Knowledge Representation and Discovery Systems

2016-02-07

"We need new goals." - Karen Coyle.

Karen Coyle ended her SWIB 2015 talk, "Mistakes have been made" with a call to arms: "There's so much more we can do for the user, but how can we develop a technology on top unless we have figured out what our goals are? And the goals have to be based on what users want to do not what we will let them do in the catalogue". And for her in order to support new goals "we don't need a new technology, we need data and technology that work together." In the library world, the shape of this data and this technology are subsumed under the heading of linked data.

Now, as Coyle points out, simply adopting linked data will do nothing for our users unless we adopt a different set of rules, but I believe that the work currently being done in linked data is necessary for us to begin to understand what those goals might be. This blog post is an attempt to get down some ideas around linked data and library technology that I've been thinking about for a while.

Knowledge Representation: The Context of Linked Data.

Many, if not most, library workers have come to linked data through the work we were already doing. Cataloguers and metadata people may see linked data as an alternative or as a next stage in metadata work, especially with respect to object modeling in the currently very dynamic field of repositories. Systems workers may see linked data as a possible data model for underpinning library systems. Both cataloguers and metadata people may see linked data as a way to increase findability of library resources on the web. But the ideas, technologies, and practices that we include in the term "linked data" are part of a larger context known as "knowledge representation and reasoning" Knowledge Representation

knowledge representation system is, essentially, a system which contains facts and rules about those facts, such that it can solve problems. In the Wikipedia article, knowledge representation and reasoning "is the field of artificial intelligence dedicated to representing information about the world in a form that a computer system can utilize to solve complex tasks". The system contains a picture of the world (a representation of knowledge about the world) which can

be queried, which can create new facts from old facts (inference), and which can reason about the state of the world contained within it.

Davis, Shrobe, and Szolovits describe five characteristics of a knowledge representation:

1. It is a *surrogate*, it stands in for the real world in order to allow a system to reason about the world.
2. It is a set of *ontological commitments*, that is, terms in which a system thinks about the world.
3. It is in itself a *theory of intelligent reasoning*, that is, it models a particular understanding of what "intelligent reasoning" is.
4. It is a medium of computation, in other words, it is an effective system.
5. It is a medium of human expression, a language in which we, as humans, say things about the world. (Modified from R. Davis, H. Shrobe, and P. Szolovits. What is a Knowledge Representation? AI Magazine, 14(1):17-33, 1993.)

Linked Data and Libraries

Now I'm sure a lot of cataloguers and systems people are wondering what any of this has to do with linked data, metadata, or library systems, and certainly moving towards linked data should be done with caution. But it seems to be that understanding the broader context of linked data might help us exercise that caution but still come up with the new goals that are necessary for us to satisfy the needs of our users as we move towards a library infrastructure of "data and technology that works together".

What we in the library world describe as "linked data" is in fact a knowledge representation with the potential of expressing all facts of the real world. The semantic web (a term often used interchangeably with linked data) aims to transform the world wide web into a single, vast knowledge representation system, whose knowledge base is the graph of linked open data we are currently contributing to. There are two ways in which libraries can participate in this project: the creation of ontologies and the publishing of linked data to the semantic web, and the creation of systems which can use the data of the semantic web to allow users to "do what they want to do". The publishing of linked data and ontologies, the work being done on object modeling, and the creation of repository systems like Hydra and Islandora and platforms like the Digital Public Library of America, are all participating in the knowledge representation system that is the semantic web.

Discovery Systems

So where does library discovery fit in? The problems identified by Karen Coyle in "Mistakes have been made" - an outdated data model, technologies that don't look "outside our own circle" for ideas and best-practices, and that are overlaid on top of a data model that no longer satisfies our needs or the needs of our users - all these problems are still to be addressed from a linked data

perspective. Some work has been done on using linked data to make library resources discoverable on the web, like Dan Scott's work with Schema.org, and indeed this is the single use-case covered by Zepheira's "Libhub Initiative"). But we have not yet begun to think about what discovery systems might look like that take advantage of the possibilities of linked data.

Now, when I talk about library discovery systems, I don't mean the current crop of "next-generation" OPAC replacements. It is clear that in many cases users are finding their own way to our resources, either through the open web, or through other linked systems, and it is equally clear that our discovery systems are increasingly inappropriate for use in a world where "the collection" is no longer a single identifiable thing. These systems are based on the outdated data model and technologies that we have been using since before the days of library automation, and they rely on search techniques that have not scaled well and are likely to be made completely obsolete by the advent of the semantic web. They are not equal to the challenges of what Lorcan Dempsey calls "the facilitated collection". And worst of all they also fundamentally assume a model of user behaviour and requirements that are constrained by the data and technology at our disposal. We force users to "do what we allow them to do" rather than making it possible to for them to do what they want.

This isn't to say that there might not be a place for library-specific discovery systems, but I doubt they will be the norm, and they will be created for very specific, well-defined purposes. Library discovery will increasingly happen within the semantic web, made possible by linked data technologies and allowing our users to achieve their own goals by harnessing linked data and the technologies that work with that data. What I see happening is, as the linked data infrastructure of the semantic web becomes more mature, users will use querying techniques tailored for linked data to explore knowledge, to explore facts about the world. Eventually, this exploration may lead them to a resource that requires library support (a license, a subscription, proxying, etc), and it is at that point that library systems have to integrate with a user's semantic workflow in order to connect them to the resource they want. This means that in addition to creating linked data and repository software, in addition to making our resources discoverable on the open web, we need mechanisms to make the connection between a user and an institution, technologies to handle authentication and proxying within the semantic web, and ways for users to continue their work within the web with support from fully integrated library data and technologies. Given this view of the future, it is unlikely that libraries will run out of work to be done.

s I say, I think that we are currently working very hard within the metadata/cataloguing/repository side of our field, but on the discovery side, we seem to be focusing primarily on search engine optimization (either with Schema.org or by converting MARC records to BIBFRAME for the Libhub initiative). But we haven't seen much done in the area of thinking about how our users might begin to explore this new data infrastructure, and we haven't begun to think

about how, for example, proxying might be done in a linked data context. Our attitude towards the library web site and the discovery system haven't fundamentally changed in forty years, and this attitude is, I think, holding us back from really participating in the linked data world. Right now two of our goals should be continuing the work we have already started in linked data and arguing against the continuation of out-of-date data and technologies that are doing nothing but preventing us from participating in the world of linked data.

[A note about vendors: it should go without saying that our vendors are some of the worst offenders in maintaining an outdated view of library systems and data. I think the Hydra and Islandora projects show that if we want to move forward with linked data technologies, open source is pretty much the only viable solution.]

[Note: I've learned pretty much everything I've talked about here through conversations with and talks given by Karen Coyle and Tom Johnson. All the good stuff is theirs, all the inaccuracies are my own].

Coding, Pedagogy, Humanism

2016-02-08

This is the text of a talk I gave at the Digital Pedagogy Institute last year at University of Toronto, Scarborough. There has been a lot of discussion around the question of library workers learning to code, and this was my attempt to set out my thoughts on the subject. I realize that the term "coding" is ambiguous and arguable, but I hope this text lays out a particular way of approaching the question.

Coding, Pedagogy, Humanism (pdf)

Towards a Marxist Analysis of Open Access and SciHub

2016-03-01

The recent post on Scholarly Kitchen about SciHub and its attendant comments provide a good illustration of Marx's theory of historical materialism. In the article and comment section, two ideologies struggled for supremacy. One we might characterize as 'pro-Access' - supportive of Open Access in general or SciHub in particular - and another we might characterize as 'status quo'. The status quo ideology occupies a range from 'there's nothing wrong with scholarly publishing' to 'we recognize the issues with scholarly publishing, but we think things will eventually sort themselves out'. This case provides an unusually clear cut target for a historical-materialist - or Marxist - analysis. This struck me when I first read the post, and I wanted to get some thoughts down on the subject. These notes are provisional and perhaps overgeneralized, but may provide food for further thought.

Scientific publishing arose alongside modern science itself, part of an ecosystem that included societies like the Royal Society (established in 1660) and the Académie des sciences (1666). Science, and scientific publishing, developed just prior to - and contributed to - the Industrial Revolution, and so is inextricably linked with the technological and industrial developments of capitalism itself.

Historical materialism tells us that the forces of production engender certain relations within society, but that as the forces of production develop (modernize, etc), those relations become an obstacle to further development. In the words of the Communist Manifesto

> We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organisation of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder. Into their place stepped free competition, accompanied by a social and political constitution

> adapted in it, and the economic and political sway of the bourgeois class. (Marx & Engels, The Communist Manifesto, Penguin Classics, p. 85) Online version

A similar movement is going on before our eyes. The development of computerization, the internet, and the newest digital technologies have made the traditional system of scientific publishing (or scholarly publishing more generally) not only obsolete, but 'so many fetters' that must be 'burst asunder'. Scientific publishing is now a hindrance to the sharing of knowledge, and thus to the rapid development of new technologies, which are the driving force behind economic development, just as they were during the Industrial Revolution.

The rise of peer-to-peer technologies, open-source software development, and Open Access publishing are all part of a network of changes in the relations of production, changes in how we work and how we control work, how we produce knowledge and how we share knowledge. Peer-to-peer, open-source, and open-access can be understood as attempts to circumvent the existing relations which now stand as fetters to economic development.

It stands to reason that peer-to-peer - the freeing up of information flows - should have affected consumer media (e.g. mp3 and movie sharing) first, given that entertainment media are more readily recognized as commodities than the artefacts of scholarly publishing. But the 'piratization' of scholarly publishing was inevitable from the moment Napster was invented (1999), if not from the first broadcast of the first pirate radio station. SciHub does not run contrary to the development of capitalism, but is in fact made inevitable by the technological changes that have driven the development of the economy since the 1960s. One of the indicators of ideological conflict masking the fundamental identity of social positions is when the two sides of an argument (in this case the 'pro-Access' and 'status quo' sides) see themselves as fundamentally opposed, as striking a blow against neoliberal capitalism and for bourgeois rigour and respectability, when in reality both sides merely represent a 'generation gap' in the relations of production at this moment in twenty-first century capitalism.

But as in all cultural change in every class society, there are those who benefit from the status quo, and those who do not benefit, but do not see the obstacle. Both sides, however, are part of a struggle between the relations of society and the forces of production. Both sides are integral to the dialectic development of capitalism over time. Both sides evince an ideology that, in the end, supports capitalism at different moments of its existence: either the traditional capitalism of scientific publishing and Royal Societies, or else the new, digital capitalism of liberated information flows. As a Marxist, I recognize not only that the pro-Access side must eventually be victorious, but also that, while Open Access does not strike a blow against capitalism, it does contribute - through furthering its development and 'heightening its contradictions' - to the hastening of its end.

> Capitalist production can by no means content itself with the quantity of disposable labour power which the natural increase of population yields. It requires for its free play an industrial reserve army independent of these natural limits. – Marx, Capital, Volume 1.

The other day, following a various discussions in Twitter, I posted:

I guess I should write a blog post on my view that universities are money laundries and job sponges.

— redlibrarian (@redlibrarian) March 3, 2016

Now, I realized quite quickly that these each of these phrases is compressed enough to require unpacking unpacking on its own, so I today I just want to tackle the idea of the university as a "job sponge", which is the piece I've been carrying around with me the longest. This simplification of the initial idea, however, is still difficult to figure out how to frame. Should I start with "credential creep" or "tuition as surplus profit", both of which are interesting aspects of this problem. There are many different ways to come at the idea of the university as intentionally keeping people out of the work-force. In the end, as always, it was best to go all the way back to Marx for a way to think through this idea, so I have decided to focus these notes on the idea of precarity and the reserve army of labour. Others have written on precarity and exploitation, and to them I am indebted.

In Chapter 25 of *Capital*, Volume One, Marx talks about the "industrial reserve army", that is, the mass of unemployed people who are produced by capitalism and kept in reserve to compensate for fluctuations in the proportion of constant and variable capital in the economy (briefly, constant capital refers to non-labour components of production, and variable capital to labour). Marx refers to this proportion as "the organic composition of capital" Since capitalism is always in flux, always in a position of constantly reappearing disequilibrium, the organic composition of capital is also always in flux; the needs of industry for labour are always changing. In order to deal with this changing requirement for labour efficiently, capital must always have a supply of unemployed labour waiting to put to work, and somewhere for the unemployed to be "parked" when the need for labour diminishes. In the 19th century, when Marx was writing, there were ample "labour sinks" or "employment sponges", as anyone who has read Dickens can attest. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge lets the cat out of the bag, so to speak:

> "At this festive season of the year, Mr Scrooge, … it is more than usually desirable that we should make some slight provision for the Poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time. Many thousands are in want of common necessaries; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir."
>
> "Are there no prisons?"
>
> "Plenty of prisons…"

> "And the Union workhouses." demanded Scrooge. "Are they still in operation?"
>
> "Both very busy, sir…"
>
> "Those who are badly off must go there."
>
> "Many can't go there; and many would rather die."
>
> "If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

At the time that Dickens was writing, of course, universities accepted only the sons of the bourgeoisie, i.e., those who were wealthy enough not to have to work themselves (euphemistically called "independently wealthy", to hide the fact that their wealth was in fact dependent on the exploitation of labour). The University at this time cannot be seen as a job sponge, because those who attended University were not workers; had they not been at University, they should have been just as idle.

This situation changed after the First World War, when returning soldiers, often working class, were admitted to university. This corresponded to a change in the position of women in the universities as well. For example, women were allowed to attend lectures at Oxford, but not to matriculate, since 1870. In 1920, a new University statute granted women "full membership" of the university. These changes opened universities up to more diverse populations than simply the sons of the upper and middle classes, a move which has always been understood by bourgeois ideology as a "democratization" of the university, and thus as a social positive.

During and after the Second World War, and into the long boom, productivity and thus the need for labour remained high. This is the classic period of the university as democratic opportunity, the period when more and more families were able to send their children (often for the first time in history) to get an education. During this period, the "organic composition of capital" gradually changed, and I would argue that the increasing enrollments at universities from the 1960s to the present are due not simply to the increased wealth and leisure of average citizens, who can now afford both the tuition and the lack of income provided by an unemployed student; not simply to this, but also to the fact that production has been on the decline since at least the early 1970s. As fewer and fewer jobs require fewer and fewer workers, as capitalism moves production to parts of the world where labour is cheap, and as the rise in standard of living in the West forced the closure of such institutions as the workhouse, it fell to the universities to become one of two primary job sinks in Western society (the other being the system of mass incarceration in place today).

Which brings me to the question of precarity. Part-time work, zero-hour contracts, short- and limited-term "fluid" labour, have all reached new heights in the last five to ten years. The University has become a mechanism for the efficient management of labour supply. Not only is it able to keep more and

more people out of the workforce for longer and longer periods (which is where "credential inflation" comes in), but it is in fact able to manage oversupply in fields where this is required by the economic system.

The oversupply of librarians is discussed a lot, but I want to offer a perspective that connects precarity oversupply to the managerial mechanism of the university. Librarians have historically been a privileged class of labour: we have historically had permanent employment, good pay, good benefits. These are all things that the current phase of capitalism needs to abolish, in a futile attempt to increase the rate of profit ("the return on investment") that, again in Marxist terms, is constantly declining. Oversupply of librarians is not an accident, but an exigency of the capitalist system as it attempts to dismantle what little privilege and power librarians have among the working class. The same is true of academics. And it is the university that, while it keeps a reserve of unemployed people out of the workforce and unemployment lines in most sectors, floods specific sectors (like librarianship) with workers who have no choice but to accept precarious employment in order to put pressure on employers to gradually erode the working conditions of all librarians. This is the classic function of the reserve army of labour as described by Marx in *Capital*.

> The overwork of the employed part of the working class swells the ranks of the reserve, whilst conversely the greater pressure that the latter by its competition exerts on the former, forces these to submit to overwork and to subjugation under the dictates of capital. The condemnation of one part of the working class to enforced idleness by the overwork of the other part, and the converse, becomes a means of enriching the individual capitalists, and accelerates at the same time the production of the industrial reserve army on a scale corresponding with the advance of social accumulation." (Capital, vol 1, p. 658).

The mechanism of managing labour supply is not explicit or forced upon university departments or library schools. It is managed through the economic logic of capitalism itself. In order to maintain its position (indeed, often its existence) within the university, a department must continue to increase enrollment, partly for the tuition, partly for the portion of budgets disbursed by university administration and the state, and partly, as I have suggested, due to an ideological position that sees always-increasing enrollment as equivalent to increased education and opportunity. Thus the cultural logic of capitalism uses every mechanism at its service to accomplish its end, which in this case is the efficient and effective management of labour supply under the guise of democratization and "uplifting the whole people" (the "promise" of the University of Alberta.

What about this self-understanding of universities? What of their "vision" and "mission" statements? What about all the people who send their children to university for an education and increased opportunity? The first two questions can be easily dealt with. The image of the university as an institution of financial

disinterest, whose only concern is the search for knowledge and truth, has never been true. The truth is always dialectical, and it is a mistake to suggest that any human institution is entirely one thing or another, and that its position within the structure of human relationships does not change - along with that structure - over time. As for the final question, this simply shows that universities, like everything else, do not operated in a vacuum, that the ideology and "cultural logic" of capitalism is present in the totality of how we see, understand, and think about the world and our position in it. The only way to resist the power of this total ideology is, as per Jameson's exhortation in *The Political Unconscious*, to "always historicize!"

Correction

The statement about scholarships for soldiers appearing after WWI came from a misreading (or rather a misremembering) of Robert Graves' memoir *Goodbye to All That*. After the war, Graves went to Oxford as what we would now call a "mature student". It turns out that he had simply deferred his university career until after the war; he would likely have attended anyway. However, he did not pay full tuition - he was a awarded a £60 "exhibition" (a kind of scholarship) to attend. Graves writes,

> I had just finished with Charterhouse and gone up to Harlech, when England declared war on Germany. A day or two later I decided to enlist. In the first place, though the papers predicted only a very short war - over by Christmas at the outside - I hoped that it might last long enough to delay my going to Oxford in October, which I dreaded. (Goodbye to All That, Penguin Classics, p. 60).

The subsidizing of soldiers' tuition can probably best be dated to the Serviceman's Readjustment Act - known as the GI Bill - of 1944, that is, to end of World War 2 and the beginning of the long boom.

Philip K Dick and Commodity Fetishism

2016-03-08

Philip K. Dick (1928 – 1982) is mainly known for a certain kind of high-concept, countercultural science-fiction, full of drug use, paranoia, and metaphysical "big questions". But what struck me in going on a PKD jag lately was not only the focus on commodities in Dick's fiction, but the focus on what Marx called "the fetishism" of commodities, the products of human labour.

Marx's concept of fetishism had a long history, but his immediate influence was Ludwig Feuerbach, who viewed religion as, in Marx's words, a realm in which "the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race" (*Capital*, Penguin Classics, p. 165). Human ideas, fears, hopes, emotions, become embodied in external things, which then appear to human beings as objects separate from human beings, which exist in the world and enter into relations with us. The process of fetishization, then, is similar to what Lukacs and others have called "reification", in which a nexus of human relationships is mistaken for an objective fact, the classic example of which is the commodity itself.

In the first chapter of *Capital*, in which he analyzes in great detail the nature and characteristics of the commodity, Marx justifies this analysis by exposing the "mystery" of the commodity, the way in which the actual nature of commodities is hidden from the very people whose lives are daily confronted with the world as 'an immense collection of commodities' (p. 125). The section in which Marx sums up his analysis and described commodity fetishism deserves to be quoted at length:

> The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simple in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. [...] [T]he

> commodity-form and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. (p. 164-165).

We are unable to see and recognize the truth about commodities by endowing them with properties and powers apart from their nature as products of labour, by mistaken their nature as products of our labour for something independent of us. In reading many PKD novels in a short period I was struck not only by how his worlds are so completely dominated by commodities, but how the paranoia and "unreality" of Dick's fiction is so often expressed through an exposure or breakdown of the fetishism of commodities, a realization of the commodity as product of human relationships, an unmasking of the domination we human beings have willingly placed ourselves in. The commodity is the representation of that domination, but it hides the fact that we are dominated by ourselves, by the very relations that the commodity mystifies.

From the very beginning, in *The Man in the High Castle*, commodities play a huge role in Dick's world-building. In a San Francisco governed by the Japanese, victorious after World War Two, American artefacts have enormous value, and a black-market in knock-offs thrives. Dick interrogates the nature of these commodities, asks what is *inside* the commodity that makes it valuable (in this, mirroring Marx's intense interest in the nature of the commodity in *Capital*):

> "Don't you feel it?" he kidded her. "The historicity?"
>
> She said, "What is 'historicity'?"
>
> "When a thing has history in it. Listen. One of those two Zippo lighters was in Franklin D. Roosevelt's pocket when he was assassinated. And one wasn't. One has historicity, a hell of a lot of it. As much as any object ever had. And one has nothing. Can you feel it?" He nudged her. "You can't. You can't tell which is which. There's no 'mystical plasmic presence,' no 'aura' around it." (*The Man in the High Castle*, in *Four Novels of the 1960s*, Library of America, p. 57).

Despite their differing views of the nature of value (Dick's "historicity" vs. Marx's labour theory), both Marx and Dick understand that the value or significance of a commodity is not inherent within it, but is imbued in it by us. It's value is in the human relationship that intersect with it. Commodities are dizzyingly abundant in *The Man in the High Castle*, as in other PKD novels, whether the commodity is a collection of miniature sets and figures (*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*), records and ID-cards (*Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*), androids (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*) or drugs (most of the novels, including A Scanner Darkly). Commodities are mountain

of physicality, an impersonal force that weighs on all of Dick's characters, as indeed it weighs on all of us who live under capitalism.

Much could be written on the idea of "drugs as commodity" in Dick, but I want to turn to perhaps the most sustained interrogation of commodities and fetishism in Dick's novels: the fabulous Ubik in the novel of the same name. One is initially struck by the chapter epigraphs, each one proclaiming the virtues of the same wonderful product in the style of advertising copy. From chapter one:

> Friends, this is clean-up time and we're discounting all our silent, electric Ubiks by this much money. Yes, we're throwing away the bluebook. And remember, every Ubik on our lot has been used only as directed. (Ubik, Library of America, p. 611).

The reader would be forgiven for assuming Ubik to be a kind of vehicle. But as the chapters go on, the precise nature of Ubik becomes increasingly less clear. From chapters two and three:

> The best way to ask for beer is to sing out for Ubik. Made from select hops, choice water, slow-aged for perfect flavour, Ubik is the nation's number-one choice in beer. Made only in Cleveland. (p. 618).

> Instant Ubik has all the fresh flavour of just-brewed drip coffee. Your husband will say, Christ, Sally, I used to think your coffee was only so-so. But now, wow! Safe when taken as directed. (p. 625).

Ubik itself does not enter the plot of the novel until chapter 10. Until then, we are presented with something – clearly a commodity – whose nature does not reside in what it *does*. The value of Ubik is independent of it's use; in Marx's terms Ubik's "use-value" is immaterial. By the time Ubik is finally presented to the reader as a plot element, the cast of characters are in the midst of a nightmarish reality that seems to be killing them through some kind of time-effect. Ubik comes on the scene with a promise to reconstitute a decaying reality: "One invisible puff-puff whisk of economically priced Ubik banished compulsive obsessive fears that the entire world is turning into clotted milk, worn-out tape recorders and obsolete iron-cage elevators…" Belief in Ubik – in the form of an aerosol – literally keeps the world together. It turns out (spoilers ahead!) that the characters are comatose, locked into a mental network, while their bodies are kept alive following a massive explosion. As their bodies die and their minds fade, the world itself dissolves, and it is only Ubik that holds the final dissolution at bay. But Ubik has no nature of its own, the aerosol form is merely the accident of the minds locked in the network (it could, in fact, take on any of the forms of the commodity, as evidenced by the chapter headings). Ubik is nothing but the manifestation of a group of people's belief in the unity and stability of the world. In this sense, Ubik not only provides a perfect illustration of commodity fetishism, but of the psychological truth of historical materialism itself. It is the system of commodity production itself that determines, creates, and preserves our consciousness and, like Ubik, like all commodities in PKD, it

is our blindness to the truth of the mystery known as “the commodity” that provides the limit to what can be understood as real.

These are just a few thoughts I had on reading PKD last summer and autumn. I think there’s plenty of scope for digging more into the nature of commodities in Dick’s fiction, but that’s probably enough for now.

Open World, Open Work

2016-03-17

> Note: this post is drawn from a larger project applying critical theory to data structures.

Every model is an interpretation, a simplification, a representation. In *The Prison House of Language*, Jameson discusses the way in which our choice of a model affects how we think through problems, and the effect on our understanding of the adoption of language as a model after Saussure. The history of structuralism and poststructuralism is the history of the linguistic model in both an initial, expansive phase, and later a critical, "deconstructive" phase. The main task of poststructuralism is to expose the power dynamics and dominance relations implicit in both structuralism and language itself. It is unsurprising then that poststructuralists like Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze not only held up the linguistic model to critique but also, in various ways, offered their own alternatives, both methodological and structural. In terms of methodology, Derrida's deconstruction offered a means to analyze and expose the asymmetrical power relations inherent in structural analysis, while Foucault's archaeology of knowledge sought to demonstrate that the long, smooth histories performed by structuralists (e.g. the Annales school) were in fact punctuated by breaks, disruptions, sudden changes of structure from one moment to another. These breaks are played down or erased by structuralist historiography in favour of an account of the long-term structural development. Alternative structures, rather than methodologies, were proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, where they offer up the "rhizome" as a model which might avoid the hierarchy and domination inherent in other kinds of structures. The poststructuralists were concerned by the oppressive or repressive effects of various kinds of authority/hierarchy within a structure. The domination of one side of a binary opposition over the other must be deconstructed; structures with origins, roots, privileged terms, must be countered by other structures. For Deleuze, the rhizome was opposed to the tree (in which a single node determines the leaves and branches) and the root-systems, in which an entire structure grows out of a single root. The rhizome, on the other hand, is undifferentiated, it is a network of relationships in all their chaotic multiplicity. The rhizome, Deleuze contends is not a model or an interpretation (a "tracing") in which reality is simplified and distorted, but is (in some sense) reality itself, or at the very least a "map" of reality ("Whenever a multiplicity is taken up in a structure, its growth is offset

by a reduction in its laws of combination"). In *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari take aim primarily at Freudian interpretation, in which the reality of the patient's life and lived experience is simplified and reduced to the terms of the Oedipal model. But for Deleuze and Guattari, the issue is not simply with Freudianism, but with models in general. They stand against the reduction, simplification, and interpretation of reality and for (again, in some sense) reality itself, understood in all its multiplicity.

The urge to not limit or reduce the scope of action or of understanding was reflected, in Umberto Eco's view, by a trend towards aleatoric, or open, works of art. The "open work" (*opera aperta*) is freed from the domination of the author's will, intent, or model of reality.

> It is instead the end product of an author's effort to arrange a sequence of communicative effects in such a way that each individual addressee can refashion the original composition devised by the author. [...] As he reacts to the play of stimuli and his own response to their patterning, the individual addressee is bound to supply his own existential credentials, the sense conditioning which is peculiarly his own, a defined culture, a set of tastes, personal inclinations, and prejudices. [...] The work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood. (Eco, *The Open Work*, 3)

Not only is the author's model no longer privileged, but there is no privileged interpretation - in fact, there is no interpretation at all: the response to the work of art is as multifaceted as reality itself.

Eco insists upon the difference between French avant-garde art, which took structuralism as its model, and the Italian which, he says

> posits a universe which poetry does not set out to judge. Rather, the aim of poetry is to capture and fix it in all its disponibilité, its myriad connotations and equivocations, its potential Otherness, its implicit capacity to vouchsafe to the poet something not yet known to him. (Eco, *The Open Work*, 244)

In other words, despite his insistence on the fundamental difference between the French and Italian approaches, Eco's view would not be out of place in Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus, in which multiplicity and openness of life, experience, reality, are fundamental, and any aesthetic or model which seeks to limit or circumvent these is seen as oppressive if not fundamentally corrupt.

In the French context, as Eco points out, the avant-garde "preferred to take structuralism as its operational model" and Eco mentions Roland Barthes in this regard. The importance of Barthes to this discussion comes from his concept of "readerly" (lisible) vs. "writable" (scriptible) texts. While most texts, according to Barthes, are readerly (in Eco's view they are "closed", their meaning is circumscribed), writerly texts are open, the reader (Eco's "addressee") is

an active participant in the construction of meaning. In contrast to this opposition (i.e. in contrast to this model), Barthes offers a conception of the ideal text in which

> the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable…' the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.(Barthes, *S/Z*, 5)

Compare this with the characterization of the rhizome:

> Principle of multiplicity: it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, "multiplicity," that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world. Multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are. There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject. There is not even the unity to abort in the object or "return" in the subject. A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows). Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first. (Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 8)

It should be clear that, no matter how "anti-interpretive" these structuralist and poststructuralist conceptions are, each posits its own hermeneutic which it is hoped will avoid the tyrannies of centre, origin, root, or power. For Jameson, "all of the original philosophical systems or positions in recent times", including those which claimed an anti-interpretative stance, as well as those which offered a "neutral" concept of "immanent critique" (such as the New Criticism), "have in one way or another projected a hermeneutic which is specific to them". For structuralism and poststructuralism the "master code" of the hermeneutic is language itself even when, as with Derrida and Deleuze, the hermeneutic itself is offered up to critical analysis.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson is concerned to show that "Marxism subsumes other interpretive modes or systems" like existentialism or the various structuralisms.

> To put it in methodological terms, [their limits] can always be overcome, and their more positive findings retained, by a radical historicizing of their mental operations, such that not only the content of

> the analysis, but the very method itself, along with the analyst, then comes to be reckoned into the "text" or phenomenon to be explained. (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 57)

The key to Jameson's project can be found, ironically enough, in Derrida's dictum "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (there is no outside-the-text). While this has been sometimes understood as stating that critique can and should only ever be immanent ("there is nothing beyond the words of the text"), Derrida can also be understood as saying that text and context are one, are unified in a totality of interpretation. If this reading of Derrida is correct, then in fact he and Jameson are fundamentally in agreement. For Marxists, the concept of "totality" is a difficult and dangerous one, easily equated as it is with "totalitarianism" and this with the myth of communist facelessness, the erasure of the individual, and the gulag. For Marxist critics, totality has often been seen as a vulgar, lazy interpretation of cause and effect, in which the economic and social totality creates concrete effects within a work of art (the epitome of this view of course is socialist realism). For Jameson, all hermeneutics can be understood in terms of their relation of the work of art to the totality: is the critique immanent or transcendent?

> Rightly or wrongly, a totalizing criticism has been felt to be transcendent in the bad sense, or in other words to make appeal, for its interpretive content to spheres and levels outside the text proper. (*Political Unconscious*, 57)

But Marxist criticism, due to its dialectical and historicizing nature, is able to widen the scope of an interpretation in order to draw both the work and the interpretation into the total social relations at a given historical moment.

