FREEDOM OR MICRO-FASCISMS:
debates in ethics & information studies

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In his book *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy*, John Buschman links librarianship to Jurgen Habermas theory of the development of the public sphere. In so doing, he argues that "all librarians are Habermasians: the mere act of organizing and purpose of informing are inherent rejections of postmodernist notions and an affirmation of the idea of making rational meaning through communication." (47) Postmodernists in Buschman's view, unintentionally collaborate with the capitalist enterprises that threaten the values in librarianship. But, as Bernd Frohmann suggests, Jürgen Habermas is not the only theorist who may instruct us on issues in library and information studies (LIS) (86). The following paper will not offer a defence of postmodernism or post-structuralism as such, these being categories that comprise a wide variety of themes, issues and strategies. Instead the paper will offer an elucidation of some of the concepts created by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, particularly their reformulation of the concepts of power and freedom. Their unique articulation of these concepts has had considerable impact upon traditional ideas of ethics and political action. Consequently their concepts will have considerable bearing on recent attempts to find foundations for values in librarianship as well as debates in information ethics.

The common mantra in LIS is: "the more information, the more power." The ultimate value ascribed to library and information services is to protect the public's interest in access to information. Access is a value that is articulated frequently in LIS literature. But a precise elucidation of the relationship between increased access and power has not been offered. Buschman argues that access to information is directly connected to democratic ideals but notes that, until now, the relation has not been defended in any intellectually

rigorous manner (46). He employs Habermas' theories of the public sphere and communicative action to establish a foundation for values in librarianship and to defend publicly funded institutions committed to ensuring access to information. Access to information will help move citizens in a democracy more toward the "ideal speech situation" where debate is not stifled by inequalities in the wealth and status of the citizenry. The Habermasian public sphere is distinct from both the state and capitalist enterprises. Within a non-governmental realm, public debate and the resulting consensus making occur in the public sphere given a reasonable degree of freedom from domination and influence. Libraries, according to Buschman, play an active role in the public sphere. They are places where we can work to create democratic institutions and processes through rationally organized discourse, as well as provide the resources to check validity claims (Buschman, 170).

A reader familiar with postmodernist writers will not be surprised then that Buschman discourages any attempts to incorporate their work into LIS debates. As critics are fond of pointing out, the postmodernist thesis about the downfall of meta-narratives poses serious problems for anyone developing an emancipatory project such as Buschman's. Postmodernist writers have been considerably skeptical of emancipatory projects founded on universal human values that are, in fact, the values of only one group or culture. Yet Buschman believes that truth claims (as Habermas formulates them) are necessary for rational discourse and to facilitate consensus building.

Buschman also sees postmodernism aligned with capitalism in so far as both celebrate fragmentation, indeterminacy and discontinuity; these being the very characteristics that have permitted capitalist expansion and the erosion of public institutions such as the library. He claims that postmodernists do not have the tools to critique capitalism because they have focused on the danger of totalizing theories without realizing that the power of capitalist mechanisms is not solely due to totalization but also to capital's flexibility. He enlists Fredric Jameson to defend his claim that postmodernism is an outright celebration of the market (46). Arguing that postmodernism is not a break from capital, but an expansion of it, Jameson had instead characterised it as stage in capitalism defined by rapid technological change, integrated world markets and increased

capital expansion into all realms of social life. Postmodernism is not something to celebrate or reproduce since it offers no "foothold for resistance" (Buschman, 45).

It would be inaccurate to suggest, as Buschman does, that postmodernists uncritically champion the adoption of information technology. It is necessary to distinguish between empirical claims about the changing structure of society in an information world and imperatives to adopt certain economy models or social practices. Jean-Francois Lyotard, a leading theorist and writer of one of the seminal texts in postmodernism, claims that the collapse of meta-narratives due to the proliferation of media images does not necessarily, but only potentially, has libratory effects (67).

Deleuze and Guattari have co-authored numerous collaborative works in philosophy, psychoanalysis, politics and culture, but their status as postmodernists is seriously debatable (De Landa 2). Regardless, their work has been challenged on the very same grounds as postmodernist work. Deleuze and Guattari's celebration of transformation, becoming and decoding has also been construed as a celebration of capital's tendencies. In the words of one critic: "There are, effectively, features, that justify calling Deleuze the ideologist of late capitalism" (Zizek 183-184). It is an oversimplification of their work to suggest, however, that celebration of becoming and decoding is a celebration of market forces. Also, the lack of universal truth will not necessarily deny us the chance of resisting the encroachment of capital. In part, due to the constant focus upon truth, we have missed some of the most intriguing aspects of writers like Deleuze and Guattari.

