The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship

Edited by Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale. Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018. 274 pp. Softcover. $35.00. ISBN 978-1-63400-030-7.

In an article for *Jacobin*, Professor Erik Olin Wright describes the library as a "kind of real utopia," one that "[embodies] principles of access and distribution which are profoundly anticapitalist."[1] While acknowledging the links between the history of the American public library system and income inequality (some have argued that Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic project was designed to strengthen capitalism through perpetuation of a meritocracy[2]) and submitting that library policies and funding decisions may, in practice, propagate some of the worst aspects of the neoliberal society in which they exist, Wright cites the library as one of the few institutions that exhibit the "emancipatory ideals of equality, democracy, and community."

As the workers within this "real utopia" of libraries and archives, it may be tempting to focus on the day-to-day activities of our practice, satisfied that these egalitarian principles are the foundation upon which our whole profession stands. The Critical Librarianship ("Critlib") movement suggests that practice removed from theory is not enough for librarians and archivists to meet the present demands of our users and communities or to imagine ". . . what other worlds are possible" (p. ix).

Following in the footsteps of predecessors like the Progressive Librarians Guild and the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table, the Critlib movement has sought to foster discussions around the practice of critical librarianship through online forums, in-person meetings, and scholarship. This intellectual space has been criticized for being exclusionary and out of touch with the actual practice of librarianship, but it has helped bring a conversation on the importance of applying critical pressure to library work into the main forums of the profession (pp. 1–9).

The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship explores this tension between theory and practice in the field and argues for their interdependency. Editors Karen P. Nicholson, Western University PhD candidate and information literacy manager at the University of Guelph, and Maura Seale, history librarian at the University of Michigan, have pulled together a team of contributors that includes practitioners and educators from across the library and archival professions. The book describes the library and information science (LIS) profession tending to fall into the practice side of this dichotomy, valuing practicality and efficiency over theory-based reflection and critique. Emily Drabinski's foreword

acknowledges the elitist connotations that the term "theory" evokes: "Theory is too hard, it's for snobs, I don't have time for it. Theory is for the leisure class" (p. vii). Indeed, our political and environmental concerns are so urgent, taking the time to theorize and reflect rather than act can feel like a luxury unsuitable for the immediate demands of our current crises.

The authors acknowledge these questions and criticisms and argue that they are born out of the neoliberal climate under which all workers, within and outside of the library or archives, must operate. The fetishization of productivity and a constant threat of austerity as a punishment for inefficiency in a capitalist society are tools used to distract the workforce from understanding the social ramifications of the products of their labor. In the essay "'Ruthless Criticism of All that Exists': Marxism, Technology, and Library Work," Sam Popowich argues that LIS professionals, administrators, and the public tend to perceive libraries as ". . . independent entities when in fact they too are complex networks of relationships between people" (p. 45). This obfuscation allows the work of librarians and archivists to be devalued and erased.

The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship itself serves as an example of theory-informed practice by presenting critical examinations with clear applications to current challenges in the world of libraries, archives, and beyond. In the book's introduction and first section, "Librarianship and the Practicality Imperative," the authors demonstrate how critical theories can be applied to LIS practice. These chapters challenge readers to look beyond the scope of our profession and consider how librarians and archivists might combat or contribute to larger societal inequities. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins expertly describe the linkages between capitalism and the history of librarianship as a means for explaining the consequences of our past and establishing a path for resistance. Sam Popowich applies Marxism as a critical theory for understanding new challenges presented to LIS practitioners by twenty-first-century technologies. Drawing on recent examples such as the unacceptable working conditions of Amazon warehouses, Microsoft's "racist chatbot," and Facebook's fake news, Popowich describes the serious consequences of "generalized under-theorization of information technology" (p. 50).

In Section 2, "Theory at Work: Rethinking Our Practice," authors apply critical lenses to specific aspects of library practice. Alison Hicks describes how sociocultural theory can effectively inform information literacy, and Simon Barron and Andrew Preater outline an approach for applying critical thought to systems librarianship, perhaps one of the most resolutely practice-focused areas of the LIS field. Chapters by Jessica Schomberg and Jessie Loyer ask readers to critically evaluate our policies and practices by considering perspectives of disability and Indigenous thought. Sarah Coysh, William Denton, and Lisa Sloniowski describe their experience engaging with colleagues as part of a

reading group to illustrate how a "collaborative reading of critical theory itself is an act of resistance and inspiration in a neoliberal work environment" (p. 129).

