



Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice, Together Again

Schlesinger's *Vital Center* and Library Activism

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*Contemporary debates within American librarianship, and in the country at large, often frame intellectual freedom and social justice as competing or opposed values, but looking back to earlier moments in the intellectual history of libraries and the country demonstrates the fundamental and interdependent relationship that exists between civil liberties and civil rights. In the early Cold War period, librarians and the American Library Association (ALA) engaged in an activist campaign to protect intellectual freedom from threats like anti-communist censorship and loyalty oaths. At the same time, historian and public intellectual Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* laid out a program of radical centrism, capturing the intellectual currents that informed ALA documents like the 1948 Library Bill of Rights and 1953's *The Freedom to Read*. Revisiting Schlesinger's work underscores the extent to which, both historically and in the present, racism and oppression represent primary barriers to the intellectual freedom of Americans and provides an opportunity to explore new framings of fundamental values within the library profession.*

Contemporary librarianship in the United States has developed a conceptual dichotomy between the values of intellectual freedom and social justice. Observers of this dichotomy accurately point to the “Berninghausen Debate” and related events of the late 1960s and early 1970s as the origins of this separation. The legacy of that period remains in the structure of the American Library Association (ALA), with the Social Responsibilities Round Tables, founded in 1969, maintained as a separate entity from the Office of Intellectual Freedom. Debates over the relative importance of intellectual freedom and social justice are consistently among the most explosive within librarianship, whether in public or behind the closed doors of library organizations.



In her outstanding exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of this tension, Emily J. M. Knox identifies both intellectual freedom and social justice as classically liberal values and argues that the frequent heated conflicts between these values within librarianship reflect a tension that exists within liberalism itself. Knox (2020, 9) posits that to overcome this conflict, “the profession must develop deeper and more nuanced foundations for its values.” Maintaining an overly rigid distinction between the values of intellectual freedom and social justice—framing them as competing values that frequently clash—belies the extent to which these values are closely related. Philosophically and culturally, they are the fruits of the same tree. Additionally, as I will attempt to demonstrate, this “competing values” framing can obscure material realities, especially in a country with a long history of oppression like that of the United States, and cause the profession to underestimate the severity of threats to the intellectual freedom of marginalized people.

Looking further back into the history of the American librarianship reveals one possibility for a different framing. Intellectual freedom, as a value or even a concept, has not always been part of librarianship. Historians of the profession detail its rise in parallel with the global political events of the 1940s and 1950s, but we would benefit from a deeper analysis of the way the specific political environment of that period influenced, and continues to influence, the rhetoric of intellectual freedom deployed by the library profession.

The rhetoric of intellectual freedom was not developed as a neutral position, but a political one, embedded and clearly legible in the politics of its day. To establish and explore those connections, I propose to place the documents of the early intellectual freedom movement within the ALA and the library profession as a whole, alongside a popular, influential, and representative political text of the early Cold War: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*. Schlesinger’s text outlines a “radical centrism” that would preserve the freedom of citizens in the face of threats from right-authoritarian fascists and left-authoritarian communists.

The initial commitment of librarians to intellectual freedom was not a retreat from politics but an embrace of a specific, “radical” centrist political position popular in Cold War America. Schlesinger’s *Vital Center* is an important document of the intellectual depth of that position, but it also acknowledges the pressure that America’s history of racial injustice and continuing commitment to segregation and discrimination would place on the centrist coalition. Similarly, politically engaged librarians of the 1950s and

early 1960s attempted to address issues of segregation and racism using the language of intellectual freedom. In a society so scarred and wounded by racism, pursuing social justice is a prerequisite to securing the intellectual freedom of the individual.

If a postwar centrist consensus ever existed within American librarianship, it shattered in the late 1960s in ways that parallel political developments in the country at large. This shattering produced the current understanding that intellectual freedom and social justice are competing values that require balancing or which represent different political orientations. My hope is that a closer reading of the radical centrist mood that inspired librarians to take up the cause of intellectual freedom in the face of widespread censorship might help us articulate a vision of intellectual freedom that is truly for everyone—one that is not in tension with social justice, but actively advances it.