> Thus, it can be argued that [the Marxist type] of interpretation, while containing a transcendent moment, foresees that moment as merely provisionally extrinsic, and requires for its completion a movement to the point at which that apparently external content (political attitudes, ideological materials, juridical categories, the raw materials of history, the economic processes) is then at length drawn back within the process of reading.(*Political Unconscious*, 57)

There has been much discussion recently about the supposed "neutrality" of algorithms (most recently, Matthew Reidsma's "Algorithmis Bias in Library Discovery Systems"). The logic of some algorithms have been held up as examples of ways in which supposedly neutral technologies (and technologists) in fact promote, normalize, and reproduce existing ideological structures of dominance and inequality. In fact, the algorithms (or at least their effects, their symptoms) are being read as texts, are being interpreted, are being subject to more-or-less conscious and rigorous hermeneutics. This is not the first time that seemingly neutral elements of data or information have been subjected to ideological interpretation. Hope Olson, for example, has written about the effect of patriarchal ideologies on knowledge organization, and in 2002 wrote *The Power*

to Name: Locating the Limits of Subject Representation in Libraries, in which she deconstructs subject classification to demonstrate that certain terms of class, race, gender, etc., are privileged and others marginalized and excluded. Olson's description of controlled vocabularies ("librarians' tools for naming subjects") follow the linguistic tree model that Deleuze and Guattari critique in A Thousand Plateaus. The structure of controlled vocabularies support and reproduce linguistic dominance ("the power to name") by limiting, structuring, modeling descriptive data:

> [A] controlled vocabulary is a language universally applicable within the context of a library catalogue or index [...] It is the only set of terms or notations that may be used within that system. The exclusivity of a controlled vocabulary requires it to be complete at any given time for the naming of a given universe of information. [...] [T]he selection of concepts to be named defines the limits of the system, its inclusions and exclusions. The selection of terms for these concepts often introduces blatant biasses or, more commonly, subtle, insidious marginalizations.(Olson, *The Power to Name*, 6)

One of the principles of semantic, or linked, data, is the open-world principle, which suggests that whatever is represented within a given structure, we can always assume there is more that is unsaid. Combined with the AAA principle ("anyone can say anything about any topic"), linked data seems to offer a way out of the domination and repression offered up by other data models (including the data models that underlie traditional bibliographic description). It seemed to me that, given the supposed neutrality of data structures and models, as well as the way in which the semantic graph seems to approach the ideal of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome (their equivalent of Barthes ideal text), that it might be useful to attempt to apply Jameson's method to the question of semantic data. That project is still underway.

Naomi Klein, Lenin, and Climate Change

2016-03-27

Naomi Klein opens *This Changes Everything* with an anecdote about an airplane prevented from taking off because its wheels have sunk deep into the overheated tarmac. In this story and others, Klein sees an important irony within the truth that is climate change:

> The temperatures in the summer of 2012 were indeed unusually hot. (As they were the year before and the year after). And it's no mystery why this has been happening: the profligate burning of fossil fuels, the very thing that US Airways was bound and determined to do despite the inconvenience presented by a melting tarmac. This irony – the fact that the burning of fossil fuels is so radically changing our climate that it is getting in the way of our capacity to burn fossil fuels – did not stop the passengers of Flight 3935 from reembarking and continuing their journeys. (*This Changes Everything*, 2).

This "irony" is a classic example of what Marxists refer to as a contradiction. "Irony" implies something accidental or fortuitous about how the state of affairs came to be: "look, we can't burn fossil fuels because we burn so many fossil fuels". But a contradiction in the Marxist sense never loses sight of the fact that the juxtaposition of two truths such as these are far from accidental; they have, in fact, been determined by the movement of history itself.

In Hegelian and Marxist dialectic, a contradiction is resolved through "the negation of the negation" and the production of something new, a new state of affairs. In this case, Klein's title is well-chosen. In the synthesis that resolves a contradiction everything is changed.

But Klein is not a Marxist, and her prescription for the kind of change necessary to avoid the disaster that climate change is bringing ever closer is not a materialist one. She recognizes that the change that must take place is economic, but she hedges on the question of whether such an economic change has ever taken place ("I must report that the answer to that question is predictably complex, filled with 'sort ofs' and 'almosts' " (p. 453)) while ignoring the historical example of the victory of the middle-class in Europe, precisely the kind of social revolution which must occur if Klein's vision of a "safer and more equitable"

society is to be realized.

But for Klein, the building of such a movement requires only that people "open their eyes" in order to see the truth and begin to change the structures of their lives and to demand political, social, and economic change. But this was precisely the view of Feuerbach, Bauer, and Stirner that Marx and Engels criticized in *The German Ideology*. In Klein's view, "a great deal of the work of deep social change involves" debates and stories:

> Because if we are to have any hope of making the kind of civilizational leap forward required of this fateful decade, we will need to start believing, once again, that humanity is not hopelessly selfish and greedy. (p. 461).

This, of course, raises the spectre of "class-consciousness" and its place in the coming revolution. For Feuerbach, Bauer, and Stirner (the "Young Hegelians" of Marx's critique), all that was required for social change was for people to change their view of the world. In *The German Ideology*, Marx countered that

> The relations of men, all their doings, their fetters and their limitations are products of their consciousness [therefore] the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for [another] consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the world in a different way, i.e. to recognize it by means of having a different interpretation. (* The German Ideology*, p. 36).

For Marx this was an untenable position. *The German Ideology* provides the most detailed elaboration of historical materialism in Marx's writings, according to which the socio-economic change in society resulting from the crises provoked by contradictions such as those cited by Klein cannot be the result of a change in consciousness, because consciousness itself is a product of history. While Marx agrees that a wholesale change in consciousness is necessary for "the success of the cause", he argues that this change "can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution" (*The German Ideology*, p. 60). The consciousness of the class fighting for change can only come about in the process of the revolution itself.

> If [the] material elements of a complete revolution are not present – namely, on the one hand the existing productive forces, on the other the formation of a revolutionary mass, which revolts not only against separate conditions of the existing society, but against the existing "production of life" itself, the "total activity" on which it is based – then it is immaterial for practical development whether the idea of the revolution has been expressed a hundred times already. (p. 62).

For Klein, the elaboration and the communication of the idea (through debates and stories) will be enough for her revolutionary movement to come about. It

does not seem to be that "a revolutionary mass" is anywhere near existing in the countries where this revolution is necessary (i.e. the countries of developed capitalism). But it seems clear that the contradictions arising out of the juxtaposition of climate change with advanced capitalism can only lead to more and more crises, both economic and climatic, and that these crises may lead to the formation of the revolutionary mass. But Klein is wrong to think that "we will win by asserting that such calculations [of human life vs. profit] are morally monstrous" (p. 464). No revolution ever came about through the assertion of a fact.

Klein does seem to understand that, despite much of her programme being framed as "demands", at a given moment, actual power will have to be taken. If we are watching for the contradictions to sharpen, for the final crisis to come – as it must come – then there must be people ready not only to "debate and tell stories", though there is a place for that, as there is a place for everything in Klein's book. But there must also be those who are prepared to recognize when the moment for the seizure of power has arrived. This was, perhaps, Lenin's greatest gift: the ability to recognize the historical moment for what it was. In addition to a movement like the one Klein envisages - coming before the revolution like John the Baptist – we should be looking to the example of Lenin in the realm of organization and the practical seizure of power. When even non-Communists like Naomi Klein recognize the need for revolution, when the crisis of climate change is visible and apparent in our everyday lives, when the contradictions of capitalism are heightened day by day, perhaps the lessons of October are once more relevant.

The Library as Mediation

2016-04-07

> [T]he problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. " Lukacs, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat."

An outside observer would be forgiven for thinking librarianship has a culture of handringing. Much ink has been spent in writing about crisis, change, the future of libraries, the continued relevance (or not) of something called "the library". The move from a physical to a digital information space has, it seems, called into question not only the continued viability of "the library" but also its characteristics. "The library" is not an inventory of books. "The library" is no longer a physical space. Rhetorically "the library" takes the appearance of a concrete thing, and one of the reasons the move to digital has caused such existential anguish is that we do not understand how "the library" might be represented in a decentralized, relational manner. There are many, today, who are embracing the possibility of the non-physical library (primarily through the mediating metaphor of the graph or the semantic web), but even this embrace is seen as oppositional, as a transformation of the physical library. Whether this transformation is a good or bad thing is open to (seemingly endless) debate. But what I want to talk about here is the idea that "the library" as a thing does not, and never has, existed.

In his essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat", Lukacs formulates the idea of reification, which is traditionally understood as coming from Feuerbach's critique of Christianity through the materialism of Marx. Essentially, "reification" is the mistaking for a concrete object a series of relationships between human beings. For Marx, the problem of the reification of commodities was of primary importance: the worker who produces coats does not merely produce an object that someone can use to keep warm, but produces an object which stands between and relates many different people in different kinds of transactions: the worker herself, the factory owner, the distributor, the retailer, the purchaser, the purchaser's family, etc, etc. In having the object stand in for all these relationships, the relationships themselves become hidden by the object.

For Lukacs, however, the process of reification applied not only to commodities,

but to "all subjective and objective phenomena" in capitalist societies. I would like to suggest that "the library" itself is a reification, a mystification of an objective whole for a network of human relations that, when recognized as such, untangles all of the problems associated with change and transformation, and clears up the relationship between library work and the modern, digital world. One of the problems with reification is that the objective vision becomes trapped in a single aspect, when it can really only be understood dialectically, that is, changing over time and in relation to other things. By ascribing objective characteristics to a thing called "the library" we attempt to make it static, unchanging, so that as the world changes around it, our understanding and recognition of it become increasingly contradictory (the position in which we find ourselves today).

Another concept to support this idea of the library as social relation is that of mediation. Jameson describes the classical view of mediation as the "dialectical term for the establishment of relationships between [...] the internal dynamcs of the political state and its economic base" (*Political Unconscious*, p. 39), and I would argue that "the library" (as a nexus of human relationships) occupies – and has always occupied – a mediatory position between various economic realities (that is, the reality of commodity production) and socio-political requirements. The public library and the academic library differ in precisely what and how they mediate these terms, but not in the fact of being themselves mediations.

To take the academic library first, we must discuss the network of economic (primarily financial) relationships that exist within the university at large. Income in the form both of tuition and grants allow students and researchers to participate an educational/research activity which claims to be financially disinterested. The library's role is to take a portion of this income and provide access to resource and services which are purportedly "free". The ideology of librarianship provides a set of workers who understand their role as facilitating access to these resources and services with as few barriers (technological, intellectual, financial) as possible. The library, thus, stands as the nexus of relationships between politicians, vendors of library resources and technology, faculty, students, librarians, etc. It is these relationships that constitute the core of library work. "The library" does not exist outside or beyond this network of relationships. Even the library collection should be seen as the objectification of increasingly expensive financial relationships between a whole host of agents. The fact that all of these relationships are reified is present in the language that we use: "we are managing the collection", "we work for the library", "students use the library", etc.

Such is the "reified" nature of the academic library as it stands in 2016, but what are the commodity relationships that the library mediates? The university is often understood as an institution that provides an education and is more or less financially disinterested. In truth, power and prestige of those who run universities is dependent on the production of certain kinds of commodities (workers,

buildings), as well as on the circulation of money through various hands as part of the massive fraud known as the financial sector (any investigation into the relationship between banks, businesses, donors, and university buildings will expose this part of the fraud). The library itself pays inordinate amounts of the income of the university to private vendors of library resources and technology, but presents those resources and that technology as "free" to faculty and students. The academic library there mediates between an academic system which is fully implicated in commodity production and financial capitalism and a vision of the university as altruistic and enlightening. The mediation is aimed primarily at student and faculty population who provide a large part of both the income and the labour of the university. The library, in the end, mystifies or hides the real economic relationships between all the agents who are connected to it.

The situation for the public library is slightly different. Public libraries tend to be branches of the capitalist state (city government, councils, etc), and part of the mystification of the capitalist state is not only to appear disinterested, but to appear to provide social services and increase the public good. However, they must also maintain the cultural logic of capitalism among the general population. Public libraries, then, play the role not only of seeming to provide a disinterested, enlightened public service, but also to prop up ideas of the value of entertainment, of consumer choice. Ironically, the free provision of popular commodities through the public library increases the fetishisation of those commodities, through implicit approval and recommendation by an authoritative, trustworthy source. The relationships objectified in "the public library" are fairly similar to those of the academic library, but the economic reality and ideological structures mediated by it are slightly different.

How can recognizing and exposing the reification of libraries and the mediations they uphold help us in dealing with the economic, social, and technological changes we are currently in the midst of? The answer may lie in the concept of hegemony taken from Gramsci and Lenin. For Lenin, and for many socialists of the 19th and early twentieth century, capitalist domination was the domain of the state, and coercion was predominantly effected through state violence. Lenin maintained, however, that in order for the proletariat to lead all of Russia's exploited into revolution, the proletariat needed to achieve "hegemony" over the other exploited classes. By this meant that the proletariat had to recognize the needs and interests of the other classes and include the satisfaction of those needs in its own political programme.

Gramsci offered a broader and more nuanced view of hegemony. For him, in addition to the proletariat in the revolutionary movement, the dominant class also exercised hegemony, in the form of cultural, intellectual, and ideological values and norms. The ways people conditioned to think about and act in society were conditioned, not directly coerced, through state institutions like schools, churches, and political programmes (today we would add marketing, professional sports, and entertainment to this list). The library, both public and

academic, also occupy spaces within this network of state control of culture.

One of the code-words for hegemonic institutions is "trust"; libraries, churches, schools, universities – these institutions are seen as bearers of public trust in ways that that more directly coercive or political institutions (like the police or the Senate) are not. Many articles have been written about the perceived trustworthiness of libraries (two examples here and here). This position of trust indicates to me that libraries are indeed hegemonic institutions, mediating between state power and the culture of citizens.

But hegemony is a difficult thing to control and maintain, due in no small part, to the fact that exercising state violence against cultural institutions destroys the hegemonic effectiveness of the institutions, while potentially increasing it's cultural value (which, as recent news out of Russia has shown, does not prevent the use of state force entirely). Hegemonic spaces also require the work of intellectuals in order to function, and intellectuals, too, are not usually amenable to the usual channels of state force. Hegemonic institutions, then, typically possess a small amount of play, indeed require it for their hegemonic function to be fulfilled. But this does not mean that libraries, schools, etc, are automatically spaces of potential freedom from cultural domination. As mediations, the characteristic of such spaces can only be driven by the attitudes, consciousness, and work – indeed the very social relations – of those who work in the library and those who use it. To answer the question of how recognizing and exposing the reification of libraries and the mediations they uphold help us in dealing with economic, social, and technological changes, we have to recognize not only the hegemonic position of libraries, we have to understand, in the first place, that the reification of libraries cements cultural domination and must be resisted. Once the intellectual resistance to one kind of reification takes hold, it can potentially be extended to cover the reification of all other relations, and eventually the reification of the commodity itself. But the library as mediation requires that library workers consciously recognize themselves as working within hegemonic institutions, as supporting the dominant culture and, in the end, state power, coercion, and exploitation. Only by being very clear with ourselves about that can we open up the minuscule space for resistance inherent in hegemonic institutions, and the do the work of which libraries are, I believe, capable. This work can only be undertaken together – library workers and users, no leaders, no followers – in order to be able to think an alternative – any alternative – to the cultural dominant of capitalism in the 21st century.

Organizational Structure and 'Democratic Centralism'

2016-05-02

I would like to propose a thought-experiment. Rather than the top-down, centralized library – either academic or public – in which decisions are made by a funding organization and implemented by library workers responsible, ultimately, to a chief librarian; what if rather than this organizational structure, libraries were organized instead on a federated model of self-organizing units, coming together in larger committees as appropriate in order to fulfill the mandate of the library and perform the work required of library workers in a state of full transparency and collegial, bottom-up, decision-making.

The term "democratic centralism" is a vexed one. On the one hand it refers to strict party discipline in which discussion among party members shall be free and unfettered before a decision has been taken, while all members are expected to abide by the party's decision once the decision has been made.

> Lenin's vision… was of a Party built from below upwards with the higher organs deriving their powers from, and directly accountable to, the lower ones. There could, in this organisational framework, be no question of the Central Committee or Central Organ issuing irrefragable directions. Always and at all times democratic centralism, in Lenin's conception at this time, entailed the right of dissent: it 'implies universal and full *freedom to criticise*, so long as this does not disturb the unity *of a definite action*'. (Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought*, v. 1, 232).

On the other hand, Harding shows that Lenin's focus changed during and after the first world war and the revolutions of 1917, moving from questions of party structure and discipline to a more European outlook and investigation into the structure of finance capitalism and the state

> For good reason therefore Lenin, during this period, never applied his idea of democratic centralism to the Party – the Party was seldom mentioned in his writings at this time. The idea was, rather, applied to the relations between the multiform communes which the revolution had thrown up and the voluntary federation of different

> national groupings. Always it insisted upon the utmost local independence or autonomy and the widest possible variety of the forms of self-administration. (v. 2, 178)

Following Marx, Harding argues, Lenin's view of the socialist state went from the massive centralization of Imperialism to a federation of small communes based on the Paris Commune and the Soviets, which arose in St Petersburg and Moscow in 1905 and 1917. Lenin's view of democratic centralism at this time was based on the democratic Soviets coming together voluntarily in centralized organizations where necessary and appropriate.

> In this guise the whole pattern of what was later to be called democratic centralism is quite inverted. Initiative clearly rests with the local communes, their agreement to pursue common goals is voluntary, the centre must never impose its will on the localities for, as we have seen, the vitality of the socialist project, indeed its whole viability, rests upon the widest variety, the broadest experimentation with differing forms of self-administration. The role of the central administration is merely to help clear the path of mass creativity of the obstacles it encounters. (v 2., 173).

What Lenin is proposing here is nothing short of the abolition of the centralized national state that (in Europe) developed out of the collapse of the Roman empire and the struggles of empires of the middle ages, and were made inviolable in the treaties backed by military power of the 18th and 19th centuries, and had reached what Lenin considered its highest form in the Imperialist states in the period leading up to the first world war. Instead of centralized administration and influence and power flowing down from the top, Lenin envisaged a voluntary federation of self-organizing communes coming together at higher and higher levels as necessary in order to accomplish the tasks that required that level of organization.

Library organizational structures, like most organizational structures, mirror the structure and power flows of the capitalist state, only they tend to do so without even the lip-service paid to democracy through the mechanism of elections. In some libraries, collegial governance provides a countervailing force resisting centralized, top-down, decision making, but as Revitt and Luyk have shown, collegial governance, even where it exists, tends to be variably and imperfectly applied.

> A review of the nearly 40-year history of library councils in Canadian academic libraries suggests that the collegial governance model endorsed by CAUT is perhaps something for academic libraries to aspire to, rather than something that is currently experienced.

In public libraries, of course, anything like collegial governance is not even on the agenda.

While individual librarians in administrative or managerial positions may try to

foster and support decision-making coming up from the rank-and-file, fundamentally the decisions of the university administration, provost, and chief librarian, tend to be made with little or no consultation or transparency. Chief librarians, whether in academic or public libraries, are responsible to their boards for implementing certain kinds of decisions and programmes.

To return to the thought-experiment, then: can we envisage an organizational structure among libraries which implements Lenin's later vision of democratic centralism. What if library units (branches, departments) had no unit head, but organized themselves in order to accomplish the work that needs to be done. How, then, is the work to be done decided on? Imagine, then, that these self-organizing, autonomous units came together in order to decide precisely those questions. The library workers who attend these multi-unit committees would be elected and given the responsibility for representing the views of the units and committing the unit to accomplishing the work decided on at this central level. The important thing in this thought experiment is this: that the units themselves are self-organizing and democratic, and that such central committees that come into being arise out of the voluntary association of units with a shared understanding of the work they are there to do. In this form of organization, then, a library worker might be similarly elected to represent the library to the provost, or city council, or whichever larger organization funds the library. This library worker, like all committee delegates, could be democratically recalled.

The "human nature" argument will no doubt be raised here; that human beings are inherently lazy and hence some will work more than others in these self-governing communal units; that human beings "just aren't like that". I could respond to this criticism theoretically or through historical justification. But it is simpler to remind critics of something else Lenin said (quoting St Paul): "he who does not work, does not eat", which sounds harsh, but simply removes the mystification of human labour under capitalism and openly reiterates an eternal truth of human life.

I am not proposing this democratic-centralist model as something we could feasibly implement in the short-term, or perhaps at all under the current mode of production, but I think that bearing alternative models of social organization in mind can be useful as we face up to problems, big or small, in our current organizational structures.

Public Libraries, History, and the State

2016-05-10

> The usual fate of the object of new historical creativity is to be mistaken for the replica of older and even obsolete forms of social life to which the new institutions may bear a certain similarity. (Marx, quoted in Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 49)

John Pateman, CEO of Thunder Bay Public Library, in his article/blog-post in *Open Shelf* is not wrong to see the origins of the public library lie in structures of social control. But he takes this to be some kind of atomic fact, eternal and independent, bearing no relation to any other facts. Alistair Black, in his *New History of the English Public Library* (1996) and his work connecting public libraries to the concept of "social hygiene" ("The Library as Clinic", 2005) has created a convincing argument against the idea of public libraries as agents of enlightenment or progress.

However, the idea that public libraries have "not changed fundamentally" in the last century and a half, while seeming to lead to a "historical analysis" of public libraries in the Western world, in fact ignores the reality of history itself. In the first place, it is patently absurd that any phenomena does not change over time, but in the second place, and more importantly, Pateman's view of the public library sees it as somehow independent of other important changes in Western society, culture, and politics since the middle of the nineteenth century. When Pateman states that the public library is an institution of social control, he carefully avoids identifying the party which controls and the party which is controlled.

The public library became institutionally enshrined first in England, in the Public Libraries Act of 1850. The year is not accidental. The English capitalist class (bourgeoisie) was the most advanced in Europe, having demolished Feudalism 150 years before the French Revolution, in the English Civil War of the 1640s (now known as the War of the Three Kingdoms). In raising arms against the king, Cromwell and Parliament inaugurated the primacy of capital in Britain. By 1848, when the bourgeoisie consolidated power through revolution in the rest of Europe, the British capitalist class was in complete control of the country's society, culture, and politics, a fact confirmed by the Reform Act of 1832. The period 1848-1851 saw the consolidation of power by capital across Europe (cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital*), and it is in this context that public

libraries were endowed with political legitimacy.

The Mechanics' Institutes *did* provide a model for public libraries, but their social function was completely different. The bourgeoisie – which included intellectuals and specialists at the upper-end of the working class – used Mechanics' Institutes not only for self-education, but for the creation and maintenance of a world-view and ideology that corresponded to their class. (The term "mechanic" meant more what we would call an engineer, rather than a mechanic in today's sense). In principle, the Mechanics' Institutes occupied a similar position to coffee houses in Central Europe – they were a forum for the representation to itself of a class readying to take political and hegemonic control. They represented, in fact, the self-consciousness of the bourgeoisie to itself. (Cf. Jurgen Habermas *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*).

With the victory of the revolutions of 1848-1851, however, the project of the bourgeoisie changed. It no longer had to represent bourgeois culture and values to itself, it had to ensure their spread to the other strata of society, the petty-bourgeoisie, the working class and, if possible, the peasantry. The raising of the public library from the position of a Mechanics' Institute to an official state institution solidified the role of the library in instilling and maintaining the values of bourgeois society.

This was, however, a period when there were no other sectors of society through which bourgeois values could be spread. There was no "entertainment industry", and the characteristic elements of the culture industry as a whole (bourgeois practices of concert going and reading, for example) were only just developing. I would argue that the development of the state and the culture industry have indeed changed the fundamental mission of the public library over the subsequent hundred-and-fifty years.

The capitalist state has passed through various forms since the 1850s. Initially, in the period of classical liberalism, state infrastructure was small, as the doctrine of laissez-faire allowed capitalise enterprise to manage its own affairs. The end of the 19th century, however, saw the development of finance-capital to accompany, if not to supplant, large-scale industry. Hilferding, Bukharin, and Lenin himself in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916/17), all trace the development of finance capital and the imperialist consequences of that endeavour. Imperialism, of course, led to larger state machinery, increased militarisation and, eventually the First World War. (Indeed, many historians see the First and Second World Wars as part of a single process of dealing with the fallout of the imperialist period [cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*]). Following the Second World War, the state remained larger than in the liberal period, but the state machinery was refocused away from militarism towards social programs: the welfare state. The public library in this period became an institution of social progress, alongside institutions of public health (like the NHS), public education, etc. Now, this is not to suggest that public institutions in this period were no longer responsible for maintaining bourgeois hegemony, but they had changed dialectically: they were also responsible for increasing

the standard of living among the working classes and the poor, all of whom had been increasingly radicalised by the horrors of capitalism in the years 1914-1945.

It should come as no surprise that other public institutions of this period include public broadcasting (e.g. the BBC (founded 1922)) and the CBC (1936)), and the rapid development of the two most active sectors of the culture industry, the recording industry and Hollywood. The public library became only one of a number of public institutions of the welfare state, but it also increasingly found itself only one of a number of institutions of the culture industry.

After 1991 – the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War – the form of the state and the bourgeois-capitalist project changed again. Seemingly victorious, bourgeois state required systems of propaganda to counter a rising tide of discontent and protest (beginning, by most accounts, to the "Battle for Seattle" in 1999). The public library has become an instrument in that propaganda battle. But in every historical progression, traces of the previous moment are always present: the imperialist state is present in the welfare state, etc. So the progressive mission of the public library that dates from the welfare state period occupies an uneasy position alongside the public library as institution of bourgeois propaganda. It is, in fact, this contradiction within the heart of the public library, as well as its relations to other social, cultural, and political, phenomena, that continues to drive its development through time. This movement through the resolution of contradictions is precisely the way in which history and the world change over time. One of the core positions of capitalist ideology is precisely to ignore this process of change, which is why the Marxist dialectic provides such a challenge to the bourgeois worldview.

The term "neoliberal" is overused today, and it often goes unaccompanied by a definition. From one perspective, neoliberalism is a form of capitalist state formation, driven by a return to small government and laissez-faire economics. This neoliberal position seeks to discredit public institutions, especially those which achieved a measure of public trust during the welfare state period, prior to dismantling them completely, in order to regain the small government of the mid-19th century. This is the neoliberal context for both the attacks on public health services and attacks on Public Libraries in Britain and North America (since Thatcher and Reagan, both regions have been on the frontline of neoliberal depradations). As a public service, the neoliberals needs to destroy the library, but as an organization with a measure of public trust, they cannot be upfront about it. They are not, however, concerned about dismantling the public library as an institution of propaganda, because laissez-faire capitalism simply outsources or privatized the function of propaganda to the other sectors of the culture industry. It seems to me that Pateman, by focusing on one particular element of the history of public libraries and ignoring the rest, is in fact contributing to the circumspect destruction of public libraries from within, rather than attempting a good-faith reconstruction of a public library mission.

In Pateman's subsequent post, "Snuffy's Revenge", he discusses an abstraction (like "The Traditional Public Library") he calls "The Community Led Library".

Again, Pateman critique of public libraries may be in good faith, though they are again based primarily on vague stereotypes and strawman. However, even if Pateman is in good faith, the promotion of "community led libraries" can lead - as we have seen recently in the UK - to reduced government funding and the staffing of libraries by volunteers, once more supporting the neoliberal agenda of "small government". Pateman's critiques of "the traditional public library" and his crude promotion of a "community led" abstraction in the end simply contributes to the dismantling of public library systems.

EDIT: I've been asked to provide some references for the idea that "community-led" libraries can be a cover for the defunding/destaffing of public libraries. Here are few links:

From the Guardian From Public Library News (UK)

UPDATE: 17/05/2016 - John Pateman has replied to a query from Jane Schmidt about the co-opting of the term "community-led" in the UK. His response implies an understanding that the term **is** being used in a neoliberal way, but Pateman dismisses that as an "incorrect use of the term", rather than seeing how, even with the best intentions, public library discourse remains dominated by the requirements of the capitalist state.

Some Thoughts from #lodlamto

2016-05-14

Apologies for the length - there's been a lot to think about the last few days. This is an initial, provisional attempt to formalize some thoughts that came out of #lodlamto

At the end of an interesting workshop on SPARQL at the #lodlamto conference on Thursday, I overheard two software developers talking about how unintuitive SPARQL was to people with SQL experience (because SPARQL queries and SQL queries are "false friends"). The two developers came to the conclusion that SPARQL could safely be ignored because "no one industry is using it". I've come across this idea before – mostly from non library-technology people who hear about linked data technologies from someone in the library world. Linked data seems overengineered, counterintuitive, and too heavy for most purposes. Now, most of us know about non-library-specific linked data applications (like Google's knowledge graph, for example), but I got to wondering whether it was true that linked data was not being used in applications outside the library world. I put the question out on Twitter, and followed it up with the "is it us?" question: are library technologists/metadata people obsessed with linked data even though it's not a widely used concept/technology, or are other technology areas missing what seems obvious to us?

A few people chimed in with, I think, enough examples of linked data use outside libraries and search engines to prove that linked data **is** being adopted where it makes sense. But that's an important distinction: it seems clear after looking at the examples, that linked data satisfies a particular data need, which is not a requirement for many technology projects. And I think this cleared up for more (at least to a certain extent) the boundaries of linked data as an approach to a problem. Libraries, search engines, and social networks all have problems that can be solved by linked data, but not all problems are best approached from a linked data perspective.

Ron Houk pointed out the Gnome project is using linked data and SPARQL at least in some parts of its workflow. Mark Matienzo suggested biomedical informatics, Steven Folsom pointed me to an ISWC2015 keynote on "Semantics and Inference Processing in Finance" and then what might be the most intriguing example of linked data use outside of libraries, the linking of data to track those

involved in human trafficking. More technical information on the DIG project can be found here.

Exploration in addition to Answers

What I think is really interesting about all these examples, and what connects to recent developments in the field of my day job (library discovery systems) is that a graph is not meant to be simply an aggregate of knowledge presented statically, it's essentially meant to be explored. In the discovery world, this idea takes the form of user expectations moving from searching for and finding an item, to users finding a set of results and exploring and doing more different kinds of things with the results. In a sense, we're talking about adding more research and exploration to our systems, rather than just providing an interface to a surrogate record. Karen Coyle has talked about this, most recently in her SWIB15 talk, Mistakes Have Been Made. One thing that the examples above makes clear is that the point of linked data is not simply displaying some representation of the linked datasets, but providing a data structure that allows for exploration and discovery without requiring exploration and discovery connections to be made explicitly by human beings (which is the case, for example, in the authority structures of a library catalogue).

At #lodlamto a lot of the benefit of linked data was exposed through the kind of research question not easily answered by current relational databases (e.g. "who was a fresco painter in Florence in 1344", "how many churches were renovated in Germany after the Second World War"). The problem with these is not that they are more sophisticated than what we might think of as a standard SQL query, but that that they remain static: we query a graph and get back an answer (even if the answer is a set of solutions). This is obviously a use case, but it is far from the most interesting one, in my perspective.

What linked data should give us is the ability to use a single static query like those listed above as a transient point in the more fluid exploration of the data in question. This functionality is mirrored in the multiple patterns that can be included in a single SPARQL query. While these graph queries can give us the answers to quite complex static questions, but it also opens the way to using graph queries in a more extensible and fluid way.

So the publication or aggregation of linked data isn't an end in itself. What is important to libraries, to social networks, or to the DIG project, is being able to start at any node or set of nodes (which is likely the result of a query) and then being able to move from node to node and graph to graph without any explicit linking by human beings, thus making the possibilities of exploration potentially unlimited, precisely because every linked data publisher can work independently, as long as the data they publish is open, and reuses existing ontologies as much as possible.

The Data Question

One important concern here is not simply that we will reproduce the existing

problems libraries have in their data infrastructure in terms of siloization, non-standard practices, and unwillingness or technical inability to share, but that we will end up reproducing more subtle problems in new (and hence less detectable ways). For example, the critiques of controlled vocabularies Hope Olson performs in *The Power to Name*, the critique of representation in authority and other kinds of records Jordan Claire and Myron Groover spoke about at #lodlamto, and Allana Mayer wrote about in "Linked Open Data for Artistic and Cultural Resources", and the recent debates around LCSH subject headings, all indicate problems with the existing method of creating data within particular networks of power and domination. That linked data has the capability not only of allowing subaltern voices to be heard ("anyone can say anything about any topic") and also makes adding or modifying vocabulary terms much cheaper than it is now, does not alter the fact that, living as we are within the same networks of power and domination but now with linked data, we will have to guard against and understand how to mitigate the very real coercive force of such power when it comes to data, metadata, and vocabulary control. One argument against vocabulary and ontology work being done in isolation is the temptation to create a new vocabulary rather than reuse existing ones; another argument can be made that the isolation of vocabulary groups may have a tendency to reproduce the worldview of the smaller group, leading to the same problems we have in, for example, LCSH today.

The Interface Question

In addition to the data problem, something similar exists with respect to user interfaces. What I worry about is that one of the reasons it's difficult for some people both inside and outside libtech to see the end result of linked data, is that our interfaces and our "understanding" of user expectations and workflows are lagging behind our data, infrastructure, and tools. If we use linked data technologies to drive a standard library OPAC interface then we are doing our users a disservice, as well as squandering the capabilities of open linked data. Another concern is that work in linked data is currently being done institution-by-institution, which involves a lot of duplication of effort, code, data, etc. Instead, we should try to come up with the relevant shared standards, tools, and techniques, to not reinvent the wheel, and to allow each institution to focus on what they do that is *actually* differently from all the rest, and move all of us forward together. As with vocabulary and ontology development, this requires a much closer working relationship between all institutions and organization than hitherto exists. Any initiative in Canada around linked data must be as open, transparent, and inclusive as possible.

