The phenomenon of burnout or occupational stress has received considerable attention over the past decade or so in academic, professional and popular literature. In keeping with the individualistic tenor of American culture most of this literature emphasizes the psychological dimensions of the problem, attributing burnout to particular personality traits and recommending a variety of individual coping strategies. While the organization and conditions of particular work settings are sometimes examined along with the psychological makeup of employees, the broad social-structural reasons for intolerable occupational stress are rarely investigated. Without ways to understand how socio-economic factors such as bureaucratization, hierarchy, and routinization militate against the possibility of meaningful, fulfilling work, millions of Americans have no choice but to blame themselves for the profound occupational dissatisfaction they feel. After all, we are told, “the good life” is available to all in this society. Hard work, initiative, and talent is rewarded. If we feel frustrated and dissatisfied in our work it must be due to our own shortcomings. Meanwhile corporations increasingly offer things like yoga and transcendental meditation as palliatives to prevent employee stress from interfering with productivity.

To attribute the frustration, ennui, and powerlessness so many of us experience in our jobs to the very nature of work within corporate capitalist society is to bridge an ideological chasm of substantial proportions. To its considerable merit Marcia Nauratil’s *The Alienated Librarian* succeeds in interpreting occupational stress in librarianship in terms of factors specific to the historical development of the profession, recent trends in librarianship, as well as broad historical and structural factors integral to the development and functioning of capitalist society. In order to make the shift from an individualistic psychological view of burnout to a social-structural one, Nauratil employs Marx’s theory of alienation as a conceptual paradigm. Because workers in capitalist society do not own the means for producing what is necessary for their own subsistence, they must sell their labor power to those few who own the means of production. As a consequence of this situation workers are alienated from both their productive activity and the product of that activity.
since they have no control over the conditions of their work or the disposition of the products of their work. Furthermore, according to Marx, under conditions of competition and inequality workers are alienated from other human beings and eventually become estranged from their own potential for creative, cooperative activity. At the core of alienation lies the worker’s fundamental lack of autonomy with regard to his or her productive life. Citing numerous studies, Nauratil identifies a lack of control over the circumstances of one’s work activity as a crucial causal component of occupational stress and concludes that burnout is a manifestation of a pervasive and deeply rooted socio-economic alienation.

While industrial workers have historically been most severely victimized by alienation, recent trends towards the assimilation of professionals into public and private bureaucracies have proletarianized professional work through deskilling, routinization, and subordination to organizational goals and thus increased their susceptibility to alienation. Nauratil makes the case that librarianship is especially susceptible to alienation and attributes this to several historical factors. A rigid, autocratic style of management and bureaucratic organizational structures emphasizing efficiency, quantification, and stasis have decreased the opportunities for innovation and the exercise of professional judgement as well as reducing the interaction between librarians and patrons to brief, mechanical exchanges. The feminization of librarianship in light of traditional and pervasive societal sexism has contributed to an undervaluing of the profession. Furthermore, the lack of a clearly defined, articulated and defended sense of professional purpose has historically enabled socio-political elites to manipulate librarianship for their own reactionary purposes. The arguments here are not unconvincing, but as in the overview of work in Western history earlier in the book, Nauratil casts her net a bit too widely. She tries to cover too much of American library history in too short a space and the results are often superficial. Nauratil is on firmer ground when she analyzes current trends in librarianship which contribute to alienation. Here she confronts issues which are among the most critical in librarianship today.

Common to the various, contemporary trends which have circumscribed the professional autonomy of librarians is the imposition of entrepreneurial ideologies and methods in an attempt to deal with
fiscal constraints and burgeoning technology. Private sector austerity management strategies are fundamentally incompatible with the public service mandate of libraries. The emphasis on productivity, efficiency and autocratic "bottom line" decision-making entailed by such strategies subjects librarians to the tyrannies of the private corporation and results in role conflict among librarians who regard themselves as autonomous professionals committed to the public good. The impact of automation, while somewhat more ambiguous given the possibilities for improved user services, also plays a role in alienating library workers by intensifying task specialization and fragmentation as well as tending to compel workers to adapt to the imperatives of the technology. In order to pay for costly new innovations in information technology and as a solution to shrinking budgets libraries are increasingly adopting a marketing orientation which attempts to identify the more lucrative market segments and tailor services to appeal to them while ignoring those segments considered unprofitable.

The Alienated Librarian concludes with a critique and rejection of current approaches to ameliorating burnout which recommend individual coping strategies while ignoring the deeply rooted structural causes of alienation. Teaching employees to adapt to oppressive working conditions reinforces their sense of powerlessness (a major component of alienation) by assuming that those conditions are inamenable to change. Nauratil advocates collective intervention at the organizational level, specifically direct worker control over the labor process and direct or representative influence on organizational policies. She suggests various forms of participative management (quality circles, autonomous work teams, codetermination) which should be feasible in libraries and urges the mobilization of forces in library associations, unions, and education to advocate the restructuring of libraries along lines conducive to optimum professional autonomy.

Worker alienation, not only in libraries but throughout American society, is a phenomenon which can only be addressed through a fundamental restructuring of the workplace and the economy. Nauratil draws examples of workplace democracy from European and Scandinavian countries with solid socialist traditions and, while she acknowledges the difficulties in implementing participative management in a capitalist society, she perhaps underestimates the
enormous resistance in this country (even in the public sector) to ideas of this sort.

A more fundamental, though not fatal, criticism of Nauratil's book is that given the severity of the threat to free and equal access to information represented by the efforts to commercialize libraries, one wishes that she had given more emphasis to analyzing how many of the same factors which contribute to the alienation of librarians also undermine the public's right to know and consequently the foundations of democratic decision-making. The application of the values and methods of the marketplace to libraries erodes the status of information as a public good and creates an underclass of the information poor at the same time as it deprives librarians of their professional autonomy. Nauratil understands this and touches on it in several instances, but given the severity of the situation, more attention might have been warranted. Still The Alienated Librarian is admirable for its efforts at analyzing library issues in the context of broad social, political, and economic structures. It is readable, well documented and, most importantly, shows flashes of the critical spirit and social imagination so lacking in much of what passes for scholarship both within and without librarianship today.

by Henry T. Blanke