In the sections that follow, I quote liberally from Schlesinger’s book as well as from documents of the movement for intellectual freedom within libraries of the early 1950s. The specific language used, and the echoes that exist between Schlesinger and the library community, help to establish the shared intellectual environment of the period and to contextualize documents like the Library Bill of Rights and *The Freedom to Read*.

I want to add, by way of positioning myself, that I am not a political centrist, but am in fact a Leftist. The goal of this reading is not to evince nostalgia for a Cold War period that might have seen me blacklisted out of the library profession. Instead, I hope that understanding our profession’s commitment to intellectual freedom as a mode of political action, rather than an expression of neutrality, might make a small contribution to discussions that seek to reinvigorate our professional commitment to ethical action.

Schlesinger’s Radical Center

Toward the end of *The Vital Center*, Schlesinger writes, in a remarkable passage,

The rise of totalitarianism, in other words, signifies more than an internal crisis for democratic society. It signifies an internal crisis for democratic man. There is a Hitler, a Stalin in every breast. (251)

He goes on to quote from Albert Camus’ *The Plague*, comparing the impulse to tyranny, or to succumb to tyranny, to an infectious disease, easily passed from person to person, able to be contained only through constant and communal vigilance. For Schlesinger, the conflict between free, democratic societies and totalitarian regimes on the right and left



is fully internalized; it is fought not just within communities or institutions, but within the body of each individual.

Schlesinger begins his argument with an account of industrialization, which he portrays as alienating and anxiety-producing regardless of the mode of government or economic organization under which it occurs. This anxiety provides an opening for the totalitarian impulse, from within and without. He writes of the failure of both the Right and the Left to resist this impulse with sufficient force and vigor, using language that valorized stereotypically masculine traits (Cuordileone 2000, 515). On the American Right Schlesinger describes the business community and the capitalist system as uninterested in politics beyond the protection of their own interests and unprepared for the challenges of Hitler and Stalin. On the American Left, he finds the “Doughface” progressive (Schlesinger 1949, 38): soft, rather than hard, and easily lured into totalitarianism through his sympathy with communism. Neither the Left nor the Right, Schlesinger argues, is an effective counter against the totalitarian impulse to impose state violence and control. The Left, he argues, succumbs too easily to the communist impulse to seize personal property. The Right, in this formulation, shares with the fascist governments an insufficient respect for personal liberty.

Schlesinger’s concept of a radical center relies explicitly on a modified version of Jean-Pierre Faye’s horseshoe theory, which Schlesinger credits to DeWitt C. Poole (Schlesinger 1949, 145). In this formulation, political moderates, rather than representing a neutral center, are actually at one extreme, occupying the furthest possible position from the twin threats of fascism and communism. When he writes that Poole’s “ingenious solution [reformulates] the right-left classification in terms which correspond to the complexities of this ghastly century” (145), Schlesinger makes clear the close connection between this formulation and the specific threats of his political moment. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the extensive literature regarding the validity of the horseshoe theory, but it is valuable to note the role of this theory in the argument that centrism and moderation can in fact represent a radical position of resistance to the twin threats of Left and Right totalitarianism. Schlesinger makes this most explicit in his conclusion, which defines a “new radicalism”:

The spirit of the new radicalism is the spirit of the center — the spirit of human decency, opposing the extremes of tyranny. Yet, in a more fundamental sense, does not the center itself represent one extreme? While at the other are grouped the forces of corruption—men transformed by pride and power into enemies of humanity. (256)

Schlesinger insists that centrism is not a neutral position but a form of extreme opposition to tyranny. His is an activist centrism, extreme in its allegiance to individual rights to both liberty and property.