The User Question

I've said before that one of the things many libraries are very bad at is requirement gathering. Recognizing that user assessment and usability testing is a subset of requirement gathering, it follows that many of us are very bad at that too. Listening to Alan Harnum talk about the immediate value to his users of the work he does, based on an actual relationship with the users in question, is

extremely edifying. But Alan no longer works in libraries. There are many areas in which libraries would do well to look outside the profession for guidance, and requirement gathering/user assessment is certainly one of them.

The connection to linked data, to my mind, is that without a close relationship with the users of our tools and interfaces, it will be nearly impossible for us either to let people know about the new possibilities of a linked data infrastructure, or to understand what our users actually need and want from us, or to recognize if an when we have satisfied their needs. The end result, of course, is business as usual, and the same inadequate tools and interfaces that libraries have had to live with for a long time. Linked open data and open source software give us the ability to go beyond the limits of an outdated data model and shoddy vendor-supplied tools and interfaces. We shouldn't squander the opportunity.

Openness, Publication and Consumption

But even a focus on building tools and interfaces may not be the best place to put our energy. We are increasingly aware that the main library interfaces are being bypassed by many users, who prefer to search for resources on the open web, then use more-or-less transparent library tools (e.g. the library proxy) to gain access to licensed resources. We ought to be taking a hard look at the time, effort, and energy we put into applications that may not even be used.

More importantly, like government organizations, libraries no longer need to have a monopoly on their applications. It is currently extremely difficulty to expose library data efficiently, either due to proprietary APIs, or data locked down either through licensing, technology, or privacy concerns. Linked open data may be the key to liberating our own data for use by other application developers. We have seen how opening up transit data encourages people to write applications more quickly and with higher quality than applications written by (or for) the transit service itself. With linked data, we can expose our data secure in the knowledge that it is immediately linkable with other data sets, built on a simple, solid data model, so that others can reuse and repurpose the data as desired.

It is always tempting to see social formations reflected in technology, to imagine that the flat structure of linked data and the AAA principle reflects a democratization of our data model and vocabularies. Perhaps that will turn out to be the case, but it is much more likely that our understanding and application of linked data principles will be less than adequate or incomplete, or that the system of domination in which we live will continue to distort our best intentions, as it always does. The problem of breaking out of our own histories, our own institutional and organizational cultures, in order to make linked data really work, not for us, but for the people and communities we serve, is a difficult one. All we can do right now is, on the one hand, attempt to broaden and deepen our knowledge and skills, continue to fight for the open (source, access, data) against closed (systems, code, minds), and keep speaking up about the ways in which our current data practices reflect oppression and inequality in our

societies at large.

Much of this blog post came out of discussions at #lodlamto, held at Ryerson and York, May 12-13, 2016, and in conversation with John Fink, Ruth Collings, Myron Groover, Alan Harnum, Kim Pham, Allana Mayer, Robin Desmeules, MJ Suhonos, Tom Johnson, Gillian Byrne and Christina Harlow, for which I am grateful

Functional Programming: An Attempt at an Explanation

2016-05-18

After making a workshop proposal to the Access Conference, I began thinking of how I would approach explaining functional programming to programmers who "just don't get it". When I first looked into functional programming, it made my head hurt - it was a different way of approaching programs. It took me several years before I finally got what FP was, and how I could think about working with it. Since the Access proposal was rejected this year, I thought I would try to get some of these ideas down here. This blog post isn't for experienced programmers, especially not for programmers who already know FP, or LISP, or Clojure, etc, etc. It's an attempt to give a sense to people who do some coding in a procedural or object-oriented language of how FP works, and some of the things you can do in an FP idiom.

Those Parentheses

First off, I want to tackle the question of the parentheses. Many people new to FP will find themselves faced with something like

```
(defn word-count [x]
  (let [words (vec (str/split (str/replace (str/lower-case x) #"[\W]+" " ") #"\s+"))]
      (reduce conj {} (for [y words]
      {y (count (filter #{y} words))}))))
```

and get really intimidated. What's with all the parentheses? The first thing I should say is that you quickly get used to working with the parentheses. The second thing is that they aren't conceptually difficult. In Ruby you might make a function call like this:

```
# Ruby
square(5)  # 25
```

See, there are two parentheses. They come after the function name, and surround the argument. In Clojure you would write:

```
;; Clojure
(square 5) ;; 25
```

There are still only two parentheses, only this time you put *both* the function name and the argument inside them. Let's try chain two functions together:

```
# Ruby
divide_by_two(square(5)) # 12.5

;; Clojure
(divide_by_two (square 5))  ;; 12.5
```

In both cases, you have four (two pairs of) parentheses, only in Ruby they come after the function name and surround the argument, while in Clojure, they surround both the function name and the argument. This can lead to some interesting behaviour. In both Ruby and Clojure, operators are functions. The "+" function takes two arguments, adds them together and returns a result. For the sake of argument, let's rewrite that as a "plus" function in Ruby:

```
# Ruby
def plus(first, second)
  first+second
end

plus(5, 4) # 9
5 + 4 # 9
```

These two functions calls ("plus" and "+") do exactly the same thing, but their syntax is different (with the "+" function, the function name goes *between* the two arguments). In Clojure, the two functions would have exactly the *same* syntax:

```
;; Clojure
(defn plus [first second]
  (+ first second))

(plus 5 4) ;; 9
(+ 5 4) ;; 9
```

So what we see in Clojure is that a) everything that's not a primitive is a function and b) functions always have the same syntax. This makes it really easy to understand what a program is doing and follow the chain of successful function calls. Which brings me to the last thing I'll cover in this post - how does a functional program work?

How can you build a program out of functions?

In object-oriented programming, the terms *function* and *method* are often used interchangeably, especially among people who have come from, for example, a procedural language like C. A mathematical function maps one value to another through a mathematical transformation. In programming, a function can either return a value (like a mathematical function does) or it can have a side-effect (e.g. print to the screen or cause a change in program state) or both. A method

is a function that is attached to an object in an object-oriented language. In FP, we try as far as possible to write *pure* functions, that is, functions which only return a value (i.e. that don't have side-effects) and *always* return a value (even if the value is "nil").

So for example, our "square" function might be defined like this:

```ruby
# Ruby
def square(num)
  num*num
end

square(4)  # 16
```

```clojure
;; Clojure
(defn square [n]
  (* n n))

(square 4) ;; 16)
```

Given the number 4, the square function will *always* return the number 16, because the function is defined only with reference to the values passed to it. In procedural and object-oriented languages, we're allowed to write functions that might look outside themselves for some data, so for example we might write:

```ruby
# Ruby
def check_weather_and_date(date)
  "Today's date is #{date} and the temperature is #{@temperature}"
end
@temperature = "30 Celsius"
check_weather_and_date("March 1")
  # "Today's date is March 1 and the temperature is 30 Celsius"

@temperature = "-5 Celsius"
check_weather_and_date("March 1")
  # "Today's date is March 1 and the temperature is -5 Celsius"
```

We can see right away that, due to it's reliance on the variable @temperature, we can pass the same argument ("March 1") to the "check_weather_and_date" function and it will return different results. The @temperature variable is part of the program's *state*, and because state can change independent of the function, it makes functions very difficult to test and understand.

In functional programming, we try to avoid state as much as possible. We make sure that we write functions that return the same value every time, making them very easy to understand and test. And because we always write *functions* as opposed to *methods*, we know that our functions will always return values. This allows us to build smaller functions up into larger units through *composition*:

```clojure
;; Clojure
```

```
(def author "SAM")
(reverse (clojure.string/lower-case author " WROTE THIS")
  ;; siht etorw mas
```

That's a pretty trivial example, but here's an example of a working rna-transcription function in one line, using only a composition of simple functions:

```
;; Clojure

(defn to-rna [dna]
  (clojure.string/join (map {\G \C \C \G \A \U \T \A} dna)))
```

Through function composition, you can end up writing very sophisticated, powerful programs building up from very simple functions that you chain together, secure in the knowledge that all your functions a) don't depend on state and b) always return a value. Because functions always return a value, you can chain functions together so that they take the return value of one function as the input of another.

I've only scratched the surface here, and haven't talked enough about side-effects and state, the lack of variables and variable assignment, or control structures and recursion, but hopefully this attempt to demystify functional programming will be useful.

'Who Signs the Paychecks': On Collegial Governance

2016-05-31

When I was young, I attended a meeting of the Winnipeg IWW, in the course of which a young bike courier asked about union certification for his "cooperative". An older man took issue with the young man's characterization of the organization as a cooperative, demanding to know who owned the equipment, whose name was on the lease - "who signs the paychecks?". The lesson here was to dig below the comforting phrases and descriptors to the economic (and therefore power) relations that actually pertained.

As part of the Social Studies and Humanities Congress being held in Calgary, my colleague Sean Luyk tweeted out the CAPAL "Statement on Collegial Governance" dated April 2015 (and approved at the CAPAL AGM on June 1). I'm somewhat interested in the question of collegial governance because it's something we talk a lot about but rarely, if ever, see in action. Sean and Eva Revitt's talk at University of Alberta earlier this year on their work studying library councils was very interesting, especially because it underscored the fact that whatever committees librarians belong to within U of A, we certainly have nothing approaching collegial governance (though we do have a library council). So I glanced briefly at the CAPAL statement, after which the following exchange took place:

@redlibrarian I agree with you, it's best read as an aspirational document

— Sean Luyk (@SeanLuyk) May 31, 2016

Now, "aspirational" to me indicates that it describes a state of affairs to be worked toward (to aspire to), but if this is the case, surely an aspirational document must take care to accurately describe the *current* state of affairs. If it does not - if, as Sean further states, the audience of the document is librarians in bargaining positions and senior administration - then it may actually *harm* the librarians' bargaining position to mischaracterize the situation, playing into the hands of senior administration who, let's face it, are unlikely to read such a document, let alone take it seriously.

> CAPAL/ACBAP endorses professional academic librarians as equal participants in the governance structures of academic institutions

> and recognizes the core role of academic librarians in the teaching and the advancement of research and knowledge in the mission of educational institutions.

This opening statement does not define who the participants are that we would like librarians to be equal to. Faculty? That's not a homogeneous group within an institution. Administration? The University President? The vice-presidents and associate vice-presidents? Once we begin to ask "equal to whom", we are forced to recognize that "equality" is not a term that can be used to describe the hierarchy of a university. And once "equality" is thrown in doubt, then "endorsing" a view of librarians as "equal participants" becomes not only too vague to mean anything, it in fact covers up the unequal, hierarchical structure of the organization. Hiding the fact of an unequal employer – worker relationship behind an illusion of equality is dangerous at the best of times, but especially so in a period of collective bargaining. One of the ways in which capitalism succeeds in continuing to exploit workers is by mystifying its own economic relationships. In the same way that the bike courier "cooperative" hid a reality of employment, characterizing a university as an egalitarian, democratic organization obscures the reality of economic domination at play within all the constituent relationships. To paraphrase the older worker at that IWW meeting, if librarians should participate at all levels of the organization does this mean we can write the checks? Obviously not.

> Frequently a minority within their academic communities, it is often difficult for academic librarians to achieve equal representation within a democratic process.

Again, which "democratic process" is being described here? I've seen no indication at any of the universities I've worked at that anything that could remotely be described as "democracy" holds for the institution. The members of the board of governors are political appointees, and the search criteria, remuneration, and decision-making powers of the president and VPs fly in the face of anything that might even be called *bourgeois* democracy (which isn't, in the end, democracy at all). Universities are not democratic institutions. All of the committees and councils that faculty (and librarians) belong to serves only to hide that fact and to give academics a semblance of agency within the larger organization. To insist that universities and libraries are somehow democratic is dangerously naïve.

> Centralized and unilateral decision-making risks alienation and is counterproductive to the advancement of an organization's mission.

Again, this makes it sound as if such a model of decision making is an aberration, something that, once it is pointed out, everyone will agree to remedy. It ignores the fact that centralized and unilateral decision-making is the norm in universities and in academic libraries. To pretend otherwise, especially to librarians in a bargaining position, is to play into the hands of the employer's bargaining team. Revitt and Luyk state the case more strongly when they note "evidence

of a general disenfranchisement of librarians from significant decisions affecting library operations, resources, services, and the appointment and evaluation of senior library administrative positions".This has certainly been borne out in my experience.

> Academic libraries, like the institutions that house them, are public spheres that play a critical role in safeguarding our democratic freedoms; and as such, they must be governed based on values rooted in the public good and professional ethics and principles.

This, I'm afraid, is an opinion stated as a fact, with nothing to support it. As always the truth is more complicated than that. Leaving aside the question of what "democratic freedoms" we in fact possess, it can also be argued that academic libraries play a role in the management of the economy (through controlling supply and demand of workers at different levels of accreditation) as well as the reproduction of ideology and the cultural hegemony of the ruling class. Now, the library is not *just* these things, but it is *also* those things, no matter what else it is. To give a one-sided description of *anything*, never mind academic libraries, is an abdication of critical thinking, something that libraries are supposed to promote. It does no-one any good to repeat over and over again a naïve and simplistic view, an ahistorical, fairy-tale view of the importance of libraries. By repeating phrases such as these to those who don't believe a word of it (employers, administrators, etc), we play into their hands. As long as they pay lip-service to these views we can be led into anything.

What follows after this is a description of what a library council should look like. This, I suppose, is the aspirational part of the document, and I agree that such proposals would – if they could be effected – be helpful and beneficial to library workers in all sorts of ways. But to base such proposals on a vague and one-sided characterization of the university and the library as egalitarian, democratic upholders of the public good means, on the one hand, the proposals will never be enacted (because nothing challenges the administrations rosy characterization of the mission and structure of the university and library) and on the other hand that librarians will lose out on an opportunity to cast a critical eye on the organizations that we are extremely privileged to work in.

Elsewhere on this blog, I have criticized the bourgeois university and provided a blue-sky notion of an alternative model of organization, one that doesn't require us to attempt to win any recognition from our employers by repeating platitudes about democracy and egalitarianism.

Now, I recognize the importance of propaganda, but for propaganda to be effective it has to be just a little more extreme that what everyone can agree with. It is unclear whether the CAPAL statement is intended to be propaganda or whether it is actually meant to have be used as a tool in collective bargaining, or even whether it is simply meant to be educational. The problem with this statement is not just that it is vague, not just that it argues a single rosy opinion, the problem is that it is safe, and therefore, from an administrator's point

of view, can be safely ignored.

In closing, I have to admit that the argument can be made that university and library administrators will ignore what I write too. The difference is that I know that nothing I say can change the fundamental nature of my relationship to the university and library *as a worker*. All I can do is to write for other library workers, and the greatest courtesy I can do, in that case, is to try to speak as plainly as possible and to expose, as consistently as I can, the reality of "who signs the paychecks".

Materialism and the Mode of Production

2016-06-27

In Karl Marx and Critical Librarianship, John Pateman, CEO of Thunder Bay Public Library, seeks to provide a Marxist framework for a "Needs Based" library model. In 2008, Pateman wrote in *Information for Social Change* on "Developing a Needs Based Library Service" which, while not naming Marx directly, did refer to Marx's statement in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) (taken from Louis Blanc). "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs".

For Pateman, it seems, Marx's ideas are the bedrock on which the "Needs Based Library" could be founded. I say "could" because in neither document is the "Needs Based Library" posited as anything more than an abstract, aspirational model which returns libraries to a purported (but unsubstantiated) tradition of democracy and social justice which Pateman believes libraries have diverged from.

It seems to me that Pateman's reading of Marx does not do justice to the sophistication and nuance of Marx's theoretical contributions, but I don't want get into a debate about relative interpretations of Marx. I do, however, want to point out a major absence in Pateman's analysis, one which has always been considered fundamental to Marx and to Marxist analysis, the concept of *materialism*.

Pateman begins *Karl Marx and Critical Librarianship* by mentioning the base and superstructure, by which Marx meant the ways in which economic production was organized, and the culture, politics, social formations, etc, which develop out of a given mode of production. In his sketch of historical materialism published in 1859, Marx wrote:

> In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. (Marx, preface to *The Critique of Political Economy*)

The important thing here is that the "base" is material. The ways in which we, as workers, interact with the world to satisfy our needs (through work) is the foundation of the superstructure, and therefore of all social forms and institutions (including libraries). The relationship between the base and the superstructure is, of course, dialectical, but Marxism is an economic determinism, and it's important to remember the importance Marx ascribed to material reality and the relations that it engenders.

In this case, then, when Pateman states that "we can interpret the Superstructure as the organizational culture [...] and the Base as the Strategy, Structures, and Systems" of a library, he is losing sight of the materialist basis of capitalist production, and therefore confusing what is an economic relationship, and what is, for want of a better word, cultural. Organizational culture is obviously (but not merely) cultural, but so are strategy (how and by whom is strategy decided), services (what services, aimed at whom, provided how), and systems (in Pateman's view, systems are "policies and procedures"). We can see the "superstructural" nature of these categories in the fact that the actual relations of production (capitalist/funder, manager, employee, "consumer") remain unchanged.

I have to keep reminding myself that Pateman's "Needs Based Library" is not a description or a model of an actual existing library, but an imaginary construct described using quasi-factual statements which, I'm starting to realize, are not meant to be taken as descriptions of actual fact (this was part of my problem with the CAPAL statement on collegial governance). So that when Pateman writes:

> A Needs Based Library Service is both democratic and accountable. Stakeholders include staff, partners, suppliers, service users, lapsed users and non users. (Pateman, 2008)

He doesn't mean *is* in any kind of descriptive or ontological sense. By losing sight of the material forces and relations that actually exist in society, Pateman seems to free himself from any actual constraint, and confuse "should" statements with "is" statements.

So we end up back to the question I raised in my last blog post: who signs the cheques? If Pateman's Needs Based model is actually meant to be realistically applied, how does his "constitution" deal, with the realities of capitalsit relations, for example, with collective agreements? How would a Needs Based public library convince a (capitalist) municipal government to fund an organization that tries to not base itself on capitalist relations of production? Does a Needs Based library manage to exist in some kind of non-capitalist space simply because it is an imaginable option? As Gillian Byrne asked, does getting rid of traditional hierarchies simply replace them with relations of personal domination? Pateman's constitution seems to imply that this would, in fact, be the case:

> The transparency of the Constitution means that you no longer have

> to depend on office politics to get things done. With the Constitution made accessible to everyone, anyone in the Library can quickly figure out who owns what, the decisions he or she can make, and who to hold accountable for which functions.

Somehow, office politics would "wither away" once everyone knows "who owns what". This is precisely the idea that Lenin had which he belatedly tried to deal with in his testament against Stalin, but to no avail.

Further reading in Marx might have led Pateman to two other salient ideas, which appear in the same document as the discussion of the base and the superstructure:

> At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.

and

> No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.

This indicates that economic realities, material relations between people and classes, can't be changed or overthrown simply by closing ones eyes to them. We must have no illusions about how the mode of production creates the labour and living conditions in which we find ourselves. And it is only by changing the material basis of production that we can permanently and thoroughly change the superstructure. By ignoring, as Pateman does, the material constraints on our agency, he loses a major component of the Marxist framework on which he bases his library model.

In my view, Marx and Marxism are both valid bodies of thought for critiquing the current model of librarianship, imagining alternatives and, hopefully, pushing forward the kind of change Pateman is looking for. But I don't see the value in ignoring the very real material conditions of our working lives in favour of what seems to be little more than wishful thinking.

ADDENDUM: on applying Marxism to library work. In discussing Pateman's article, Jane Schmidt pointed out that details of what an actual implementation

of a Marxist model of libraries might look like is still lacking. I don't have any fully-fleshed out thoughts or ideas on this topic yet, but the more I think about it, the more I think that some kind of dual power could provide a way forward. Dual power was a term coined by Lenin to refer to the fact that, while the Tsarist and Provisional Governments were still legally in control, the Soviets (councils) in Moscow and Petrograd were providing social services and making political and practical decisions without reference to the government. The Black Panthers too, have exercised dual power to provide social services to their communities in the face of an abdication by the US and state governments. I still need to think more about this, but I wonder if self-organization by library workers without attempting to overthrow the decision-making apparatus, might be a way forward.

Review: Marx's Ecology

2016-07-01

Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature, John Bellamy Foster, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

Marx's Ecology fills a gap in Marxist scholarship by, in a sense, taking seriously Marx and Engels' claim to materialism. Reading 20th century Marxists, it can sometimes seem as if "materialism" is being used metaphorically, or at least has lost some of the precision it held in the 19th century (the same can be said, of course, for "dialectic"). Bellamy recovers not only Marx's own interest in materialism, but the history of materialist thought from the pre-Socratics and Epicurus, through to the scientfic discoveries and displacement of idealistic/religious views of the world ("natural theology") culminating in the work of Darwin and others. Putting Marxism in this context not only uncovers new depths to Marx's project, but it clarifies the sense in which Marx and Engels always maintained that project to be "scientific". Foster shows the extent to which Marx and Engels were fully versed in the scientific theories and advances of their age. The end result is not only fuller recognition of the place of ecology within Marx's thinking, but a way to fit Marxism into thinking around ecology, population, climate change, and other social/ecological problems we are facing today.

The initial impetus for Marx's materialism was the reading of Epicurus, especially as popularized by Lucretius in his *De rerum natura*, a didactic poem in which he sets out and explains Epicurus' philosophy. For Epicurus (as for Democritus), the world was composed of atoms which interacted mechanically, those interactions producing everything that exists in the physical world. In this schema, both "the gods" and Platonic ideals have no place, and the teleological view of idealism is surplus to requirements. Foster carefully links the areligious, anti-teleological view of Epicurus with that of the early scientific thinkers like Bacon and Newton, showing that the materialistic science of the 17th and 18th centuries was, if anything, a vindication of the theories of Epicurus and the pre-Socratics. By the early 19th century, Epicurean philosophy was being recovered as an antidote to idealism, just as his materialistic physics was an antidote to religiosity in science. In 1841, Marx wrote his doctoral thesis on *The Difference between the Democritean and the Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, part of a growing movement in Germany attempting to modify the idealism of Hegel

with materialist thought.

For Marx, Epicurus and Hegel stood at two poles of a very productive, dialectical, relationship. Epicurus' materialism allowed Marx to reject the idealism of Hegel while retaining Hegel's conception of dialectical movement and totality. In this way, the logical and philosophical foundations of Marxism were laid. But materialism did not only inform Marx's philosophical views; the victory of materialist science in the work of Huxley, Lyell, Tyndall, and especially Darwin, gave Marx the scientific information required to firmly anchor the theory of historical materialism and *Capital* within the scientific understanding of his day. Indeed, Foster's book is perhaps at its most interesting in uncovering the connections between Darwin's work and Marx's. It is no coincidence that Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) appears at the time Marx begins working on what will become *Capital* (1867). Darwin and Marx were very near contemporaries, and this fact alone gives fresh insight into the wider context of Marx's economic project, and the context in which he worked. Marx is generally considered first and foremost a political writer, his self-identification as an economist often played down, and his view of his work as scientific generally dismissed. But by connecting Marx's work with Darwin's, as well as the general development of modern science in the mid-19th century, Foster recovers an aspect of Marx which is generally ignored.

In all, *Marx's Ecology* is a fascinating book, making the connection between science and (materialist) philosophy clear and providing much-needed historical context not only for Marxism, but for the history of ecological thought in and through advances in materialist thinking and scientific discovery.

Coevolution and Dialectical History

2016-07-03

One of the interesting discussions in John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology* is the discussion of "coevolution". Foster relates how, due to their study of Darwin and other 19th century scientists, came up with the idea that, just as the internal organs of animals evolved along with changes in their environment, so did human tools ("the external organs") but, given that tools were used by human beings to change their environment, both tools and environment evolved alongside each other in a mutually modifying relationship.

Alfred Russel Wallace, "co-discoverer with Darwin of the theory of natural selection", maintained that the mind itself was an organ like any other, evolving alongside its environment which, increasingly, included the use and effects of tools. "Early humans", Foster writes,

> were able to alter their relation to their local environment, radically improving their adaptibility. Those who were most ingenious in making and using tools were most likely to survive, which meant that the evolutionary process exerted selective pressures toward the enlargement of the brain and the development of speech (necessary for the social process of labour), leading eventually to the rise of modern humans. Thus the human brain, like the hand… evolved through a complex, interactive set of relations. (Foster, p. 203)

In this way, Marx and Engels' dialectic view of history received support from the scientific discoveries of the 19th century. The evolutionary, mutually determining view of the development of nature correspended to the dialectical, holistic theory of human history.

This discussion made me think of the history of libraries, often not much more than a history of famous buildings or a checklist of book technologies (scroll to codex, manuscript to printed book, etc). While the field of Book History has long recognized the material basis of its object of study (the physicality of the book itself, the material organization of labour, production, and distribution), there always seems to be a gap in the material history of libraries. This gap also corresponds to a lack of contextual, holistic thinking around library history. What, for example, was the effect of the dissolution of the monasteries, not only on monastic libraries and their collection of libraries, but of a trained,

disciplined, literate workforce (monastic scribes) suddenly finding themselves unemployed? More closely tied to the idea of coevolution, what effect did the change in book format have on the organization and structure of libraries and on the workers and practices within them? These questions are raised, for example, in the field of manuscript studies, but the connection to library history is often left relatively undefined. This, of course, raises the larger question of the effect of changing modes of production, their effect on the organization both of book production, as well as libraries, their buildings, and their staff. Libraries are one of the few institutions with a long enough history that we can trace the effect of different modes of production over time.

In Public Libraries, History, and the State, I attempted this kind of dialectical historicizing by relating some aspects of public library history to the evolution of the state over the 19th and 20th centuries. This was only a small part of dialectical determinisms at play in library history. The changing class structure of a given society, the particular moment of equilibrium (or disequilibrium) within capitalist production, the fortunes of the political class at a given moment in time, all of this plays into the material history of the library.

The most recent large-scale change was, of course, the rise of digital technologies and the distributed web, which had an effect not only on print culture - complementing ink and paper with electronic, steel, and plastics - but the library as well. The gradual rise of the internet and technologies of online publishing, access, and distribution have called the very physicality of the library and its holdings into question. The debate around the effects of this evolutionary moment tend to be one-sided, as if the traditional library and traditional usages and practices needed to be stacked against some "disruptive" model which seeks only to destroy the library as we know it. But if we follow the dialectical, coevolutionary model of history, it should be clear that what will result from the contradiction between traditional library buildings, books, and modes of reading, and newer ones, will be something new, something different from either the traditional library or the technocratic, decentralized, uncontrolled flow of information beloved of bourgeois entrepreneurs, politicians, and media people.

The dialectic, in Jameson's view, can be both a philosophical system (as in Hegel) and a method (as in Marx), but in fact it is both of those things at once: a way of thinking about the world that resists the static categories of traditional thought. To think dialectically is to, first, see the totality of relationships at play. The library cannot be taken as a self-contained, identifiable entity - it is the product of relationships between people both avowedly related to the library and completely outside it (one thinks of city planners or university donors), and it evolves alongside both the material culture of reading and writing, research, teaching, and learning, and the physical and digital worlds in which the library occupies space. But dialectical thinking is also to recognize that the traditional categories of logical thought have alternatives. Jameson calls out "the law of non-contradiction" (that is both A and not-A cannot be true) as not holding within dialectical thinking. In fact, the very cornerstone of the dialectic is that

the concepts of A and not-A are never clear, never stable. A is always changing, always in the process of becoming something other than A.

It is this emphasis both on the totalities of the relationships which constitute and entity, and the insistence entities as dynamic and always-changing, that sets dialectical thinking apart from traditional (or even "common sense") categories of thought. In a sense, the dialectic restores the effects of time to our thinking and understanding.

> Did not the the dialectic, even in its Hegelian form, set out to inscribe time and change in our concepts themselves, and to show how some all-too-human longing for timelessness obscured the inadequacy of our mental categories[?] (Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, p. 3)

What am I driving at? Perhaps I am tentatively suggesting a research project into the dialectical, coevolutionary, materialist history of the library. Such a project would need to look closely and critically at labour, at buildings, at the relationship with cultures of print, and with the material effect of the digital on all these things. It would also have to pay attention to modes of production, to forms of the state, and to the dominant and subaltern ideologies. It would have to treat the library as an institution, practices of reading, writing, and research, technologies, and classification systems and standards, as all part of the superstructure, material traces of the determining effect the mode of production has on anyone working in libraries today, or at any point in the past.

Race, Class, and the Police

2016-07-07

Note: these thoughts are, necessarily, incomplete - they do not, for example, discuss the oppression of women - but I hope they add constructively to the discussion of a difficult, complex, and emotional issue. They are likely inadequate, and in some cases maybe wrong, but they are set down in good faith.

The confrontation of Toronto Pride and the Toronto Police by Black Lives Matter, intimidation and oppression of First Nations and other people in Canada and the United States, fascist and racist outbreaks in post-Brexit Britain, and the seemingly endless executions of Black people by police in the United States, all require an attempt to understand how and why our society is the way it is, in order, perhaps, one day to create a new and better society. In any period of social upheaval, such as the one we are living through today, it is usually instructive to go back to Lenin.

It seems to me that there are two elements to what we are seeing: the state-sanctioned legitimacy of police violence, and the fact that the targets of violence are predominantly people of colour.

In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin discusses Marx and Engels' conception of the capitalist state. For all three, the state was not an institution somehow standing apart from the social relationships inherent in a society. Instead, it is the organization of the ruling class against the lower classes, required by the ruling class so that the antagonism between the exploiters and the exploited do not tear society apart. In order to achieve a semblance of legitimacy, the state positions itself (in appearance, but not in reality) as standing above the fray, of remaining aloof from social conflicts. In this view, the impossibility of convicting police officers of illegal shootings can only be seen as an accident (or worse, as the legitimate workings of a "neutral" justice system).

In reality, the state is the organization of the tools and institutions of violent oppression of one class against the rest. If such tools and institutions (police, prisons, justice system, etc) did not exist, the antagonisms between social classes would tear society apart. In effect, the state is the mechanism by and through which the ruling class maintains control over society. For Marx and Lenin, the commune on which they modeled their view of the society of the future (the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Soviets of 1905 and 1917, respectively), such police

activity as would be required would be supplied through the self-organization of the community itself. The police would not be a separate, permanent body of permanently armed men with a state-sanctioned monopoly on violence.

We have seen, over the last few years, the increasingly militarization of the police (most notably in Ferguson, MO following the killing of Michael Brown). To the Marxist this is an indication of the need for increased violence to maintain control over a society increasingly riven and fractured by social antagonisms.

The police, then, despite decades if not longer of a heavy public relations campaign, are an institution of state (that is, ruling class) oppression exercised through violence and the threat of violence. And the police cannot be reformed, because they occupy a necessary position within the state apparatus. Only by getting rid of the state can we get rid of the police.

But in order to self-organize, in order to get rid of the state, we need to abolish social classes. Only in a classless society, a commune, can everyone be seen as a member of the community, and not as an Other to be feared and killed. It is precisely because First Nations and Black people, LGBTQ and immigrant communities, all those who suffer at the hands of the capitalist state and the bourgeois ideology, are seen as Others, as "not members of our community", and so it becomes legitimate to oppress, harass, and kill them with impunity.

That race is the criterion through which this social mechanism plays out is indisputable. But race itself is a social relation, and so contains within it economic (that is class) elements. What follows is one way of thinking about how this works, but there are many others, and they are by no means mutually exclusive.

Capitalist society requires certain elements of society to be kept in poverty, to be kept precariously-, marginally-, or flat-out un-employed, it requires certain people to remain uneducated and marginalized. In the earliest decades of capitalism, these people were the working class as a whole, including white factory workers, women, and children. Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England* is a scathing indictment of the treatment of the English working class in the middle of the 19th century. Following the Second World War, partly as a reward for dying in a massive imperialist conflict, and partly to defuse the social tensions that had created the conditions for the war in the first place, a section of the working class was increasingly bought off with higher wages, improved living standards, etc. This is generally known as the Long Boom which lasted until approximately 1973, when the neoliberal revenge against the working class (now undertaken under the "austerity" euphemism) set in. This section of the (predeominantly white) working class took completely to the bourgeois ideology of the ruling class and became ideologically (though not economically) what we now refer to as "middle class".

