



The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship

Editors _ Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale

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Reviewer _ Stew Wilson, research librarian, Hagen Ranch Road Branch,
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The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship from Library Juice Press (<http://libraryjuicepress.com>) comes as part of a new generation of critical librarianship. Once the domain of a few librarian-scholars, critical conversations are becoming more prominent in librarianship as part of larger conversations of identity politics and intersectionality and through forums such as #critlib on Twitter.

Critical theory, which has its roots in Marxist critiques of capitalism, is a site of tension within librarianship. Librarians, some argue, must accept that we are part of neoliberal institutions and need to prove our worth to stakeholders through economic metrics. Critical theory, which aims to reveal the systems of dominance and oppression inherent within neoliberalism, has been criticized in LIS literature as overly philosophical and disconnected from practice. Worse, for the solitary practitioner seeking change within their institution, critical approaches are often shut down and discouraged. The question for today's critical librarian is: How is one to connect theory with practice to bring about meaningful institutional change? This question is at the heart of this book, and is examined in the context of a critical reflection on the progress (or lack of it) made in the application of critical theory to librarianship.

The first part of the book, *Librarianship and the Practicality Imperative*, examines the privileging of practicality over theory in librarianship and the false dichotomy of theory and practice. Far from a new trend, Lua and Gregory describe the history of American librarianship as one of constant tension between its capitalist roots and its democratic ideals. Popowich draws on examples in library automation to describe theory and practice as part of a “dialectically unified whole,” in which theory and practice mutually inform each other. These chapters explore the tension between the neoliberal bottom-line and the democratic principles of librarianship.

Theory at Work: Rethinking Our Practice offers examples of the interaction between theory and practice and will be of interest to librarians interested in practical examples of connecting theory to practice. Hicks argues for a sociocultural perspective on information literacy. In the following chapter, Barron and Preater propose the field of “critical systems librarianship,” which examines the power

of Big Software and LIS providers, and asks critical questions about the privacy, neutrality, and openness in these systems. Coysh, Denton, and Sloniowski, in “Ordering Things,” describe how an after-hours Foucault reading group inspired positive change in their professional work, while Loyer describes the indigenous idea of *nehiyaw*, and describes ways that this idea of self-care can benefit librarianship. What is striking about this section is the variety of critical conversations; while Barron and Preater offer a more formal description of a new field of critical study, Schomberg offers a personal narrative of her own disability through the lens of critical disability studies, and Coysh, Denton, and Sloniowski describe critical conversation in an informal setting. The value of this section is to demonstrate how critical conversations are situated in both personal reflection and formal scholarship.

The third part of the book, *Theory and the iSchool*, offers perspectives on critical librarianship in MLIS programs. Caswell describes a pedagogical approach to critical archive studies which encourages students to critique issues of provenance; Penny Andrews, et al., describe their experience participating in a critical LIS reading group within an iSchool (of particular interest is the comment from one student that participation in critical conversation does not presume identity as a critical theorist). In these accounts, theory within the iSchool is more aspirational than realized; Nicola Andrew's account of working as a New Zealand Maori with indigenous collections in the United States is particularly poignant in describing the experiences of marginalized LIS students within iSchool programs slow to acknowledge non-traditional perspectives.

Critlib and the Community considers the role of community in critical librarianship. Beilin's “Critical Librarianship as an Academic Pursuit” is a highlight. While it's intended as a discussion of the extent to which critical librarianship is embedded within academic discourse, it is just as effective a precis of the current state of critical librarianship as the editors' introduction. The theme of academic discourse continues with Berg, who makes a case for collaboration with “quantitative criticalists”—quantitative researchers who might provide insight to a field that often relies heavily on qualitative data. Almeida's theory-heavy analysis of the tensions of #critlib as a space



of community, activism, and contestation is the only analysis of the #critlib community in the book, despite the publisher's description on the back cover.

While *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship* is a book of theory, the theory here is consistently *about* practice. The librarian more familiar with critical theory than critical practice will find useful examples of connecting theory to practice; for total beginners,

this book will serve as a good introduction to theory in librarianship. Librarians already engaged in critical practice will find that this book captures a moment of reflection in critical librarianship in questions of how theory itself is communicated in the profession, and questions of the extent to which power, exclusion, and dominance exist within a field which aspires to transcend cultural hegemony.

Open Divide: Critical Studies on Open Access

Editors _ Ulrich Herb and Joachim Schöpfel

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Reviewer _ Samuel Edge, graduate student, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alabama

Open access is frequently a topic of conversation in library and information studies courses. Usually imbued with hints of social justice, progressivism, and equality, professors and students alike often point to open access as something that librarianship “got right.” On a personal level, while working with document delivery in a large biomedical library, I became an enthusiastic supporter of open access articles and journals that allowed me to save staff time and deliver content to our patrons more expeditiously. After reading *Open Divide: Critical Studies on Open Access*, my relationship with open access is no longer quite so simple. *Open Divide* lays the concept of open access bare, making note of its benefits, but also clearly exposing its flaws, faults, and corruptions.

Open Divide: Critical Studies on Open Access is composed of seventeen short, critical studies that explore the current situation and varied history of open access in detail, challenging conventional wisdom on the topic and advancing avenues for future growth, modification, and change. Divided into two distinct parts, the text covers both the general background of open access (history, methods, opportunities and challenges, critiques, possible future paths) and the impact open access has had on the Global South, which was originally intended to be one of the main beneficiaries of open access initiatives.

The first part of the book, which explores the overall concept of open access, presents many points that lie in stark contrast to the progressive, egalitarian view of open access that is commonly advanced. The contributors note that the original goal of open access—to level the field of knowledge production and dissemination, thereby creating a global knowledge “community”—has been corrupted by large commercial publishers. These commercial publishers discovered that article processing charges

(APCs) levied for processing open access journal content are a viable replacement for the current subscription-based scholarly communication system. In the APC model, instead of being charged to access published work, individuals and institutions are charged to publish the work itself.

This shift towards the commercialization of open access—a drastic change from the concept's original grassroots beginnings—has other serious consequences as well. Namely, as the prestige and acceptability of open access grows, it runs the risk of becoming steeped with a sense of elitism and superiority, essentially morphing into a dysfunctional replacement for the already broken scholarly communication system. The contributors note that both the exclusivity of and the high registration fees for open access conferences already demonstrate this trend. If the voices that were supposed to benefit most from open access initiatives—such as those in the Global South—cannot afford to participate in the movement, the point is seemingly defeated.

The second part of the book critically examines the effect of open access on the Global South and provides ideas for future development and refinement of the open access paradigm. Although the Global South has benefited from increased access to scholarly literature, the text also points out that audiences in the Global South often face many barriers in accessing any kind of electronic resource. These barriers include a lack of internet connectivity (or lack of consistent internet connectivity), a lack of other necessary equipment, and a lack of the technological skills needed in order to operate the equipment.

The point is also made that in terms of publishing research, the current open access system greatly favors the Global North, whose scholarly work gains even further