The Radical Center’s Commitment to Social Justice

Consistent with his activist vision of centrism, Schlesinger understands issues of social justice as critical to individual freedom. “The sin of racial pride still represents the most basic challenge to the American conscience. . . . It may be foolish to think that we can transform folkways and eradicate bigotry overnight. But it is fatal not to maintain an unrelenting attack on all forms of racial discrimination” (190–91). Later, Schlesinger underscores the threat that America’s racism represents to its foreign policy:

The shocking racial cruelties in the United States or in most areas of western colonialism compare unfavorably with the Soviet nationalities policy (at least as described in Soviet propaganda) and with the long Russian tradition of racial assimilation. This fact gives Communism a special prestige for African or Asiatic intellectuals who have had to suffer under discrimination of color in the West. (230)

It is important to underscore the seriousness with which radical centrists like Schlesinger viewed social justice issues. It may be tempting to view the Cold War center’s interest in racial justice as a cynical desire to eliminate one of Moscow’s most effective criticisms of the West. However, for Schlesinger, civil rights and civil liberties are co-equal priorities. He argues for

the essential importance of issues of civil rights and civil liberties. Every one of us has a direct, piercing, inescapable, responsibility in our own lives on questions of racial discrimination, of political and intellectual freedom—not just to support legislative programs, but to extirpate the prejudices of bigotry in our environment, and above all, in ourselves. (252)

Nowhere in *The Vital Center* is it suggested, as is often argued by librarians, that a commitment to social justice is in tension with the radical pursuit of a free, democratic society. Throughout the work, Schlesinger argues the opposite: that a commitment to social justice is an essential part of the radical centrist program. The radical centrist position, which Schlesinger defines as the position farthest from the tyranny of fascism and communism, and therefore most committed to individual rights, also recognizes that oppression,



discrimination, and bigotry are serious threats to the rights of individuals.

Radical Centrism in Libraries

Schlesinger's radical centrism is a helpful lens through which to view the political commitments of librarians who were engaged with issues of intellectual freedom during the period surrounding the book's publication in 1949. The period from 1948 to 1954 was in many ways formative for the American library profession's understanding of intellectual freedom. Louise S. Robbins (1996) has published an exceptional and detailed history of the profession's attempts to define and advance intellectual freedom during this period. Robbins' history underscores the challenges the profession faced in effectively advancing intellectual freedom in an era of censorship, anti-intellectualism, and pervasive suspicion. While the politics of individual librarians no doubt varied widely, radical or activist centrism provided a framework within which the profession as a whole, and the ALA most specifically, could engage effectively with the political environment of the period.

This study will read Robbins' history and primary documents of the period through the lens of Schlesinger's radical centrism and its synthesis of intellectual freedom and social justice. It will focus briefly on each of four key documents—the 1948 Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom to Read, and the proceedings of the 1953 and 1954 conferences sponsored by the ALA's Committee on Intellectual Freedom (IFC).

Robbins makes a clear case that librarians in the early 1950s saw the 1948 Library Bill of Rights as the beginning of a new professional commitment to intellectual freedom, despite the fact that an earlier version of the document had been adopted in 1939. She cites in particular a stirring 1952 celebration of the document on its "fourth birthday" in the *American Library Association Bulletin* (ALAB) as evidence of "the library profession's dawning awareness of its ethic of freedom" (Robbins 1996, 65). Specifically, the 1948 Library Bill of Rights newly committed librarians to fight censorship at a time when censorship, loyalty oaths, and other repressive practices were seen by many as necessary and appropriate weapons in the fight against communism.

In addition to looking for specific events that spurred professional actions like the Library Bill of Rights, it is helpful to also understand how the broader context, including social and political currents, influenced the field (Campbell 2014). It is perhaps too obvious, but in my experience rarely remarked upon, that the Library Bill of Rights presents itself as both American and patriotic. This deliberate conflation of intellectual freedom with patriotism creates a context in which librarians of the period could write about library

activities using sweeping language that echoes Schlesinger's writing about democracy. In the aforementioned celebration of the fourth anniversary of the Library Bill of Rights, ALAB editor Ransom L. Richardson (1952) writes that "like its antecedents, the Library Bill of Rights can maintain its existence only by the practice of men." The antecedents discussed here are the US Constitution and Bill of Rights. Schlesinger continually stresses the high-maintenance nature of US democracy, often using similarly gendered language. In the conclusion of *The Vital Center*, he writes, borrowing a phrase from Walt Whitman, that "if democracy cannot produce the large resolute breed of men capable of the climatic effort, it will founder" (256). While Schlesinger is more expressive, both authors portray the documents and practice of democracy as under threat and portray the defense of democracy as a masculine activity.

