

Class and Librarianship: Essays at the Intersection of Information

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This publication by Library Juice Press <http://libraryjuicepress.com/> is well timed to coincide with a resurged interest in Marx and how his ideas can be applied to librarianship. It is noted in the Introduction that ‘books on class and librarianship have been few and far between’ and that social class is the final taboo now that gender, race and other progressive topics have been engaged with by the profession. However, the North American focus of this publication does not reflect some important work that has been carried out in the UK – for a sample please see references to works by this reviewer at the end of this review.

The Academic Library as Crypto-Temple: a Marxian Analysis by Stephen E. Bales applies the French Marxist Louis Althusser’s concept of the ‘Ideological State Apparatus’ (ISA) and argues that the public library is a state maintained, superstructural institution designed not to coerce but to persuade the public of the historical bloc’s legitimacy by reinforcing the dominant culture. The historical mission of the public library is to maintain the political / economic status quo. The outcome is to exclude those who feel ‘out of place’ when using the library or who think they ‘don’t belong’ there. They are treated as ‘the other’ by library staff and included patrons. Some people are excluded

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because they refuse to follow the necessary rituals of the library; or they self exclude themselves because of library anxiety. When functioning as an ISA the academic library acts as a stepladder for restocking capitalism's middle class technicians, white collar workers, small and middle executives and petty bourgeois of all kinds. In a call to action Bales suggests that librarians should recognise that they work in institutions that incorporate residual yet powerful ideological structures which support the exploitative tendencies of modern capitalism. He compares the symbolisms of temples and libraries and suggests that researchers should focus on how these symbolisms mold library patrons' actions related to library use or non-use.

Social Reproduction in the Early American Public Library: Exploring the Connections between Capital and Gender by Alexandra Carruthers contends that the early public library was established in the service of reproducing the values of the capitalist ruling class and this required the concurrent feminization of librarianship. Carnegie was a union busting capitalist who invested in public libraries as an antidote to the organised strength of the working class. His conceptualisation of libraries as spaces for isolated study reflected the individualism central to his personal philosophy of Social Darwinism. The function of the public library was to socially reproduce the workforce at the institutional level and also to reproduce social values and norms. Public libraries exert a cultural influence that supports the interests of the ruling class. The hegemonic power of the dominant class can be maintained consensually rather than coercively when it gains control over a range of values and norms, to the extent that these are so embedded in society that they receive unquestioned acceptance. Carnegie's speech 'The Common Interest of Labor and Capital: An Address to Working Men' at the opening of the public library in Braddock, Pennsylvania, in 1889, makes clear that libraries assist in the social reproduction of the ambitious worker who is of the most value to their employers. This individual ambition undermined the strength of the union, which depended on the solidarity of workers. Inequality must exist of necessity; the library was not a tool meant to offer social mobility to everyone, but only to the individuals able to distinguish themselves from the rest. Carnegie's public libraries were to facilitate the occasional personal improvement in a system that remained structurally the same. Public libraries reproduced middle class values and supported capital's requirements with respect to the social relations of production. Public libraries represented a rejection of unionism and a whole-hearted acceptance of capital's values. The public library helped to resolve problems of social unrest by supporting workers who desire to compete against their fellow workers for the limited prize of social mobility. Melvil Dewey's speech 'Librarianship as a Profession for College-Bred Women' to the Association of College Alumnae in 1886 is

ideologically consistent with Carnegie's. He suggested that women were ideally suited to library work because their 'natural' skills and abilities could be used to soften and temper disharmony. He compared librarianship to motherhood, with the aim of educating and raising good docile workers who understood their place in society. Individual self-improvement is posited as the reasonable alternative to addressing and altering structural inequalities, and public libraries become the solution to the problem of professional women's social mobility. The ideologues of capital encouraged both workers and women to accept their social and economic position and struggle on an individual level to become the exception to the rule of 'inequality of environment'. Recognising that capitalist ideology has deeply influenced public librarianship from its beginning helps us to understand the continuing connection between private interests and public librarianship. Now as in the past public libraries' value is derived from their ability to prepare a workforce for existing economic conditions. Public libraries' goal of improving quality of life for their users through access to information and services remains noble and worthwhile, but this is a timely reminder to reflect on the historical roots of the goal of social mobility and the structural possibility of achieving it in a meaningful way.

