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“Our Public Library”: Social reproduction and urban public space in Toronto

Lia Frederiksen

University of Toronto, 100 St. George Street, Room 5031, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G3 Canada



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SYNOPSIS

A recent struggle to stop proposed cuts to the public library budget in Toronto, Canada led toward broader debates over the effects of declining public budgets for the social reproduction of workers and citizens in neoliberalizing urban public spaces. Library proponents proclaimed that public libraries are a vital service and charged that budget cuts would disproportionately affect women and economically marginalized workers across the city. The controversy over Toronto's public library budget revealed that public libraries are unique public spaces where people are formed as workers and citizens, but through which they can also contest neoliberal disinvestment from the public sphere. Drawing from the events, outcomes, and claims made during the controversy, I argue that public libraries should be understood as spaces for social reproduction.

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Introduction

During the summer and fall of 2011, a series of fiercely contested budget proposals to dramatically cut city services resulted in highly charged public debates in Toronto, Canada. Although a wide range of city services were slated for cuts, the central source of opposition to the budget arose around the Toronto Public Library (TPL) budget. Library proponents from across the city's perceptibly fractured social and economic landscape argued that public libraries are a vital city service. Many feared that the proposed cuts would close or lead to the privatization of public libraries in Toronto. These fears were based in part then-City Councilor Doug Ford's comments that he would close libraries “in a heartbeat”, and that the goal of the budget was to “outsource anything not nailed down”. Because Doug Ford is also the brother of Toronto's controversial mayor Rob Ford, his comments seemed to exemplify the goals of the proposed budget.¹ In a widely publicized exchange, Margaret Atwood, an acclaimed author, women's advocate, and longtime Toronto resident, traded barbs with Doug Ford. She retweeted the link to the Our Public Library campaign petition that stated,

“Toronto's libraries are under threat. Tell city council to keep them open + public” ([MargaretAtwood, 2011a](#)). Calling the Ford brothers “out of touch” she charged that the “twin Fordmayors” assumed their constituents would support closing libraries because voters “don't read, are stupid, and can't count, eh?” ([MargaretAtwood, 2011b,c](#)). In response, Doug Ford commented to local journalists, “Good luck to Margaret Atwood. I don't even know her. If she walked by me, I wouldn't have a clue who she is” (as quoted in [Moloney, 2011](#)). Margaret Atwood teased, “Doug Ford doesn't know who Margaret Atwood is ... sounds like he needs to expand his library, not reduce Toronto's libraries” ([Atwood, 2011](#)).

Though it may not seem apparent from this exchange, the controversy over Toronto's public library budget revealed intense disagreement over the role and value of public libraries. Keeping libraries open and public became the central challenge to what many activists began to call an austerity budget. In doing so, library proponents made the controversy into an explicitly spatial struggle over who public libraries are for, why they are publicly funded, and what they do in the lives of individuals and communities. The debate over public libraries

evolved into a conversation about the effect of declining public budgets on workers and citizens, which led toward extensive public discussions about where and how social reproduction takes place in Toronto. The focus of this paper is an analysis of the controversy, which occurred from the introduction of budget proposals in July 2011 until the end of a library workers' strike that closed the city's ninety-nine library branches for two weeks in March 2012. Library proponents – a spontaneous and loosely organized combination of members of the public, the Toronto Public Library Workers' Union (TPLWU), and the primarily online Our Public Library campaign – charged that library budget cuts targeted women and economically insecure workers. Through analysis of this controversy, I argue that public libraries should be understood as spaces for social reproduction. Attending to the controversy as a struggle against the heightened obligations of reproductive labor in the private sphere, I draw together feminist insights into the changing spatiality of social reproduction across public and private constructs, geographers' work on neoliberalizing urban public space, and the socio-economic context surrounding Toronto's public libraries since the rescaling of social policy in Canada in the 1980s to demonstrate that public libraries are uniquely political spaces intricately embedded in changes to social reproduction extending from the household to the global scale.