Lenin identified this process of buying off the working class in his analysis of support for the First World War by left-wing parties in his 1916 book *Imperialism: The Latest Stage of Capitalism*.

But this process of promoting (or bribing) the white working class in North America made the racial and heteronormative basis of this promotion explicit. The remaining members of the working class and poor, those who were not bribed to support the ruling class, were increasingly people of colour and sexual and gender minorities (those who were, from a bourgeois point of view, "unprofessional" and unemployable). This process has continued to the present day.

So we have, currently, legitimate anger on the part of oppressed people (oppressed by race, class, and gender), coming up against the violence of an institution for the maintenance of state control (the police), supported and legitimated by a working class bought off by higher wages and higher standard of living (who no longer recognize themselves as working class). And into this mix we throw the murderous tool developed and perfected throughout the long centuries of the capitalist mode of production: the gun.

Since all of these social relationships, all of these historical dynamics are products of the fundamental way in which society is organized, reforming this or that institution is doomed to failure. Only by fundamentally changing the forces and relations of production and the social relationships that grow out of them can we eventually get rid of the state, get rid of the police, and get rid of the need to see certain people, certain human beings, as non-human, as not part of the human community. Only by creating a society in which seeing Black, First Nations, LGBTQ people as human beings and not as disturbers of the social order, can we end the ruthless, criminal, sanctioned violence and murder with which we live today. As Paolo Freire wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> While the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind's central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern. Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality And as an individual perceives the extent of dehumanization, he or she may ask if humanization is a viable possibility. Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompletion. But while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is the people's vocation. (p. 45).

I don't have any real practical proposals for what we can do *right now* in order to try to bring about this kind of change, to further a project of humanization for all. But we can start with listening, reading, and education ourselves, calling out hypocrisy and lies and recognizing the effect of generations of dehumanization on marginalized members of our communities. I also think a good start would be to ban guns outright. But we must also remain cognizant of the legitimacy, the requirement, to fight back against a state whose organization of violence can, perhaps, only be met by confrontation up to and potentially including more violence before we eventually, hopefully, achieve peace.

Precarity and Capital

2016-07-16

*What follows are a few thoughts about precarious labour and Marx' **Capital**. They should not be considered exhaustive. I have also simplified Marx's argument to a large extent.*

In reading Michael Heinrich's masterful 2012 *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, I was struck by his remark that, in order to increase the production of relative surplus value, only two mechanisms lay open to the capitalist, and that one of these "is difficult to imlpement and [...] cannot happen permanently" (105). The case which Heinrich dismisses is when "the quality and quantity of the means of subsistence considered necessary is reduced". What I think Heinrich misses here is that the standard of living of the working class is just as much a social determination as everything else in *Capital* (albeit with a hard lower limit), and that since the end of the Second World War, that standard of living has - in the developed West, and for a certain section of the working class - been steadily rising. It stands to reason that, having devised a mechanism to reduce this standard of living, capital should employ it, in the name of increased profitability. This mechanism is, of course, precarious labour.

The previous paragraph requires some background explanation. In *Capital*, Marx identifies the source of value in human labour, and the source of capitalist profit in the exploitation of that labour. This exploitation takes place in the process of production, in which workers are paid a wage commensurate with their standard of living, but produce more value in a given working day than they are paid in wages. The extra value produced by workers is called surplus value, and the production of surplus value lies at the heart of capitalism. In order to remain competitive and to constantly maintain profits, the capitalist must always seek to increase the proportion of surplus-value time to the time he is paying for in wages. If a worker is paid $100 per 8 hour work day (the cost of maintaining the worker in her standard of living), and puts $100 worth of value into the product in 4 hours, then the remaining 4 hours provides free value to the capitalist (i.e. the capitalist gets $100 for nothing). The working day thus breaks down into:

4 hours paid + 4 hours unpaid = 8 hours (4 hours profit)

Now, the capitalist could increase the amount of unpaid time by increasing the

length of the working day, but that is usually limited (in Canada, for example), both by legislation and collective agreements. The only option left for the capitalist is to increase the amount of value produced by the worker for any given length of time. If, for example, an increase in the worker's productivity means that she produces $200 worth of value in 4 hours, and she remains paid $100 for the work day, then her wages are made up in only 2 hours and the working day breaks down into:

2 hours paid + 6 hours unpaid = 8 hours (6 hours profit)

Typically, this increase in the productivity of labour takes place through a) increasing the number of workers employed by the capitalist, b) increased division of labour and c) replacement of human labour by machinery. A side-effect of the increased productivity of labour is that the goods produced become cheaper, thus lowering the costs of the means of susbsistence (roughly, the standard of living) for the worker, allowing wages to be lowered. For Heinrich, this is the "typical case" by which productivity, and therefore the rate of surplus value, increases.

But, in the period since the Second World War, the standard of living of large numbers of the working class in Canada and the US has increased steadily above subsistence level. Due largely to labour action on the part of workers organized into unions, wages and benefits have risen along with the standard of living. That the entire working class has not benefited equally from this (i.e. people of colour and women) is indisputable, and there are solid economic (= capitalist) reasons for this. But for the majority of the working class, this has been the case, and capital has always looked for a way to get out of paying for much of this increase.

Precarity is a new term to use for, essentially, the condition of workers living right at the means of subsistence. Through zero-hour contracts, part-time contracts that don't trigger benefits and don't add up to much (if anything) above a living wage, the cost to the capitalist per worker is lowered, while the worker still contributes the same amount of labour (= value) as before. Some of the cost is offloaded onto the state, but much of it simply evaporates. The benefits of the long boom are wiped out at one stroke.

Precarity is only one mechanism by which capital increases relative surplus value, while also exercising its domination over workers. There are others, such as, for example, the mixing of multiple unions and non-unionized workers in a given organization, leading to competition and strife among the workers to the benefit of capital. But, in essence, precarity is nothing new - it only seems that way after the decades of rising standard of living after 1945. It is important to remember that precarity is the *rule* under capitalism, and the hard-won gains of the past 70 years are the exception. It is also important to remember that precarity and its particular mechanisms (e.g. zero-hour contracts) are not accidents or aberrations; they are part and parcel of the brutal logic of the capitalist process of production. As such, they cannot be dealt with through

reform of the capitalist system, only by its abolition.

Librarianship: Values and Profession

2016-07-22

I've been thinking quite a lot lately about the presumed values of our presumed profession. "Presumed" in this case both in the sense that we presume we agree on meanings (of the words we use to describe our values, for example) and in the sense that a profession of librarianship is presumed to exist. This double presumption, it seems to me, is difficult to support, in part because the two presumptions feed into each other ("what do we mean by *profession*?") and in part because our presumptions serve to mystify real relationships among people, and between people and the world.

Mark Matienzo of DPLA wrote a post a couple of weeks ago on The DPLA Technology Team Core Values. I was initially struck by how concrete each of the core value areas was. Each area was not only fairly specific ("Maximal openness to DPLA technology and infrastructure") but each was accompanied by a statement adding clarification or context ("Maximal openness to DPLA technology and infrastructure, through use of minimally restrictive open source or reuse-friendly licenses for software, documentation, and related assets"). After some discussion on Twitter, I threw out the idea that perhaps our (= libraries' or librarianship's) values should have to conform to the SMART principles. These are criteria which, in project management, are required for the definition of a goal. A goal must be

- Specific,
- Measurable,
- Achievable,
- Realistic, and
- Time-bound

Perhaps not all of these apply to values as opposed to goals, but some of them are, I would argue, crucial. If we aren't specific and can't measure achievement of our values, how do we know that we actually exemplify them? A good example of library values which are to all intents and purposes meaningless, context free buzzwords, the University of Alberta Libraries principles and values are as follows:

Principles

- Accountable
- Open
- Responsive
- Sustainable
- Transparent

Values

- Collaboration
- Inclusivity
- Innovation
- Intellectual Freedom
- Service

That's it. No attempt to clarify or define these terms. No links to examples. No sense as to how they might be measured. How do we know if we exemplify any of these principles or values? Absent specificity, this becomes the prerogative of whoever controls the discourse. In fact, it becomes subjet to the power hierarchy within the library itself.

At around the same time I discovered a "bucket list" for land reclamation professionals:

Wouldn't this be neat for librarianship. Not likely tho. pic.twitter.com/R7qfaMwmgP

— (@redlibrarian) July 20, 2016

Again, this led to some discussion around whether or not librarians could achieve consensus on such a list for our profession. I argued that whether or not we could achieve such a consensus, it's almost a moot point because we have no forum through which to discuss these things. In Canada, we don't have a professional association with the size and reach of the American Library Association (and this was true even before the dissolution of the CLA). Small constituencies (like Library Twitter, the CARL Directors, or CAPAL members) might have a way to discuss these issues, but for the most part librarians are stuck within their organizations and institutions which may or may not foster critical discussion (in my experience, the latter predominates).

Other professions have centralized consensus in the form of their licensing bodies: teachers, doctors, and lawyers all have specific and measurable values to which they must adhere. It has been pointed outmany times before that, by that criteria, librarianship is not a profession at all.

And yet, there *is* something common to the outlook of most library workers I know. Something on the level of an orientation or a worldview that perhaps cannot be captured by anything so prosaic as a mission, vision, or values statement. This is why we argue so vociferously about a lot of this stuff, even though we recognize that it's unlikely to do any good.

Finally, in a Twitter discussion with Peter Binkley I proposed the idea that perhaps, given that libraries are no longer about books, we could agree that we

should promote reading. I argued that there was a possibility, a case to be made, that reading is a qualitatively distinct activity from other "media consumption" promoted by postmodern capitalism. I'm not necessarily wedded to that idea, but I think it's a conversation worth having. In the end, I settled for the idea that it would be nice if libraries could stand for something, anything, since at present it seems that we are simply reacting, silently and by default supporting the neoliberal and corporate order (albeit in different ways according to whether an institution is academic or public). It seems to me that there is very little (read: none) critical thought that goes into the provision of services. Most of these decisions are made either by the chief librarian or the small group of senior librarians with little or no input or debate. At the same time, the default line in many contexts (presentations, publications) is the success and leadership of libraries and their services. "We done good" is the refrain. This, I think, is what drives so many of us to be critical - of the values that we proclaim we hold, of the principles to which we claim to adhere - because there is no shortage of people uncritically proclaiming the universal value and goodness of the library that never fails.

A good example is with "intellectual freedom", something that we all - in principle - support. But like many library values, it is seen more in a negative than a positive context. Intellectual freedom is often reduced to "you can't tell me what to think" rather than an active "here's what I think". Intellectual freedom is seen as a right, when it ought to be seen as a responsibility. As a result, it is honoured more in the breach than the observance, as fear of losing funding or - to quote The Wire - suction with funding bodies (municipalities of university governors). If we are so afraid that "saying something wrong" will jeopardized our standing with our funding agencies, then intellectual freedom falls at the first hurdle. As a core value of our profession, if intellectual freedom falls, where then can our profession locate itself?

If academic and public libraries are afraid of offending their funders, whither our intellectual/professional freedom?

— (@redlibrarian) July 21, 2016

In this recently published book *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, Fredric Jameson argues that political parties on left have lost any ability they might have had to wield any kind of power, officially or unofficially. These parties might, he suggests, be rehabilitated, but without expecting anything concrete from them. Their purpose would then be to resuscitate ideas and words which, with the victory of neoliberalism and *The End of History* are considered quaint and old-fashioned. The role of political parties in the kind of utopia Jameson envisions, is to "talk socialism", "to breathe life back into the slogans withered and desiccated by the triumphant poison gas of Mrs. Thatcher's breath" (7).

> It should be understood that under the current system of representative government, the political parties can never accomplish [any

> concrete programme], but they can talk about them, they can make them thinkable and conceivable once again, they can plant the seeds and rekindle the possibility of imagining future praxis - and they can reestablish these themes in their legitimate place in the public sphere. (8)

Not only do I think that libraries - especially, but not exclusively public libraries - have a similar role to play in society to Jameson's political parties, but I think we as librarians also have a responsibility to make real, concrete, values thinkable again. In a profession where the single word "responsive" can be proposed as a principle with a straight-face, where our services are all tainted by our forced complicity with capitalist economics and politics, perhaps utopian thinking, silly proposals, unworkable schemes, arguments, curses, dangerous ideas, in a word, criticism, are vital to give the sapling worldview of librarians - that fragile, ill-defined thing - room to grow.

Libraries as Dual Power: A Utopia (II)

2016-08-06 12:55:00

(part two)

Blog posts are, by definition, "hot takes". But even as I finished part one I realized that I had not treated Libraries as Dual Power with anything like the depth it required. In this part, I want to dig a little deeper into some of the assumptions of part one.

Utopia and "Talking Socialism"

In "An American Utopia" Jameson adopts Stuart Hall's concept of "discursive struggle" to open up the possibility of recovering ideas and values destroyed in capitalist society since the rise of Thatcher-Reagan neoliberalism.

> discursive struggle posited the process whereby slogans, concepts, stereotypes, and accepted wisdoms did battle among each other for preponderance, which is to say (…) hegemony. Stuart saw that one of the fundamental strategies at work in that victory [of Thatcher] lay in the delegitimation of the language of its adversaries, in the tireless discrediting of all the slogans, such as nationalization, that were associated with a postwar labor hegemony.

We can see this in the fact that, again and again, those of us on the left- or social-justice wing of librarianship must argue against "neutrality". The idea of the neutrality of libraries is so fundamental that we are *constantly* having to argue against it, with, it seems very little success. The neoliberal ideology won the "discursive struggle", so it is that ideology which sets the terms of the discourse. It is difficult, if not impossible, to raise certain socialist ideas within librarianship and be taken seriously. Even something like the abolition of fines has to be framed as an efficiency in order to move forward.

For Jameson, the role of political parties in his utopia is to make thinkable and speakable ideas which have been obscured or destroyed in the discursive struggle against capitalism. He takes, for example, the idea of full employment, or of the nationalization of services.

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> any of these things, but they can talk about them, they can make them thinkable and conceivable once agian, they can plant the seeds and rekindle the possibility of imagining future praxis - and they can reestablish these themes in their legitimate place in the public sphere.

Indeed, the very project of thinking up a utopia is to resurface ideas and values which are considered impractical, inefficient, or impossible in today's society. It is vital that, in the face of post-political, post-ideological, neoliberal ideology, library workers continue to critique, continue to raise and take seriously ideas that are unpleasant, uncomfortable, or even unthinkable.

Mission and Vision

I have written before about the problems inherent in the construction of a mission or vision for libraries. The idea that we might "talk socialism" openly provides perhaps another way to think through the vision and mission statements of libraries. If dual power is to become a reality, some common identity among libraries must provide our users with a focus, a way to understand who we are and what services we provide. In Agon Hamza's contribution to "An American Utopia" ("From the Other Scene to the Other State"), he argues that left-wing conceptions, for example of class struggle and class society itself, have been so completely coopted and disarmed by capitalist culture, that "we need to reactualize the notion of the proletariat":

> the proletariat is not only she or he from whom surplus-value is extracted, but who is alienated from the substance of our subjectivity. In this sense, the *Communist Manifesto's* call "proletarians of the world, unite" is actual: we need a large-scale unification of workers, consumers, the excluded, immigrants, the unemployed, the unemployable and illegally employed, dispossessed farmers, youth with no prospects, and so on.

In formulating our mission and vision, we must set ourselves up as a beacon to attract the entire proletariat. Without that, not only does bourgeois ideology continue to be victorious in the discursive struggle, but the left even loses more ground to fascist ideologies such as those, for example, promoted by Donald Trump's election campaign.

> [In Brazil] it is either fascist groups or drug cartels that offer a place, arms, and organization for invisible youth from the favelas. The articulation of a brand and belonging is produced by mafia or fascists, which, in the absence of a leftist brand, allows people from the lower classes to recognize themselves as actors without depending on the institutional recognition of the state. [...] The urgent task of communist thinking is to break the vicious circle of desperate (and failed) attempts to articulate clear positions and rethink the forms of mass political organization.

That is, libraries as dual power must provide a focal point and identity through which our users can recognize our services and come to rely on us. Much has been written about the trust members of society have in the library (in the face of library closures over the last few years). I would argue that this trustworthiness not only makes the library a solid candidate for dual power, but the exercise of dual power can only make the public's trust in the library stronger.

This blog post - indeed this blog as a whole - is an attempt to recover discredited ideas about the public, the public sphere, and the possibility of a socialist or communist society. As such, it is an attempt to "talk socialism" when socialism is completely off the agenda, that is when socialism itself is considered a utopia. I want to recognize here all my colleagues who are also engaged in this work, in the face of insuperable obstacles on the part of state power and bourgeois ideology.

Libraries as Dual Power: A Utopia (I)

2016-08-06 12:54:00

(part one)

When I was in library school, our collection development class rehashed the Berninghausen Debate (probably for the millionth time - sorry, Dr Howard). Essentially, the debate boils down to the social role of libraries, often framed as a debate over the "neutrality" of libraries. In terms of collection development, this ends up being a debate over giving users "what they want" (essentially, mass market commodities) or curating a collection with a social or political agenda in mind. I argued that mass-market commodities were immediately available to the vast majority of library users and that libraries should focus not only on the development of collections for the underserved (the homeless and immigrants, for example), but also on promoting materials that were not part of the continuum of mass-market commodities (alternative social or politicial theories, for example, or non-bestseller fiction). Given that bestseller fiction is available from any Chapters or airport bookstore (or online), it seemed ridiculous to devote library budget and display space to promote that material at the expense of other, less obvious, things. The counter to this argument, of course, was the supposed neutrality of libraries and collection policies, as well as the idea that we simply "give users what they want" (presuming that the wants of users are somehow not socially determined). The function of the library, I argued, was not in neutrally providing users access to content they somehow already desired, it was in producing and maintaining the desires for the commodities of capitalist culture itself.

Lately, I've noticed how both public and academic libraries have begun to loan out material that explicitly seek to address social/cultural/health issues. The loan of internet hot spots by Toronto and Edmonton Public Libraries and SAD lamps by University of Alberta Libraries, are explicitly meant to address the digital divide on the one hand and the mental health of students on the other. What's interesting about this is that this places the library in the position of addressing problems which ought rightly to be addressed by the parent organization. The digital divide in a city ought to be addressed by the municipality; the mental health of students ought to be a concern of the university at large. By offloading these social services onto the library, the municipality is able to

abdicate responsibility - a process inherent in the dismantling of the welfare state. When I was in Bournemouth in 2010, I was shown a flagship social centre within a public library branch. The centre was a library, but it contained offices for a social worker, employment officer, as well as a community police station.

Whether providing these services should be the role of the library or the state (i.e. the municipality or the public university) is not what I want to talk about here. Rather, I'm interested in the idea that libraries already provide a network of social services that operate in tandem with constituted state power. I want to talk about libraries as dual power.

In "An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army" (Verso, 2016), Fredric Jameson constructs a thought experiment whereby the American Army becomes the mechanism for socialism in the US. Without challenging the existing state and municipal governments, the Army becomes a medium by which every American citizen would receive health care, employment, social services, etc. Jameson selects the Army after discarding other non-state institutions, such as the church, the post office, and the professions, because it is an institution that crosses political borders, has both local and national presence, and already provides, for example, socialized medicine for its members.

> If business, the professions, religion, even the labor unions (let alone the post office or the Mafia) are inadequate vehicles for dual power, what can then be left in late capitalism as an already organized institution capable of assuming the parallel and ultimately revolutionary role on which alone radical social change depends?

Dual power, a term coined by Lenin, and referring to the coexistence of the soviets (workers' councils) and the provisional government in 1917, essentially means the taking over of social services (socialized medicine, education, etc), by a non-state organization, *without openly challenging the existing state apparatus.* Dual power would consist of a network of social services nominally operating under the supervision of the state, but in fact independent of it.

Jameson does not mention libraries as a possible network ready for the exercise of dual power, but I would like to explore the idea a little here. The largest network of libraries is the system of public libraries, typically organized by municipality, but active in both provincial associations and consortia the cross provincial lines. They are already offering social services, whether that be internet hot spots for loan, outreach to the disadvantaged, prison literacy programmes, onsite social workers, and safe spaces for the homeless (in municipalities which have seen the massive closure of day shelters run by the government). They also employ a large, disciplined, and decentralized workforce.

Academic libraries exist in every province and large municipal area. They belong to their own consortia, but also in provincial associations and consortia with public and special libraries. They too cross provincial lines, through national networks both at the library and the university level. They have connections

with vast numbers of post-secondary students, as well as researchers in every discipline.

Special libraries provide connections with the professions and the government. Law libraries are implicated within the legal profession and the judiciary; health libraries with the medical profession; government libraries with all levels of government: municipal, provincial, and federal. Imagine presenting your library card to receive medical care.

What I am arguing is that libraries as a whole a) are already present in the lives of vast swathes of the Canadian population and b) are already structured to provide services to their consituents. As a result, libraries are well-placed as exactly the "already organized institution" on which Jameson contends dual power must be based.

There are two immediate objections to such an idea, however. On the one hand, the question of library neutrality itself. For libraries to provide the services required of the dual power institution, they must give up any pretence to neutrality. They must - just like Jameson's Army - recognize the socialist content of what they are doing. Rather than serving their current function, that of maintaining the population in their positions within capitalist culture, they would have to insist on their function as a socialist service layer, as effecting what Jameson calls "cultural revolution" in antagonism to capitalist culture.

Connected with this, the other objection is the presence within librarianship of a "leadership" layer which not only insists on the fundamental neutrality of libraries, but whose position within the hierarchy, and within the networks of capitalist power, are dependent on their ability to maintain libraries in their ideological function (i.e. the reproduction of capitalist social and ideological structures). For libraries to occupy a space of dual power, it will not be enough to resist the policies and ideas of the parent organizations; libraries would have to set itself up in opposition to the ideas and desires of library leadership itself. In a sense, libraries already have this structure, given the positioning of certain elements of the library hierarchy either in or out of a given union or association.

This, then, is my own utopia, the idea that the network of libraries that already exist in this country could come together in an explicitly socialist network (or federation) in order to take over the services and support increasingly abdicated by capitalist state institutions. Libraries, then, could provide an alternative space to bourgeois ideological reproduction, leading, in Lenin's view (and Jameson's) to the eventual withering away of the state itself.

Anyone Can Read Aloud

2016-08-27

In organizing my files this weekend, I came across a paper I wrote in library school under the influence of exposure to the history of reading. For some reason, the act of reading struck me while rereading Greene's *Heart of the Matter*, and I wanted to explore some of the ramifications. The paper exposes, I think, the fact that I was by no means conversant with all (any?) of the literature about orality and literacy, Greene, or indeed literary studies itself. Despite that, I think there are a few interesting ideas here, and it might be of interest to someone.

'Anyone Can Read Aloud': Orality and Literacy in *The Heart of the Matter* (pdf)

LIULockout: Collegial Governance Part II

2016-09-07

In 'Who Signs the Paychecks', I wrote:

> Hiding the fact of an unequal employer – worker relationship behind an illusion of equality is dangerous at the best of times, but especially so in a period of collective bargaining.

And only a couple of months later we have the example of the Long Island University faculty/librarian lockout, which has several interesting features. On the one hand there's an almost unprecedented (in academia) resorting to classic union-busting maneuvres (short-notice lockout, obstruction of communication through blocking access to faculty email, scab labour), but there's also a tactic which seems especially heinous to those of us north of the border: the unilateral and immediate cancellation of health insurance. At this point, the tactics of university administration tips from being ugly but still within the bounds of traditional labour disputes to - at least from a Canadian perspective - a criminal act. It is no longer the ability to work and organize that is being disrupted - Russian roulette is being played with people's lives.

It is in this context that I think it is actually dangerous to ignore or obscure the fact that the needs, wants, and missions of administration (whether at the library or the university level) are not the same as those of faculty, librarians, and staff - especially in, but not restricted to, periods of collective bargaining. To pretend otherwise puts not only livelihoods at risk but also, as in the LIU case, actual lives.

It was argued that the CAPAL statement on collegial governance was meant to be read as an aspirational document. It strikes me that aspirations should be framed using "ought" language, no matter how idealistic that sounds ("the university ought to be a democratic organization"). To frame an aspirational document in "is" language is either disingenuous or dangerously naive. An aspiration is inherently idealistic, otherwise it would be a programme (of change, of revolution, of reform), so there is no need to shy away from idealistic language.

It is much clearer to point unambiguously to the inequities of power, especially as labour disputes sharpen along with the depths of capitalis and ecological crisis in both Canada and the US. That such a crisis is deepening can be seen in the

more-or-less open warfare on workers (especially workers in weaker positions, according to race, gender, sexuality, poverty) in the US. Cancelling workers' health insurance is tantamount to putting a gun to their heads to force them to approve a "collective" agreement (the bourgeois euphemisms become positively obscene in a time of crisis).

However, it is important to bear in mind that in universities, absent an actual owner, administration is composed of workers too. Coopted by a capitalist system that has even reached our institutions of higher learning, they are acting according to the requirements of the system. So too with scab labour. There was some debate yesterday about the justice of calling "replacement workers" scabs, and it is again vital to remember that calling in scab labour (Marx's "industrial reserve army") has a higher function than merely replacing labour power: it is to divide and disorganize workers themselves, setting them against each other in order to weaken their opposition to the real power - that of capital itself. I have no problem using the "scab" language, if only to combat the prevalence of mealy-mouthed bourgeois euphemisms like "labour action" instead of "strike", but we have to remember that scab's *especially* are put in a terrible position by capital. In the LIU situation, replacement workers are drawn from ununionized positions and threatened with termination for noncompliance. The violence of the relations of production touch unionized workers, that is beyond dispute, but unionized workers have to look out for nonunionized workers too, even scabs, who are often in an even worse position.

And on that note, might we hope that a lockout of faculty might convince some of them that they too are workers, that their privileged socio-economic position behooves them to act in solidarity with all other workers in the university? One of the main tactics of capitalism is to divide and conquer through offering better standards of living to some and not to others, but it is important to remember that these standards of living are granted by capital on sufferance, they are not the just desserts of some intellectual essentialism.

These are just a few thoughts, not fully worked out. I felt it was important to write something up about the LIU faculty and librarian lockout, in solidarity.

A Marxist Analysis of the Gender Pay Gap

2016-09-22

I've been thinking a lot lately about the gender pay gap (especially in universities, because that's where I work). Over the last few years, some Canadian universities (e.g. McMaster and Waterloo) have done internal studies to determine the extent of the pay gap and have implemented pay raises in order to compensate and help close the gap. There are some standard "justifications" raised against the idea of a gender-based pay gap, none of which are worth trying to rebut, for example that women don't ask for pay raises, a canard which has been thoroughly debunked. As I've been working my way through Marx's *Capital*, however, I began to wonder what the economic justification and mechanisms were (and by this I don't mean what are the *avowed* economic explanations, but what are the underlying dynamics of capitalism that create the conditions for a pay gap along gender or racial lines).

Marx starts out with a very simple question: when we exchange two commodities, how do we determine their value? His answer to this is that value is created by human labour: the labour theory of value which he took over from (e.g.) David Ricardo, states that human labour creates value which is then "embodied" in the commodity. This value is immaterial and not easily measurable, since its measure is really the "socially necessary labour time" embodied in the commodity. Over time, one commodity becomes a "universal measure" of any value, and we end up calling that commodity money. So, we can say that any output of production has value through being a product of human labour, and this value can be measured in money.

Money, Marx continues, is not the same as capital. The capitalists have to have a reason to bring labour and raw material together, to advance their own money to set up in industry and produce commodities. This incentive is profit, which returns to the capitalists after they sell the commodities they have produced. The question now becomes, how does the magnitude of value increase during the process of production, so that the commodities are worth more when they are sold than the raw materials and labour costs that went into them? In other words, where does the profit come from? (Capital is money that performs this operation of regularly increasing value).

Since the capitalist pays money for raw materials and for human labour, and only

human labour can create *new* value, the extra value (what Marx calls *surplus value*) can only come from value added to the commodity *that the capitalist has not paid for*. But how can this be, considering that workers sell their labour to capitalists on the free market? Surely the workers are capable of demanding the wage they want! (See here how the arguments for lower wages for women are the same as the arguments used to justify worker exploitation at the time Capital was written). The price of the commodity "labour power" (what the worker has to sell) is set on the market the same as everything else: it is the cost of all the commodities that went into its production, so the wages that a worker can command are equal to the amount of money spent on creating them as a worker (this explains why people with degrees are paid more in our society: all the money laid out on making them the worker they are goes into the price they can command for their labour power). Let's say the worker asks for $100 per day in wages and in 8 hours of work produces $100 of value - in that case no surplus value is produced and the capitalist receives no profit. The task of the capitalist is therefore to try to get the worker to produce *more* than $100 worth of value in an 8 hour day.

There are many ways that this can be done. Marx distinguishes between lengthening the working day and increasing the productivity of labour. Iff the worker produces $100 in 8 hours, they will produce $150 in 12 hours, even if they've already agreed to be paid only $100) and if, trough increased automation for example, a worker can now produce $150 worth of value in 8 hours, but you still only pay them $100 dollars, then in both cases $50 of surplus value is produced and pocketed by the capitalist.

But the capitalist can never stop at, say $50 worth of profit, because all the other capitalists are competing to increase their own profits, making it harder and harder to create surplus value anywhere. So the process continues, with capital constantly seeking new ways to cheapen labour and to increase productivity. Looked at from this angle, any *social* mechanism by which lower pay for *some labour* can be justified (i.e. labour performed by women) is worth it as it increases the amount of surplus labour performed by women, and hence the surplus value derived from their work. These social mechanisms are present as flat-out misogyny, but also operate in less direct ways (it has been suggested for example that women are subtly disadvantaged during salary negotiations).

Lenin referred on more than one occasion to the bribery of the upper levels of the working class, the raising of their standard of living to bring them around to support the status quo. The reason for increased exploitation of women with respect to men, is that enables male workers to be bought off by being in a better situation (this too manifests itself in insidious social ways, corrosive to both men and women). What has been said here applies to any group (i.e. new immigrants, racial minorities, etc.) which can be exploited to a higher degree and played off against other groups within the working class. One thing to bear in mind (especially among male workers who are happy with their lot) is that, under capitalism, *all* workers are exploited, all workers are forced to produce

surplus value. What we have here is a condition in which women are *more* exploited because they are women.

It seems clear to me that *all* Canadian universities (not to mention all other workplaces) ought to be immediately implementing plans to investigate the pay gap and take measures to close the gap. If not proposed by university administration, it ought to be a plank in all upcoming collective bargaining. Reducing the rate of exploitation of any and all members of a collective bargaining unit ought to be a priority for the unit as a whole. It's something, indeed, that would be worth striking over.

Open Data and the Question of Knowledge

2016-10-16

This weekend, I attended the Alberta Open Data Summit. It was very interesting to hear from libraries working with open data, but also to hear from all the "policy wonks" about their vision of how Open Data can support municipal policies around inclusion, social welfare, etc. The keynote was be Jean-Noé Landry, Executive Director of Open North, who discussed some of the initiatives that have grown out of the Open Data movement in Montreal. One of the things he talked about was indicators of maturity within the Open Data movement. Troy Pavlek has given a good summary of the conference and has a photo of Landry's slide in his blog post. The main indicators from Landry's point of view are:

- From **apps** to **systemic** change
- From data **visualization** to **interactive online tools**
- From **hackathons** to **sustained engagement** processes
- From **demand** to **context** specific data user approaches
- From **champions** to **mindset shift + capacity building**
- From open **data portals** to **personalized dashboards**
- From **local policies** to **global frameworks**

All of this is well and good, however, something bothered me with the state of the discourse throughout the conference. I tweeted at the time:

… and obstacles to perfect knowledge have technological solutions") that I fear is part of the Open Data narrative…

— Mutable Data (@redlibrarian) October 14, 2016

#LT never mind the very safe politics of the whole thing.

