

BOOK REVIEW

***Into the Future: The Foundations of Library and Information Services in the Post-Industrial Era*, by Michael H. Harris and Stan A. Hannah (Norwood NJ: Ablex, 1993)**

by Henry T. Blanke

Perhaps no other single work of social theory has had as profound an influence on the library profession as Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973). From library school curricula to the pages of *Library Journal*, Bell's thesis that we are in the midst of a transition from a goods-producing society to an information society has gained wide currency. Influential enough in other spheres, the idea that innovations in computerization and information technology are forging a new social formation has virtually become an article of faith in librarianship. Bell's pronouncements to the effect that "if capital and labor are the major structural features of industrial society, information and knowledge are those of post-industrial society" resonate with the status-starved sensibilities of librarians who envision an enhanced social role for their profession. In their rush to embrace the "information society" paradigm, however, librarians have failed to scrutinize the assumptions and implications of Bell's forecast, nor have they assimilated, in any sophisticated way, the substantial body of critical literature dealing with the subject. Certainly, if Bell and other prophets of post-industrialism have been criticized for technological determinism, technocratic elitism, and for their view of information as a commodity, it behooves librarians to come to terms with these issues.

Toward the goal of redressing this paucity of informed analysis in the library literature regarding the information society paradigm, Michael H. Harris and Stan A. Hannah have written a citation-laden survey of post-industrial theory and its implications for librarianship. Emphasizing the linkages between library issues and broader political and economic trends (an approach sorely absent from most library research), the authors argue that the increasing economic importance of information in combination with rapid developments in information technology have generated forces which challenge traditional conceptions and practices of library service. Beginning with the influential F. Wilfrid Lancaster, a growing contingent of library theorists have advocated the necessity of moving away from the historical library as a socially underwritten repository of public information and toward a more entrepreneurial, highly technologized model. In the more extreme version of this vision, the electronic "paperless society" (Lancaster's phrase) of the near future will render traditional libraries obsolete, while the emergence of a vast market of individuals and institutions willing to pay for access to computerized information sources promises unprecedented opportunities for those librarians willing to redefine themselves as private "information consultants." Against this perspective on the future of the profession are those who defend libraries as vital democratic institutions charged with providing free and equal access to information as a public good.

Harris and Hannah are clearly sympathetic with the latter view as they describe how the logic of commodification and innovations in information technology impact on government information policy, the library profession's self-image and hopes for enhanced status, and the internal organization of the library workplace. Yet in each case, the authors strive unsuccessfully to reconcile the positions of those in the field who are critical of commercialization and technological determinism with those who eagerly welcome the promise of

a privatized information environment. Because they believe that "it is no longer constructive to continue the debate in terms of 'simple acceptance or rejection' of the commodification of information," Harris and Hannah call for "a much higher degree of conscious agreement and commitment to a shared professional ethos" (p.56). However, they never adequately establish on what basis such a consensus can be forged. It may well be that a professional ethos grounded in what John Buschman has called the "values of print literacy, social memory and equal access to resources" cannot be reconciled with commodification and technical rationality.

In the book's most effective chapter, Harris and Hannah analyze federal information policy in terms of the function of the state in capitalist societies. Using a structuralist approach, they argue that capitalist states oscillate between their function to facilitate capital accumulation and the necessity of legitimizing the system by meeting enough of the basic needs of enough of the population to insure social stability. The intense commitment of the Reagan administration to the accumulation function combined with the belief that information was becoming a fundamental source of economic growth translated into policies which have facilitated the privatization of public information. The Reagan-Bush years resulted in the transfer of vast amounts of tax-funded government data to the commercial information industry. Harris and Hannah demonstrate how neatly information society rhetoric meshed with the ideological orientation of the Reagan-Bush era to convert the view of information as a commodity into national policy. They encourage librarians who oppose these developments to acquire a more sophisticated understanding of political economy and to avoid moral appeals, ritual slogans and justifications for the state's legitimation function.

I would agree, but the authors then continue with a ritualistic plea of their own that we "must somehow find a way" to overcome

divisions within the profession between the camp of librarians opposed to privatization and the growing pro-information industry element. The chapter concludes, oddly, by urging us to reflect on a passage by political scientist Adam Przeworski to the effect that there can be no certainty as to whether democratic socialism would be a more egalitarian and just system than capitalism. It is not clear what Harris and Hannah are getting at here. Should progressive librarians abandon socialist ideals in favor of a more pragmatic approach or for the sake of professional unity? One would have thought that the savvier understanding of political economy they advocate would require more of a socialist commitment, not less.

Again, it is obvious that the authors' sympathies lie with the left-liberal wing of the profession, but they try so hard to be fair and evenhanded and clutter their text with so many brief quotes and citations that it becomes difficult to ferret out their argument, other than the advocacy of some vague third way between the "idea of information as a commodity" and the "fruitless commitment to blind resistance" to commodification (p.139). One misses here the critical bite normally associated with Harris' work, especially in the sections on the impact of information technology on the organization and operation of libraries. Here the authors end up simply recommending more sophisticated and creative applications of such technology without sufficiently analyzing issues such as the increasing reliance of libraries on commercial database vendors and the imposition of user fees to cover the costs of new technologies.

Into the Future closes weakly with the advice that librarians who view information as a social good must "agree to disagree" with the information-as-a-commodity school and then attempt to "argue well" about contested concepts such as the "right-to-know." Since the authors conclude that the arguments of both camps are of "more or less equal merit," presumably they would advocate

compromise and accommodation (pp. 143, 144). However, to compromise on such fundamentals as the principle of free and equal access to information as a public right will send the profession further down the slippery slope of entrepreneurial librarianship toward the final dissolution of whatever potential the library may have had as a public sphere of democratic inquiry and social dialogue. Given the stakes, one would have hoped for more of a critical intervention from Harris and Hannah and less of a bland survey.

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