Methods

A combination of critical methodological approaches guided this research, which is part of a contemporary case study in my current research on public libraries and social reproduction at the scale of the city. First, participant observation at public meetings, events, and organizing activities from July 2011 to January 2012 and the TPLWU strike in March 2012 informed the texture and chronology of events that I present. Second, I conducted a discourse analysis of comments in the public sphere drawn from newspapers, public meetings, social media, and interviews to guide my interpretation of the controversy in the context of the city's divided social geography. I analyzed thirty-seven hours of tape recorded citizen deputations at city council meetings; seven hours of in-depth, semi-structured key informant interviews with current and former library administrators, staff, board members, and union representatives; and approximately thirty pages of social media comments from Twitter and Facebook, including #TOPoli, #StoptheCuts, and #OurPublicLibrary tweets. To analyze this data, I drew on critical discourse analysis methods to locate public discussions in their political-economic and social context and feminist methods from geography and urban planning that situate the everyday lives of city dwellers in relation to the spatial practices and spatial politics of cities.

The article is divided into four sections after this introduction. The first section explicates the relationship between public libraries and social reproduction through feminist scholars' work on social reproduction and geographers' debates on the neoliberalization of urban public space, connecting these to the restructured relationship between the state, social policy, and public libraries in Canada since the 1980s that has intensified individual reliance on public libraries for social reproduction in Toronto. Linking these literatures helps to

explain why the controversy over the public library budget invoked the reprivatization and the gendered, racial, and class dynamics of austerity budget proposals in Toronto in 2011. I argue that although public libraries have not been discussed in these literatures, the case of Toronto demonstrates that diverse public spaces are used to offset or absorb declining public services elsewhere because socially and economically differentiated pressures on reproductive labor result in multiple coping strategies. In the second section, I describe the events and outcomes of the controversy to foreground how library proponents gendered austerity and discussed public library use in the context of the reprivatization of social reproduction – two key outcomes of rescaling responsibility for social policy to municipalities under individualized neoliberal policy frameworks. My contention in this section is that the political arguments made against the budget proposals and the mayor's political platform also facilitated more expansive discussions about the relationship between social reproduction and public libraries. In the third section, I examine specific aspects of social reproduction that library proponents explicitly discussed in public debates: the work of socialization, particularly of children and youth as future workers and citizens; ongoing access to the formal labor market to meet basic needs and sustain life; and library service as gendered labor for social provisioning. This section indicates that public library use can be fruitfully recast in terms of social reproduction to buttress the political claims of library proponents. From this analysis, I argue that public libraries have emerged as pivotal sites for public and private provisioning as disinvestment from public services and public spaces has rolled out in Toronto, which is why the controversy can best be understood as a struggle against the further privatization of social reproduction. The article concludes by arguing that to analyze the changing spatiality of social reproduction and uneven urban geographies of neoliberalism, the spaces where these processes are linked cannot be presumed but should themselves be the object of study to specify where and how everyday life takes place.

Privatizing social reproduction and urban spatial politics

First, the role of public libraries in social reproduction must be specified to underscore the main argument of the paper. The political-economic aspect of social reproduction involves the acquisition and circulation of work knowledge and skills, and the learning required to maintain and reinforce categories of difference and the cultural practices that naturalize the social organization of reproductive labor (Katz, 2001a: 711). Because public libraries support local communities through user-determined access to knowledge and information (Nelson, 2001), their role in social reproduction emanates from the knowledge required to perform the work of reproducing social relations and sustaining people over the life course. That public libraries are popularly understood both as politically neutral community places (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002) and as equalizing institutions of the local state (Rao, 2012) reveals their dual role as public spaces for knowledge and as a dimension of social policy. Therefore in the following I specify the political economy and urban geography of social reproduction with an emphasis on changes to social policy and the local state in

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