— Mutable Data (@redlibrarian) October 14, 2016

I've been thinking more about this since the conference, and there are two things I'd like to tease out here. One is that another indicator of maturity within the field is precisely the problematization of the positivist, technocratic view of open data; and the other is the question of science, as it's understood within the Marxist tradition.

The dominant narrative in the Open Data movement seems to be that social problems (e.g. government accountability, homelessness, etc) have technological

solutions.

> Freely available for anyone to access, use and re-use, these data bring immense transformation to the table: from better-informed people, through more transparent governments to safer and highly-efficient living environments. Connecivity, Open Data, and a Bag of Chips
>
> Improved access to data will bring substantial benefits to the third sector, and so to society. Better access for more impact: what open data ca offer the third sector
>
> Access to (open) data will help prevent duplication, uncover funding gaps, reduce the research burden for planning a new project and significantly improve how donors target their aid. Open Data and Agricultural Aid: The Next Step in Tackling Hunger

This kind of technocratic positivism reminds me of the state of musicology before the publication of Joseph Kerman's *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (1985). Prior to this, music was considered autonomous, above and apart from social, economic, political, and even cultural determinations. Kerman's book was part of a movement towards situating musical culture within a social framework, that saw music as part of other social trends, pressures, determinations, etc. Needless to say "traditional" musicologists saw this "injection" of worldliness, of critique, as an affront to the pure, scientific positivism of their worldview. I would argue that what the Open Data movement requires now is just such an injection of (that unpopular word) theory. Without it, it risks being coopted into the neoliberal structures of metrics, analysis, big data, surveillance, and the replication of traditional (white, male, middle class) hierarchies of social control. The adoption of open data policies by capitalist governments cannot and will not *automatically* address social problems, exploitation, poverty, homelessness, etc. To argue that all that is required for governments to become accountable and progressive is the availability of data implies that social problems are merely failures in knowledge, and ignores the facts of structural inequality, relationships of power and privilege, and class struggle within capitalist society.

This *question of knowledge* raises its head everywhere. The idea that injustice, inequality, and oppression can be overcome simply by improving knowledge ignores both the question of power (and how it is maintained) as well as ideology and ideological reproduction. At bottom is an Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is perfectable and perfect knowledge leads to perfect societies - an idealism that is at odds with the Marxist understanding of the material world.

The question of the distinction between science (true knowledge) and ideology (false knowledge) has long been of interest to Marxist theorists (notably in the work of Louis Althusser). For Georg Lukacs, writing in the 1920s, the Marxist theory of knowledge was qualitatively different from the theory of knowledge tacitly assumed by bourgeois science. In What is Orthodox Marxism? he writes that

> The methodology of the natural sciences… rejects the idea of contradiction and antagonism in its subject matter. If… contradictions do spring up between particular theories, this only proves that our knowledge is as yet imperfect. Contradictions between theories show that these theories have reached their natural limits; they must therefore be transformed and subsumed under even wider theories in which the contradictions finally disappear. (10)

A classic example of this is the subsumption of Newtonian physics under Relativistic physics, but this process is well-documented in Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). For Marxists, however, Lukacs goes on,

> in the case of social reality these contradictions are not a sign of the imperfect understanding of reality; on the contrary, they belong to *the nature of reality itself and to the nature of capitalism.* When the totality is known they will not be transcended and *cease* to be contradictions. Quite the reverse. They will be seen to be necessary contradictions arising out of the antagonisms of this system of production. When theory (as the knowledge of the whole) opens up the way to resolving these contradictions it does so by revealing the real tendencies of social evolution. For these are destined to effect a real resolution of the contradictions that have emerged in the course of history. (10-11)

At issue with the positivist approach to Open Data is the suggestion that open data, and therefore improved knowledge, is all that is required to overcome the contradictions and oppressive structures of society. And the risk with this kind of thinking is that the opening up of data can become an end in itself; the open data movement might then stop once it has accomplished everything on the right hand side of Landry's list (personalized dashboards, for example) without going further, using Open Data to expose the real inequalities, power dynamics, and oppressions of society, "and by opposing, end them".

Academic Labour, Governance, and the Strike

2016-11-04

As I write this, the University of Manitoba Faculty Association, which represents faculty members, librarians, and other academic staff, is on day 4 of a strike. Today, they are leading a march to the Administrative Offices of the University to demand improved working conditions and job security. After interference from the Government of Manitoba, UMFA has agreed to move forward with mediation on non-salary issues.

In September, faculty and librarians at Long Island University's Brooklyn Campus were locked out for 12 days by their administration, who attempted to replace them with scab labour, many of whom - being non-unionized - had no choice but to comply.

In June, library workers in Mississauga were on strike for nearly three weeks. Once you start looking, conflicts between administrators (whether academic or municipal) and workers can be seen everywhere, all the time. We may be past the historical period of mass industrial strikes and lockouts (thought the threatened CUPW strike this summer argues otherwise), but labour issues in librarianship simply show that the class struggle is alive and well.

In January 2015, the Supreme Court found that a government interpreting "essentially services" too broadly abrogated the constitutional right to strike, which (as I understand it) made the collective agreement between University of Saskatchewan and its faculty members unconstitutional. This has had an effect on all other non-union faculty associations in Canada, association which are bound by provincial legislation **but not** by the province's labour relations act (or its executive body, the labour board). This is true in Alberta as well, where the government is now trying to decide whether simply to modify the existing Post-Secondary Learning Act to make it constitutional, or to take all labour-related language out of the PSLA and make the academic associations subject to the Alberta Labour Relations Act. The presidents of the three largest universities in Alberta - Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge - obviously want to continue under the PSLA rather than give academic workers the protection of the labour board. James Turk of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (which includes librarians) wrote a letter to the AASUA (UAlberta's faculty association) in support of the associations being recognized and covered by the

labour relations act. In the letter, Turk identifies several problems with the PSLA:

- It does not allow the membership to decide the structure of the organization
- It gives the employer sole power to determine who is and is not a member of the organization
- It has no statutory powers (e.g. to compel witnesses) in the case of disputes
- It includes no requirement to bargain in good faith
- It includes no requirement for fair representation by the association of a member
- It denies the right to strike

Now, the three presidents who submitted letters in support of the PSLA to the province of Alberta used several arguments, but I want to talk about one in particular: They argue that the labour relations act is unnecessary for academic institutions because they are managed through collegial governance. In this view, there is no conflict between employer and employed, between administration and rank-and-file workers. Partly this can be explained through the fact that the Board-of-Governors and the Province are not private corporations, partly due to the fact that much of a university's administration is composed of (usually ex-) faculty members. Under the PSLA, academic staff members remain in scope for the collective agreement even while bargaining on the other side of the table. Move along, there can be no class struggle here because our minds are on higher things, the summit of intellectual achievement, and collective bargaining is simply a material blot on our proverbial copybook, a necessary evil, but we're really all on the same page.

This argument is patently absurd. And yet, the presidents double-down on it by claiming that, by making the academic faculty associations subject to the labour relations act, this will *cause* collegial governance to be destroyed. So the argument runs: we have no conflict, but if you try to protect yourselves, then we *will* have conflict. The argument used by racketeers for generations.

I have written about collegial governance (or lack thereof) elsewhere. We do not have collegial governance, so the argument that it will somehow disappear if we become subject to the labour relations act is a straw man.

But there is something more interesting I want to bring up here: the question of ideology. Emily Drabinski, one of the librarians heavily involved in union organizing at LIU, wrote recently about her experience on the board of *Radical Teeacher*, beginning in 2008. At one point, she writes:

> Managing an explicitly radical journal like *Radical Teacher*, the editors might have been expected to understand scholarship as a material practice. For Marxists, life is produced and reproduced through material conditions. Under capitalism, factors such as surplus labor and the demand for profit constrain these conditions—factors that also play into scholarly publishing as librarians experience it. When

> the board members didn't see their labor as such, I felt I should intervene, in order to articulate some of these practices. As a librarian, I understood and was able to explain to the other board members why people weren't buying our journal.

And again:

> Taking Radical Teacher open access meant working with scholars until they understood that scholarship requires work beyond the realm of ideas. Even though the Marxist materialists on the board understood on some level that people made the journal with their hands, it was harder for them to see that we were part of a bigger economic structure.

This last part strikes me as strange because seeing the bigger pictures is, in my view, one of the foundational ideas of Marxism. One of the best discussions of Marxism and "the totality" is in Georg Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*, but is a hallmark of most Marxist writers, especially those writing after the Western Marxist "return to Hegel" of the 1920s and 30s.

If the presidents of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge are in good faith (though the PSLA, of course, does not require good faith), then the absurdity of the collegial governance argument can only seem convincing to them if they are unable to understand a) "scholarship as a material practice" and b) that they (and we) are part of a larger economic structure in which struggle between those who own the means of production and those who do not is guaranteed and a first-principle. I do not think they are speaking in good faith, neither do I think they are ideologically naive. I think the know full well they are arguing for the maintenance of a system that - in the ongoing class struggle - benefits them and the economic, social, and political structures of capitalism.

The fight keeps going on, as we can see right now at the University of Manitoba. Maybe next week it will be Saskatchewan's turn, the week after that Edmonton Public Library or University of Victoria. If nothing else, worker solidarity requires that we recognize that while the location of the struggle may change, the identity of those on either side do not change. As Marx put it in the *Communist Manifesto* more than 150 years ago, the workers have nothing to lose but their chains; they have a world to win.

I see that this blog post is long enough already. I have some thoughts about the right to strike, but those will have to wait for a part two…

It should go without saying that I support the University of Manitoba Faculty Association in their ongoing strike.

Here is the video and text of a talk I gave at University of Alberta's School of Library and Information Studies, November 16, 2016.

Watch Video

Read Text (pdf)

Readers, 'Users', and the Manufacture of Wants

2016-11-23

I've been thinking a lot lately about the criticism that librarians tend not to look outside their own field for inspiration, best practices, cautionary tales, etc. This problem isn't specific to librarianship, of course, but given our culture of "permanent crisis", looking beyond our disciplinary borders (such as they are) might be a way to gain perspective and strategy with respect to our mission and values. This is even more important right now, as Bibliocracy points out, given that we could be (are?) facing the greatest test of both mission and values in many years. Myron has also pointed out the importance of economic understanding as we attempt to make sense of and position ourselves in the world:

> genuinely serious about economics—if you don't understand how systems around you work (or are conceptualised) it's hard to make good choices
>
> — Bibliocracy (@Bibliocracy) November 15, 2016

As a Marxist, of course, I'm all for looking at the economic explanations for cultural phenomena, so I went back to Marx and other economists who - in opposition to the dominant trend in bourgeois economics - did not dismiss Marx outright. What follows, then, is an attempt to give some economic weight to some trends in librarianship.

One of the sideshows of the Berninghausen Debate in the 1970s, was the question of whether we should be exercising our professional expertise in collection development or simply, as the Baltimore County Public Library put it, 'Give 'em what they want'. This argument was framed around professional responsibility and expertise: who could judge the value of a given work to another person. With the rise and dominance of approval plans and (more recently) patron- or demand- driven acquisition, this argument has lost its urgency, but in reality, it hasn't gone away, it has simply migrated to other areas of librarianship. A good example of this is the prioritizing of "giving students what they want" in academic libraries, both in terms of space and services, and in terms of user-experience design for online and digital services. This argument is also often framed as pitting professional expertise (the curated LibGuide, for example) against the needs and wants of "users" (however user is defined). In broader terms, this is an argument around consumer choice - that capitalist canard

that becomes harder and harder to define the more its used. (Another example is the current struggle over Library of Congress subject headings, though the arguments there are significantly different, in my view).

When I was in library school, some of us argued that "what users want" is socially constructed, and so collection development was ethically required to take a social justice position with respect to acquisition and "marketing" of stock. If all our "users" saw in the library was material upholding the dominant (bourgeois) view of the world or material that reinforced the role of our users as "content consumers", then we were simply helping to reproduce the dominant ideology, contributing to the social construction of the bourgeois subject itself. Taking the position of "neutrality" simply help to entrench bourgeois ideology, consumerism, and the values of capitalism. This argument is based on what Marx would call "superstructural" phenomena - what we would now probably call culture. But there is an economic argument that can be made here as well.

In Paul Sweezy's 1942 book *The Theory of Capitalist Development* - a Marxist rejoinder to Joseph Schumpeter's *Theory of Economic Development* of 1911, he discusses the question of demand in Marxian and neoclassical economics. Marx has often been accused of ignoring consumer demand due to his focus on the forces and relations of production in society. Sweezy argues that Marx recognized the important of demand, but that it legitimately played little part in his economic analysis, partly because consumer demand is itself determined by other economic phenemena:

> Under capitalism, effective demand is only partly a question of consumers' wants. Even more important is the basic question of income distribution which in turn is a reflection of the relations of production or, in other words, of what Marxists call the class structure of society. (49).

In addition to this, Sweezy holds up Marx's materialist conception of history (historical materialism) as supporting the playing-down of "what users want" in Marx's economic theory:

> Wants, in so far as they do not spring from elementary biological and physical needs, are a reflection of the technical and organizational development of society, not *vice versa*. [...] If one is interested in economic change and if one accepts the position that subjective factors play an essentially passive role in the process of change, one can scarcely deny that Marx was justified in neglecting consumers' wants as he did. (51)

Sweezy supports this view with a quote from Schumpeter - definitely *not* a Marxist economist:

> We will, throughout, act on the assumption that consumers' initiative in changing their tastes - i.e., in changing that set of data which general theory comprises in the concepts of 'utility functions'

> or 'indifference varieties' - is negligible and that all change in consumers' tastes is incident to, and brought about by, producers' action. (Schumpeter, *Business Cycles*, quoted in Sweezy, 51)

Now, librarians are not used to thinking about themselves as "producers", or indeed of library workers as employees in firms (public libraries, universities) which are producing and selling commodities. However, if we *are* different than any other capitalist enterprise, we have to engage with this idea straightforwardly. The time is past when we could simply make comforting assumptions on this score.

With respect to users, however, there is an even more challenging problem. We really have no choice but to meet the demands of our users (whether they are students, members of the public, online users and consumers of digital services). Usability, user experience, and design are and will remain important focuses for libraries and library services. But we have to come to terms with the question of consumer demand - whether they are constructed, or self-generated; whether they are spontaneous, or the effect of "producer action"; whether they themselves are "neutral" or further reproduce patterns and structures of capitalist domination. And no matter which side of the argument we come down on, we have to think carefully about how we go about acting within the context of our evaluation of consumer demand.

Now, I am not an economist. I'm sure there is a lot more to be teased out in this area, and perhaps others in the library world have already undertaken an economic analysis, not just of what our users needs are (we already know we should be doing that), but of where our users needs come from in the first place. However, I hope that as an exercise in looking outside librarianship for ways of looking at an issue in our profession, this was worthwhile.

Gramsci and Library Neutrality

2016-12-04

This Friday, I was interviewed along with University of Alberta School of Library and Information Studies professor Michael McNally on the CJSR radio show "Shout for Libraries". We were interviewed by Celine Gareau-Brennan and Lorisia Macleod, two SLIS students. We began by discussing the age-old question of library neutrality. Neither Michael nor I support the idea of library neutrality and, while I have met rank-and-file librarians who hold this position, I find it mostly part of the discourse and value system of library administrators. When Michael and I were asked why we think the idea of library neutrality continues to be so strongly held, we mentioned things like reification of social relations and hegemony. But the question made me start wanting to dig a little deeper into this: why has library neutrality continued to be a bone of contention ever since at least the 1970s debates around social responsibility and professionalism, if not before.

At the same time, I kept thinking about the lecture I gave a few weeks ago in SLIS about librarians' complicity within the state structure, our role in maintaining the hegemony of the capitalist class. I realized - prompted by Michael's recommendation to Shout listeners that they read Gramsci's prison diaries - that I hadn't mentioned Gramsci once in the entire lecture, despite his ideas about hegemony and intellectuals being a core part of that lecture's argument.

I think these ideas - around the non-neutrality of libraries, hegemony, and the role of intellectuals - are are part of a single coherent theory in Gramsci, where I've taken them apart and tried to discuss them separately (a failure of dialectics!). This blog post goes some way to bring these ideas back into a single frame.

In his analysis of the intellectual classes in Italy in the early 20th century, Gramsci identifies two main types - there are organic intellectuals, who arise out of and accompany a given social class as its position in society changes, and there are traditional intellectuals, whose positions are historical; social classes find these intellectuals "always already" existing on the social scene. Organic intellectuals tend to be specific to the mode of production, so industrial engineers, for example, along with other industrial technicians, are the organic intellectuals of capitalism (i.e. they developed alongside the bourgeoisie, and help to maintain

and reproduce bourgeois culture and ideology).

The classic example of a traditional intellectual is the priest: the church has existed for millennia, and across many changes of society, class, and mode of production. The rising class "takes command" of traditional intellectual organizations in order to use the social capital, the social power of the organization to further the goals of the rising class. Despite the fact that public - and even academic - libraries don't have the lineage and prestige the church holds, I would argue that librarians belong to this class of traditional intellectuals. (I don't think this is too big a stretch; Gramsci himself includes schools as a mechanism for producting intellectuals.)

The social purpose of intellectuals, according to Gramsci, is to promote and reproduce the ideology, and thus the hegemony, of the ruling class. Organic intellectuals arise along with the ruling class, but the realm of traditional intellectuals must be "conquered":

> One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer "ideologically" the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals. (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 10).

Elsewhere, I've connected the changing form of the academic and public library with phases of the rise of the bourgeoisie *in the form of the state*. The liberal state required different things from the library than the welfare or neoliberal state. My argument in that case is more top-down rather than woven through the fortunes of the bourgeoisie. In Gramsci's view, intellectual work begins prior to, and proceeds independently of, the conquest of state power. It is a function, in his terminology, of civil society just as much as political society.

How does this fit into the idea of library neutrality, and then into my proposal that librarians are in fact complicit with capitalist state power, the maintenance of hegemony, and the reproduction of ideology? Gramsci points out that, with respect to traditional intellectuals, whose institutions have long and storied histories,

> since these various categories of traditional intellectuals experience through an "esprit de corps" [i.e. a profession] their uninterrupted historical continuity and their special qualification [i.e. the MLIS], they thus put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group [i.e. as neutral]. This self-assessment is not without consequences in the ideological and political field, consequences of wide-ranging impact. The whole of idealist philosophy can easily be connected with this position assumed by the social cmplex of intellectuals and be defined as the expression of that social utopia by which the intellectuals think of themselves as "independent", autonomous, endowed with a character of their own, etc."

(SPN, 8).

In other words, hegemony is only possible if the class-nature of ideological reproduction remains hidden. And since intellectuals owe their position in society (prestige, etc), precisely to the power of the ruling class, it follows logically that the mystification, the obscuring of the class relationship between intellectuals and the ruling class must be maintained. In librarianship, as in other professions and classes of intellectuals, this is achieved by an insistence on "neutrality". Intellectuals play an integral role in the conquest and maintenance of power by the ruling class. For Gramsci, civil society and political society (the state)

> correspond on the one hand to the function of "hegemony" which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of "direct domination" or command exercised through the state and "juridical" government. The functions in question are precisely organizational and connective. The intellectuals are the dominant group's "deputies" exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government. (SPN, 12)

In order to combat the dominance of capitalist ideology, library workers must be open and up-front about our orientation. We have to engage in "discursive battle" with every expression of bourgeois (capitalist, neoliberal) ideology. At the same time, we must be careful that we aren't simply reproducing capitalist hegemony with a new face. And that, I think, is the trickiest part.

I'm not sure why Gramsci was absent from my SLIS lecture. Perhaps there was something Freudian in it. Perhaps, on the other hand, there is something here similar to Foucault's use of Marx: "I quote Marx without saying so, without quotation marks [so] I am thought to be someone who doesn't quote Marx" (Foucault, *Power/Knowlege*, 52)

Book Review: Fredric Jameson's An American Utopia

2017-01-05

My review of Fredric Jameson's An American Utopia (Verso, 2016), appears in this month's issue of International Socialism:

Let's all join the army

Libraries, Users, and the Mass Line

2017-01-06

> To link oneself with one's users, one must act in accordance with the needs and wishes of one's users. All work done for the users must start from their needs and not from the desire of any individual, however well-intentioned. It often happens that objectively users need a certain change, but subjectively they are not yet conscious of the need, not yet willing or determined to make the change. In such cases, we should wait patiently. We should not make the change until, through our work, most of the users have become conscious of the need and are willing and determined to carry it out. Otherwise we shall isolate ourselves from our users. Unless they are conscious and willing, any kind of work that requires their participation will fail… There are two principles here: one is the actual needs of the users rather than what we fancy they need, and the other is the wishes of the users, who must make up their own minds instead of our making up their minds for them.

This paragraph is a modified version of an extract from Mao's address on "The United Front in Cultural Work" from 1944 (included in the Little Red Book, p. 125). I've substituted "users" for "masses" in order to see how well Mao's concept of the mass line fits with a contemporary understanding of library/user relationships and user experience. This was suggested on Twitter by @glam_librarian, and it made me start thinking about the connections between Marxist organization and/or movement building and how library workers understand and work with their users. With the substitutions made above, I don't think the paragraph would be out of place in an article or book on library user experience or assessment.

It seems to me that the Maoist mass line is meant to provide an alternative to the "democratic centralist", vanguard party, view of leadership that comes out of the Leninist and Trotskyist traditions. For Mao, "the people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history", and communists *must* work alongside (not above, in front or - especially - behind) the people. Indeed, the library (society) can only serve the needs of its users (the people) if it is actively involved with, communicating with, and listening to, the users. Library workers are put in the position - due to the structure of capitalist organizations -

of being separate from their users: we are employees of a university, municipality, or other organization, and our users are not. We are tasked with and responsible for creating library services *for* them. In this way, the structure of the library's relationship with its users mirrors the undemocratic (indeed anti-democratic) political systems of capitalism itself.

Elsewhere I've written about the idea of employing (or deploying) "dual power" in libraries, and it seems to me that the concept of the mass line is a useful addition to this proposal. If, as library workers, we seriously mean to make a difference in the lives of our users, then we can't continue to make top down decisions around services and service design and implementation. We have to figure out better ways of consulting, communicating with, and listening to our users. In some ways, the library mass line would operate similarly to the way outreach and reference librarians in public libraries operate - being among the library users, in a way that is foreign to many units and levels of library leadership. Indeed, the concept of library leadership itself comes under increasing attack if we accept the idea of dual power + mass line.

One criticism of this view might be that Mao's language still seems to set up a separation between library workers and users that will lead to failure. As Erin Leach wrote in a valuable recent blog post:

> True engagement with user communities is hard. But creating structures, systems, and services intended for their use without their input is a waste of everyone's time and resources.

I think one useful corrective to this problem might be to bear in mind Gramsci's distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals (indeed, it is useful to read Mao "through" Gramsci in this way in general). Historically, librarians have always belonged to the class of traditional intellectuals, intellectuals that the ruling class finds *already* on the scene, ready to help justify and support the cultural and ideological needs of the ruling class itself (i.e. its hegemony over the subaltern classes). What Mao is calling for, I think, is that those of us who do mass line work - who work with users - must begin to see ourselves as organic intellectuals, intellectuals whose responsibility is to the public - especially its most marginalized members - rather than to the ruling class.

"True engagement with user communities", to my mind, means precisely this recognition of the class nature of the work that we do and the commitment to the needs and requirements of our users rather than to the hegemonic requirements of the ruling class and its ideology. This requires, in many ways, the political education of library workers, which is a topic for another time; but it also raises a question I have tried to address previously on this blog: the question of in what sense the wants and needs of user groups themselves are products of and support the ideological reproduction of capitalism.

Library user experience discourse tends to regard user needs as spontaneous and essential, rather than constructed. This goes against the Marxist view of culture as reflecting (in some sense) the forces and relations of production

present in a society at a given moment. If user needs *are* spontaneous and not constructed, then it makes sense that library user experience work need only hear, understand, and support the needs of the users as expressed by those users. But if, on the other hand, user needs are constructed and serve to support the ideological and hegemonic requirements of the ruling class, then library user experience work (indeed all library work) becomes much more complicated.

Mao doesn't explicitly talk about ideology with respect to the mass line (again, in this case Gramsci is a better model to follow), but he does address the problem I have identified above. In his view, those of us working to support the needs of users must engage in education and social justice work in order to support real user requirements, rather than simply the needs of the ruling class. Again, this makes the task sound simpler and easier than it is. This is in fact extremely complex work, with many pitfalls (most of which involve thinking of library work with its attendant expertise as somehow privileging us with respect to the knowledge and desires of our users). Again, I think a corrective to this to recognize the class positions of all involved.

This blog post raises more questions than it answers, but I think it points the way to potentially fruitful new directions in library/user relationship research, while also raising problematic ideas in the area of library management and leadership, and the concept of bourgeois hegemony itself. I will stop here, then, with a final "adjusted" quote from Mao:

> We should go to the users and learn from them, synthesize their experience into better, articulated principles and methods, then do [education] among the users, and call upon them to put these principles and methods into practice so as to solve their problems and help them achieve liberation and happiness. (LRB, p. 129).

*All quotations from Mao are from "Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung", [Beijing]: Foreign Languages Press, 1972.

Dostoyevsky's Poor Folk

2017-01-07

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Poor Folk / The Gambler*, translated by CJ Hogarth. London: Everyman, 1962.

Since it's the new year, I thought it would be a good plan to commit to writing a post for each book I finish this year. I'm a chronic leaver of books unfinished, but over the last couple of years I've realized that just reading the beginning of a book - especially as I've started reading more non-fiction - was really only giving me a superficial understanding of the thing. Two books I read all the way through last year made me really feel how much I had been missing by not finishing books: John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology* and Neil Harding's monumental *Lenin's Political Thought* - both of which end up being much more than the sum of their parts by the end. Foster's book in particular really needs to be read to the end in order to get the full weight of his argument.

With that, then, I'll get started with the book I picked up when I returned from vacation about a week ago: Dostoyevsky's *Poor Folk* (1846). I've tried to get into this one before, but I've always given up fairly quickly. Dostoyevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk* is epistolary, and at first gives the impression that it's going to be very twee and sentimental. The first letter, for example, begins like this:

> My dearest Barbara Alexievna, - How happy I was last night - how immeasurably, how impossibly happy!

Immeasurable happiness? In Dostoyevsky? I should have known things would not remain in such a state. The story of the novel is thin enough: an aging civil servant, Makar Dievushkin, has taken it into his head to support - emotionally and financially - an impoverished young girl who lives in the building opposite. They write letters to each other and share small amounts of money as and when they come by it. He relates to her the trials and tribulations of his office life and the poverty-stricken denizens of his tenement building. She remembers her past, the way she and her mother were used and abused by relatives; on the death of her mother, Barbara Alexievna has come to live in this tenement. Essentially the novel traces these two characters negotiations of the lives and conditions of the very poor in 19th century St Petersburg. In the end, Barbara consents to marry a man she does not love in order to escape.

As thin as the plot is, the interest lies not only Dostoyevsky's detailed descriptions of the lives and harrowing situations of the characters in the tenements. Indeed, the living conditions of the slums of Petersburg make Dickens' descriptions of the poor of London seem picturesque caricatures. Dostoyevsky, as always, is full of compassion for this people, and it is in this that I think the secret of the novel's reception lies. For *Poor Folk* was justly celebrated even before its publication by such eminent critics as Nekrasov and Belinsky. It's hard to judge, from reading the novel alone, quite what sparked this enthusiasm.

If we take the state of Russian literature just prior to *Poor Folk*, the landscape was dominated primarily by Pushkin and Gogol. Pushkin was essentially an epic poet of the Byron mode who took as his subjects not the heroes and adventurers of Byron but real Russian people (like Eugene Onegin and Tatiana). At one point in the novel, Dievushkin - Dostoyevsky's stand-in - sings the praises of Pushkin's *Tales of Belkin*, a collection of five short stories published in 1831. These introduced into Russian literature stories of the poor and downtrodden, ordinary people, untouched by the Romanticism of Pushkin's poetry or the grotesqueries of Gogol's fiction. For Gogol - whose *Overcoat* (1842) provided the model for Dostoyevsky's second Novel *The Double* - wrote about the "little people" of St Petersburg too, but he placed them in fantastic situations far removed from the real life that Dostoyevsky saw reflected in Pushkin. In *The Nose* (1836), for example, a St Petersburg civil servant wakes up to find that his nose has left his face and is living a life of its own. Dostoyevsky's *Poor Folk* looked at the same class as Gogol and Pushkin, but described their lives in all their squalid detail, with all the pathos and compassion that Dostoyevsky was capable of. It was the novelty of this approach, coupled with the straightforward narrative and Dostoyevsky's skill, that makes *Poor Folk* so important in the history of Russian literature, even if the story itself seems slight to us from the vantage point of more than 150 years later.

In this sense, *Poor Folk* inaugurates a new period of realism in Russian literature, and gives a new resonance to a famous quote of Dostoyevsky's: "We have all come out from under Gogol's Overcoat". As Nikolai Andreev writes in the introduction to the edition of *Poor Folk* that I read:

> It is not only the acknowledgement of a debt, but also the declaration of Russian literature's emancipation from the 'soullessness' of Gogol and of his school of which the novel *Poor Folk* is the literary refutation.

Personally, I enjoyed *Poor Folk* - it's hard not to get caught up in the fortunes of Makar Dievushkin and Barbara Alexievna - but it was also nice to read a novel of Dostoyevky's that was psychologically straightforward. I read *Demons* (*Devils*, *The Possessed*) last year, and as fascinating as Dostoyevsky's more psychological novels are, they can be exhausting. *Poor Folk* stands as a good reminder that he was an extremely skillful writer who could write excellent "straight-ahead" fiction when he decided to.

What also struck me, though, is how much the novel is about *books*. In addition to Dievushkin's preference for Pushkin over Gogol, he and Barbara Alexievna are constantly exchanging books, and one of Dievushkin's acquaintances is the author of popular fiction in the Paul De Kock mode (allowing Dosteyevsky to pastiche the style with devastating effect). There is also an episode from Barbara Alexievna's past which turns on the purchase of a complete set of Pushkin as a gift. Books - both as novels and as physical, material objects - populate *Poor Folk* just as much as the characters do. This, I think, speaks to Dostoyevsky's own concern for books, the importance he places on reading and writing as well as the physicality of publishing. This provides a refreshing break from the squalor of the novel - no matter how bad things get, all of Dostoyevsky's characters continue to read.

The novel portrayal of the real lives of real people, in this case the poor and marginalized, places *Poor Folk* in the tradition of those books which expose the inhuman conditions to which various groups have historically been condemned. Turgenev's *Huntsman's Sketches* exposed the plight of the Russian serfs to such an extent that the book is credited with helping convince Tsar Aleksandr II to emancipate the serfs. Similarly, books like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* recover and express the lost or repressed humanity of an oppressed group, making it - one hopes - no longer possible to ignore the humanity of those whom the ruling classes consider not human. Paolo Freire, in his *Pedagogy of Hope*, writes that "while both humanization and dehumanization are realy alternatives, only the first is the people's vocation". He argues that "dehumanization" has never been the project or vocation of a society, though I think that Dostoyevsky and - for example - James Baldwin might disagree.

The strange thing about Dostoyevsky, the thing that marks his later, more psychological and visionary novels as well as his first, is the strange lack of anywhere to place *the blame*. Freire goes on to say that "dehumanization… marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it", and I think this is also a theme of Baldwin's. But for both Freire and Baldwin it is clear who the oppressor is. For Dostoyevsky this is never clear. Even in the famous Grand Inquisitor chapter from *The Brothers Karamazov*, the evil is somehow dispersed, dissipated, as if evil exists, and evil people exist, but these things are somehow merely contingent, tangential to the oppressive conditions in which people live.

I'm tempted to think that I simply don't fully understand Dostoyevsky yet. It may be that I'm wrong, and there isn't some transcendent idea behind all the manifestations he left behind, but I hope that isn't the case. Dostoyevsky's work is too significant not to contribute at least to some extent to a project of humanization. Indeed, Dostoyevsky himself believed that that was precisely what his work was for. It remains to be seen, from my perspective at least, whether that hope will be born out.

Baldwin's The Fire Next Time

2017-01-17

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Vintage, 1963.