What Deleuze and Guattari offer goes far beyond what Buschman recognises as the possible, though small, contribution of postmodernism. He acknowledges that postmodernist writers have contributed valuable insights by emphasizing the importance of marginalized voices and multiple and contradictory forms of power (153). But Deleuze and Guattari's theory of freedom goes far beyond an empirical claim about the plurality of identities and multiple forces operating in the constitution of the individual. It is not merely a matter of questioning the notion of universal human attributes and replacing it with multiple identities or multiple truths. It is instead a matter of recognizing that in our quest to reproduce

identities and truths we enslave ourselves. Deleuze and Guattari provide us with theories of freedom and power which permit us to ask radically different questions. Their theories do not lack an ethics, although value, in their sense, is radically different than what we have encountered in the history of philosophy. The following analysis of the concepts of freedom, power and value will provide different ways of tackling problems in LIS.

Self-Determination or Critical Freedom

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that, because the customary conception of freedom is far too limited, many critical questions remain unaddressed. Traditionally, the problem of freedom is couched in terms of autonomy and determination. Freedom is defined as autonomy from external forces that prevent our self-determination. Liberal thinkers frequently remain unconcerned about external forces, believing whole-heartedly in the individual's capacity for self-determination. Marxists, on the other hand, have focused on the manner in which economics determine social relations. While challenges to the notion of the completely sovereign individual have come from many directions, the postmodern critique was primarily aimed at Marxists who emphasised economic determinism.

The response from traditional Marxists has been comprehensive and decisive: there is no need to abandon Marxism in order to acknowledge that there are many determining factors beyond the economy. David Harvey admonishes postmodernist thinkers for not understanding the intricacies of Marxism: "The [Marxist] meta-narratives that the post-modernists decry were much more open, nuanced, and sophisticated than the critics admit" (Harvey 115). Many Marxist writers understand that a model does not explain numerous social forces where the economic base determines the social superstructure. Vincent Mosco holds that society is "overdetermined or multiply determined. [D]etermination means setting limits and exerting pressures" (5). Society is, according to Mosco, a set of given circumstances or limits within which individuals make choices autonomously.

Similarly, much of the political literature in LIS also presupposes the major political problem to be one of determination by external forces, such as the market or the state, and the solution to be

autonomy. Buschman, for example, notes that library administrators have been under considerable pressure from the private sector to justify expenditures according to economic models of efficiency, to constitute library users as customers, and to adopt technology uncritically. Librarians, he argues, should battle for more autonomy so that they and library patrons determine the future of the institution.

Michael Harris expresses a similar hope for LIS. He is quite critical of librarians' "apolitical" stance because a free market ideology underpins many of the decisions made in libraries. Their attempt at neutrality masks the structural influences upon "institutions dedicated to the creation, transmission, and reproduction of hegemonic ideology" (Harris, *State* 241).   Yet Harris believes that there is empirical evidence that it is possible to escape ideology. He intimates that librarians must reject a neutral stance and must clearly articulate values in librarianship in order to promote the autonomy of the institution.

The autonomy of the institution is not the only concern if Roma Harris' analysis of librarianship is correct. She analyses the external forces that operate on the library. Her main concern is the influence of market forces and the imperative to legitimize the profession (Harris, *Librarianship* 2). The search for professional status, according to her analysis, has resulted in the erosion of librarianship's service ethic. The service ethic is essential to the values of librarianship because it requires librarians to serve needs that are determined by the library patrons themselves. The ideology of professionalism contradicts these values because it associates power, status and remuneration with autonomy and control. Harris therefore concludes that, according to this ideology, librarians are more likely to be considered professionals if they determine the needs of patrons rather than serving needs that patrons determine for themselves.

Given these conceptions of libraries and librarianship, the success of the profession can be measured in part by librarians' ability to determine the direction of their institution in the service of their patrons whose research is also self-determined. Yet, the reliance upon a conception of freedom defined as self-determination leaves many questions unanswered.

Deleuze and Guattari note that the problem of freedom has always been discussed as a matter of determination versus autonomy. They turn the concept of determination on its head. Self-determination, generally regarded as a form of freedom, is in fact a form of determination since an individual is limited to realizing only that which she or he already is (Evens 273). The true terror of freedom is due to its indeterminacy. If truly free, we do not know what we will become; we must affirm chance (Deleuze 44). Deleuze and Guattari's concept of freedom, in the words of Paul Patton, is "critical": "critical freedom thus concerns those moments in a life after which one is no longer the same person. It is the freedom to transgress the limits of what one is presently capable of being or doing, rather than just the freedom to be or do those things" (85). In the words of Deleuze and Guattari:

> Why do people fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation? How can people possibly reach the point of shouting: "More taxes! Less Bread!"? As Reich remarks, the astonishing thing is not that some people steal or that others occasionally go out on strike, but rather that all those who are starving do not steal as a regular practice, and all those who are exploited are not continually out on strike. (29)

Deleuze and Guattari sum up the problem with one simple question: "Why is it so difficult not only to win but to bear freedom?"

