

Response to Dr. Samuel E. Trosow's Keynote Address

I want to begin by noting that it is an honour and privilege to respond to Dr. Trosow's keynote, as he has served as my long time mentor. From teaching me in my first MLIS class to co-supervising my doctoral dissertation and now working as research collaborators, it has been a very fortunate set of opportunities.

Dr. Trosow's keynote should be commended for several reasons. His call for a holistic and critical approach is key as information issues, particularly policy issues, become increasingly entangled. Concerns regarding access to information often bring up conflicting issues related to privacy, rights to information and copyright. Approaching these as separate and distinct policy spheres misses the important interaction between these policies. Secondly, he has raised the crucial point of examining power relations that shape information practices and policies. Finally, his call for a critical approach to technology is particularly welcomed in a field that often suffers from technophilia but at the same time cannot afford to be technophobic.

In regard to building a critical political economy of librarianship, Dr. Trosow has identified several important works within the field of library and information studies (LIS), and I want to expand the discussion by suggesting some other bodies of literature that are important for scholars and practitioners.

A critical political economy of librarianship must engage with not only more recent works on political economy, but also the foundational works in this area. The logical starting point in such a discussion is Adam Smith. While Smith crudely highlights the importance of self-interest ("It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner,

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but from their regard to their own interest²¹) and the invisible hand (“led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention... pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it²²) in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith is much more careful to underscore the limits on self-interest in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.³ The first chapter of Marx’s *Capital*, with its thorough discussion and delineation between labour value, use value and exchange value, remains important for anyone interested in the concept of commodification;⁴ however, it is also important to consider Bastiat’s alternative conception of value which emphasizes labour time saved and satisfaction produced rather than the labour put into a good,⁵ which Marx criticized fiercely.⁶

Two works of classical political economy remain eminently useful – Marx’s *Grundrisse* and Mills’ *A System of Logic*. The passages on the fragmentation of machinery and the general intellect⁷ have been fruitfully explored by several modern scholars on the information age including Dyer-Witherford⁸ and Terranova,⁹ among others.¹⁰ Underappreciated, though, are the insights from Mill with regard to motives in economic analyses, despite his being the bastard father of *homo economicus*.¹¹ In the fifth essay in *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions in Political Economy*, Mill defines political economy as, “the science which traces the laws of such phenomena of society as arise from the combined operations of mankind for the production of wealth, in so far as those phenomena are not modified by the pursuit of any other object.”¹² However, Mill is aware of the weakness of relying solely on self-interest as the only human motive, stating,

So far as it is known, or may be presumed, that the conduct of mankind in the pursuit of wealth is under the collateral influence of any other of the properties of our nature than the desire of obtaining the greatest quantity of wealth with the least labor and self-denial, the conclusions of Political Economy will so far fail of being applicable to the explanation or prediction of real events, until they are modified by a correct allowance for the degree of influence exercised by other cause.¹³

More importantly, Mill’s call for a science of political ethology, which would study the diversity of human motives and aim to understand relations between the individual, state and society, has been largely ignored.¹⁴ Indeed, perhaps rather than a critical political economy of librarianship, we should strive for a critical political ethology.

A critical political economy (or ethology) of LIS also requires examining the field to engage with works that have been particularly influential in theoretically informing neoliberal economic theory. Jonathan Cope’s article in this special issue (page 67) is an important contribution in this regard.¹⁵ In addition to

Hayek and others mentioned by Cope, I would suggest that scholarship within the field of law and economics, also known as the economic analysis of law, be critically studied as this scholarship has been particularly influential in the area of intellectual property rights. Specifically, LIS practitioners and scholars should read Coase's articles, "The Federal Communications Commission"¹⁶ and "The Problem of Social Cost,"¹⁷ both of which are critical of the role of government regulation in the economy. Further, Coase's essay, "The Lighthouse in Economics," is an important contribution as he highlights the weakness of the lighthouse as an example of a public good.¹⁸ In reference to Dr. Trosow's keynote, this essay provides a critical counterpoint on the nature of public goods. While Richard Posner has written extensively on patents and copyrights as both a scholar and judge, his paper "Utilitarianism, Economics, and Legal Theory," is particularly interesting.¹⁹ His suggestion that wealth maximization is an ethical framework, and one that is superior to utilitarianism,²⁰ highlights the perverse normative assumptions that underpin law and economic scholarship (and jurisprudence).

Finally, if we want to consider the library's role as a place for critical and rational debate in the public sphere, I suggest it is also necessary to consider the antithetical view that the library is a hegemonic apparatus. This claim is not new, but has received little attention within LIS. Specifically the work of Harris²¹ and Pawley²² must be considered when we discuss the library's contribution to the public sphere. For example, to what degree do traditional conceptions about the importance of authoritative sources, which serve as a basic element in most information literacy instruction, serve to entrench dominant power relations?

Finally, need to stop thinking of librarianship as being about a place – the library – and instead view it is a mental tool kit for dealing with issues of info access, innovation and technology and of property, commodification and ownership. Dr. Trosow's keynote has raised numerous important issues for the field and I want to echo his sentiment that as a profession and discipline we must continue to strive for a progressive librarianship.

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NOTES

- 1 Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, (New York: Bantam Classic, 2003), p. 23-24.
- 2 Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, p. 572.
- 3 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 50-54, 199-200, 317-318, and 363-363.
- 4 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Ben Fowkes (trans.) (London, Penguin, 1990), p.125-177.
- 5 Frédéric Bastiat, *Economic Harmonies*, W. Hayden Boyers (trans.), George B. de Huszar (ed.), (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1964), p. 58, 97, and 111.
- 6 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, Martin Nicolaus (trans.), (London: Penguin, 1973).
- 7 Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 690-707.
- 8 Nick Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 13-14, and 219-221.

- 9 Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, (London: Pluto, 2004), p. 86-88.
- 10 Cope's article within this special issue (page 67) also discusses LIS explorations of Marx's idea of the general intellect.
- 11 Jopseh Persky, "Retrospectives: The Ethology of Homo Economicus," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 9(2), (1995), p. 222.
- 12 John Stuart Mill, *Essay on Some Unsettled Questions in Political Economy*, 2nd ed., (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968), p. 140.
- 13 Mill, *Essay on Some Unsettled Questions*, p. 140.
- 14 John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, 8th ed., (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), p. 626-627.
- 15 Cope, Jonathan (2014/15). "Neoliberalism and Library & Information Science: Using Karl Polanyi's Fictitious Commodity as an Alternative to Neoliberal Conceptions of Information." *Progressive Librarian*, No. 43, Winter. p. 66.
- 16 Ronald H. Coase, "The Federal Communication Commission," *Journal of Law and Economics*, 2, (1959), p. 1-40.
- 17 R. H. Coase, "The Problem of Social Coast," *Journal of Law and Economics*, 3, (1960), p. 1-44.
- 18 R. H. Coase., "The Lighthouse in Economics," in *The Firm, The Market and the Law*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 187-213.
- 19 Richard A. Posner, "Utilitarianism, Economics, and Legal Theory," *Journal of Legal Studies*, 8, (1979), p. 103-140.
- 20 Posner, "Utilitarianism, Economics, and Legal Theory," p. 136.
- 21 Michael Harris, "State, Class and Cultural Reproduction: Toward a Theory of Library Service in the United States," *Advances in Academic Librarianship*, 14, (1986), p. 211-252.
- 22 Christine Pawley, "Hegemony's Handmaid? The Library and Information Studies Curriculum from a Class Perspective," *Library Quarterly*, 68(2), (1998), p. 123-144.