Recently, in a Facebook exchange (on politics, of course), someone was ridiculed as a liberal for calling another person "unkind", and I think there is something to this. To my mind liberals, just as much as conservatives, have things they want to preserve in the world; the world as it is, fundamentally, even with all its faults, is a place worth holding on to and working on to try to fix it. For both liberals and conservatives too, these elements that they would like to preserve are sometimes real (in that they really exist, or existed at some point in the past), and sometimes simply fictions, legends (for conservatives, this might be a legend like the neverexisting "white nation"; for liberals, this might be fiction like the social contract). I think that this question of kindness must fall somewhere in the liberal camp of things – real or not – worth preserving, worth trying to cultivate in a world that has become, for various reasons, predominantly unkind.

Now, Nietzsche already exposed this myth of kindness in the 19th century, making it a hallmark of the "slave morality" of which Christianity was the apex. It seems to me that Baldwin, among many others, would recognize this characterisation of "kindness" as a virtue designed to keep people in their places. "Slave" for Baldwin is a more concrete – a more historically precise – term than it is for Nietzsche, but you can read in The *Fire Next Time* where Baldwin thinks kindness will get anyone. Kindness would mean accepting the limits that White society puts on you, the "place" White society expects you to know. Unkindness is a requirement for maintaining your self-respect in a world that is – at every moment – attempting to convince you of your worthlessness. The kind of social change Baldwin calls for, hopes for, requires unkindness on the part of Blacks towards Whites. In its place – for Baldwin's book is, in fact, full of virtue if not of kindness – is the virtue of humanization, but Baldwin recognizes that in a society founded on, needing (in a deep psychological sense), seeing Black people as non-human, no one is going to grant humanity to Blacks; it can only be won through struggle, that is, through unkindness.

And I think this focus on something other than kindness, this focus on a broader – teleological, perhaps apocalyptic – sense of humanization allows Baldwin to be more understanding. Kindness requires self-censorship in order to spare feelings,

but Baldwin's unflinching portrayal not only of his own childhood and youth in Harlem, but of the Nation of Islam, and the complicated (though in the end quite simple) dynamic of White guilt and White superiority, is always tinged – as these things are, for example, in Dostoyevsky – with a forgiveness, a charity that goes beyond the simplistic virtues of the Christian (both Baldwin and Dostoyevsky had complicated relationships with Christianity), and has less in common with "love thy neighbour as thyself" than with what I think is a more subtle teaching of Jesus': "love thy enemy". For it is unkind to call someone an enemy – are we not all friends and neighbours? To call someone an enemy is to recognize some struggle between you, some strife that would – in the usual way of things – be unbridgeable, to call out the other's wickedness or iniquity, to tell it like it is. Someone who says we are all neighbours is either naïve or lying, and in any event, loving one's neighbour is easy – the world does not change because we love our neighbours. But the world does change if – and this is the more radical proposition of Christ – we can love our enemies.

And Baldwin does want the world to change, but not – as Dostoyevsky does – for it to go backward. Dostoyevsky believes in a world before liberalism, before atheism and socialism, a world where people not only accept but love the places God has set for them in society, and because of this society is a harmonious whole, fulfilling God's plan. Baldwin doesn't want to go backward; backward for Black people means slavery once more, slavery of that concrete kind that weighs on American history like an executioner's hood. Baldwin is no liberal because he recognizes that for the world to change, for society to be (one hopes) improved, even the good things about the world we have now must be destroyed. White sensibilities must be pitilessly attacked for White superiority to be dismantled.

And it is this, I think, the pitiless need for the current sick world to die coupled with a profound and intelligent humanism, that makes Baldwin so important not only for American culture, but for human culture. Like Dostoyevsky, there may be much that one might disagree with – perhaps even deeply disagree with – but one must face up to his work with open eyes. Taking kindness as a virtue in and of itself, something to be adhered to blindly, means closing one's eyes to the unkind things that Baldwin and Dostoyevsky and others have to say.

This is what elevates *The Fire Next Time* above the particular social and historical moment for which it was written. It is important, obviously, to always bear in mind the concrete situation Baldwin is talking about, the forces of American and World history that are still with us (as is more obvious to us today than perhaps even 15 years ago). It gives *The Fire Next Time* an undogmatic quality that demands attention and a sympathetic reading, and it allows for a broadening out of Baldwin's immediate concerns to the wider field of radical politics itself. The Facebook exchange referred to above was the silliest, most childish rehash of left-wing stereotypes, the kind of thing that turns people off of politics (left or right), and is unworthy of the kind of sober, serious, humanist, consideration that thinking about these issues requires of us.

I thought long and hard about whether to post this. In the first place, there's the question of whether I should be commenting at all on Baldwin's book. The second question is to what extent an exhortation against kindness actually fits with how I think I and other people should behave. In the days following the "nazi punching" of Richard Spencer, this question has come up again and again. For me, a lifelong commitment to pacifism has recently started to seem more and more shaky. In Domenico Losurdo's book on Nonviolence, he argues that "nonviolence" is always held up as an ideal to which oppressed people are expected to conform, despite the fact that oppression has always dealt violence to them. I think - going back to the example of Jesus again - we must have love in order for the world to change, but sometimes (often?) love is unkind. We have to be careful not to confuse the two.

Finally, I'm reminded of a quote from Martin Luther King that has been making the rounds recently, from his Letter from Birmingham Jail:

> I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.

Kindness is the hallmark of a negative peace; what Baldwin writes about in *The Fire Next Time* are the conditions for justice, a positive peace.

One Big (Library) Union

2017-01-17 15:23

Although I was never a member of the Canadian Library Association, I - along with many other people - had some criticisms of it. One my my main concerns was that while it officially endorsed intellectual freedom, its endorsement had - at least as far as I could see - no effect on the organizations that composed it. CAUT is active in the academic world making sure that universities kept up their ends of various bargains, and had a power to sanction that CLA never had, and likely never wanted. In the end CLA came to represent the library leadership class and the libraries that made it look good and supported it financially. It was, as was pointed out a few years ago, the Canadian *Library* Association, not the Canadian *Librarian* Association. It wasn't there for us.

One of the strange things about simply being born is that we are born into a world that already exists. It is tempting to imagine that things have always been as they are, or that the reason something is a certain way is because of some objective reason. But the study of history tells us that this is rarely, if ever, the case. Things come to be out of struggle and argument and discourse, out of the passions, opinions, justifications, and reasoning of the people who happen to be around and involved. These people both self-select (people with interest and access) and are selected or deselected (I'm thinking here mostly of people who are *excluded* and *prevented* from participating). What this should say to us, though, is that nothing that exists today is sacred. We can change it all.

In reading about this history, I came across an episode in the library history of Nova Scotia, around the time that CLA and Canadian librarianship were being formalized. Much of the struggle in those days was around forming a "community of interest" recognizable to the labour board (the same issue still pertains to non-unionized library workers today). In the end, the system we have now came into being: municipal unions for public librarians, academic associations (whether unions or not) for academic librarians, as well as some outliers. Typically, public librarians are included in a municipal union alongside other city workers, while academic librarians are sometimes lumped in with faculty, sometimes not. Now, it might be politic to argue a community of interest between academic librarians and faculty members, but it's a stretch to argue community

of interest between public librarians and other city workers. (And we know from experience how fragile the collegiality between faculty and librarians can be). In addition, library workers who are not recognized as librarians are typically in other unions, lumped in with other sectors. The "community of interest" that applied - one assume - among library workers as a whole is splintered among various unions and associations (or are completely unprotected) and placed among other constituencies with other interests. I haven't mentioned the CLA in this framework because to my mind the CLA didn't really fit in here at all.

As this model was coming into being, alternatives were proposed in various places. In 1973, a debate over the proper form of organization, especially as it pertained to the guarantee of academic or faculty status and tenure, took place in Nova Scotia, where various models of organization were proposed. One of the most interesting, to my mind, is the proposal of a province-wide union of librarians. Ruth Hafner, St Mary's University's chief librarian at the time, argued that

> librarians would be better served by forming a provincial union inclusive of all librarians with a form of librarian status akin to academic status but focused on conditions of work and promotion specific to the profession.

Jacobs, Leona. "Academic Status for Canadian Academic Librarians: A Brief History", in *In Solidarity: Academic Librarian Labour Activism and Union Participation in Canada*, edited by Jennifer Dekker and Mary Kandiuk, Library Juice Press, 2015, p. 27.

This proposal was in contrast to the idea that academic librarians should form a community of interest within the academic community (rather than the librarianship) community, in which case wages, evaluation/assessment, and promotion would fall under academic norms and procedures - essentially, the system we have today. (Well, sort of - it's become clear to me how vastly different every university is in terms of the policies and procedures governing their librarians).

What a fascinating idea. What if, instead of the current splintering of the community of interests, we formed instead a nationwide union of library workers, one which was able to take over and decide for itself how library workers ought to be governed, one which had the teeth to sanction any interference in the intellectual freedom of library workers, one which could call a nationwide strike, rather than the isolated labour actions library workers currently have to fight?

Now that the CLA is no more and has been replaced by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations, the ambiguity of the CLA's position has been removed: the Federation is made up of associations, not librarians. This leaves the ground free for a different organization - one with some teeth - that represent the interests of library workers. (And let me be clear, this would not be a "librarian" union, this would be a union for all library workers).

This idea initially occurred to me in the context of intellectual freedom, and

the situation in which public librarians find themselves unable to discuss issues of importance to them, or issues that the whole field is discussing, because they don't possess "academic freedom" (this applies too, of course, to library technicians and other "non-professional" library workers). A nationwide library union could enforce an intellectual freedom clause in all library contracts in the same way that a faculty association (and e.g. CAUT) can ensure academic freedom in cases where it has been abrogated.

I have no idea what this One Big Union might look like, but the Industrial Workers of the World might be a good model to investigate. I also don't know what would be required in order to implement it. But I do know, from reading library history, that these things - as contentious as they may be - can be implemented, can be modified after they are implemented, but the first step is to start the conversation.

I'm also aware that there will be flaws, constraints, and objections to this idea. But it's worth raising, I think, for all that.

Weil's political parties and PKD's last interview

2017-01-27

Weil, Simone. *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, New York: NYRB, 2014.

Dick, Philip K. *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, New York: Melville House, 2015.

There are many ways that books can resonate with a reader, and most of them, I think are situational – reading the right book at the right time. I read both of these slim volumes in a couple of days last week and they each resonated differently for me. The Simone Weil essay was one of those books that seems to clearly formulate something you've been thinking of for some time, but have never really been able to express. The resonance in this case is a kind of recognition of the truth contained in the book, a recognition based on confirmation (yes, a confirmation bias, if you like). This was always my experience with Nietzsche.

Now, I haven't voted in an election since – I think – the 1995 Manitoba Provincial Election, when I was 18. It's not because I think "my party" is guaranteed to win or because I'm lazy – it's because I actively think electoral politics distract from the real mechanisms of power in a capitalist society. The multi-party system of Canada is no better than the two-party system of the US or the one-party system of China, because the mode of production and the relations of dominance and oppression, of patronage and influence, are independent of the mechanisms of parliament, congress or presidency. To me, political parties and the shenanigans of what we call "politics" are mostly irrelevant. For Weil, however, political parties – while not good – are not harmless either, they are actively bad. And she bases this on a rigorous separation between the forms of goodness that we take for granted and actual good outcomes. Much of the essay carries huge resonance with what we are seeing in the US and elsewhere at the moment:

> Democracy, majority rule, are not good in themselves. They are merely means towards goodness, and their effectiveness is uncertain. For instance, if, instead of Hitler, it had been the Weimar Republic that decided, through a most rigorous democratic and legal process, to put the jews in concentration camps, and cruelly torture them to death, such measures would not have been one atom more legitimate

> than the present Nazi policies (and such a possibility is by no means farfetched). Only what is just can be legitimate. (5)

For Weil, one of the main problems is that the will of the people (she draws heavily on Rousseau) can never be concretely expressed because the mechanisms for that expression – political parties – become their own ends. The purpose of a political party is to expand its membership and to get elected, not to achieve anything good or legitimate.

> Once the growth of the party becomes a criterion of goodness, it follows inevitably that the party will exert a collective pressure upon people's minds. This pressure is very real; it is openly displayed; it is professed and proclaimed. It should horrify us, but we are already too much accustomed to it. (16)

As a result, "we have never known anything that resembles, however faintly, a democracy. We pretend that our present system is democratic, yet the people never have the chance nor the means to express their views on any problem of public life" (5). This was exactly what I noticed when, in my late teens and early twenties I flirted with the Communist Party and the Industrial Workers of the world. Political parties, like most (all?) of the institutions of bourgeois life, support Weil's contention that "nothing is more comfortable than not having to think" (27).

In addition to being an activist and political thinking, Weil as also a mystic. The real criterion of goodness, in her view, is an "inner light" that exists within all of us. I am too much of a materialist to accept this view, but it doesn't detract from the clarity and force of her argument:

> Political parties are organizations that are publicly and officially designed for the purpose of killing in all souls the sense of truth and of justice. Collective pressure is exerted upon a wide public by the means of propaganda. The avowed purpose of propaganda is not to impart light, but to persuade. Hitler saw very clearly that the aim of propaganda must always be to enslave minds. All political parties make propaganda. A party that would not do so would disappear, since all its competitors practice it. All parties confess that they make propaganda. However mendacious they may be, none is bold enough to pretend that in doing so, it is merely educating the public and informing people's judgement. (16).

Finally, Weil's outlook, the starting point for her call for the abolition of all political parties can be found when she writes: "Goodness alone is an end. Whatever belongs to the domain of facts pertains to the category of means."

I think that Philip K Dick would agree with Weil on that last point. Also a mystic, Dick by end of his life believed that he had been taken over by the prophet Elijah, that the message from the divine had been revealed in two of

his novels: cryptically in *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* (1974) and openly in *Valis* (1981). The Last Interview contains not only the text of an interview conducted the night before the massive stroke that eventually killed Dick, but a number of other interviews from all points in his career. This book resonated for a different reason than Weil. I've found lately that I've begun to be drawn to artists and writers with particular conceptions of the world that are outside what we might call the mainstream. Andrei Tarkovsky, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Lawrence Durrell, John Fowles… not "outsider artists", but artists who have a different world inside them that they are trying to get out.

The PKD interviews are interesting because they let us hear his own voice which is similar in tone, but very different from the voice of his novels. Unlike Dostoyevsky, whose style is marked by a "polyphony" of identifiable and singular voices, Dick's novels are somehow "flattened" into something like a fax. This probably derives from his early days churning out pulp sci-fi for magazines, but it is also of a piece with his view of the world as somehow flat/muted and threatening at the same time, banal and sinister.

There is a pathos to Dick both in the details of his life and the fact of his mental illness (I don't think there can be any disagreement that he was mentally ill). He was an incredibly intelligent, flexible thinker, knowledgeable on many subjects and with a keen curiosity and a voracious appetite for books and facts, and it is wonderful to hear his enthusiasm in some of this interviews. But that enthusiasm is always undercut by (what he didn't want to be called) paranoia, and I'm not sure whether the religio-mystic mania of his final years makes up for that or not. I'll have to read these again in a few years to find out.

The Library Systems Disaster

2017-02-01

As someone who has worked in library systems/discovery for nearly ten years, I knew our systems had problems, but I generally thought they made the best of a bad situation. I've used academic libraries for three degrees, and in general, they were fine - they served their purpose. But I've been thinking more and more lately about user experience, and also about the totality of how our systems work together to solve whatever problem they're supposed to solve (note: I'm being purposefully vague right now as to what that problem is).

I think one of the reasons systems librarians think things are working *OK* is because a) we know the constraints within each system and b) we tend to work on particular problems connecting two pieces of the puzzle. It's hard for us to think in terms of the entire process that a user has to go through when trying to find or get access to material. Think about the applications/systems that are involved in a basic discovery system search leading (one hopes) to full text:

- The library website
- The discovery system (and article databases)
- The metadata
- The link resolver
- The proxy

This doesn't address what users need to do *within* each of these systems, which - when they work - can range from the simple ("enter your ID and password") to extremely confusing (a user enters an endless discovery-system/link-resolver loop, for example).

Last night I was trying to track down the full text of some book reviews I had written in the early days of my career, which I didn't think to keep. Knowing - as our students and faculty do - that our library systems are at best OK and at worst actively bad, I started out in Google. But the journals I published these book reviews in aren't open access, and I find nothing, so I turn to a journal-title level search in our discovery system (because I can't remember the titles of the reviews themselves). I track down the journal, and inside the proprietary database I do a search within the journal for my last name. Nothing comes up. So a broad-based search in Google has failed and a narrower search in a particular journal has failed. At this point, if I was a student, I would give

up and hit the pub. But I'm a professional. So I turn to one of the discovery services that my library licenses (Ebsco). A search for the journal title and my last name finally pulls up some results. I'm off-campus, so before I can click into any of the results I have to be redirected to our proxy and log in.

Once inside the record, I notice (because I know what I'm looking for) that the actual PDF is not available in the discovery system, so I have to click on our link resolver. This gives me two options, one of which is the publisher database I've already tried. That should be the canonical record, right? But that link takes me to the journal home page, where I already know I can't find the article. The second link in the link resolver menu is to an Ebsco database. I've just been searching Ebsco, so I figure that won't work because I already know the record doesn't have the PDF. But when I click on the link I *am* taken to an Ebsco record with the PDF. I get my full text.

Now, this account leaves out many of the issues within, for example, the discovery system (e.g. relevancy, search optins, configuration, database activation, etc), which are also esoteric and hard to get right for users (but as David Fiander points out "discovery systems are sold to librarians, not to users"). Having said that, just the fact that all these different systems have to be hooked together in slapdash ways forced on us by vendors, by lack of staff time, by outdated application architectures, means that, in my view, we can't keep tinkering with all the bits and pieces that make this work and hope to - in the end - have a successful method for students, faculties, and researchers to do what they want.

And we can't presume to know exactly what they want. As library workers, we can't (and we shouldn't) try to guess in advance every use case. User stories and personas, in my view, have been an attempt to try to guess use cases, rather than focusing on user-centred design and development which is abstract and flexible enough to allow for any use case. Known-item search and contextual browse shouldn't be a zero-sum game.

The vendor solution to all of this is, of course, "buy our new thing!" - that new thing being cloud LSPs with integrated link resolver and proxy. But we all know that under the hood, a vendor's cloud LSP is just hooking those pieces together (with duct tape and glue) the way we're doing it right now. Also, one of the major issues is quality and interoperability of metadata - publisher metadata, when it isn't of abysmally bad quality, doesn't necessarily follow any of the myriad standards the library world has come up with. Two different vendor records for the same item can appear radically different. And since we trigger system behaviour off metadata (for example, constructing a link resolver URL), the presence or absence of a single field can bring the whole house of cards down.

It's disheartening to think that the systems you work on are not only pretty crappy, but that there's no feasible way of fixing them. We can't redesign our existing systems - they are already in production, and we have so much else on our plates. However, we may - as a profession - need to decide that we're going

to tear everything down and start from scratch. But I'm afraid that the library world's solution will end up like the library's world's solution to institutional repositories: enormous monolithic systems which are hard to implement and are unclear as to the problem they're trying to solve (institutional memory? long-term preservation? humanities computing corpuses? big data?)

I think we need to start again, but from two "open" principles: one is an open knowledge base. This has been raised before, but the more I think about it, the more I think this is the number one thing we could do to improve our systems. We have to stop relying on vendor or publisher records, especially when those are locked in proprietary systems. If every cataloguing department in North America divvied up the journals that are currently being published, we could produce high-quality records and put them in an open knowledge base for everyone to use. (I know there are open KB project out there; I don't know how mature they are, and I haven't heard any library talk about adopting them). Proprietary KBs are what keep us from moving to 100% open-source systems (writing a proxy, a discovery system, or a link resolver is not hard, but you need the data).

Secondly, we need to create data models that are not conceptual models. As someone mentioned this morning on the BIBFRAME listserv, in his opinion BIBFRAME is doomed to fail in part because of the super-heavy conceptual nature of the model. Our systems need simple, lightweight models that we can build simple, lightweight APIs on top of.

There's a lot more that we would need to do to build library systems that actually work for people, but these are two things I think we would have to commit to at a bare minimum.

The Owl Problem: Composition and Abstraction

2017-02-09

One of the complaints about programming tutorials is that they have the same problem as drawing tutorials, which John Fink refers to as "the owl problem".

Essentially, the problem is that the tutorials give you a couple of simple, manageable steps, and then expect you to fill in the gaps between those and the finished project. The same problem exists in a lot of online instrument tutorials, and I've heard it discussed as a problem with expertise: "experts" skip over steps that they unconsciously know, so they aren't necessarily good at explaining things. You want something explained by someone who isn't an expert, someone for whom the missing steps still need to be consciously held in mind.

Anyway, I started thinking about the owl problem, and wondered if part of the problem isn't *thinking too big*. When we decide to write a software application, we usually have the end result in mind, which might include all the functionality and use-cases (drawn, say, from user-stories) that can be gathered together. In Agile development, we aim for a "minimum viable product", but this is still a functioning application worth showing to stakeholders. In other words, a minimum viable product is still an owl. With expert programmers this might not be much of a problem: they can fill in the blanks between a user-story and a finished feature, but in terms of learning to code, this way of thinking may not be the best way.

Over the last year or two I've gotten into functional programming with Clojure, which is a LISP. I've written before on how working with a LISP requires a different way of thinking about programming, especially if you're coming from a procedural or object-oriented background. It occurred to me that some of the lessons I've learned from functional programming might be a way to help with the owl problem.

Abstraction

As SICP tells us, abstraction is one of the most powerful tools programmers use. The more abstract a procedure is, the more flexible, understandable, and reusable it is. In object-oriented programming, abstraction is one of the first concept you come across. OO tutorials often have you think about a concrete object, like a car. You know what components a car has, so you split the car

up into multiple components (doors, wheels, windows, etc). You're told not to worry about the implementation of the components right now - those implementations are hidden (encapsulated) and the component itself is an abstraction. So, you might start with the car (in this case, this is the owl), and you might break it down to components or features, but you put off the concrete implementation of each component. You put off actually writing implementation code until you have to (thus avoiding, for example, premature optimization).

(In procedural programming, at least when I was taking computer science courses, the method was again to start with a programme that was *too big* or *too long* and look for area where you could extract a function or method, encapsulating well-defined pieces of code. This is the opposite of starting from individual functions and *building up*.)

Composition

Functional programming starts from the other direction. Basically, the idea is not to worry about what your end result is going to be. Obviously you know you're going to build a car or drawn an owl, but you don't need to think about things at that level at first. Think about the concrete implementations of a feature. A door needs to open, so you write the code that opens a door. A wheel needs to rotate, so you write the code that rotates a wheel. Later on, when you have written a bunch of these pieces of code you can combine them into larger units of functionality (composition).

NOTE: I'm simplifying here for the argument. In fact the switch between different levels of abstraction and both the encapsulation/abstraction and composition of functions/methods happens all the time, and organically, while you're working on a program. But again, this comes with a experience, for a beginner, it might be worth while thinking about encapsulation and composition as mutually exclusive.

To take an example: in the library world we have link resolvers. These basically take an incoming URL which contains some metadata, parses the URL to extract the metadata, queries a knowledge base, selects (or constructs) an outgoing URL and sends a user to a licensed resource.

Now, with the owl problem, we would be thinking about a minimum viable product that includes all of this functionality. In an OO tutorial, you might design the application with abstractions where those features should be, deferring their implementation. With FP, however, you might start at the bottom: given one URL, output a different URL. (In Clojure, one of the advantages to thinking in this way is that you're always thinking about data and data transformations, rather than other kinds of functionality). You can write this fairly simply in Clojure:

```
# takes an input URL, looks up the target in a target collection, and
# appends the parameters to the new target URL
```

```clojure
(def lookup_table #collection of URLs)

(defn transform_url [url]
  (let [[target params] (clojure.string/split url #"\?")]
    (str (lookup_table target) "?" params)))
```

But a function is just a piece of code that takes in a value and returns a value, meaning you can write functional code in, say, Ruby:

```ruby
LOOKUP_TABLE = #collection of urls

def transform_url(url)
  target, params = url.split("?")
  "#{LOOKUP_TABLE[target]}?#{params}"
end
```

Now, obviously writing any one of these functions doesn't give you the minimum viable product (owl), but you can work on these functions independently, making them as simple as possible, and then *compose* them into functions of higher-level functionality.

One benefit to this way of working is testability. Pure functions (functions with no side effects) are trivially easy to test: given a value a, produce value b. Even if you have to introduce a side effect, the side effect's behaviour is kept distinct from the value transforming function, again making things easier to test.

So, from the perspective of dealing with the "owl problem" for beginning programmers, I think a functional approach has much to offer in terms of thinking about composition and abstraction. Once a lot of the mechanics of this way of coding are taken care of, then higher level components or features might become easier to design and write, leading to the capability of a novice programmer to tackle more object-oriented or procedural ways of coding.

Formalism and the Oblivion of Process

2017-02-10 11:00:00

One of the things I've become aware of over the last few years is how process can be (and often is) used as a substitute for thinking, discussing, debating, interrogating, critiquing, and reaching consensus. In short, process becomes an alternative for the hard work we should expect to be doing in libraries. Process is seen as a silver bullet because the other stuff is difficult, messy, time-consuming, and often intangible.

In his 1862 novel-as-memoir of his time in a labour camp in Siberia [1], Dostoyevsky writes about the difference between work performed to make simply to fill up the day (what we would call "make-work projects") and work with a defined goal. Prisoners who receive an assignment for work with an assigned goal can go back to barracks when the work is done; otherwise they work until a specified time. With make-work projects, the work is "done more for the sake of form than of need" (p. 84). Later on he writes that prisoners in the prison hospital were locked into their dormitories and not allowed into the hall to use the toilet, despite the fact that the toilet was nearby and there was a guard on duty all night. "Who originally established this order I don't know; all I know is that there was no real order in it and that the whole useless essence of formalism was nowhere expressed more fully than… in this case" (p. 175).

Here we have an example of process substituting for thought, consideration, and active decision-making. When a process is applied, reasoned, argued-for decisions can be avoided because it is better to follow the process; following the process will ensure success.

In the library world, we are all about process. We like the formalism of cataloguing rules, the process-heavy mechanisms of library accounts, library cards, interlibrary loan, and all the moving parts that make up the (admittedly complex) library system. It seems to me that there are two fundamental problems with the insistance on process over anything else. On the one hand, it makes it very difficult for us to change (maintaining traditional processes, even when they no longer work, is the epitome of the "we've always done it this way" problem). On the other hand, it substitutes a belief in *automatic* success (without defining success) with the intellectual work required to understand and evaluate what success means in a given case. How many of us have embarked upon new

projects, beginning with the *process*, the formal procedure of project management, without ever having a clear understanding of what the project is supposed to achieve, i.e. what would constitute success.

I believe this formalism, this oblivion of process, affects all the different areas of the library, from the "procurement-based IT" that Alan Harnum has written about, to problems of assessment, to new-hire messianism, and the profileration of library standards. It affects projects - which are often never completed because we don't know what "complete" means - as well as services, which are considered successful because we've followed our usual model for service delivery. The uncritical acceptance (either in whole or in part) of new procedures and methodologies (ITIL, PMP, Agile, Scrum) which either get only partly implemented or which limp along year after year out of faith in their processes, means that librarians can get in the habit of *thinking* we're moving forward, when in fact we're simply caught in the some procedural morass as we always have been.

There are alternatives, definitely - I've seen successful projects, successful assessment and evalutation, services implemented without being bogged down by procedural conformity, but these are exceptions.

Why is this important now? Over on Twitter [@allanaaaaaaa](https://twitter.com/allanaaaaaaa) and [@bibliocracy](https://twitter.com/bibliocracy) have been discussing ways libraries might best respond to what many of us see as the coming dominance of fascist state tactics, likely sooner rather than later. I think this recognition of the deeply-rooted allegiance to process, to formalism, is important in this case because one of the *values* of formalism - to library administrators, to the state, as much as to prison guards - is that it automatically invalidates and shuts down any critique or interrogation that is not process based. An insistence on process, coupled with the values of neoliberal capitalism, leads to surveillance in the library *whether librarians recognize it or not*. Any attempt to critique the encroachment of surveillance is deferred - the process will take care of it. There are several problems with this. First, our process are imperfect, they leak data, they support values that run contrary to those that - I hope - most library workers would endorse. Secondly, they are easily manipulable - by university administrators looking to cut positions or services, and by the state itself. Third, we never get back to the critique. We run out of time, or energy, or political capital. Fourth, because following formalized process "is how we've always done it", it prevents an awareness that what was merely annoying under the previous political regime, becomes actively harmful and dangerous under the new one. As contexts change, library structures of thought, feeling, and decision-making - in short, our organizational and professional culture, have to change too. Doing what we've always done is likely to start getting people arrested and deported (or worse) before very long. Fifth, how do you counter a position that most people aren't aware that they've taken? The hegemony of process is so deeply-rooted in our professional culture that it's difficult, if not impossible, to get people to see it - and the dangers it poses - for what it is.

This is the problem with "library neutrality" in general, and the insistence on process is simply one of the ways "neutrality" influences library practice.

How do we counter this? In the academic world, we have to use what intramural academic freedom and political capital we have to raise these questions as vigorously and frequently as we can. In public libraries, I think the the position of staff members is much more difficult, and I'm not sure what tactics public library workers can adopts while still protecting themselves and their patrons.

Anyway, these are just a few thoughts on a tendency in libraries that is rarely if ever discussed in library school, and is so subtle and ubiquitous that it's hard to notice even when you start working in libraries. This post should not be considered a definitive statement, but is hopefully complementary to other writing in this area, like Allana's Libraries in the age of fascism, which has much more concrete suggestions for what we are going to need to do as the political landscape changes over the next while.

[1] quotes taken from Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*, New York: Knopf, 2015.

Practice, Reading, and Fake News

2017-02-10

I was asked to write a guest blog post for The Alberta Library's website, Behind the Stacks. I wrote about how broad and varied reading is an important element in negotiating and navigating fake news, or propaganda.

Behind the Stacks: Practice, Reading, and Fake News.

Review: The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

2017-02-12

Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.

It's always seemed to me that there were two trends in the English novel (the novel in English, not the novel of England). There's the Jane Austen-type, where the "ironic distance" between the narrative and the characters is low, the writing is meant to provoke in the reader the feelings of the characters, and much more is *shown*, not *told*. On the other hand there is the Dickens-type novel, with a high degree of ironic distance, the writing is meant to entertain with tales of the characters, and much more is told instead of shown. The style of the first tends towards verbal stability, the second to exuberance. Both kinds of novel develop out of early-pre-novelistic literature, and neither is more or less legitimate than the other. Nevertheless, the two trends diverged somewhere around the time of, say, *Tristram Shandy* (1759) and both styles are rarely, if ever, attempted by the same author. (Dickens tries it in the first section of *Great Expectations* and John Fowles' also attempted it). The crowning achievement of the Dickens' type novel is probably *Ulysses*, but that type is always looking to produce extraordinary examples, outliers. The first type is always looks to keep its head down, and general consensus seems to be that the crowning achievement here (if one can be said to exist) is *Middlemarch*.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a novel of the second type, drawing not only on the tradition that runs from *Tristram Shandy* through Dickens to Salman Rushdie, but also on the Latin American tradition of Garcia Marquez and Vargas Llosa. The verbal exuberance of *Oscar Wao* is fleshed out not only by plenty of colloquial Spanish, but also through references to science-fiction and fantasy, as well as to deliberately unscholarly-sounding footnotes. As always with this kind of novel, puns and wordplay abound, and while this all makes for an entertaining read, it suffers the same problem as all the novels of the second type (except *Ulysses*) in that it tells more than it shows. We witness the tribulations of Oscar's family, but we do not really feel them.

Diaz himself is aware of this:

> How she survived I'll never know. They beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog. Let me pass over the actual violence and

> report instead on the damage inflicted: her clavicle, chicken-boned; her right humerus, a triple fracture (she would never again have much strength in that arm); five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out. About 167 points in damage total and it was only shee accident that these motherfuckers didn't eggshell her cranium, though her head did swell to elephant-man proportions. (147, emphasis added).