The need to defend the anti-censorship stance against accusations of un-Americanism is especially evident in the third statement of the 1948 Library Bill of Rights, which begins, "censorship of books, urged or practiced by volunteer arbiters of morals or political opinion or by organizations that would establish a coercive concept of Americanism, must be challenged by libraries" (ALA 1948). This is particularly striking in contrast to the next statement, which cites the "free access to ideas and full freedom of expression that are the tradition and heritage of Americans." The document engages directly in a heated public debate about what it means to be American, committing librarians to a stance that equates the maintenance of free expression with patriotism.

In 1952 the IFC convened librarians, journalists, publishers, and academics for their first Conference on Intellectual Freedom. The proceedings of that conference reveal a profession grappling with a very challenging political environment. The introduction to the proceedings begins with an evocative description: "For some time we have been living in a twilight between war and peace" (Bixler 1954, 1). A number of the speakers begin their presentations by addressing the national or global political environment. Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* is included in the bibliography of the conference as a work on "the concept of liberty, including liberty in relation to government."

In his remarks at the 1952 conference, David K. Berninghausen celebrates the Free American Library in Berlin, calling it "our answer to Russian propaganda in Germany" (1954, 70). He evokes a Soviet book-burning campaign and proclaims that "today there are loud voices in America demanding that American libraries copy the methods of Germany and Russia, banning certain expressions of opinion" (70). He goes on to raise the stakes even



further, arguing that “the position of the United States in the world today is such that if we surrender our faith in freedom of thought, it may disappear from the globe” (71). Here libraries, as symbols of free expression, become a form of wartime propaganda, adding essential credibility to America’s case against communism. Here Berninghausen parallels Schlesinger’s argument about the strategic importance of advancing civil rights. To defend its claims to advance freedom abroad, the American government must live up to them at home.

In the following year, the ALA and the American Book Publishers Council released *The Freedom to Read*, a statement that received national attention in the press and elicited a statement in support of intellectual freedom from President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The language of *The Freedom to Read* again contains echoes of Schlesinger’s radical centrism, particularly in its conclusion:

We do not state these propositions in the comfortable belief that what people read is unimportant. We believe rather that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours. (ALA 1954)

Here, the advocate of intellectual freedom—the librarian or the publisher—embraces the peril of free expression and the dangerous ideas that come with it, as a defense against the greater danger of totalitarianism. The statement is explicit in contrasting democratic governments with “totalitarian systems [which] attempt to maintain themselves in power by the ruthless suppression of any concept which challenges the established orthodoxy.” However, the statement’s final point underscores that librarians and publishers cannot remain neutral in the practice of their professions and that their professional judgment is essential to the freedom to read:

It is the responsibility of publishers and librarians to give full meaning to the freedom to read by providing books that enrich the quality of thought and expression. By the exercise of this affirmative responsibility, bookmen can demonstrate that the answer to a bad book is a good one, the answer to a bad idea is a good one. (ALA 1954)

With its dramatic syntax and gendered language, *The Freedom to Read* statement echoes both the tone and the ideas of Schlesinger’s radical centrism. That tone underscores the statement’s activist stance, and places it into a political discourse that portrays the openness to ideas and the

opposition to censorship as a vigorous, patriotic, and masculine defense of democracy.

From the adoption of the revised Library Bill of Rights in 1948 to the publication of the *Freedom to Read* Statement in 1953, the ALA advanced a controversial political agenda in opposition to censorship. This agenda encompassed a specific kind of American patriotism and a centrist political position that resonates at many points with the vision of the vital or radical center that Schlesinger outlines. However, as Robbins repeatedly underscores in her history of the period, the implementation of that agenda within the profession would proceed by fits and starts and struggle to live up to the grand language of ALA’s public pronouncements (Robbins 1996, see 64, 85, 95, 133). In particular, the challenges that the ALA encountered in promoting intellectual freedom in a country where freedom has never been equally distributed are relevant to our current situation.