Ethics: Emancipation or Micro-fascisms

Deleuze and Guattari want to avoid theories of false consciousness or mass hysteria when explaining why people fight for servitude. Yet their theory of freedom threatens traditional agendas for human emancipation. If the end of the emancipatory project is spelled out in advance, then the freedom of those one intends to liberate is already curtailed. The political projects of librarians which involve championing the self-determination of patrons, or the democratic ideal through access to information, already determine the people those policies are meant to liberate. Yet it is often assumed that freedom is impossible without a specific set of values, goals, or an agenda, and that the purpose of critique and the search for truth is to understand who we are, what human potential has not been fully realized and how to progress toward good and overcome evil. Liberation then consists in removing false premises and realising ourselves. Yet in Deleuze and Guattari's conception of freedom, the

elusive search for truth and essential human characteristics is not a form of liberation. But they do not leave us without an ethics. They make an ethical claim: things of value are those that leave open possibilities for alternative ways of organizing rather than limit us to what we already are.

The traditional definition of emancipation is freedom from the forces that bind, affect or determine us. We judge a political system, for example, according to the manner in which it exerts its power and the manner in which it dominates us. According to Deleuze and Guattari, power is not about domination. It is defined as both the capacity to affect and to be affected (Patton 50). From their definition of power alone, therefore, we cannot derive an ethics. Freedom is not freedom from forces that affect us. To be able to be affected is also a form of power. Deleuze and Guattari, therefore, make no ethical judgment on the basis of the mechanisms that limit human capacity for self-determination. Instead Deleuze distinguishes between active creative forces which can act of their own accord and the reactive forces which operate only by limiting and resisting the creative potential of other forces (Nietzsche 39-71). Deleuze attributes value to the active forces which can permit transformations and creativity and thereby the development of new values.

In his reading of Nietzsche's controversial notion of "will to power, for example, Deleuze claims: "Against the image of a will which dreams of having established values attributed to it Nietzsche announces that to will is to create new values" (Nietzsche 85). Nietzsche's misunderstood idea of "will to power" is not a will to dominate others, as it has so frequently been interpreted to mean. It is a will to produce something new. "Will to power does not mean that the will wants power… [T]he will to power is essentially creative and giving: it does not aspire, it does not seek, it does not desire, above all it does not desire power" (Deleuze, Nietzsche 85). That which is of value is that which produces something new and it is directly tied to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of power. In this way, Deleuze and Guattari are said to have abandoned a representational notion of power (Evens 50), meaning that power is not a matter of showing that one has a superior capacity. If power is representational then we have to work with a set of static ideals that define superiority. There is then an imperative to represent oneself

as powerful by appealing to an already established set of values, leaving little room for creativity and critique.

Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of power can help to shed some light on the relationship between access to information and power. The battle for open access to information is, as noted above, frequently deemed to be the duty of librarians. Yet the power of texts continues to be debatable. In *Fear of Words*, Alvin Schrader analyses attempts to censor texts in Canadian libraries. He argues for complete, open access. To placate those parents who fear, for example, that children will become homosexual or violent from reading "inappropriate" material, Schrader argues that we should not be afraid of (mere?) words. Yet all texts must have the potential to be powerful if there is any rationale for open access. The tension in his work is very well illustrated by Susan Madden who is quoted by Schrader as saying:

> I was a juvenile court librarian for 7 years. During that time I saw literally thousands of kids, but I never saw one who was in lock-up because of something they had viewed or read. In fact, I would say that over 80% of them were there because they could not read. (119)

Her argument implies that literate children have more opportunities and therefore need not resort to a life of crime. It is not the literature they read but lack of opportunities that leads them to crime. Yet might we not want to ask why reading does not lead to more delinquency? What is it that books do to us that we readily adhere to social norms, capitalist modes of production or the disciplining mechanism of institutions? Madden would like books to give children the power to act and a larger set of choices in life. The question remains: do books give children the ability to once again express their power or superiority according to a pre-existing set of norms, or challenge those norms?

In the case of censorship, we may wish to heed Deleuze and Guattari's warning against micro-fascist agendas. It is very easy, they argue, to resist totalitarianism (state sanctioned burning of books, for example) because the control mechanisms of this form of organization are transparent, unified and centrally organised. But fascist organizations operate when individuals or groups themselves demand the continuous reproduction of traditional values. According to Deleuze and Guattari, it is easy to oppose totalitarian agendas

and "not even see the fascist inside you" (215). A new research agenda may therefore be called for which could break away from the traditional assumption in librarianship that more information will provide power to individuals and groups. We instead could ask how texts give us power to affect and be affected. When do texts aid us to reproduce norms, when do they discipline us and when do they move us to create new values?

Conclusion

Buschman's analysis of the library's role in the public sphere makes an exceptional contribution to discussions in LIS. His suspicions about postmodernism reflect serious concerns about the uncritical adoption of a capitalist mandate. A closer look at specific concepts and specific writers has demonstrated that Deleuze and Guattari can provide us with an ethics and insights into questions that have, as of yet, not been asked in LIS.

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