

BOOK REVIEWS

Building a Case Against Neoliberalism in LIS from the Ground Up: An Essay Review of John Budd's *Self Examination: The Present and Future of Librarianship*¹ and *Knowledge and Knowing in Library and Information Science: A Philosophical Framework*²

review by John Buschman

After reading the two works by John Budd in the title of this essay review, and after thinking it through, I was going to proceed on the considered opinion that John Budd's recent *Self Examination* is a very useful book (a highly complimentary description in my vocabulary). Further, *Self Examination* provides an extended excursus from the point at which he ended his earlier (and also highly useful) book, *Knowledge and Knowing in Library and Information Science*. I'm still going to proceed this way, but recent publications in *Library Quarterly* – Michael Buckland's review of *Self Examination* and Paul Jaeger's two (I argue, linked) articles on developments in LIS theory – have made the job more interesting.

Knowledge and Knowing

First, the basics: *Knowledge and Knowing*, written in 2001 and winner of the Highsmith Library Literature Award, is a very sound intellectual guide through the philosophical bases upon which library and information science (LIS) is (often unwittingly) grounded – and the philosophical issues with which (again, often unwittingly) it is permeated. It is also an excellent guide to subtopics such as the portions relevant to LIS of the history of scientific thinking and positivism, the relevance of epistemology, an overview intellectual history of LIS thought and theory, and an argument for a blending of approaches to achieve a form of *praxis* through a variety of philosophical hermeneutics. Budd's approach to thinking these through is not *the* one we must take (and he does not make that argument), but it is a thorough and well-grounded review of a large and sophisticated literature characterized very well and brought legitimately to bear on the issues of theory and practice in LIS. One could quibble here and there, but Budd is engaging in the very current and difficult task of putting intellectual traditions, schools, and discourses in dialogue with one another – and he did this very successfully in *Knowledge and Knowing*. This is very much in tune with the broader trends of current intellectual and philosophical work: we have many theoretical insights – and they seem to contradict and cancel out one another at base. To be productive, these insights and lines of thought need to “talk” to one another. Thinkers like Seyla Benhabib and Richard Bernstein have been at this for a while, and Budd's work brings LIS into this fold. In all, *Knowledge and Knowing* is more than worth the intellectual work to read and think along with Budd.

Why, you ask, do I begin with a nine year old book? First, because after around 300 pages, Budd comes to some uncomfortable (and relevant) conclusions and questions for the field:

What is needed in LIS is...attention given over to the meanings that...inhere in the things we do and the things we say...(in other words, what do we *really* mean)...[Our practices do] “not have as its meaning or ultimate purpose conformity to some set of rules... rather observing those rules give effect to some other objective....” Reflection...means that theorizing is a part of life for serious practitioners. The professional, in constantly reflecting on action, is constantly theorizing... (p. 287).

There may have been...a shift in the symbolic capital of the library from an accepted recognition of selectivity of contents... and purpose based on edification of the reader to a received symbol of public institution.... Once objectified, the definition of the symbolic capital is removed from its previous holder.... As a cultural good, the library has in many ways drifted from the realm of the pure to that of the commercial. The current symbolic capital of the library allows it to transform itself from an agency in denial of the economy to one embracing it (p. 325).

Effective *praxis* means a sound form of reflection, and his *tour de force* in *Knowledge and Knowing* brings us to this point – and a questioning of the relationship of the library to the functioning of the market and the economy as institutional models. Second, in his recent *Self Examination* Budd picks up and carries on from this point. To understand Budd’s recent book, I argue, it is very helpful to know where his project left off in *Knowledge and Knowing*.

Self Examination

Self Examination, in many ways, simply reviews, evaluates, and situates the contemporary manifestations of the same issues and problems Budd confronts at the end of the earlier work. The work is, again, highly useful as a broad overview of the history of libraries, parsing the philosophical meanings of core ALA value statements, the relationship of LIS and libraries to education, and so on. The chapters and sections of chapters on information and informing, ethics, democracy and technology are excellent. Upon reading *Self Examination*, one will come away with a clear idea of the thrust, importance, and relevance of many recent theories within LIS – and how they relate to one another and to key intellectual issues. The literature review is again broad and deep – this time much less overtly philosophical, but one can see clearly the concerns expressed in the earlier volume brought up to date:

The library exists to assist people on their paths to understanding, not merely to help people navigate through a building, a catalog,

or a database as an end in itself.... In other words, the action is intended to lead to learning.... Christine Pawley expresses [it] well: “we need to recognize that information ‘access’ is not just about information consumerism but also about individuals and groups of people actively shaping their world...in a way that renders the consumer-producer dichotomy irrelevant” (pp. 232-233)