Intellectual Freedom and Civil Rights

In a discussion group at the 1953 Conference on Intellectual Freedom, academic librarians grappled with an apparent conflict between intellectual freedom and social justice, or to use a term that would have been familiar at the time, civil rights. To a contemporary reader, it is likely to be one of the most fascinating moments of the conference:

The question of whether college or university libraries should select books openly advocating Communist was posed. The consensus of opinion seemed to be that the advocacy of Communism deserved representation in a university library, but Mr. [William S.] Dix reminded the group that if the Communist is allowed to sell his point, the library must logically also include violently anti-Negro or anti-Semitic—anti-anything or pro-anything—books that most college libraries do not now collect. Organizations such as the NAACP and the Anti-Defamation League would then subject the librarian to a further pressure for censorship. No final resolution of this difficulty was achieved by the group, but it became obvious during the discussion that if libraries are to maintain a position of neutrality in controversial subjects, representation in the library of all sides of debatable questions cannot be denied. (Harlow 1954, 120)

Underlying this remarkable moment seems to be the shared assumption that communist works, even when they are of intellectual and research interest, represent the most dangerous possible ideas that a library might include, both from the point of view of opening the library up to political pressure and in the sense of representing a danger to freedom itself. In 1953, a library that contained communist works



could not, it appears, make the argument that racist or anti-Semitic works were in fact more dangerous or repellent. The intellectual structure provided by the horseshoe theory is implicit in the discussion—including the dangerous ideas of the Left (communism) necessitates balancing the scales by including the dangerous ideas of the Right (anti-Semitism, with its strong suggesting of Nazism and other European fascisms, and racism).

While recording notes of public discussion is a challenging and thankless task, it is worth noting the gloss our faithful reporter imposes on the discussion. The group, it appears, did not reach a consensus on the issue at hand, but the notes inform us of the logical conclusion—purchase everything, even the racist material. But let’s look at the scenario that this solution actually describes. If we are to take this conclusion at face value, it demonstrates that, by demanding the censorship of communist materials, the American Right might in fact be able to force academic libraries to purchase racist and anti-Semitic material for their collections—material they would have ignored were it not for the Right’s censorship campaign against the Left.

This scenario demonstrates the difficulty of locating a political center or a stance of neutrality in a system of extremely asymmetrical power and aggression. It also demonstrates why Schlesinger does not apply the horseshoe theory to the question of civil rights, but instead elevates civil rights, along with civil liberties, as co-equal requirements of American freedom. What is on the other end of the political spectrum from racism, from anti-Blackness? What book would a library purchase to “balance out” a racist or anti-Semitic one?

At this point it is worth pointing out that the Library Bill of Rights, much like its namesake, did not, in its first versions, aspire to provide equality to Black library users. Echoing the Constitutional Convention, the library profession could not dictate to its members from the South. In 1941, only four public libraries in the greater South provided full service to Black patrons, with three of those libraries located in Texas; an additional twelve libraries provided limited, segregated service. In 1954, 59 cities and towns provided full service at their main libraries, but 39 of those municipalities were located in either Kentucky or Texas. Five states—Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina—had no public libraries where Black users could receive equal service (Holden 1954). While Paul Bixler of the IFC made inquiries into the state of library services for Black Southerners in 1955, the library profession would not undertake a national conversation about the denial of library service to Black users until 1959 (Robbins 1996, 107). Failure to account for the prevalence and influence of racism in

America can make it very difficult to accurately identify the most serious threats to intellectual freedom.

Oppression as a Primary Barrier to Intellectual Freedom

The problem with trying to separate issues of social justice and intellectual freedom, as our profession has attempted to do, is that, as Schlesinger understood in 1949, racism and discrimination are themselves among the primary threats to the civil liberties of Americans. Some might argue that the events of the intervening decades, in particularly the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, have transformed American society to the point where discrimination and racism are no longer critical threats to our freedom. Within the context of libraries and their commitment to intellectual freedom, this position is untenable, as I believe the following studies and statistics demonstrate. These are just a small sampling of the many contemporary studies that suggest the continued influence of structural oppression on the American marketplace of ideas:

- A *New York Times* study of English-language fiction books published by major publishers between 1950 and 2018 found that 95% of the books were written by White authors. In 2018, 89% of the books published by major publishers were by White authors. (So and Wezerek, 2020)
- In 2008, only 15% of the articles on major opinion (op-ed) pages were written by women. The OpEd project, which has trained nearly 17,000 people since that time in an attempt to improve representation in expert forums, reports that figure had climbed to 26% in 2022. (OpEd Project 2022; Yaeger 2012)
- The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film publishes an annual report titled “Thumbs Down,” which details the overrepresentation of men among published film critics. In 2022, they found that 69% of film critics were men, 31% women, and 0.3% were nonbinary critics. (Lauzen 2022, 3)
- According to data gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2020, 74% of full-time faculty at US universities were White. Of those who had achieved the rank of full professor, 51% were White men and 28% were White women. (NCES 2020)
- In 2017, ALA found that 87% of its members were White (Rosa and Henke 2017, 3)

Racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, class prejudice—these and other forms of oppression shape our



information environment. They influence the opportunities authors, artists, and other creators receive. They influence the reception of new works and ideas. And, as Schlesinger might point out, they undermine the credibility of our claims to openness and freedom, to our claims that the ideas and values we adopt have won out in an open marketplace of ideas rather than in a rigged old-boys' club or smoke-filled room.

Studies like the ones cited above are rightly used to point out and illustrate the effects of racism and misogyny in specific professional or creative environments. However, taken as a whole, they demonstrate the devastating and profoundly distorting weight of oppression on the overall intellectual and creative environment in the United States. These effects are inevitably reflected in library collections, influencing the freedom to read just as they influence the freedom to write and publish. It is also important to note that lack of access to spaces like publishing, librarianship, and academia is only one of the many continuing effects of slavery and racism on the ability of Black people and communities to build wealth and influence in the United States.

But it is also important to imagine better worlds. Imagine the vibrancy and diversity, the wealth of experience and innovation, that would exist in a truly inclusive American intellectual environment. Imagine library collections animated by the churn of constant cultural and intellectual exchange. During the Cold War, American propagandists used jazz to promote the vibrancy of American culture overseas—imagine a country whose intellectual life lived up to that propaganda.

Another important point underscored by these statistics is that the modern social justice movement, as it relates to racism, is a direct continuation of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which was itself a continuation of organized pro-Black civil rights movements that predated the founding of the United States (Carey 2012). There is a tendency in our professional discourse to discuss issues of social justice as taking shape in the 1970s, and therefore of newer interest to the profession and the nation (see, e.g., LaRue 2021). Though often well-intentioned, this narrative disrupts a long and continuous history of pro-Black activism by highlighting only the aspects of that activism that crossed over to gain attention in the mainstream media. It also obscures the extent to which centrist intellectuals of the 1950s, like Schlesinger, saw civil liberties and civil rights as co-equal and related concerns, each of which were critical to America's defense against tyranny.

Conclusion

In concluding I wish to adopt Schlesinger's characteristic sense of urgency and try to answer pressing questions clearly. In pitting intellectual freedom and social justice against one another, the library profession has made a grave mistake and fallen into a messy intellectual and rhetorical quagmire. Inevitably, ideas and political commitments are formed in a specific intellectual and historical context. As contexts change, ideas may sharpen and gain focus, but they may also lose their charge and impact.

In reifying the sense of tension between intellectual freedom and social justice, libraries reflect broader political and cultural debates that portray social justice concerns as inimical to individual liberty. This framing is very effective in producing polarizing arguments, impassioned debate, and engaged television viewers and website users. It is also effective in undermining movements for social justice without addressing or disputing the underlying problems they point to. This framing, however, rarely leads to greater understanding or new consensus.

The library profession has the potential to provide leadership on issues of intellectual freedom. We have a responsibility to develop frameworks and ways of understanding that account for the complexity of our current political and cultural environment, and which can help us build consensus around issues that are critical for libraries, library users, and library workers. Our current political moment is very different from the early Cold War era, but the consequences of the radical centrist politics of that era linger in the profession's public statements and internal debates. Because of those lingering echoes, we can benefit from a more precise understanding of the implications of radical centrism:

1. The commitment of ALA and the library profession to an ethic of intellectual freedom arose not in a moment of political neutrality, but of activism.
2. Schlesinger's radical centrism is a model for understanding the intellectual currents that undergird library advocacy for intellectual freedom during this period. It argues for an activist center, using the horseshoe theory to present the center as the furthest possible position from totalitarianism.
3. Schlesinger's deep commitment to intellectual freedom stemmed not from an absolutist commitment to individual rights but from a belief that civil liberties, along with civil rights, were essential to the survival of the United States in a threatening global environment.



