections of artefacts the value of which lies less in a content that is frequently accessible otherwise, but in their very nature of objects belonging most of the time to communication systems and cultures deeply different from ours. To use a term that has become a buzz word in the cultural world, a mediation appears very necessary to educate the public, the political authorities, and, last but not least, the librarians themselves, to the special nature and the special needs of special collections. It is sometimes disconcerting, in truth disheartening, to have to explain that these special needs have a cost, and a high one at that. Conservation is costly, as are scholarly cataloguing, intelligent digitalisation, and all “*valorisation*” policies to use another buzz word.

Difficult decisions have to be made. On what ground? In libraries that assert increasingly to be user centred what is the public directly interested by the heritage and what are its educational needs? Strangely enough the “*sociologie des publics*”, developed by such luminaries of French thought as the radical sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and widely used as a policy tool for library management, has totally bypassed the heritage and special collections. We lack any kind of serious quantification in that field – contrary to the numerous studies dedicated to museums and their public. To give a ballpark figure though, it is often estimated that special collections in France concern four categories of public:

- a professional public, the special collection librarians acting in French libraries, whatever their professional status, roughly 150 people
- a scholarly public composed of students and researchers in the university, around 15.000 people
- a public of collectors of all kinds, book lovers etc. estimated at 150.000
- a general public that supports initiatives in the heritage field, more or less 15.000.000 people.

The categories mentioned all share one characteristic, beyond their dubious numbers, that of not being represented in a unified way. There is no such thing as a library heritage lobby. In libraries special collection librarians are a minority, in the university as well, and the numerically important population concerned by the heritage is fragmented, in political terms, between a number of local institutions. To this consideration I must add the obvious fact that even more than paper products, digital ones have an audience that goes way beyond the political community that decides to fund them. Catalogues, databases, virtual exhibitions and the like are international by nature, pointing to the fact that in Europe in general, and in France especially, no collection is ever totally local.

All that means that to bridge the gap between special collections and their publics, librarians have to think and act both local and global, both with next door neighbours and with distant friends, well aware of the risky nature of their endeavour and of the difficulties they will encounter.

Where do we go from here?

To try and accommodate the various needs of the public, Enssib has chosen to act in five directions. Putting Enssib forward is not due to sheer vanity but to the still hyper-centralized French situation.

First, in the initial training of librarians, where management skills and technology are justly dominant, we have always kept a significant volume of teaching hours for the history of collections and the history of the book – in a broad sense. This choice has been criticised, in the past, as an obsolete attitude – there was even a student strike against the history of the book in the early eighties – but we now see it as a competitive advantage, so to speak, in a Europe where most library schools have reduced dramatically or totally suppressed, this kind of teaching.

Secondly, we have developed a series of continuing education sessions designed to form a cycle dedicated to the heritage and special collections, from rare book or prints cataloguing to the preservation of ancient photographs or the creation of virtual exhibitions on the web. The public concerned here is mostly made of librarians who find themselves confronted with a career change or a special initiative that requires specific training. You can consult the programs on our web site (www.enssib.fr).

Thirdly, some of these continuing education sessions already take the form of virtual classes that start three months before the actual face-to-face sessions and offer both a specific course and individual tutoring. A good example is the course on ancient prints

prepared by one of our specialists. We are constructing a library of teaching products in the field, both for continuing education and initial training.

To open even more the educational offer for special collections, Enssib as one of the institutions behind a learned body, the *Institut d'histoire du livre* organizes since 2002 a Book History Workshop on the model and with the help of the Rare Book School. It presently offers five sessions in parallel during the month of April. Contrary to the general nature of continuing education programs mentioned earlier, courses in the Book History Workshop are highly specialized and aimed not only at librarians in public institutions but to a wider audience of booksellers and collectors. Most of them are taught in English, there again contrary to regular continuing education programs, to accommodate an international audience. Probably because of the lack of such courses in Europe, and the quality of teachers such as Michael Twyman or Kristian Jensen, to name but two, this bold initiative has had a lasting success that will lead us to open a second session in the summer.