Budd is explicitly making an argument for what he calls the “moral information society” in a series of contrasts arranged as a taxonomy: information as something “to be transmitted, used, bought, sold, given, or hoarded” versus “exchanged through discourse”; democracy as an “aggregation of preferences according to which officials legislate and adjudicate” versus a “deliberative engagement through which majority and minority voices are heard”; and a library as an “archaic and obsolete warehouse” versus a “place and space where people engage with information and with one another to learn, read, and grow” (pp. 219-221). Budd is particularly specific on the destructive connections between neoliberal ideas about information, technology, markets, democracy, and libraries. In other words, he has built a critique of the public consequences (for libraries and beyond) of the ethos and domination of possessive individualism and neoliberalism from the ground up through these two books. *Self Examination* is not a jeremiad, but Budd’s thinking through and linking of ideas is very clear – and you *do* end up at solidly-grounded basis of critique. The book is very well done, and the project is successfully carried through both books.

Challenges

So far, so good. However, Michael Buckland, an august emeritus LIS professor and author, trashed Budd’s recent book in a *Library Quarterly* review: The book is “a tract from a socialist democratic perspective... suitable for...readers with an appetite for reading about ethical issues in U.S. librarianship and who do not mind a narrow focus, a parochial view, and a dogmatic tone.” Buckland is explicitly challenging an examination of “civic and political aspects” of librarianship: “It is widely accepted that libraries are important for sustaining Western liberal democracy. But so is oil, and, more to the point, libraries can also be important assets in nondemocratic regimes.”³ He has made this same point many times in, for instance a letter to the editor of *JASIST*.⁴ In it he asserts that advocates for the links between libraries and democracy seem to inherently posit an “essential” relationship (meaning libraries = democracy and/or democracy = libraries by definition). In contrast, he argues that libraries are shaped by their context. Therefore, libraries are neutral tools, to be used by the regime or institution that sponsors them. So, while libraries are important to democracy, “so is oil” (he uses this phrase often). Buckland goes on to cite Lenin’s librarian wife, the library-centric actions of Mussolini’s minister of education, and the Nazi’s use of/interest in libraries for their purposes. He cites his own textbook as already authoritatively refuting

the relationship of LIS to democracy⁵, concluding that, LIS thinkers don't engage democratic theories of LIS because they "have found it to be an unproductive line of inquiry."

On another – more thoughtful – front, Paul Jaeger, an editor of *Library Quarterly*, advances a thesis in two articles published in the same issue.⁶ In the first, an editorial essay, he deals with the longstanding struggle in LIS with/for theory. In so doing, he cites Budd, Wayne Wiegand, Michael Harris (and me) among others describing the problem. The common denominator is that, in each case, the cited author is suggesting a rich source of theoretical insights from critical theorists outside LIS. Jaeger is making an argument for home-grown or "native" LIS theory. To be sure, he wants to see theory grow in importance in LIS graduate education, but "not even" the vaunted "iSchool movement has brought greater emphasis to theory" (p. 204). Jaeger argues against "borrowed theory" that is, in the cases he cites, of a critical-theoretical type. Why? Because it is "an intellectual dead-end that bodes rather poorly for the long-term viability of an academic discipline" (p. 206). Habermas or Gramsci or Mouffe apparently are what is holding us back. In the review article he fleshes out (as I am arguing) at least part of the crux of the matter: "the hand-wringing opposition to computers and the Internet" (p. 290) and that "technology is a necessary part [of libraries] that must be better understood" (pp. 297-298). Negative analytical treatments of technology are less than helpful. Jaeger takes to task an author that, he argues, "is pining for a past that never was and is angry at the present, yelling at information scientists to get off the lawn" (p. 296). Change – especially technological change – must be accepted, whether for good or ill. In the end, it seems that Jaeger wants theory to ascend in LIS education, but through the course of these two pieces, he wants to warn us off being *too* critical and questioning in our theory. Native theory good, imported critical theory bad.