From Steam Engines to Search Engines: Class Struggle in an Information Economy by Amanda Bird and Braden Cannon suggests that the information economy has replaced the steam engine as the driver of capitalist enterprise. Information is a commodity and the people involved in its creation, organisation, transmission and preservation – including librarians – are commodities themselves. The labor of information workers is a product that contributes to capitalist economies. Librarians are anomalies in an information economy because their work runs counter to the dominant ideologies of property, control and profit. Public libraries are agents of social control. The authors locate the class struggle within the hierarchies and organizational culture of public libraries. Library Assistants see Librarians as authority figures and not necessarily as allies; and Librarians align themselves more with Management than their fellow workers. To create a united workforce means levelling hierarchies and breaking down barriers between Library Assistants, Librarians and Management. One way of doing this is to focus more on individual strengths, talents and abilities rather than professional qualifications. Deprofessionalization is not the problem but the solution to creating a strong, unified workforce. Management are fellow workers because they also have to sell their labor. They may have more control over what they do but they can share this control with their fellow workers, and create more autonomy by developing flatter less hierarchical structures. This in turn will create a more equitable and egalitarian organisational culture. While information work does not exist at the point of production it still directly impacts the efficient management and profit

generating capacities of the economy. Library workers are key agents in the information supply chain which they can either enable or disrupt. Librarians do not use this power because professionalism is a divisive ideology which creates tension and conflict between Librarians and their fellow workers. Librarians serve their own profession and its elevated standing instead of the communities in which they work. They do not share the same values. Deprofessionalization can create greater class consciousness within the library workforce. Trade unions also have a role to play in this process by bringing workers together to raise awareness of their shared class interests. These shared interests could extend to Management who are first and foremost fellow workers who have to sell their labor. The artificial division between workers and Management is as arbitrary and damaging as that between professionals and non-professionals. Bird and Cannon suggest that raising class consciousness is the way forward and that library workers should form alliances with their local communities, join organisations such as the Progressive Librarians Guild, reach beyond the narrow library sector, and build solidarity by linking with wider struggles. But before we can build solidarity with others, we must create it among ourselves, by breaking down the false divisions between non-professionals, professionals and Management. Only then can we affect meaningful and substantial change, as workers and with workers.

Working with Information: Some Initial Enquiries by Steve Wright proposes that the function of information is the ongoing reproduction of what Marx once called ‘the present state of things.’ Information has come to play an increasingly central role within contemporary capitalist social relations. The purpose of information is to secure the expanded reproduction of capital. Wright constructs a compelling argument that information and information technology are vital to capital. He also offers some critical perspectives on information at work over the past fifty years, and gives some interesting case studies, such as the Olivetti factory in Italy. He examines the hierarchical division of labor and how this profoundly atomizes the working class in a political sense, fragmented into a myriad of individual entities, frequently indifferent to any common interests they might share. He explores the parasitic nature of capitalist social relations through the emergence of a white-collar proletariat and a cybertariat, a term used to designate the kinds of work which involves telematics. But regardless of these new categorisations, capital by its nature continues to rely upon labour time as both its measure and ‘the life giving elixir that animates it’ (Marx). Wright’s call is to learn from the lived past and from the imagined future. For example, Cory Doctorow’s novel *For the win* (2010) features the Webblies attempting to apply lessons from the history of the Industrial Workers of the World to a not-long-distant Asia. Another futurist, Randall Collins, asserts that job losses due to the application of ICT in the workplace are likely

to sound the death knell for capitalism no later than the middle of this century. Wright believes that there is still much to learn from Marx's value analysis, which locates the potential for a new way of living precisely within the social antagonisms that emerge in response to capital's attempts to commodify human capacities. Information workers can contribute to the construction of coalitions of 'solidarity and places of encounter'.

Crisis talk by Toni Samek presents key talking points from the author's closing keynote speech at the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) Librarians Conference in October 2012. This is contextualised in a critical commentary about the broader conference activity and there is a select chronology of important events that have occurred since (up to March 2013). The conference theme 'Contested Terrain: Shaping the Future of Academic Librarianship' was marketed in terms of the threats posed by Wal-Mart style corporate management that cuts costs by deskilling work, outsourcing professional responsibilities, misusing technology and reducing necessary services and positions. Samek considers how Librarians can push back against this destructive agenda and uses some recent job postings to identify the problem and some potential solutions. Samek concludes by posing a number of questions. Can we move bottom-up from canary in the coalmine to become a leading player alongside our allies in a broader digital labour movement? Is there enough political will among our ranks? Who might recruit and who might be recruited into these re-framed management positions? And why?