Finally, because we are convinced that traditional French style training for a closed profession is no longer an option in its present form – just think that it is impossible now for a foreigner to follow the curriculum of French librarians, and that conversely the French diploma for librarians is not recognized abroad –, we have opened last year with the university Lumière Lyon 2 a master's degree called "*Cultures de l'écrit et de l'image*". Its aim is precisely to train special collections librarians, both French and foreign, that will not necessarily have the title of "*conservateur*" but will be able to answer the needs, permanent or temporary, of public or private institutions. More and more in fact we see that freelance personnel on a contractual basis fulfill tasks that traditionally were entrusted to a permanent personnel of librarians, cataloguing special collections for example, or organizing an exhibition. It is yet rare in libraries, but already common in museums. We think it is important that training these new "professional figures" be done with the guarantees that our tradition can offer. Enssib and the *Dipartimento di Storie e Metodi per la Conservazione dei Beni Culturali* of the University of Bologna (sede di Ravenna), have started a collaborative effort to offer a truly European perspective to our students in the field.

Riassunto

Quale "training" e formazione sono svolti in Francia e come si preparano i conservatori per le collezioni speciali di libri? La esperienza maturata in 10 anni come direttore di Enssib mi consente di rispondere alla domanda. La Scuola svolge l'iniziale "training" per i conservatori e provvede alla loro formazione continua, potendo così rappresentare un esempio interessante per i partners italiani e per definire le "nuove figure professionali" nell'ambito della conservazione dei beni culturali.

Summary

What kind of formal training and continuing education are provided in France for special collection librarians, and how do they prepare librarians for the variety of educational roles they have to play? To answer these two questions I will mostly rely on my experience of ten years as director of Enssib, the school that has a monopoly on the initial training of all French librarians and provides most of their continuing education, hoping this will be of interest to our Italian partners with whom we work to define "new professional figures" dedicated to the preservation of cultural artefacts.

Résumé

Quel "training" et formation se déroulent-ils en France et comment se préparent les conservateurs pour les collections spéciales de livres? L'expérience mûrie en 10 ans comme directeur de Enssib me donne la possibilité de répondre à la question. L'Ecole effectue le "training" initial pour les conservateurs et s'occupe de leur formation continue, pouvant ainsi représenter un exemple intéressant pour les partenaires italiens et pour définir les "nouvelles figures professionnelles" dans le domaine de la conservation des biens culturels.

Zusammenfassung

Wie waren die Trainings- und Ausbildungsprogramme in Frankreich und wie werden die Konservatoren für die speziellen Sammlungen von Bücher ausgebildet? Meine 10-jährige Erfahrung als Direktor von Enssib setzt mich in die Lage, auf die Frage zu antworten. Die Schule organisiert das anfängliche Training und Programme für die fortdauernde Ausbildung für die Konservatoren. Das ist ein interessantes Beispiel für die italienischen Partners und um die neuen Berufsprofile im Rahmen der Erhaltung der Kulturgüter auszubilden.

Resumen

¿Cuáles son los sistemas de preparación y formación utilizados en Francia y qué adiestramiento reciben los conservadores para las colecciones especiales de libros? La experiencia acumulada en 10 años como director de Enssib me permite responder a la pregunta. La Escuela proporciona a los conservadores, no sólo la preparación inicial sino también una formación continua, lo cual representa un ejemplo interesante para los colegas italianos y para definir las "nuevas figuras profesionales" en el marco de la conservación de los bienes culturales.

Резюме

Какой «training» и обучение проводятся во Франции, и как готовятся специалисты по сохранности специальных книжных коллекций? Десятилетний опыт работы директором Enssib позволяет мне дать ответ на этот вопрос. В школе преподается начальный «training» для книгохранителей и обеспечивается непрерывное обучение, что может послужить интересным примером для итальянских партнеров, а также позволит определить «новые профессиональные фигуры» в области сохранения культурного наследия.