4. Librarians in the early Cold War intellectual freedom movement identified systemic threats to intellectual freedom—communism, fascism, and domestic censorship—and fought against them. However, they underestimated or ignored the effect of racism on the intellectual freedom of Black Americans, as evidenced by their almost complete lack of access to public library services in the South.

This study of a pivotal period in the history of American libraries also has some broader implications. Most importantly, it shows that there is nothing natural or inevitable about our current framework, which separates intellectual freedom and social justice into separate concerns. In fact, at a key moment in the development of the profession's commitment to intellectual freedom, writers like Schlesinger portrayed issues of civil rights and social justice as essential to a free society. This is not to paint Schlesinger as any sort of racial visionary—movements for civil rights and racial justice are older than our country—but to point out the deep and abiding connection between the values of equality and individual freedom.

Secondarily, it demonstrates the importance of identifying true threats to intellectual freedom and of working toward a shared understanding of those threats within the library community. The political circumstances of the early Cold War era galvanized the library profession, enabling an unusual degree of coordinated political activism. In our current political climate, there is in fact widespread agreement that democracy and freedom are again under threat but much less agreement as to where the threat comes from. It is not surprising that librarians struggle to find consensus in the current climate.

Separating social justice from intellectual freedom has led us to ask the wrong questions and to enter into an endless debate that artificially pits two deeply related and interdependent concepts against one another. Instead, maybe we can learn to ask, as Celeste Bocchicchio-Chaudhri (2019) already has: “intellectual freedom for whom?” We can then focus on identifying the most significant threats to intellectual freedom, including threats that affect or actively target the freedoms of marginalized people. We do not all need to agree or speak with one voice, but we do need a framework that allows the library profession to identify and address specific threats to intellectual freedom, including coordinated and systemic threats that mobilize hatred and oppression against marginalized authors and readers.

The current political environment is every bit as challenging as the one American libraries faced in the early Cold War, and we encounter that environment through a haze of spin and misinformation, through the fragmented kaleidoscope of social media or the dull, gray glow of consolidated corporate news. The intellectual framework that puts intellectual freedom against social justice is inadequate for the current moment. They are both underlying values of a liberal democratic society, and they complement each other far more often than not. In the United States specifically, an understanding of social justice—an understanding of the structure and history of oppression—is essential to identifying the most dire threats to intellectual freedom.

When, as Kelly Jensen's ongoing reporting documents, censors organize around the country to demand the removal of books by marginalized authors, or books of interest to marginalized readers—books by the Black authors who pioneered critical race theory, or by LGBTQ authors—the intersection of social justice and intellectual freedom becomes straightforward and apparent (Jensen 2022). Attacks on intellectual freedom do not occur in a vacuum—they are shaped by cultural and political forces. In the United States, sustained and coordinated campaigns against marginalized groups represent the greatest threats to intellectual freedom, both historically and in the current environment.

Certainly some will argue that I have misjudged current threats to intellectual freedom. They might argue, for example, that it is conservative authors and readers, rather than those who are Black or LGBTQ, whose freedom is under the greatest threat within libraries. The discussion that would result from that disagreement, however, strikes me as fundamentally different than the more abstract way in which our profession currently frames debates about intellectual freedom. Such a discussion might be just as divisive, but it might also provide a way to talk about important issues with greater specificity and nuance. This imagined discussion presupposes as fact that racism and bigotry are potential threats to intellectual freedom—the point of disagreement is now whether they are the most significant threats. Our current discourse, which pits social justice against intellectual freedom, obscures the impact of oppression on intellectual freedom. As a profession, we must continue to seek language that more accurately reflects our values and their relationship to our material and political circumstances.



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