Conclusion: Back to Budd

Budd's work, as I noted, is engaging LIS in a very current, very sophisticated, and very difficult intellectual practice of putting intellectual positions and discourses in productive dialogue with one another. To do so is difficult enough; to do so to end up informing the practical and pragmatic tasks of libraries is more so. To be fair, Jaeger's points are not the mean-spirited jabs of Buckland; he is genuine about the task of producing valid theoretical insights from within LIS. But both of these authors seem to want theory that doesn't question too much – especially technology and its overarching social-economic context. Buckland is the most obvious in this. Addressing the "Five Grand Challenges for Library Research"⁷ (oh my...), Buckland says that a "major research front...[is] the central question... 'What has been the influence of technological modernism?' By technological modernism we mean the impact of positivism, scientific management, efficiency, and algorithms" (p. 679). This is exactly, precisely, right-on-target what Budd's project deals with. Ah, but Buckland wants it both ways. In the next sentence he limits the inquiry to "technology, standards,

systems, and efficiency [which] lead to engines for social progress.” Budd has clearly gone off the rails by not limiting his inquiry in such a way that he’s already defined the answer (capitalism driving technological “progress”). No wonder Buckland was so cranky with him in the *LQ* review: he was coloring outside the lines! Elsewhere in his self-cited authoritative textbook, Buckland helpfully defines (and similarly limits) theory for us: “The body of generalizations and principles developed in association with practice in a field of activity (as medicine, music) and forming its content as an intellectual discipline” (p. 33). Nope, can’t get to critique of the market or concerns for democracy there either. Readers of this journal should be steeped in the critique of Buckland-style false neutrality – and it is what Budd parses carefully throughout both books. Ditto democracy and libraries. It is the complex interaction between the institution and its political context that should be the object of becoming more informed about in LIS – that is Budd’s point about neoliberalism and democracy in *Self Examination*. You can’t be neutral on a moving train, Howard Zinn said. Jaeger is concerned about democracy and libraries broadly – but he seemingly does not want to push too hard on the social and political ripples that technologies produce in libraries and democracy – nor the system that finances and produces technologies.

Buckland in this instance is playing the technocrat who simply rules out of order thinking that crosses his boundaries – much like the definitions of rational action in economic theory. Jaeger is, I believe, pulling oars in the generally the same direction as Budd and others he cites who want to increase the profile of theory within LIS and LIS education. He simply prefers theory developed within LIS – and sees it as core intellectual challenge to the field. In addition to the limiting effects of how Jaeger frames the matter, I would argue that LIS need not produce a Pierre Bourdieu or even a “lite” version of him. LIS should, however, *grapple with* the insights of a Bourdieu: neoliberalism is a “programme of the methodical destruction of collectives. The movement toward the neoliberal utopia of a pure and perfect market is made possible by the politics of financial deregulation.... [Neoliberalism] is a logical machine that presents itself as a chain of constraints regulating economic agents” and in the process obviating politics and the legitimacy of public or common concerns.⁸ That was written twelve years ago. A library is nothing but a collective, brought together by and for another collective: a community, a school, a university. How is this *not* core and key concern for us? However much the “iSchools” run away from them, the collective of libraries is still the engine of LIS. Roma Harris’s recent essay makes that abundantly clear.⁹ So, like the field of education, LIS has an enormous body of institutions and institutional practice to deal with. And like education, much of LIS training is – and will be – pragmatic. There simply is no reason *not* to utilize, adapt, and respond to the body of theoretical insights in other fields. Why not stand on those shoulders? To avoid doing so is to circle the wagons in precisely the same breathe-our-own-air way that led to lacerating critiques of LIS (and educational) scholarship. LIS tended to devolve into cookbook, rule-following discourses with that mindset. Knowing something well about

the bigger theoretical world out there is healthy for LIS, and Budd's work is a key effort in connecting the two.

End Notes

1. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2008.
2. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2001.
3. Michael Buckland, "Review of *Self Examination* by John M. Budd," *Library Quarterly* 2009 79 (2): 272.
4. Michael Buckland, "Letter to the Editor," *JASIST* 59 (9): 1534.
5. Michael Buckland, *Library Services in Theory and Context*, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press, 1988.
6. Paul T. Jaeger, "Review Article: Looking at Newness and Seeing Crisis? Library Discourse and Reactions to Change," *Library Quarterly* 2010 80 (3): 289-300; "From the Editor: Education, Adoption, and Development: Building a Culture of Social Theory in LIS," *Library Quarterly* 2010 80 (3): 203-209.
7. *Library Trends*, 51 (4): 675-685.
8. "The Essence of Neoliberalism: Utopia of Endless Exploitation," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 1998. Available at: www.homme-moderne.org/societe/socio/bourdieu/varia/essneoUK.html
9. "'Their Little Bit of Ground Slowly Squashed into Nothing': Technology, Gender, and the Vanishing Librarian," in *Information Technology in Librarianship: New Critical Approaches*, eds. Gloria J. Leckie and John Buschman, 165-180. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2009.