The "report" of the violence not only becomes a laundry-list of wordplay, but the reference to role-playing hitpoints and the elephant man, the out-of-nowhere "motherfuckers" all serves to take us away from the violence as it was actually inflicted. There are reasons for this - Diaz' novel is about the effects on a single family of the violence and distortian of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic - and whether you prefer this or something more intimate, more sensible, is a matter of taste only, I think. And certainly one doesn't have to choose - the clinical language and descriptions of Garcia Marquez which achieve enormity or the blood, sweat, and tears of Jane Austen - literature has room for all of this.

On the other hand, it's difficult to understand whether Oscar Wao himself is meant to represent anything beyond himself. In novels of the second type, allegory, representation, symbolism abound (one thinks of the repeated names in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or the word-painting in *Ulysses*), so it's tempting to think that Oscar, the overweight virgin geek who eventually falls to the violence of the regime, is meant to represent something more, but I'm not sure I can tell what that is. Perhaps, true to the postmodern vision, this is nothing but play, and I shouldn't be looking too deeply for hidden depths (postmodernism and postmodern novels being concerned primarily with surfaces), but it *does* seem as if Diaz wants to say something serious about about the violence of politics, families, and dictatorships. Does the playfulness, the surface play, undermine that? I'm not sure.

This was certainly entertaining, and there's a lot to enjoy in the book, but I'm not sure it quite got where it intended to go.

The ILS and Systemic Generality

2017-02-12

"simplicity buys you power" – Daniel Higginbotham

1. Complexity and the ILS

At a recent presentation about FOLIO, I was reminded of conversations that took place a couple of years ago with Gillian Byrne and others around the idea of "disintegrating" the ILS. The "integrated library system" which developed out of early library automation initiatives and is now morphing into the "library services platform" (essentially, a modular ILS in the cloud). One of the aspects of our conversation was that, perhaps, the integration of the ILS was a cost, not a benefit, to library work. From my perspective, this idea grew out of an increased decoupling of the OPAC from the rest of the ILS, which has culminated in my own work with an implementation of Blacklight at University of Alberta Libraries.

Working with a decoupled OPAC has lifted many of the constraints inherent with working with a legacy, proprietary ILS: we are not limited in data or document format, for example, nor on clunky, outdated, essentially pre-web UI technologies. We are also free, down the road, to switch out the ILS layer and keep our Blacklight implementation. Since Blacklight only requires MARC records from the ILS (and some user-facing functions accessed via API), it is agnostic as to the underlying system.

One of the things that came out of the FOLIO discussion was some more information about the underlying system layer of the project. Below the OKAPI microservices platform, FOLIO plans to have a databases (SQL or NOSQL), an indexer (probably Solr), an object repository (Fedora), and a few other storage applications. It's argued that this will allow FOLIO to accept and manage many more different formats and object-types than ILS' currently can. Libraries can substitute other applications for any of these pieces (say, ElasticSearch for Solr), but for most libraries, this layer is encapsulated by FOLIO - they access the system layer through OKAPI, and in any event the system stack lives in the cloud.

Another thing that came up was the fact that, as the FOLIO rep put it, Sirsi-Dynix' BlueCloud is a suite of services built on top of Symphony (one of Sir-

siDynix's ILSs), which raised a red flag for me, because marketing and selling a modern LSP which is fundamentally built on top of an out-of-date, basically obsolete application, seems at best a bad idea, at worst a scam [1]. If the LSP is meant to take advantage of modern archiectures and technologies, building it on top of a legacy ILS would be like putting a Tesla body on top of an Edsel. It turns out things aren't quite so dire - according to the BlueCloud documentation, SirsiDynix had the chance to redesign and re-implement the database layer of their existing ILSs and chose not to, ostensibly in order to focus on more important things (given that, according to them, their database architecture and design decisions were solid and well-founded).

Even if this is the case, and they haven't based BlueCloud on Symphony, this is still problematic. The Symphony database can still only handle records in a small number of formats (i.e. MARC), its indexes are still built on outmoded conceptions of search, discovery, and access, and it likely still tightly couples the database design to a database implementation (can you use MongoDB with BlueCloud, or do you have to use Oracle?).

What is common in both these characterizations of the database or system layer is an insistence on the part of vendors for an encapsulated solution that on the one hand hides complexity from people who work with the system, and on the other hand makes libraries even more dependent on vendor-supplied solutions for maintenance and support (Ebsco's avowed business-model with the FOLIO project). However, there is something disingenuous and self-serving about this particular instance of hiding complexity. It gives vendors an incentive to *increase* complexity contrary to best-practices and industry standards, or at least not to actively reduce complexity (anyone who has had to log in to an SFX server and work directly with the software knows what I'm talking about). But even worse than that, it doesn't *in fact* reduce the complexity presented to the library worker, it simply shifts it. Managing, for example, the printing of library slips or user-rules within an ILS are mind-numbingly complex. The next-generation library systems like Primo and Summon hide the underlying complexity of the database systems and ETL pipelines, but anyone who has worked with Primo's normalization rules and pipelines will know that this doesn't save on cognitive load, skill, training, or experience required to configure the system. The people who understand these things tend to become single-points-of-failure in a library system. And since there are so many of these pieces within the ILS, the library systems ends up with many people who understand a single piece of the ILS *really well*, but that knowledge isn't shared (indeed, it's barely shareable). Again, the end result is that we rely even more on vendor support, but it also means that the cost of moving away from a given system, which is already high, becomes even higher: imagine all those single-points-of-failure who now have to learn an entirely new, entirely different, equally overcomplicated system.

One of the thought-experiments systems librarians sometimes like to undertake is to imagine the smallest, lightest stack of open-source tools on which you could

build a library system. The great thing about many open-source applications, take Solr for instance, is that they are multi-purpose. You can index anything in Solr, not just bibliographic data. On the other hand, ILS modules (circulation, cataloguing, OPAC) are built for a single purpose. Just as many people won't tolerate single-purpose gadgets in their kitchen, why do we tolerate single-purpose gadgets in our library systems? If, indeed, these modules made things simpler and easier for staff, that would be a good argument in their favour, but they don't - the complexity is simply shifted to a different part of the workflow.

2. Clojure and Systematic Complexity

The ILS (and the LSP) then, are not *complex* per se; they are *complected*, a word coined by Rich Hickey, the inventor of Clojure, to describe systems which are composed of simple things, but are made complex through entanglement of their simple pieces (see Simple Made Easy and Simplicity Matters). In essence, the "integratedness" of the integrated library system is the problem. Not only are many disparate technologies employed "under the hood" (a telling phrase) in the ILS, but this entangling is hidden from the users, making their work not so much complicated as complected. Working with library data in a system should be simple, but it has been made complex.

Now, one of the principles of Clojure is simplicity, and one of the ways in which it is simple is through what has been called "systemic generality". In the *Programming Clojure* book, this is introduced alongside one of the programming epigrams by Alan J. Perlis: it is better to have 100 functions operated on one data structure than 10 functions on 10 data structures. In Clojure, rather than the myriad classes, arrays, and hashes that get created in a given object-oriented programming [2], Clojure programming relies upon the use of a few very simple collection types. Rather than creating a new datatype (class) for a specific kind of data (i.e. describing or modeling your data with a class), you simply use Clojure collections (mainly vectors and maps) in order to hold any kind of data you're working with.

This systematic generality, this lack of specific classes in favour of a few generalized data types that are used *everywhere* really does reduce the complexity of an application. Vectors and maps are not single-purpose data types, like a applicationVectorModeBitstreamPipeline class might be in Java; they are general purpose. It's much easier to remember how to use two generic types like vector and map than to remember dozens or hundreds of specific classes, depending on the size of the application.

In this case, then, what if we moved the skill and experience required by a library worker away from the one ILS module they know inside-out, to a reusable component that is likely to be understood by more people in a system, simply through its generality and reuse. A circulation module is a database of transactions; a user module is a database of users; a cataloguing module is a database of bibliographic records. Currently, the people who understand the circulation module share little or no knowledge with those who understand the user mod-

ule or the cataloguing module, simply because these modules have been made overspecific and overcomplex. If, instead, we used a database (or tables) for circulation, a database (or tables) for users, and a databsse (or tables) for cataloguing, then all of a sudden we have three people who share knowledge and expertise because they're all working on the same kind of thing (a database). Similarly, an OPAC is just a website, but working with an OPAC in an ILS is painfully different from working on a webpage (and I have no expectation that this will be different with an LSP), so if we instead made the OPAC a website then, through systemic generality, anyone who works with the web can work with the OPAC and vice versa. This helps build in-house capacity and reduce single-points-of-failure (though it still leaves the problem of small libraries, addressed below).

Given that none of the proprietary LSPs (Alma, BlueCloud and, one assumed, FOLIO) can be expected to reduce complexity, as that would reduce the means by which they can be paid for maintenance and support, maybe the time has come to disintegrate the ILS not only in the sense of breaking apart its modules, but of getting rid of the idea of an ILS module altogether. Let our ILS administrators be database administrators, our OPAC programmers web programmers, our cataloguers simply people who work with a particular database interface so that their expertise can be about cataloguing and metadata and not taken up with (what should be) irrelevant things like how to use the cataloguing client.

Obviously, this still leaves the problem of smaller libraries who can't afford to have a database administrator or programmer. However, currently these smaller libraries are limited to vendor support for their ILS problems. Applying the kind of systemic generality I've been talking about would allow them to get support from *any* database administrator or web developer. It would bring library technology more in line with standards and best-practices and help us to overcome the library exceptionalism that plagues our culture (and not just in technology). For all libraries, big and small, it would reduce if not eliminate the stranglehold our technology vendors have on us and, through competition, ought to reduce costs as well.

NOTE: I haven't talked about open-source ILSs in this post (Evergreen or Koha). My sense is, while conforming more to standards, best-practices, and generality, they still suffer from the probems of complectedness. They also have an ecosystem of support-vendors which has grown up alongside them. I'd be happy to hear from anyone who has recent experience with the open-source ILSs to know how that sector stands right now.

[1] This has actually been confirmed for me by a few other people since I first put up this post. The BlueCloud documentation, then, is being at best disingenuous when it talks about the database layer.

[2] OO languages "use the same constructs for modeling values as they do for identities, objects, and default to mutability, causing all but the most disciplined programmers to create many more identities than they should." Values and

Change: Clojure's approach to Identity and State

Fair Dealing and Private Property

2017-02-22

One of the things that Marxist theory insists upon is that socio-economic phenomena cannot be viewed in isolation. Every phenomenon exists within a social context, is the product of social relations (grounded, fundamentally, in economic relations), and possesses a history (i.e. it changes over time). Since this is Fair Dealing Week in Canada (Fair Use Week in the US), I thought I would jot down some thoughts about copyright and fair dealing in the broader context of the property relations of late capitalism.

We (librarians, publishers, etc) most often tend to talk about copyright as if it is a self-contained thing, though when we do place it in context, the context is a legal one (a framework of rights and responsibilities defined by legislation and past-practice). We refer to the copyright system or the copyright regime, we refer to the rights of creators and the rights of users, and Copyright Librarian positions tend to ask for legal experience, sometimes even a law degree. Most of us (again, librarians, publishers, etc) are not lawyers and have a very sketchy understanding of the law. Talking about copyright in isolation makes sense - it's a small, well-defined area of the law that we have a chance of getting our heads around. Many of the Fair Dealing Week activities at my university are focused on clarifying the conditions for meeting fair dealing (primarily in an educational context).

But there is another context for thinking about copyright (indeed, it's the wider context of the law in general) - the system of property relations present in contemporary capitalist society. The closest we get to acknowledging (though not critiquing) these relations is by referring to those things that are covered by copyright as "intellectual property". Private property is one of the legal foundations of the capitalist mode of production that developed in Europe in the early modern period. Prior to capitalism, property was either held in common (among the peasantry), in fief (among those who rented land from landlords) or at the pleasure of the crown (landlords). The crown's property was not considered private in our contemporary sense because the king or queen themselves were not considered private. Indeed, as Habermas has demonstrated (in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*), the very concept of "the public" developed through the public presentation of royal power and prestige.

With the development of capitalism, through the process Marx calls "primitive accumulation", property that was originally held in common (i.e. not privately owned) was simply appropriated by the class that would eventually become capitalists. A good example of this is the process of enclosure of common land for the pasturing of (privately owned) sheep herds from about the 13th century in England. Marx's initial critique of private property stemmed from the condition of peasants who were being prosecuted for taking firewood from once public, then privatized land in Germany. Marx recognized that the social relationships - between users (not owners) of land towards common land, rather than between owners of private land - had changed, and were causing social problems as the existing cultures and relationships - i.e. commonly-accepted use of a common firewood supply - were no longer adequate to deal with the new economic reality - privately owned firewood which had to be purchased. The theory of how this process works, how economic changes outstrip social relationships until those social relationships have to breaj, is dealt with at length in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Marx's critique of private property - which he set down in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 - transformed over time from the cause of material inequality and oppression under capitalism to one of the effects of a more fundamental set of relationships, the set of relationships which come together in the commodity form. Commodities - which include some but not all kinds of intellectual property - are products produced in the first instance for sale (i.e. not produced for immediate consumption, with the surplus being sold). Copyright, the law which regulates the reproduction of certain kinds of commodities, arose out of the new ease with which text could be copied after the invention of the printing press. The Statute of Anne of 1709 explicitly connects the regulation of copying with the profit to be derived from the intellectual work by the author and their family.

Essentially, copyright is an attempt to artificially maintain the exchange value of a commodity by limiting the production of the commodity. For Marx, the exchange value of a commodity was determined by the cost paid by the capitalist for raw materials and machinery, etc, and the cost paid to labour (wages). With the development of the book trade, the intellectual work of the author was *not* included in the exchange value of the commodity (their cost/remuneration was handled outside of the labour relations of the production process). The cost of reproducing a particular book cost only the raw materials and labour of the printer (i.e. it did not require labour by a new author), and the development of printing led eventually to economies of scale as well, all of which would lead - without copyright - to the plummeting of the exchange value of each individual commodity (in FRBR terms, each item).

However, not every intellectual work is produced as a commodity (i.e. for sale). What contemporary copyright regimes do, however, is "enclose" non-commodities within the commodity form. Until the rise of, for example, creative commons licensing, it was difficult (impossible?) to explicitly place something

in the public domain (defined negatively as a region not covered by copyright rather than positively as common property). We can see this, for example, in the system of auto-registration of copyright.

So, when we talk about copyright and fair dealing, we're talking about commodities and commodity relations. Fair dealing provisions are, to my mind, part of the attempt to manage the exchange value of intellectual commodities, just as copyright does. They are a recognition on the part of the state that the free market principle - which would prevent *all* uncompensated copying due to the foundational legal framework of private property) - would have social (educational, innovative) consequences that requires the right to copy to be protected. In this particular instance, the state is mediating the requirements of two constituencies of the capitalist economy: those who rely on subsidized information in order to develop the economy (managers, entrepreneurs, scientists, etc) and those who are simply protecting their private property right. So fair dealing does not, in fact, balance the "rights" of users and creators in some kind of altruistic sense; it does so only to further the development of the capitalist economy through innovation and market expansion. The use of the term "fair" here is simply propaganda, since it's based on inherently *unfair* relations of production.

A few words about open-access. Some writers - most recently David Golumbia have attempted to use Marxism to argue against OA, from the perspective that it erodes the property rights of faculty members. Faculty members, in this formulation, are workers who deserve to be compensated for their labour through whatever exchange value can by extorted through private sale. In Canada, this argument is disingenuous on its face as most faculty members are already being paid for their labour (intellectual or otherwise), and capitalism will never pay twice for the same work (which sounds like a Ferengi rule of acquisition and probably is). Open-access, to my mind, serves a similar function to copyright: it mediates between the needs of one constituency of the capitalist economy ("users") and another ("creators"). Where copyright is explicitly weighted towards creators (hence requiring an exceptional mechanism like fair-dealing), open-access is weighted towards users. But OA does not get us out of the private property and exploitative labour relations of contemporary capitalism. To lay the exploitation of workers at the door of OA (as Golumbia does) is to misunderstand that copyright and open-access are simply two mechanisms for the distribution of commodities and exchange value within an inherently exploitative capitalist system. Both open-access and copyright will become irrelevant as the crises of capitalism deepen. As librarians, we can support open-access just as we can support fair-dealing, but I think it is important to understand the socio-economic relationships underpinning each of them. As far as open-access gives more choice to the creator (author) in terms of greater flexibility in how their work is reproduced and shared, I think open-access is absolutely a plus. But it does not resist or circumvent the labour and property relations of which it is a part.

The Responsibility to Read

2017-02-28

Note: this post intersects with a post I wrote for Behind the Stacks on Practice, Reading, and Fake News

The last few years have seen the rise of a critical trend in librarianship towards "Freedom to Read Week", a period when libraries typically draw attention to the everpresent threat of censorship. While an anti-censorship stance is laudable and has, generally, been part of libraries' professed values for a long time (but not foreve), criticism has generally taken two approaches. One the one hand, saying that people should be able to read what they like is simplistic, ignores questions of power and inequality and is, quite literally, the least we can do. On the other hand, focusing on challenges to print materials (often limited to *recreational* print material) ignores other challenges to intellectual freedom and privacy that are arguably more important, and which libraries would do well to turn their attention to. In a series of tweets, Alan Harnum outlined the main points of this critique:

Freedom to Read Week - I have complicated feelings about this one and how Canadian libraries use it as part of their image.

— Alan Harnum (@waharnum) February 27, 2017

On the one hand, celebrating achievements? Good. But OTOH, that print-centric title and the focus on book banning (a tiny problem)…

— Alan Harnum (@waharnum) February 27, 2017

There seems to be this resolute desire not to engage too fully with the real threats to intellectual freedom in the networked age.

— Alan Harnum (@waharnum) February 27, 2017

There seems to be this resolute desire not to engage too fully with the real threats to intellectual freedom in the networked age.

— Alan Harnum (@waharnum) February 27, 2017

Book banning is a very politically safe topic in 2017 compared to things like Internet filtering, data collection, state surveillance, etc.

— Alan Harnum (@waharnum) February 27, 2017

Not engaging deeply with the socio-political relationships of technology to intellectual freedom also helps maintain Library Innocence.

— Alan Harnum (@waharnum) February 27, 2017

Staying away from discussion of data collection, surveillance, filtering, avoids need to discuss library complicity in those trends.

— Alan Harnum (@waharnum) February 27, 2017

And engagement with commercial software companies who may have mixed or oppositional business models to intellectual freedom.

— Alan Harnum (@waharnum) February 27, 2017

Another aspect of criticism arises in the context of academic libraries, where "freedom to read" is bound up with different questions than in a public library, or recreational-reading, context; questions of intellectual honesty, critical thinking, evaluation of sources, and of course, censorship and intellectual freedom. When my own library system tweeted a "challenges book display" which included only fiction, it led me to wonder about the broader question of "freedom to read" in an academic environment.

It's Freedom to Read week, which challenged books have you read? Have your say in the galleria #ualberta #FTRWeek https://t.co/utgqV6zBnt pic.twitter.com/KeEDpDP7hE

— Rutherford Library (@RutherfordLib) February 27, 2017

I find it interesting that, in an academic environment, the challenged book display would include not only exclusively fiction titles, but primarily Children's/Young Adult titles. This is not due to any devaluation of children's or YA reading, simply the fact that using these as examples of challenged titles is *too easy*. No-one but a crypto-fascist arch-conservative would advocate suppression of *Where The Wild Things Are* (and yes, I'm aware that this happens: there are a lot of crypto-fascist arch-conservatives out there). *Anyone* in a university ought to be able to successfully defend children's and YA books against a challenge. In addition, fiction titles are generally covered by public library Freedom to Read Week approaches. It seems to me that a more productive, more fruitful, approach to Freedom to Read ideas in an academic environment would, at the very least, address the exponentially more complicated question of Freedom to Read in a scholarly context.

Because, while there can be no intellectually honest defense of a challenge of *Where the Wild Things Are* or - the example we used when I was in library school - *In the Night Kitchen*, are there legitimate reasons to imagine challenging *Mein Kampf* (tangent: someone on twitter recently went on a tirade which was very interesting, but which was predicated on the idea that the publication of *Mein Kampf* is banned in Canada, which of course it is not). The university itself

is committed to intellectual freedom in the question of books it sells in the bookstore (my bookstore copy of the *Communist Manifesto* proved extremely important to me) and collects in the library, indeed this is enshrined in the academic freedom clause of many librarians. But in terms of reading, advocating the reading of *Mein Kampf* is something very different from advocating its collection, and this is something that that not many students will get to consider if we restrict Freedom to Read Week display to children's/YA fiction, all of which can be considered *innocent* in a way *Mein Kampf* is not. Freedom to Read Week displays in an academic environment could be a teaching opportunity, but also a lesson in responsibility. With recreational reading, Freedom to Read is being free from someone else preventing you from reading. In an academic environment, I would argue, we should be promoting the *responsibility to read*, in the face of challenges both external and internal.

And in a way, *Mein Kampf* is as simple an example as *Where the Wild Things Are*. It is impossible not to have an opinion on *Mein Kampf* whether or not one has read it. But let's imagine including, among the easier things to support, say *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Machiavelli's *Prince*, and *The Joy of Sex* (all challenged books at one time/place or another, all of which would - nowadays would be considered at worst anodyne and at best fundamentally important to modern citizenship and social justice Now, what if we added to this collection, say, a book by (David Irving)[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Irving] whose work has been condemned as holocaust-denial, but who nevertheless had a long career as a respected historian. The fact that his work is challenged by "our side" and on solid historigraphical and scholarly grounds disturbs the simplistic view of intellectual freedom we (librarians) espouse. But it's an important perturbation, one to be engaged with, not ignored. Evaluating Irving's work with intellectual honesty and rigour *requires* reading it, whether or not we want to read it or want others to read it. Including Irving in a display of Freedom to Read Week books would be a useful, necessary, challenge not only to students, but to the librarians themselves. It mustn't be forgotten, after all, that "challenge", especially during Freedom to Read Week, has positive as well as negative connotations.

#critlib and code4lib

2017-03-10

Before getting down to it, I recommend watching the stream of Christina Harlow's c4l2017 keynote "Resistance is Fertile: Building a Manualfesto for LibTech". Go, do it now. While you're there, check out the rest of the c4l2017 talks too.

It makes me sad that the #critlib tribe pays no mind to the good work at and of #c4lib17

— LIS Grievances (@lis_grievances) March 10, 2017

The 2017 Code4Lib conference ended yesterday with a stirring keynote from Christina Harlow. The tweet above appeared this morning on the ever-provocative anonymous LIS_grievances bot. There are a few things I'd like to unpack about this tweet, one of which is the idea that there's a #critlib tribe. I have a chapter forthcoming in a book called *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship* which I suppose makes me a member of this so-called tribe…?

(As an aside, the notion of a critlib tribe reminds of of this other recent LIS_grievance:

#critlib and the SJW wing of librarianship.

— LIS Grievances (@lis_grievances) March 2, 2017

This unfortunately connects critlib with the narrative of, for example, Gamergate, Men's Right's Activists, and other deluded components of the "alt-right", for whom anyone who suggests that what they personally want isn't of primary concern must be a rabid "social justice warrior".)

Within librarianship, then, I'm concerned about the idea that anyone who engages in critical theory must be a member of a "tribe", but even more worrying is the idea that there is a constituency out there who positions themselves on some kind of "alt-right of librarianship" looking to dogwhistle others of their ilk by equating critlib with the (perceived) SJW menace.

The other assumption made in the first LIS_grievances tweet is that the "critlib tribe" (whatever that is) and the code4lib community are mutually exclusive.

This is demonstrably false, even if we take for the sake of argument the idea of a critlib tribe. There are code4lib attendees who actively engage in critical theory and vice versa. And just as the code4lib community is not monolithic or well-defined - and that's how we like it - neither is the critlib community.

Code4LibYEG, which I helped to found in 2013, takes pride in its inclusiveness, while still recognizing that we have a long way to go. Our events include participants from all sectors of librarianship active in Edmonton, and we have strong participation among some under-represented groups within technology, primarily women. We don't do so well on race, possibly because of the lack of diversity within the wider Edmonton population. And, in my opinion, we don't do very well among non-professional staff (e.g. library technicians). We would like to improve on these fronts. Code4LibYEG, like the wider code4lib community, has just enough structure to be a viable group. At one of our recent meetings, the "anarchist" nature of Code4LibYEG was discussed - and while I would necessarily go that far, it's an interesting idea.

So, I'm both part of the critlib and code4lib communities, however those are defined. But the first LIS_grievances tweet was decrying a lack of engagement between the "critlib tribe" and the code4lib conference. So, taking Christina's closing keynote to stand for the code4lib conference for the sake of space and argument, let's engage.

[Caveat: there's no way I can do justice to everything Christina talks about in this keynote, so I reiterate the importance of watching her talk.]

What struck me most about Christina's talk was how she more-or-less led with a very critlib statement:

> we are in a highly polarized and dangerous political climate. White supremacy groups are more active - or perhaps, simply more visibly active in the public eye; bias incidents are up in our communities; black, brown, and trans people are being murdered; Muslims are stopped from returning to their homes; journalism and truth is being blocked. (…) This is not a time for status quo, this is not a time for our silence on these questions. (All quotations taken from Christina's speaker notes)

This is precisely the attitude that the Social Responsibility Round Table takes with respect to the ALA (for example, the contentious issue around the ALA making a statement against the Gulf War in 1991), the Progressive Librarian Guild stands by, and would not be out of place in any critlib discussion.

> I earnestly think we don't know what we believe until we see what we do. (…) So, how do we make our ethics and politics apparent in our daily actions? Especially if we don't work in some explicitly political or ethical space? How do we "walk the walk"?

To me, this is exactly the space in which critical librarianship operates. Knowing what our ethics and politics are requires critical reflection (with a very

broad definition of what that is) *especially* since our spaces are - or pretend they are - not explicitly political or ethical. It would be hard enough to act ethically/politically in a space that supported such a stance, but in librarianship, as in many other fields, we have to *also* expend energy fighting to open up such space for practice. And Christina is absolutely right that a focus on technolog(y|ies) is not the answer. As I've written before about the stifling effect of too much process, the idea that reaching for the next technology will be the silver bullet for all our (ethical, poltical) problems is ridiculous.

> I'd present that our data technologies and our seeming incompetence on the whole to implement them in any wholesale, meaningful, or ecosystem-aware fashion, highlights shifts happening not in how we define data, but in how define professional relationships, our skillsets, our power hierarchies, our interactions with ourselves and with systems.

The question this raises in Christina's talk is precisely how we can actually go about making concrete change in the world, how can we connect abstract theories about things to practice and action.

> The "making it work" spirit is another important aspect of code4lib for me. We want to get stuff done, and iterate, and experiment, and tinker, and build, and maintain - not just theorize, plan, or idealize.
>
> I see every action I do, from spreadsheets to Git repositories to staff meetings to workshops to documentation, as political - not in terms of Republican or Democrat, but as a chance to be anti-fascist, to be inclusive, to be open, to be working towards an evolving, shared vision of a community. Each datum is a chance for meaningful action, in my view, in everyday work.

I really appreciated Christina's enumeration of the cultures and movements that have informed her (Riot Grrrl and Queercore), because we all do take different routes to get where we are. My own experience was shaped largely by frustration at working on a post-Fordist call-centre assembly-line from ages 18-23, as well as anger and resentment of the university where I was intent on not being indoctrinated. Christina's point that it's important to "[take] discontent based off of a number of reasons and [make] into a work ethics and an aesthetic" is crucial and often overlooked.

Christina goes on to discuss three areas which, to my mind, serve to expose the false dichotomy between theory and practice. The first area - "seeing our work outputs as tied into our politics and ethics" - precisely identifies the unity of theory and practice. Of course we need to raise our head above the theoretical weeds and engage in practice, but these aren't mutually exclusive, independent operations. Theory and practice are entwined and engaged with each other. As an example of this Christina cites the amazing work being done by for example, the Library Freedom Project, and also calls attention to the importance of

InfoSec (information security, broadly covering all aspects of electronic surveillance and the protection of privacy).

Christina's next area - "I believe transparency and openness all circles around the idea of open organizing of our communities as well as rethinking our power structures and dynamics" - posits a democratic hope for library technology communities, one that both Code4Lib and Access are often confronting and debating. Recognizing how we fail in these areas is vitally important in order to improve, but we can only usefully fail if we do it openly and transparently. But Christina rightfully critiques our own unconscious bias in favour of closed vs. open.

> Openness for our information systems – in whichever way that manifests – is again, going against a bias that we know better than others what the work is about or how to manage it. It is a community issue as much as a day to day work issue - how often do you see closed processes, tools, events even between our working areas within a library?

There isn't enough space here to engage with Christina's ideas at the level that they merit. Have I said you should watch the video of the keynote yourself. There is so much more in Christina's talk than I can even remotely do justice to here. Needless to say, Christina's ideas are informed not only by Riot Grrrl and Queercore culture, but also by her experience within the profession and her deep, deep technical understanding of metadata, systems, and software development. This keynote was rightly making a huge impression on Twitter while it was being given (and afterwards) and it contains a huge amount of information that deserves to be deeply engaged with not only by members of the code4lib, Access, and critlib communities, but librarians in all fields. Christina closes her keynote with a call to arms that aren't out of character for code4lib and, I hope, it resonates with members of many "tribes".

> And whether or not you care about this idea of the library data technology manualfesto, I hope some of these points lands for you too. Riot grrrl or no, metadataist or developer, librarian or administration, you do you, and lets aim for engagement so we can head for shared, intersectional, engaged work based on our community's goals, ethics, politics and wishes.

The idea that critlib isn't engaging with c4l17 is, to me, absurd on its face: I consider many of the code4lib talks, and Christina's keynote in particular, *to be critlib*. Nothing is gained by drawing arbitrary borders around permeable communities.

Dyer-Witheford's Cyber-Proletariat

2017-03-14

Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2015).

> The possibility that the vast pool of workers was surplus to capital's requirements was partially hidden by precarity and informality. When the consequences of a low-wage global economy became apparent in terms of inadequate consumption and stalled investment opportunities, the slack was taken up by financialization and credit at individual and national levels, so that debt, personal or collective, becomes a feature of proletarian existence. Once the bubble bursts, however, unleashing a torrent of global unrests, the automation option reappared. Everywhere cheapened labour has revolted the option of technologically eliminating it returns to the table, enhanced by new generations of robots emerging from early twentieth-century wars, and increasingly directed not just against manual work, but at the white-collar jobs of intermediate positions once imagined as secure.

Cyber-Proletariat is a follow-up to Dyer-Witheford's *Cyber-Marx* (1999) a more theoretical work which looks at how Marx and certain strains of Marxism have remained relevant in the new world of "high-technology capitalism". What to call the kind of capitalism we currently live in remains contentious - in the later book "high-technology capitalism" becomes "the digital vortex" - with various other options on the table: post-industrial society (Bell, Toffler), information society, late-capitalism (Mandel and - with reservations - Jameson), and not the least value in reading Dyer-Witheford is recognizing that the platitudes and certainties offered up in first-year LIS courses are anything but as sure and certain as we are led to believe.

Cyber-Proletariat looks at the effects on labour of the global, digital production and exchange network that has arisen as a consequence of the focus on automation and networks developed in the transition to… whatever kind of capitalism this is, since about 1975. Politically, this is the period of neoliberalism and austerity; culturally it is - as Jameson has shown - the period of postmodernism; economically, we're talking about the end of the Fordist post-war settlement

that saw the rise not only of assembly-line industrialism, but also the welfare state and the New Deal. In the current, post-Fordist dispensation, wages have fallen, the welfare state has been dismantled, and a working class based on a homogeneous "mass worker" has been decomposed. At the same time the technologies of information capitalism - automated and networked - have spread across the globe and have embedded themselves in areas of work previously considered either too "immaterial" to allow for automation (many library functions, for example) or which - prior to neoliberal deregulation - required oversight, such as the heavily automated and networked financial systems whose lack of human oversight and the speed of its connections and transactions led to the financial crisis of 2008. The global vortex is complex and anything but monolithic.