Poverty and the Public Library: how Canadian Public Libraries are Serving the Economically Challenged by Peggy McEachreon and Sarah Barriage positions Canada as a world leader in developing Community-Led libraries. The Community-Led library movement in Canada emerged from the Working Together Project (2004-08) which piloted many of the ideas recommended by *Open to All? The Public Library and Social Exclusion* (Pateman, 2000). This movement is stand-alone and home-grown and has not required external support, such as that provided to public libraries in the United States by the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. The Community-Led library movement in Canada is organic and driven by local community needs, rather than a one-model-fits-all approach. As a result, Canada has some of the world's most socially inclusive public libraries, but it still has a long way to go before it can reach the levels of library usage which are achieved in Cuba and Scandinavia. McEachreon and Barriage suggest that what is now required are intentional strategies and systematic action by public libraries to develop policies, programs, and spaces for the poor that can have a broad transformative effect on poverty and the socially excluded. They identify the barriers to information access and point out that public libraries cater to the

middle and upper classes, directly or indirectly ignoring the unique needs of lower-income citizens. Public libraries frequently have restrictive policies, late fees or replacement costs, and can often be intimidating and unwelcoming to people not acculturated into 'acceptable' library behaviours. The organizational systems (E.g. Dewey Decimal) used by public libraries are another barrier for people already struggling to interact with a bureaucratic institution. 'Library anxiety' refers to the discomfort people often feel when interacting with the public library. The people who work in libraries may seem unapproachable because they think and act differently than patrons with low incomes, or because of the unwelcoming attitudes staff may exhibit, consciously or unconsciously. Library programs and services are targeted at the middle class, while poor people are viewed as a problem. The review of library services for the poor in the United States references the work of Sanford Berman, John Gehner and Glen E. Holt. The literature review of library services for the poor in Canada cites the Working Together Project. A survey of Canadian libraries identifies good practice in Quebec, Saskatchewan, Ontario, New Brunswick and Manitoba. The authors conclude that libraries should stop claiming that they can serve everyone and start focusing on serving those with the greatest needs. They concur with my suggestion (Pateman, 2014) that it is only by focusing efforts on the most marginalised populations that libraries can actually achieve their claim and serve everyone adequately. I have argued that a fundamental shift in how public libraries in Canada operate will have a beneficial impact (Pateman & Williment, 2013).

Lost in the Gaps: the plight of the *pro se* patron by Carey Sias argues that libraries have an important role to play in helping self-represented litigants to do everything they can to achieve justice for themselves and their families. Public law libraries are in a position to help by providing neutral access to legal information, regardless of patron income or legal qualifications. Public libraries are the most accessible option but many do not maintain robust legal collections in print. And while librarians can provide information they cannot offer legal advice. There are three levels of service typically offered by law libraries. At the most basic level, libraries provide space, books, and computers with internet access. Intermediate Level law libraries may host clinics, lawyer-in-the-library programs, or Continuing Legal Education courses for attorneys or the public. Some librarians take on roles as information creators by developing plain language or interactive forms. Libraries with Advance Level services offer extensive legal assistance to all patrons through self-help centres. Public libraries could also consider operating at these levels and providing assistance and support through partnerships, triage and referral. This will require innovative library services for changing times and a re-setting of priorities, strategies, structures, systems and organisational culture.

This excellent set of articles is the perfect response to the current crisis of capitalism which has exposed both the challenge (exploitation) and the solution (class struggle). It has often been said that capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction. One of these seeds was planted in the mid-nineteenth century when capitalists like Carnegie funded public libraries as an ally of the exploiting class. The opportunity now exists to transform public libraries into a weapon for the working class, an agency of social change, which gives voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless. By ditching professionalism, neutrality and cultural elitism, public libraries can focus on those with the greatest needs, become pro-poor, work to level the economic and social playing fields of life, and drive nails into the coffin of capitalism.

FOR FURTHER READING

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