Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines, edited by Gloria J. Leckie, Lisa M. Given, and John E. Buschman. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2010.

reviewed by Kevin Rioux

Regular readers of *Progressive Librarian* are likely to be aware that critical theoretical tools have long been mainstays of research in the humanities and social sciences, but that library and information science, heavily influenced by positivistic traditions, has been slow to adopt critical methods. Squarely addressing this lack of engagement, Gloria Leckie, Lisa Given, and John Buschman, editors of *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines*, present a substantive collection of essays on critical theories positioned especially for LIS researchers.

Leckie and Buschman introduce critical theory by tracing its source to the Frankfurt School of social thought and critique that emerged in Germany in the 1930s, along with a concurrent critical theory movement in France. Initially, critical theory was primary concerned with social aspects of economic issues. Readers new to critical methods will notice that the approach leans heavily on neo-Marxist vocabularies, which is attributable to its early-to-mid 20th Century European origins. Leckie and Buschman show us that some critical theorists eventually rejected Marxian language and/or de-emphasized economics. The goal of these later theorists was to encourage societal pluralism, democratic justice for minorities, and the recognition of a complex, diverse humanity that scientific definitions of reality, often perceived as being privileged, could not fully articulate.

It quickly becomes clear to the reader of Leckie and Bushman's introduction that the concept of critical theory can be somewhat amorphous. But one can readily conclude that critical theory works simultaneously as both a tool of social critique and as a metatheorical approach that urges the active and continuous examination of the foundations of any given theory. In contrast to some positivistic methods, critical theory encourages researchers to uncover and make explicit all underlying assumptions and goals of their research methods and agendas, and to acknowledge that they themselves, as integrated members of society, cannot be entirely neutral observers.

The editors suggest that because it is widely considered to be under-theorized, library and information science can benefit from the rigor of critical methods in a number of ways. Among them: 1) critical theory can guide researchers to read LIS scholarship "against the grain", providing richer conclusions and better guidance for practice; 2) LIS is often enhanced by adopting theoretical perspectives from other fields. Critical approaches can assist researchers to become more aware of the underpinnings of borrowed theory and theoretical developments, providing additional

integration of LIS and its research into the larger academic community; 3) critical theories give LIS researchers new perspectives and tools to examine issues that concern the field, including information technologies, equitable access to information, cultural diversity, lifelong learning, and overall societal improvement.

Following up on their introductory points, the editors present twenty-three chapters on a wide variety of critical theorists and theories written by LIS scholars from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States. Among this group are authors well known for their critical-theoretical work (e.g., John Budd, John Buschman, Ronald Day, Bernd Frohmann, Hope Olson, Sanna Talja).

Each chapter is unique, as each author is unique. But it is clear that the intention of all the contributors is to welcome the reader, even if the theoretical topic being discussed is admittedly complex. Chapters start with a biography of a featured critical theorist that includes philosophical influences and/or the social or historic contexts in which he or she worked. Then the authors provide a thorough commentary and explication of the critical theory, and relate it to possible applications in library and information science. Each chapter concludes with a full set of references for further reading.

Working with theory is always a tough business, but these writers neither obfuscate nor over-simplify. Chapters are engagingly written, accessible to motivated readers of every level of experience. Throughout the text, the reader is encouraged to actively engage with intellectually "chewy" material, and rewarding edification is the result. With a little effort, readers come away with an increased appreciation of critical methods, and an expanded view of how to consider LIS phenomena.

The editors indicate that they do not cluster chapters in any particular order because of inherent conceptual reasons. Instead, critical theorists are presented in alphabetical order. This reviewer took liberties and did some grouping to illustrate the breadth of potential audiences of this book. Thus, readers interested in pragmatic applications and the service ethos of librarianship will especially appreciate the critical theories of Michel Aglietta, Antonio Gramsci, and Dorothy Smith. Readers involved in classification, taxonomy, indexing, social media, and knowledge representation will be interested in the chapters featuring the work of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, the Psychoanalysts, and Martin Heidegger. Readers interested in information behavior will find the chapters on Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Jean Lave, Anthony Giddens, and Ferdinand de Saussure particularly useful. Researchers interested in the cultural aspects of the information sphere, including notions of power, capital, positive social transformation and democratization will appreciate the chapters on Pierre Bordieu, Paolo Friere, Henry Giroux, Jürgen Habermas, Bruno Latour, Henri Lefebvre, Herbert Mancuse, Chantal Mouffe, Antonio Negri, and Gayatri Spivak. Readers with general interests would do well to simply

start at the Introduction and read the entire book, either skipping around or in chapter sequence.

Indeed, *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science* is a fine contribution to LIS literature, and is highly recommended for experienced researchers and graduate students. The editors and contributors position critical theory well in this volume, but do not set up critical theory as a panacea to all theory building challenges in LIS. Rather, critical theory is put forth as a way to expand our horizons and keep LIS intellectually strong and honest.

But placing the book in a wider context reveals a shortcoming. Whenever scholars urge change (in this case, urging full consideration of critical theory in LIS contexts), there is always the danger of "preaching to the choir". As good as this book is, it does not entirely escape from this danger. LIS scholars already familiar with the efficacy of critical theory (the "choir") will be very pleased with this book. However, some of the characteristic vocabulary of critical theory may be bewildering to younger scholars and readers who are well-read but new to critical theory. In light of a decades-long era of capitalist triumphalism, neo-liberalism, and recent public union-busting and austerity, critical theory terms long associated with social struggles such as "emancipation", "resistance", and "progressive" may be perceived as defeated or weak or irrelevant. Critical theory is often identified with the political left and the intelligentsia, two groups that have long been on the defensive in North America, northern Europe, and Australia, the home of much LIS research. What's more, the post World War II era and the social upheavals of the late 1960s, influential for many of the theorists profiled in this book, are long-ago history for many readers. This prompts the question: Is critical theory underutilized in LIS because of perceptions of its relevance to the contemporary information scene? Is it seen as being archaic?

Neither the editors nor the contributors of this book directly address these questions, nor do they offer an explicit "tool kit" that could help researchers show that critical theory and its accompanying discourse remains more relevant than ever in this time of information commoditization. The writers and editors of this volume, clearly passionate about critical studies, are no doubt aware of this intellectual problem, but probably decided these issues could be addressed elsewhere.

This should be seen as a challenge for all of us interested in critical studies and progressive politics in librarianship. We need an ongoing effort to show that critical theoretical tools have been and continue to be relevant for LIS. *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines* serves as an excellent foundation for this effort.