

## Progressive Librarianship: Perspectives from Kenya and Britain, 1979-2010

By Shiraz Durrani. (London: Vita Books,  
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Reviewed by Al Kagan

According to the author, this book is about whether, and to what extent, any library institution can free itself from capitalist power relations, values, and outlook to provide alternative services in the context of the larger capitalist society (p. 17). Shiraz Durrani has been struggling to provide such an alternative for all his adult life in Kenya where he was born, and in London where he was forced into exile because of his political work in 1984. The author must have met or possibly worked with Kenya's most well-known author, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, because Ngugi wrote one of the three very short forewords for the book. Durrani begins with a long theoretical introduction, continues with an analysis of his work in Kenya and continues with his experiences in London. The last substantive chapter is on national British progressive efforts, and one Pan-African library initiative. The two short afterword essays by other authors are not overly important. Interesting graphics are included throughout the text.

Some historical context is needed for many readers of this journal in order to further discuss the author's project. Shiraz Durrani grew up in the decolonization period for most African countries, in the late 1950s and 1960s. And of course, that was also during the Cold War. It was a period when the West competed with the Soviet Union and China for influence throughout the Global South, or what used to be called the Third World. But the great powers were after more than resources and influence; they wanted to dominate those

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societies by becoming models for social and economic development, that is capitalist vs. so-called communist states.

Decolonization was difficult, and it took armed rebellion and revolution against the colonial powers in several countries to make a more peaceful transition possible in most of the rest of the continent. The colonial powers finally granted formal independence to most of the African countries by the mid-1960s, but their strategy was to remain in de facto control by maintaining economic dependence. Although using different strategies, Great Britain, France, and Belgium implemented what came to be called neo-colonialism in as many of their former colonies as possible. (Portugal maintained control of its African colonies until the mid-1970s.)

Most African liberation movements became radicalized because they had to fight for independence against the capitalist Western colonial powers, and looked not only for funding and arms from the U.S.S.R. and China, but also looked to them for alternative models to organize their societies. So when the people of Kenya started the Mau Mau Rebellion to win independence from Great Britain, they naturally adopted an ill-defined alternative ideology, which eventually became known as “African Socialism” under the first independent government. Although the Mau Mau Rebellion succeeded in gaining independence from Great Britain, the former rulers found a willing accomplice in Kenya’s first elected President, Jomo Kenyatta. The Western countries did not mind that Kenyatta became an authoritarian ruler, and that he soon presided over a one-party state. Kenya was seen as a model of stability and a counter to radical states in the region. Kenya became a classic neo-colonial country.

But many of the former Mau Mau fighters and some from newer generations could not accept Kenya’s status as a neo-colony, and political protest with an underground movement continued through at least the mid-1980s. As a librarian, Durrani participated in the Library Cell of this December 12th Movement, which became known as Mwakenya. In opposing the neo-colonial Kenyatta government, it is not surprising that the Movement developed a Marxist-Leninist ideology, and saw Mwakenya as a vanguard party.

Rather than focusing solely on librarianship, Durrani’s introduction is a theoretical and ideological explanation of the current global context for the information society, as defined by the crisis of capitalism and the marketization of societies. He juxtaposes progressive versus the pervasive conservative librarianship, and laments that almost all mainstream library literature omits any discussion of social or economic class. He describes how information, disinformation, and the spinning of information are political tools. Mainstream writers and practitioners accept inequality and the suffering of millions of people as inevitable, just as they accept the capitalist system as the normal mode of life. This problem is “fundamental” and “institutional.” Finance capital promotes “private good/public bad ideologies.” This system is responsible for

the massive decline of the British economy, and similarly effects public libraries. The introduction ends with very short discussions of progressive library organizations in the US, Germany, and Sweden, and a reproduction of Mark Rosenzweig's ten-point Program for International Progressive Librarianship, as presented at the 2000 Vienna meeting that brought together progressive librarians from the U.S., Western Europe, and South Africa. (Rosenzweig represented PLG at the meeting.) Readers can also find this document in *Progressive Librarian*, no. 18 (Summer 2001): 71.

The author's chapter on his Kenya experience in the Library Cell of the December 12th Movement is especially interesting because we rarely find information about progressive library struggles in the Global South. It is also interesting because it contrasts with the kind of struggle he was engaged with in a rich country, the United Kingdom. He describes the Library Cell's overground and underground activities, including publishing, poetry, and theatre events, and especially collecting and disseminating struggle information. He presents two liberation poems and many interesting graphics. Durrani's chapter on the British experience is mostly an explanation of his struggles and campaigns at two London borough institutions, the public library in the Hackney neighborhood and the Merton Library and Heritage Service. These were mainly oriented to addressing social exclusion and promoting community involvement. He opens by setting the context: economic decline, diminishment of democratic rights, large numbers of public library closings, big declines in library staffing, and more dependence on library volunteers. He states that those in power use racism to divide and rule, and argues that equality is perhaps the central issue. He informs us that according to the OECD, the United Kingdom is one of the most unequal and neoliberal societies in that group of rich countries.

The public library in Hackney serves an immigrant community where more than 100 languages are spoken. Durrani was able to organize community support to set up the C.R.L. James Library there which included the Three Continents Liberation Collection. He with the help of many community organizations made the library into a lively cultural center, which sponsored poetry, music, political speakers, and other community events. Of particular note is his work with the Black Workers Group. However, this vibrant endeavor only lasted from 1989 to 1995, when the London administration restructured the library system.

Durrani's experience at the Merton Library and Heritage Service was characterized by "needs based service." As opposed to in Hackney, they had senior progressive library leaders who valued community outreach. They mostly used a gradual approach to change, except with one experiment at the Pollards Hill Library where they went for the "whole service approach." Unfortunately, these efforts only lasted from 1998 to 2004 when new senior managers were put in place. Durrani sees the killing of the Hackney and Merton projects as the result of institutional racism.

The author's chapter on national and international initiatives gives brief treatment to a number of projects and organizations in the UK, including several under the auspices of the national library association, now called CILIP, Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals. Durrani notes CILIP's profoundly conservative nature early on in the book, and so these struggles were difficult. He highlights the progressive library education curriculum at London Metropolitan University. Durrani also describes his 2002 initiative to try to create a Pan-African association, PALIAct, the Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group. He notes some success in Kenya.

This book is mostly an examination of the author's personal experience in various struggles. As such it can be seen as a work of case studies that may be useful to progressive librarians in various contexts. The author's long introduction makes a viable case for the need for progressive librarianship. However, his ideological perspective can sometimes get in the way, or even be off-putting. I imagine that most readers of this journal will find no problem with his emphasis on class analysis, but this reviewer has a hard time with his few quotes from Mao and Stalin. For example, Mao's admonishment that comrades who don't know enough about a problem have no right to speak to it (p.73). Let me also quibble that one or two acronyms should have been spelled out and explained for international readers, and that the editing is not perfect. There are one or two graphics where the print is too small to decipher.

Shiraz Durrani has provided a theoretical point-of-departure for debates around the nature of progressive librarianship in the current global context. He has uniquely juxtaposed case studies from poor and rich countries, based on his own experiences. Perhaps current and future progressive librarians will be able to gain some insight from this work.