Section 3, "Theory and the iSchool," discusses intersections between theory and LIS education. Michelle Caswell outlines the critical archival pedagogy she employs in the classroom and describes how these strategies encourage students to critique traditional archival practice both during their studies and as professionals. Penny Andrews, Liz Chapman, Jessica Elmore, Dan Grace, Emily Nunn, and Sheila Webber describe their experience developing a "CritLIS" reading group at an iSchool in the United Kingdom to engage collaboratively with themes of critical librarianship. Drawing upon personal experience in her LIS education, Nicola Andrews examines how the field upholds colonialism and how Historical Trauma Theory might be adopted to create more equitable library spaces.

The final section, "Critlib and Community," analyzes the Critlib movement, examining its possibilities and limitations. Ian Beilin describes how critical librarianship, embedded in academic discourse and theory, has led to critiques of the movement as exclusionary and elitist. The chapter goes on to envision how embracing academic theory can allow for self-critique within the movement and make it possible to realize "the broad vision of critical librarianship" (p. 197). The following chapter by Violet Fox, Kelly McElroy, Jude Vachon, and Kelly Wooten features a discussion of "Zine Librarianship" and the ways this informal community draws upon both critical theories and lived experience and practice. Selinda Adelle Berg uses her experience as a doctoral researcher to describe intersections between quantitative research and critical librarianship. In the book's final chapter, Nora Almeida describes the power of the individual work of critical librarians and provides a succinct and motivating definition of the Critlib movement: "Collectively, these librarians will develop new ways to think and talk about what librarianship is and does and should do" (p. 254).

The authors, coming from varied professional and personal backgrounds, provide perspectives often lacking in the LIS literature. While the reader does hear from established experts and practiced professionals, the voices of recent graduates and workers from libraries of all sizes and types are also present. This book advocates for the application of critical pressure on all aspects of our practice, and the Critlib movement itself is not exempt from examination. I particularly admired the authors' willingness to critique and question the limitations of critical theory and the shortcomings of the Critlib community.

While much of the book focuses on librarians and library work, archivists will find the overarching themes to be relevant and broadly applicable. As we continue to grapple with shared professional challenges (the erasure of archival labor, funding cuts and other financial pressures, persistent archival silences, and our collective failure to diversify the field, to name a few), the necessity

for a re-examination of all areas of our work is crucial. Critical Librarianship demonstrates a template for questioning our practices, identifying the problems, and moving toward a more just future.

The major strength of this publication lies in its immediacy. The demands on information professionals in our current political climate are urgent. By examining our work within the context of critical theory, the authors suggest we might re-envision our labor and chart a new path for resistance. Drawing on pressing professional challenges and current news and events, *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship* motivates readers to apply action-oriented theory to their own work.

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Notes

[1] Erik Olin Wright, "How to Be an Anticapitalist Today," *Jacobin*, December 2, 2015, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/erik-olin-wright-real-utopias-anticapitalism-democracy.

[2] Michael Lorenzen, "Deconstructing the Carnegie Libraries: The Sociological Reasons behind Carnegie's Millions to Public Libraries," *Illinois Libraries* 81, no. 2 (1999): 75–78, http://www.lib.niu.edu/1999/il990275.html.

Records, Information and Data: Exploring the Role of Record-Keeping in an Information Culture

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Should archival and recordkeeping practices be subsumed under the growing waves of information and data management? From an institutional perspective, the rebranding of library and archival schools as information schools and the refocusing of their curricula on the supposedly more encompassing category of "information" has been met with little resistance. Records, it is often argued, share with books and other cultural instruments their being vehicles for the transmission of information, the universal commodity of our modern culture. More than ever, this seems to be the case today, as many of those cultural vehicles are created and exchanged in the form of digital objects.

In *Records, Information and Data: Exploring the Role of Record-Keeping in an Information Culture*, archival scholar Geoffrey Yeo argues that, from a conceptual perspective, such a dilution of records and archives into the surging ocean