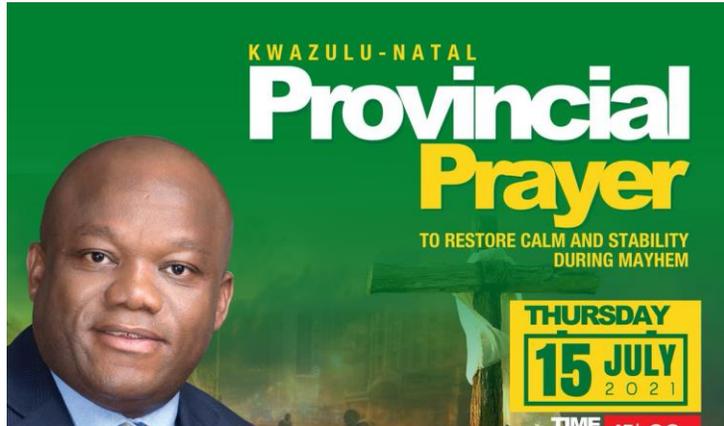


# Libraries and social justice: reflections after the looting

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# An unexpected eruption?



Images: (L to R)

<https://twitter.com/kzngov/status/1415608874917408768>

<https://zulumissions.co.za/violence-and-looting/>

<https://ewn.co.za/2021/07/21/ntshavheni-150-000-jobs-at-risk-in-kzn-in-wake-of-riots-looting>



# Returning to “normality”

- What sort of normality?
- Political, economic, social, demographic fault lines
- **Inequality**
- Disillusion with democracy
- Distrust of the state and authority
- Unemployment, poverty, deprivation

# Inequality

- No lasting peace without justice
- Massive inequality is incompatible with social justice
- Gini coefficient measures income inequality
- SA has highest Gini coefficient of 165 countries
- Tinder: a spark suffices for a blaze



Image: <https://www.e-firstaidsupplies.com/blog/how-to-make-fire/>

# Social justice: John Rawls “Justice as fairness”

## Rawls’ three principles

1. Society must give each citizen an equal claim to basic rights and liberties
2. Social structures should ensure equality of opportunity
3. Economic inequalities are acceptable *provided that* they are to the greatest benefit to the least advantaged members of society [controversial]



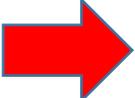
# How does South Africa measure up?

## Rawls' three principles

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. Society must give each citizen an equal claim to basic rights and liberties   | 1. OK: SA has a world-class Constitution & Bill of Rights                              |
| 2. Social structures should ensure equality of opportunity   | 2. Not OK: Unjust structures perpetuated   |
| 3. Economic inequalities are acceptable <i>provided that</i> they are to the greatest benefit to the least advantaged members of society [controversial] | 3. No! Glaring economic inequality has little or no benefit to least advantaged people |

# Information and social justice

- Poverty is self-perpetuating
- Kids lack basic skills in reading & writing
- Left behind at school, drop out
- Unemployed and unemployable
- No access to books, reading, info – risk losing functional literacy
- No access to computers and Internet – handicapped in labour market
- Impaired capacity for political participation as an autonomous citizen

**Information inequality (information poverty)  social injustice**

# Combating information poverty

- Information poverty – key contributor to social injustice
- If librarians want to be useful, relevant, recognized...
- Contribute to UN 's Sustainable Development Goals
- Many programmes world-wide: Gates Foundation, IFLA, etc.
- Libraries already do a lot (Many examples in literature)
- Traditional, new, and non-“librarianly” projects
- We can do more!
- E.g: In SA: unemployed/unemployable youth?

# Changing how we *think*

- More difficult than changing what we *do*
- Our challenge: think inside-out
- From disadvantaged communities to what we do
- From *their* perspective
- Escape from “us versus them” mindset
- Stop blaming the poor for their poverty
- Confusion of cause and effect

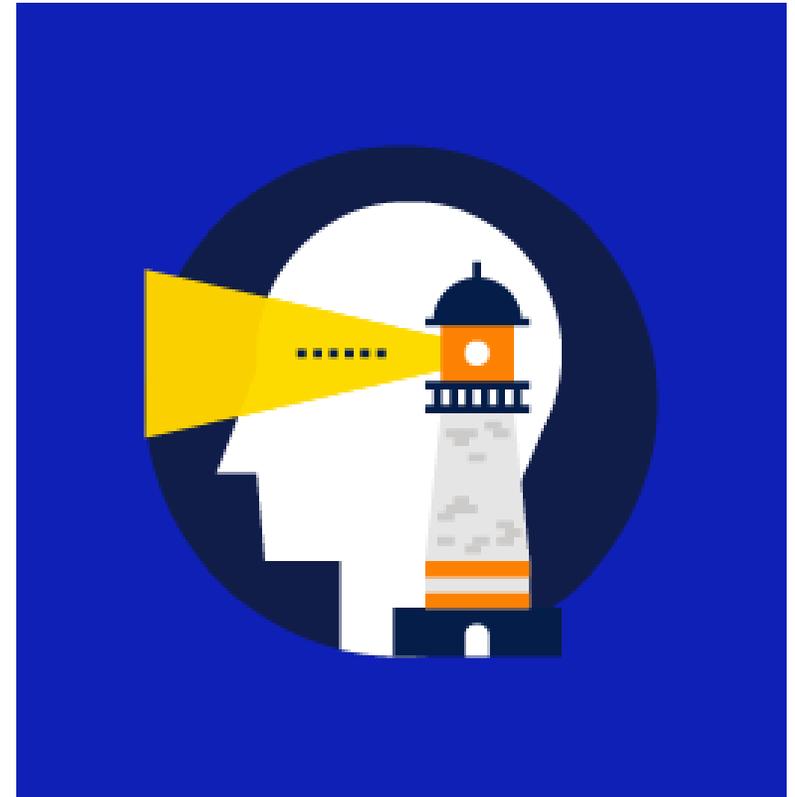


Image:

<https://www.socialthinking.com/Articles?name=inside-out-rather-than-outside-in-thinking>

# Avoid misplaced “sympathy”

- Stop denying the *agency* of the disadvantaged
- Community protests not “sheep led astray”
- Accept the “others” as autonomous, thinking human beings
- Example: understanding library burnings around 2010
- Understanding why people might want to burn down your library can make you a better community librarian.



Von Holdt et al. (2011) The Smoke that calls

# Can the subaltern speak?

- Gayatri Spivak (1988): “Can the subaltern speak?”
- Allow disadvantaged, marginalized to speak for themselves -- and listen!
- Understand how *they* make sense of their situation
- Critically rethink the status quo and what libraries do
- from *their* perspective, with them.
- We librarians are not higher beings who have to “uplift the lower classes” to our “level”
- So as to maintain our comfortable status quo

Libraries are “innately subversive institutions”\*



“[Librarians] are subversive. You think they're just sitting there at the desk, all quiet and everything. They're like plotting the revolution, man. I wouldn't mess with them.”

– Michael Moore

Are you prepared to be subversive?

# Thank you!



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