



Let this Radicalize Us

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The more things change, the more they stay the same. While many have been working at the intersection of intellectual freedom and social justice for great lengths of time, it is newer to others. And for those who are new, they enter this work at a time when there is increasing contention around issues related to both intellectual freedom and social justice. Whether we're dealing with the hyper fixation on notions neutrality, book bans, or systemic racism and whiteness in society and in the profession, there is a great need for this important work, and for these topics to work in tandem, instead of using intellectual freedom arguments to further disenfranchise marginalized groups. As a result, it may appear that intellectual freedom and social justice do not work together, but they are indeed not mutually exclusive. We need to give more care and consideration to how they do work together, and how they can work together in even better and more cohesive ways.

We need to be radical. And when I say radical, I mean that we need to be critical of the status quo and not be afraid to ask any and all questions. Author and abolitionist Mariame Kaba said, "let this radicalize you rather than lead you to despair" (2020), which could apply to decisions of the United States Supreme Court or a hollow diversity decision at your library; it could be myriad things. These things can become overwhelming, and we need to be radical and continue to have tough external conversations with our community and tough internal conversations with our peers and colleagues, even when they get difficult. Angela Davis (1987) said that radical "simply means grasping things at the root," questioning everything, including capitalism, sexism, ableism, racism, and white supremacy. By grabbing things at the root, we are acknowledging that we need to be proactive, consistent, bold, and even aggressive, particularly when faced with false

narratives and disinformation that harms others. If we're not going to defend our values and defend the things that we believe in, we're not going to have success with other people defending our values and our actions (i.e., keeping a challenged book on the shelves).

In addition to being more aggressively proactive, we need to be more precise in our language. We need to have empathy, we need to have intellectual and cultural humility, and we need to have vulnerability and transparency that allows us to have disagreements but still remain in the fight together. This requires willingness to meet someone where they are and to have our own thoughts and beliefs challenged. We need to get to a place where we can be transparent, vulnerable, humble, and therefore radical. Ultimately, this requires personal work that is continuous and critically self-reflective. This is not to say that the intellectual freedom



and social justice work stops; rather, it can occur concurrently with our self-work so we don't lose momentum or progress.

Working toward the continued integration of social justice and intellectual freedom can be difficult, isolating, and overwhelming, and it can also be done on multiple levels. Our work is done on the *micro* level (i.e., the internal conversations that we have that can increase our understanding of different issues, different cultures, etc.). We also work at the *mezzo*/middle level (i.e., within our workplaces or organizations), and at the *macro* level (i.e., work done outside in the world, going full spectrum in terms of how we are trying to improve our profession and communities). At any given time, we can be working in one, two, or all three of these levels, and this can vary according to time, space, and place. So when you're feeling overwhelmed, remember the different levels and think about what can you do today, or in this moment, because you can't do everything at once, and I think this is a good reminder. This, in addition to the work that we must do as individuals, is the radical and collective work that enables us to deal with challenges and to

do the hard work within our profession and communities to dismantle the antiquated structures and barriers, including white supremacy. Keep talking, keep protesting, and keep talking back.

"I am fully human when I recognize your humanity" (Asino 2022). What a great encapsulation of how we should think about people we work in service of, and our professional values of intellectual freedom and social justice, and the false value of neutrality (which is often conflated with being nonpartisan). Neutrality is not inherent in what we do in libraries; whatever we choose to do or enact is a decision that impacts others. Even if we choose not to do something, that's still a consequential decision. We can't be neutral because we're making decisions from our own personal and experiential lens, therefore as much as we strive for an equitable lens, we're still human. Neutrality is being weaponized as a way to shut down or avoid conversations, and it serves to dismiss and devalue other perspectives and experiences. It dismisses and devalues the humanity of others. No decision or action will be perfect or appropriate for all, but they can be radical and respect the humanity of everyone.

References

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