In the global north and west, the latest capitalism has given us a culture of iPhones, smart houses, the internet of things, and driver-less cars, but it has also given us zero-hour contracts, fake news, algorithmic bias, the automated tyranny of Amazon workers, and Donald Trump. Workers in the global south and east, at the end of vast, high-speed networks of just-in-time supply chains and free trade zones, have been given mass suicides (at the Shenzhen Foxconn plant), sickness, disease, and death. But they have also been given cellphones, and the networks of capitalism have profited on that too, for example meeting the needs of informally employed African migrants who use the phones as banking, communication, and cash transfer systems.

Dyer-Witheford characterizes our period of capitalism as a "digital vortex" not unlike the tornado that whisked Dorothy off to Oz. The increasingly rapid cycles of capitalis accumulation sweep into people's lives, in rare cases raising them to great heights, but most often sweeping their lives into ruin.

The cycles of accumulation, however, churn alongside cycles of struggle, resistance, and repurposing of the technologies themselves. Drawing on autonomous Marxism and communisation theory, Dyer-Witheford identifies spaces within the struggles of the proletariat itself which allow for resistance to capitalist totalization, as hopeless as that might often seem.

Dyer-Witheford offers a properly dialectical view of a hugely complex, vast, interconnected, and opaque system of production, circulation, and exploitation. His insistence on "proletariat" rather than working class, also offers up an interesting new perspective. For Marx, "proletariat" included those who were voluntarily or involuntarily unemployed, broading out from the concept of a *working* working class. This allows us to consider precarious labourers, the incarcerated, students, and many other classes of people who are just as - if not more - oppressed by capitalism, but who are left out of many twentieth-century accounts of class struggle. For example, Dyer-Witheford draws on the "autonomist" tradition of *operaismo* (workerism), a strain of Marxism that developed in Italy in the 1960s, and which included early theorists of unwaged labour performed primarily by women in the name of the reproduction of labour-power.

This critical view of the technologies of "late capitalism" is of vital importance

to librarians right now. Gone are the days when we could uncritically look at our automation systems and think solely of the efficiencies they would introduce to our workflows and the benefits to our users through unmediated access to systems and the consistency offered by automated and networked metadata systems (e.g. MARC). We have to be aware of how these technologies are contributing to a reproletarianzation of library workers and our user constituencies, but also how the technologies we rely on are themselves reliant on criminally exploitated labourers in cheap labour zones at the end of networked supply chains. We can no longer subscribe to the optimistic view of "the information society" with the liberating effect of its technology, as I was taught in library school. We have to recognize our – complicit – place in a global "vortex" of high-speed, high-tech, forces and relations of production.

Culture, Labour, and Artificial Intelligence

2017-03-18

In reading Chris Bourg's great talk "What happens to libraries and librarians when machines can read all the books?" I kept coming back to a couple of things that are outside its scope, but relevant to the question that she asks.

Bourg is arguing, I think, that - given the fundamental changes in AI and machine learning - we need to drasticaly re-vision our services and the goals and outcomes that guide them.

> I think we would be wise to start thinking now about machines and algorithms as a new kind of patron — a patron that doesn't replace human patrons, but has some different needs and might require a different set of skills and a different way of thinking about how our resources could be used.

Libraries and librarians have long been part of the broader world of big data, analytics, text mining, machine learning, and automation, but we have simply looked at those things as tools within our traditional workflows and models rather than as fundamentally informing changes to how and what we do what we do.

> But if this switch, from individuals reading books and articles one at a time in print to individuals reading books and articles one at a time on their own digital device is all we get from the digital revolution, then it won't have been much of a revolution.

The idea of a "revolution in libraries" brings me to the question of culture. In my experience, speaking as an academic librarian, academic libraries continue to a) have a liaison model which is mired in traditional concepts of research and teaching which continues to have less and less validity and is predicated on too much wasted effort; b) our systems and infrastructure is *slow* to change - with some exemplary exceptions we resist changes to our tools, processes, and workflows which means we are unable to absorb and adopt newer technologies, unable to be flexible and broad-minded enough to engage with, for example, machine learning, at the library system level (this is partly due of course to our completely screwed up vendor ecosystem, which squats like a vampire on the possibility of innovation and advancement in library systems); c) perhaps

most damningly, we have an ultra-hierarchical decision-making structure which owes its allegiance to the socio-political dynamics of university administrations rather than to libraries and librarians. Sites that *could* be used to expand our understanding and use of, for example, machine learning - i.e. poorly-conceived "digital scholarship centres" - are exercises in branding and self-promotion rather than honest attempts to engage in new technologies and ideas.

Bourg alludes to some of the reasons for resistence against the full adoption of machine learning (and its consequent culture-shift) but I'm not sure she gives enough weight to the inertia of library culture and tradition.

The other thing that struck me was in the discussion of jobs:

> Robots will take our jobs – In an article in Library Journal in April 2016, Steven Bell writes about the Promise and Peril of AI for Academic Librarians – and he asks "Could artificially intelligent machines eliminate library jobs?
>
> One reason people argue that AI will not replace library or other jobs is that machines can't replace the deeply human skills of creativity and interaction; which may mean that those skills become more valuable or could mean that AI will usher in an era where creativity and empathy are devalued and rare
>
> Another fear is that AI will eliminate the relationships between people and books, and between librarians and their community members

I've been reading Nick Wyer-Witheford's two books *Cyber-Marx* (1999) and *Cyber-Proletariat* (2015), in which he discusses the rise of vast, high-speed networks of automation - predicated on the constantly lowering cost of computing power as well as capital's need to replace human labour with machines - which drives, amongst other things, the rise of machine learning and practical AI. From Dyer-Witheford these developments are *absolutely* part of a strategy by capital for "robots to take our jobs" - indeed, this has been more and more the case since the 1980s, when robots began replacing automotive workers, making the Fordist assembly line obsolete. Until recently, intellectual and cultural workers were immune to this process, arguing that "the deeply human skills of creativity and interaction" could not be replaced by machine; in fact, capital was simply picking off the low-hanging fruit until the algorithmic sophistication and computing power reached the stage were "immaterial labour" too came under the sway of automation. This is the position we are currently in.

The image of the stock market traders on the floor of the NYSE, crying their trades in the crowd, are fictions from another age: they too have been replaced with high-speed networks of machine learning algorithms.

And we mustn't be too sanguine about the replacement of labour by machine. There remains, and there may always remain, a category of human worker cheaper and more expendable than the cheapest machine. Currently those workers are in zones of the global south and east, at the bottom of the global supply

chains that lead to the technologies of machine learning and artificial intelligence used in North America. We have to remember that all the technologies we use are, at bottom, the products of murderous, hyper-exploitative, deregulated zones of free trade and cheap labour far from our comfortable universities.

Finally, we have to be aware that the arrival of ultrasophisticated machine learning systems for intellectual and cultural work heralds neither a monolithic dystopia nor a post-scarcity (eu|u)topia, but simply the next phase of the subsumption of human life to the implacable logic of capital accumulation. However, this awareness opens up precisely the possibility of class struggle, the struggle to ensure that the adoption of AI does not erode "the values we care about (inclusion, privacy, democracy, social justice, authority, etc.)?", the struggle to harness and capture the tools of capitalist exploitation for our own needs. The strategy of capital from the beginning has been to "eliminate the relationships between people". Insisting on these relationships is the core, I think, of class struggle - one which library workers are going to be inaugurated into via AI and machine learning whether they like it or not. This might sound bad, but I agree with Chris Bourg that the advent of AI in libraries actually opens up a broader scope for change, which can only be a good thing.

Data, Discovery, and Access

2017-04-04

(source: The Strategic Direction of Research Library Leaders: Findings from the Latest Ithaka S+R Survey

> Library directors are increasingly recognizing that discovery does not and should not always happen in the library. Compared to the 2013 survey results, fewer library directors believe that it is important that the library is seen by its users as the first place that they go to discover content, and fewer believe that the library is always the best place for researchers at their institution to start their research. The share of respondents who agree that it is important that the library guide users to a preferred version of a given source continues to decrease. Christine Wolff, US Library Survey 2016

According to the Ithaka S+R report for 2016, the proportion of library directors who believe that their library should be the first place users look to discover scholarly content is dropping, but the absolute numbers remain high - above 50% in all three degree-areas. This indicates that library directors continue to see resource discovery as an important task for each individual library. In a recent post to the BIBFRAME listserv, Osma Suominen of the National Library of Finland wrote that "we can all agree that discoverability of bibliographic resources is very important, whatever the means". On the question of whether discoverability or access should take priority, Suominen comes down firmly on the side of discovery: "Even if it means users are crashing into firewalls when they try to access the actual content, at least they get to know that it exists and can then try other ways of getting hold of it".

To me, "at least they get to know that it exists" is the crux of the problem with library discovery thinking right now. It's a holdover from the days when finding out if something had been written - either on a particular topic, by a particular author, or, in the case of a known item, when and where it had been published - required the use of Books in Print or printed periodical indexes. "Discovery" - finding out what has been written and published - was *hard*, and in the printed index days was *by definition* the responsibility of each library.

But in a networked world, with bibliographic metadata already online and available in many different formats and locations, we no longer have the problem-

atic, difficult, discovery workflow that we did with Books in Print and periodical indexes. Answering those two questions: has something been written, and where/when was it published, is trivially easy. "Discovery" is only a problem when either, you want to be *absolutely sure* you've found *everything* that satisfies your search criteria (and nothing that doesn't), or if you are trying to force users into a single portal that satisfies their search requirements. The first case has likely been impossible since the invention of printing, but is certainly completely unrealistic today. The second case is connected to the point of view that it is the library's job to help users find out "whether something exists". Neither of these, to my mind, is a problem that needs solving.

Perfect precision and recall is possible on a small, well-described, well-understood data set, none of which describes the non-trivial data sets that we or our users work with on a daily basis. The Google, Amazon, or Proquest corpuses are vast, opaque, and noisy compared to the clean, sleek (and mythical) bibliographic databases of yore. More and more, especially with newer search and indexing algorithms, precision and recall seem to be a zero-sum game; that is, improvements in precision lead to poorer recall, and vice versa. This is a problem for no-one but librarians stuck in the days of Books in Print and periodical indexes, when they could convince themselves that these sources provided perfect precision and recall, which was not really the case then either.

With respect to the portal question, we have known for a while that our users are making less and less use of our search systems for discovery. It's not that they are abandoning our systems for other things, simply that they already have a way to discover resources. Forcing users out of the "wild west" of the open web into systems which – we like to believe – are clean and well-curated panders to *our* sense of (bibliographic) control, but doesn't in fact to anything to solve a discovery "problem" – precisely because there is no discovery problem.

Rather than trying to "get our data on the web", with every library exposing multiple copies of the same overlapping data, either to allow that data to be used by other systems or to drive traffic back to the local library (the Zepheira model), there are problems that we can and should be addressing.

In the first place, there's the question of bad, noisy data. Publisher metadata is, generally, terrible, and is the prime obstacle to good-enough discovery on the web. Can we help fix that problem by exposing our data, either through APIs or Linked Open Data - yes, but every individual library doesn't have to do it; perhaps that is a role best suited to OCLC or LoC (in the North American context; there are other organizations to play this role in other parts of the world).

The library best use that I've heard of for exposing more Linked Open Data on the web comes from Karen Coyle, who sees the ability to combine contextual bibliographic and non-bibliographic information to a user's workflow and experience. This workflow and UI may not (probably shouldn't be) implemented, owned, and hosted by a library, but if it lives anywhere else, our data should

be one of the data sources in it. But again, this should not be the responsibility of *every single library*. If libraries do decide to get in this game, we are going to have to figure out our position with respect to portals, since at the moment, this is not something that works in our favour.

Then there are our systems - this is the access question. We shouldn't accept that a user hitting a firewall and then trying to find a way around it is good library service. Given our licensing ecosystem, our systems need to recognize a user that "belongs" to us, and then remove as many barriers to access as possible. We've seen with SciHub what a user-interface designed to do that looks like. The duct-tape-and-glue approach to library systems, based on early-90s interoperability, is no longer good enough. We have the skills, expertise, and technologies to design better systems for access; this is somewhere it would be worthwhile focusing our attention, but in the age of link resolvers and proxies that "work OK", we aren't bothering. (Note that for these systems to work, the data on the web needs to be better, so this is inextricably linked to the data question above).

Finally, as [@bibliocracy](https://twitter.com/bibliocracy) points out, there's still a problem with how our users approach bibliographic resources that *starts with* discovery but does not end there. I've heard librarians talk about research as if it starts and ends with a perfect set of search results from which a bibliography can be created. This is patently ridiculous. More than discovering whether a resource exists, our users have to want to *find things out* and they have to be aware of the information context of the data they are navigating, with a view to producing something worthwhile which may (or may not) in the end be scholarship.

Too long, didn't read version: "discovery" is not a problem that needs to be solved; better data and systems for access are problems worth tackling right now, but not at an individual library level; data, discovery, and access will not - despite a librarian bias - produce good scholarship; only good scholars can do that.

‘The Peripheral’ & ‘Seveneves’

2017-04-18

William Gibson, *The Peripheral* (New York: Putnam’s), 2014.

Neal Stephenson, *Seveneves* (New York: HarperCollons), 2015.

Note: Spoilers for both books

I don’t often read contemporary fiction, but every so often I get the urge to see what’s being written nowadays. Perhaps because I’ve been writing so much about technology these days, I thought I would give Gibson’s *The Peripheral* a try. Despite being pretty much the exact demographic for Gibson’s stuff (you can fill in the blanks), I’ve only read *Neuromancer* and a few of the short stories. What I’ve read has generally left me cold, and a reread of *Neuromancer* a couple of years ago confirmed my suspicion: Gibson has the ability to match the right (high-)concept with the right elements of the zeitgeist to create a plausible world “twenty minutes into the future” (as Max Headroom put it). *Neuromancer* is well worth reading for the vision of the future (our present, for the most part) that Gibson imagined, what he got right and what he got wrong. But it no longer has the power of *the new* that I imagine it did when it appeared in 1984. Cyberpunk is old hat to us now; the colour of a detuned TV is blue, not snow…

With genre fiction, it often seems that the genre conventions, especially in terms of plot, are a useful armature on which to hang the author’s concerns. The worst kind of genre fiction is bland and formulaic, but the best - Chandler’s noir, for example - flesh the formulaic plot out with ideas and problems just beyond the capacity of most genre fiction to address. Unfortunately, a genre plot can often be shoehorned on to a story, giving shape where shape doesn’t exist - this is the problem with *The Peripheral* and - to a lesser extent - *Seveneves*. Gibson’s set up and worldbuilding in *The Peripheral* are, as usual, great - both the world of the stub (twenty minutes into the future of the kind of poor white libertarian outlaws so enamored of TV these days) and the post-apocalyptic London in which the stub exists, are really well-drawn. There are glimpses of fascinating mysteries in this world: what kind of war engendered the creation of “haptic” soldiers? How was the stub server (“somewhere in China”) discovered? What is the nature of the stub’s reality. Instead of following up on these ideas, perhaps using a genre plot to frame them, Gibson’s focus is on the genre plot itself, using these ideas as incidental flavour. The problem is that the genre plot is…

a little lame. An AV Club reviewer writes that *The Peripheral* "delivers a rote noir procedural", and I think that this would be all right, if the procedural took a backseat to the questions, when necessary. Gibson, and perhaps this is the right call when writing "commodity fiction" is concerned almost exclusively with delivering his plot with the right pacing; the interesting questions, problems, and mysteries of the world he has created come second to that.

From the perspective of a world perhaps closer to the bring of nuclear war than at any time since the Cold War, with the added bonus of an increasing rate of climate change, portending a cataclysim which could make nuclear war look cozy, one of the most fascinating hints is the banality of the jackpot (the apocalypse which lies between the world of the stub and the depopulated, nanobot-curated future London). It clearly causes Wilf some pain to recount the details of the jackpot, but it happens "off camera", and everything seems to have turned out all right in the end. So the jackpot is both an apocalypse and… well, just something that happened. Climate change had something to do with it, but mainly what it spurred was a welcome (and overdue) depopulation of the earth and the spur humanity needed to develop the technologies that would make post-scarcity a reality, even if it's a kleptocratic post-scarcity. This may sound cynical, but - bar the mechanics of the noir plot - it's actually pretty techno-utopian. I can't even rememeber the maguffin of the noir plot, but needless to say it all falls a bit flat when nanobots can create anything you need.

Techno-utopianism is something Gibson has in common with Stephenson, though Stephenson's tends to be unalloyed by any nightmares such as Gibson can imagine. Full disclosure: I've only read half of *Quicksilver*, half of *Cryptonomicon* (multiple times), and *Anathem*. *Cryptonomicon*, with its picaresque globetrotting, and its Dickensian tone leaves me cold - I think you have to be more absorbed by the technical ideas than am to really sink into it. *Quicksilver* I've found interesting, but it's a dense read. *Anathem* I really liked, though I felt let down by the ending. Stephenson, like Gibson, seems to feel that his novels require some kind of genre plot to give them shape or pacing, but unlike Gibson, he tends to spring the genre plot at the end, perhaps to make up for a failure of imagination or technique after maintaining tension and story for 600+ pages.

So let's get the main problem out of the way. The first two-thirds of *Seveneves* are set on earth and on (what becomes of) the international space station after something destroyes the moon. A Neil Degrasse Tyson standin predicts that the leftover chunks of the moon will soon grind themselves down into pieces too small to remain in orbit, and will come crashing down on earth in a fiery apocalypse. The first 600 pages of *Seveneves* is basically just a gripping working out of the consequences of the destruction of the moon. And it's great. It could lose a hundred pages or so probably, which would tighten things up, but it's so detailed and the ideas so thoroughly worked through, that it's very gripping. Stephenson, like Gibson, isn't as good on people as he is on ideas, but you're reading both of them for the ideas, mainly, so that's good enough. The third

part of *Seveneves* jumps "five thousand years" later, when the bombardment of the earth has ceased, and the survivors of the human race have reseeded the planet with water from comets, flora and fauna from the DNA stored on the space station when the Hard Rain began. I didn't find the jump of five thousand years particularly jarring - it's science fiction, I'm OK with it. The world of five thousand years hence is - as usually - fascinating and drawn with an immense amount of technical detail (this section too could probably stand to lose about a hundred pages). What bothers me more is the jump from realistic, "twenty minutes into the future" speculative fiction, to the kind of militarized Marvel Comics science fiction that - I assume - Stephenson felt he needed either to attract the fanboys, give the book an ending, maintain the pace in the (200 page) spring to the end, or all of the above. The story in part three was adequate, the details of the future world were fascinating, and dealt with the consequences of decisions made by the survivors thousand of years ago, and introduced twists to the narrative that, I think, would have been good enough for a, say, 50- to 100-page epilogue to the main story. As it was, the shoot-em-up elements of the last third were jarring.

Even without an epilogue - and perhaps this is where a cutthroat editor would have been a benefit - the first two thirds of *Seveneves* are fantastic. I think the novel could have ended with the council of the Seven Eves and it would have been a wonderfully ambiguous ending to a story all about minimizing ambiguity. Perhaps section three could have been a standalone novel, set in the *Seveneves* future.

Stephenson seems to write two kinds of books: picaresque techno-thrillers (*Cryptonomicon*, *REAMDE*) and set-em-up-knock-em-down speculative fiction (*Anathem*, *Seveneves*). I much prefer, I think, the second kind, but in both *Anathem* and *Seveneves*, it's as if Stephenson hasn't trusted himself to end the novels without a leap from speculative fiction to genre fiction; perhaps this, too, lies at the heart of Gibson's reliance on genre. It's interesting to compare them both with, say, Philip K Dick, who mined the same area (speculative fiction) in a completely different way.

Intellectuals, Labour, and the Anthropocene

2017-04-20

My proposal had been submitted last year and I had been planning to attend the upcoming Libraries, Archives, and the Anthropocene Colloquium hosted in New York by Litwin Books, but due to the unethical travel ban implemented since then by the US Government, I have decided not to travel to the US for the time being and I withdrew from the colloquium.

I had, however, done a fair amount of work on a draft of a paper looking at various Marxist strands of ecological thinking, and I thought that there was enough there to share on this blog. I don't have plans to finish and polish up this paper, so it might as well go out into the world. Maybe it will be of use or interest to some.

Intellectuals, Labour, and the Anthropocene (pdf)

VI Lenin, 'Left-Wing' Communism, an infantile disorder.

2017-04-23

V.I. Lenin, *'Left-Wing' Communism, an infantile disorder* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency, 1970). *Originally published in 1920.*

In his "Study on the Unity of [Lenin's] Thought" of 1924, Georg Lukacs argued that the "core of Lenin's thought" was the *actuality of the proletarian revolution.* When I first read this, I was unclear as to what that actually meant, but having finally read Lenin's contribution to international communist polemics, I think I finally get it. Not only that, but I think it provides a thread of continuity throughout Lenin's career (e.g. in *What is to be Done* (1902) and *The State and Revolution* (1917)); when you understand what Lukacs means by "the actuality of the revolution", a lot of Lenin's theory and practice falls into place.

'Left Wing' Communism is, ostensibly, an attempt by Lenin to identify and describe the lessons of the Russian revolution that are applicable to other countries in the context of 1920. This context includes the rise of fascism and the communist response to that threat, controlled primarily through the Comintern, but it also includes the activities and programmes of communists and socialists in all the countries of Europe, pricely because Lenin felt that proletarian revolution was not only on the agenda in those countries, but because the revolution had, in reality, already begun. We know now, with historical hindsight, that Lenin was wrong about this, but it seems clear that this was not propaganda, that Lenin really believed the revolution to be imminent, and that he was making a good-faith contribution to the success of the international revolution.

> Lenin always saw the problems of his age as a whole: the onset of the last phase of capitalism and the possibilities of turning the now inevitable final struggle between bourgeois and proletariat in favor of the proletariat - of human salvation. (Lukacs, Lenin, p. 11).

When you read Lenin's work as active interventions in what he saw as an ongoing process of revolutionary organization and activity, it makes it easier to understand the process of his thought, including the typical criticisms of vacillation or opportunism, usually leveled against him. As he states with his usual force in *'Left Wing' Communism*, there's no point in coming up with rigid, ab-

stract rules of political activity; politics and history are too complicated for that.

> To reject compromises 'on principle', to reject the permissibility of compromises in general, no matter of what kind, is childishness, which it is difficult even to consider seriously. A political leader who desires to be useful to the revolutionary proletariat must be able to distinghuish *concrete* cases of compromises that are inexcusable and are an expression of opportunism and *treachery*.

Lenin is arguing against the "left wing" segments of various Communist Parties who argue that their parties should not participate in bourgeois parliaments (i.e. stand for election, seek seats) or work within reactionary bourgeois trade unions. For Lenin, Communist Parties "must absolutely *work wherever the masses are to be found*".

> To refuse to work in the reactionary trade unions means leaving the insufficiently developed or backward masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders, the agents of the bourgeoisie, the labour aristocrats, or 'workers who have become completely bourgeois'. (p. 45)

It seems to me that Lenin's view of parliaments is - similar to Marx's - based on their relative novelty and the fact that, in their respective countries at their respective times, the bourgeoisie had not yet learned to make parliaments tools of class oppression, totally dominated both legally and ideologically by capital. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin calls the state a special institution for the suppression of one class by another. But it seems clear that he distinguishes parliaments from the state, just as he distinguishes political parties from parliaments. These distinctions were, I assume, valid ones in Europe of the 1850s (Marx) and Russia of 1905-1920, but to my mind, these distinctions have - over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first - ceased to have any validity. The compromises - both financial and ideological - required for any party to stand for parliament in North America are such as to obliterate any left wing progressivism (as witness the sorry state of today's NDP); and parliament has become an institution of ideological oppression (one of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses), while the non-parliamentary state (what we call "the government") handles actual physical oppression and coercion. As someone who believes that any left-wing political party worth the name should have nothing to do with bourgeois parliaments, I'm one of those with an "infantile disorder", like chicken pox, that Lenin attacks in his pamphlet. Chicken pox isn't particularly dangerous, and is something we all have to go through; Lenin believes the left-wing opposition will grow out of it.

On the other hand, North America in the 21st century is very different from Russia and Europe 100 years ago. Our political parties *are not whether the masses can be found*, as lower and lower voter turnout and party memberships show. It is a waste of time to participate in any of the bourgeois parties, just

as it is a waste of time to vote for them; indeed, voting simply lends a veneer of legitimacy to an institution of oppression and propaganda. I'm suspicious too of movementism (like Naomi Klein's Leap Manifesto movement), and the only party which seems to have anything radical to say is the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR-RCP). *But*, this has a lot to do with the fact that we are *not* experiencing "the actuality of the revolution". If anything, our situation is closer to the Russia of Lenin's youth, when useful political activity was only possible within the study circles such as the one Dostoyevsky belonged to, and for which he was exiled to Siberia. This "circle organization" (*kruzhkovshchina*) was occupied primarily with education and propaganda, of trying to expose the barbarity of capitalism and the bourgeois state (the kinds of things we now tend to call social justice). Propaganda and education existed alongside economic activism (i.e. labour union activity). Eventually, political activity matured leading to more rigorous activism ("agitation") and eventually poltical organizing with a view to fomenting revolution. We can't see that far ahead, obviously, but our propaganda, our education, must reflect the potential for another period - hopefully coming sooner rather than later - of "the actuality of the revolution".

2017 is obviously a great time to be reading Lenin and other theorists of the Russian Revolution to see what remains valid for us of their experience. Lenin's works are short, but - because they were written for immediate political purposes - they can be a bit dense and impenetrable, full of forgotten names and superseded polemics. But there is a wealth to be found there - and in Trotsky too - that ought to ring true to anyone working on the left in Canada, 100 years after the overthrow of the bourgeois state in Russia. What happened in Russia after the death of Lenin is an argument not worth getting into here, but it should not detract from the historical and political value of the popular rising that put the Bolsheviks in power.

Lenin, Gramsci, and "The Americans"

2017-04-27

Note: spoilers for s01e04

The Americans, for anyone who doesn't know, is a TV show that started in 2013, following the lives of two Soviet sleeper agentsi in the early 1980s, a husband and wife team who have been operating in the US since 1963. The show was inspired by the uncovering and repatriation of a Russian sleeper spy ring in the US in 2010. The show makes a lot of use of actual political and strategic events that took place in the early 1980s, notably the Star Wars defense programme. In season 1, episode 4, Hinkley's assassination attempt on Reagan take place, throwing the sleepers, their handlers in the Soviet embassy, and the FBI counter-espionage agents, into a tizzy. It becomes clear that the Soviets, hearing a statement by Secretary of State Alexander Haig that he was "in control here" (in the White House), assumed that the assassination attempt was part of an attempted coup, something the lead FBI agent finds ridiculous. He says to the mole he has planted in the Soviet embassy that that's not how it works in the US.

Razmig Keucheyan, in his survey of "critical theory", argues that different strands of Marxism are marked by different views positions on the question of power. Prior to Foucault's diffuse model of power, two of the most influential understandings of power come from Lenin and Gramsci. For Lenin, the conquest of state power was the fundmental moment in the proletarian revolution; the imposition of the dictatorship of the proletariat would both inaugurate the social revolution, and the process of the "withering away" of the state (cf. *The State and Revolution*, 1918). Keucheyan ascribes this focus on the capture of state power to the fact that autocratic Russia had an extremely large and powerful state and an almost non-existent civil society.

In Western Europe, on the other hand, civil society was much more robust. In the prison notebooks, Gramsci wrote that

> In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled, a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. (Quoted in Keucheyan, p. 40).

Keucheyan adds that this position "presupposes that in the West a 'war of movement' is insufficient on its own for the overthrow of the socio-political order". (40). It is precisely this misunderstanding of the Soviet view of (state) power and the American that lies at the heart of the episode.

At one point, Philip, the sleeper-husband, argues that the positive news coming out of the White House (that Reagan was alive and likely to survive) should be distrusted given that when the last two Soviet leaders died (presumably Andropov and Chernenko), news of their deaths was suppressed for several days. This indicates a solid understanding on the part of the writers of this difference between Soviet and American political life.

However, it raises the question of exactly how true this understanding of Soviet politics and civil life actually is. It's true that state power has played a integral role in the USSR and Russia (both before and after the revolution) - autocracy turned into the powerful Soviet bureaucracy, and then again into the monolithic capitalist state under Putin - and this led to an interpretation of Soviet life as totalitarian. But as Lenin and Gramsci understood, society is never homogeneous, and no amount of control can be exercised totally. Just as the US had (and has) its resisters - now, perhaps, more than ever - so the USSR had its dissidents. But even besides resisters and dissidents, there are always ordinary people going about their ordinary lives - that is, civil society. The situation of total fear and paranoia described by, say, Solzhenitsyn, beggars belief. In the words of the FBI agent, society "just doesn't work like that".

A final point to made with respect to this episode and the model of state power it demonstrates - and this is either unconscious or an act of pretty subtle subversion - the idea that the state that exists in a "proper relation" with civil society is not amenable to a coup also suggests that the state machine, backed by the power of civil society and US-style bourgeois democracy, can carry on even if the head of state is killed. At another level, however, it suggests a more important truth of bourgeois politics: that the individuals who form the state - Reagan, Haig - are interchangeable. If a trembling of state power can unveil the power of the civil society that backs it, then the state itself is unnecessary unless - as Lenin has it - it is nothing but the machinery of oppression of one class by another. This idea opens the door to a civil society being able to get along without a state apparatus at all, one of the most basic elements in a future communist society.

Thus the differences between Soviet and American views of state power can be read as supporting both American bourgeois hegemony *and*, more subversively, the eventual victory of communism.

Quotes from: Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, Verso, 2014.

The Data Turn?

2017-04-28

Sometimes I'll mention that people in the humanities don't use "data" to describe sources, and ppl get mad at me? I guarantee you it's true.

— Miriam Posner (@miriamkp) April 26, 2017

data specialists and data librarians in particular get mad at me, I should say.

— Miriam Posner (@miriamkp) April 26, 2017

Big Data, analytics, data analysis, databases - all these have been with us for years. But when Miriam Posner tweeted the above yesterday, I began to wonder if we aren't seeing a "data turn" similar to the linguistic turn following the adoption of (primarily French) cultural theory in the US in the 1970s and 80s. The inaugural issue of the Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies contained "A Case for Critical Data Studies in Library and Information Studies" by Tami Oliphant, and the "Collections as Data" recently released the Santa Barbara Statement, suggesting that that there is more to "data" than the narrow definition that might be provided by, say, a database administrator.

The use of "data" instead of "sources" reminds me of the resistance to using the word "text" to describe a non-textual object of interpretation. Yes, we can understand what Derrida meant, and we can recognize the characteristics shared by, say, a literary text and a non-textual object like a sound-recording. But we can also recognize that there is something metaphorical about the use of the word "text" here. Traditional scholars resisted describing non-textual objects as texts, and so it would be easy for us to suggest that today's traditional scholars are also resisting the description of non-data object as data.

But what is non-data? There are common-sense understandings of "text" and "data" that might indicate the dividing line between text and non-text, or data and non-data. But where Derrida's "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" *could* be dismissed as cultural-theory-obscurantism, it's much more difficult for us to dismiss the idea that something can be "not data". We could describe non-data as something not amenable to computation; we could also describe non-data as something which is incapable of being used as the basis for information, but both of these definitions seem particularly slippery. On the one hand, what's resistant to computation today may not be tomorrow (witness the albeit narrowly

focused advanced in machine learning lately); on the other hand, defining data in terms of information seems too circular ("what is information - something you drew from the data").

In *The Prison-House of Language*, Fredric Jameson's 1974 study of Russian Formalism and Structuralism, he talks about the use of language as a model for non-linguistic objects of study (the basis of structuralism and post-structuralism).

> The history of thought is the history of its models [...] The lifetime of any given model knows a fairly predictable rhythm. Initially, the new concept relases quantities of new energies, permits hosts of new perceptions and discoveries, causes a whole dimension of new problems to come into view, which result in turn in a volume of new work and research. (v)

> Language as a model! To rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics! What is surprising, it would seem, is only that no-one ever thought of doing so before; for of all the elements of consciousness and of social life, language would appear to enjoy some incomparable ontological priority, of a type yet to be determined. (vii)

What I see in the discourse around "data", and in the funding priority given to, for example, data and digital librarianship, at the expense of other, more traditional fields, is a commitment to data as a model, to an understanding of data as having "ontological priority" in the world of late/digital/cybernetic capitalism. And given that so much of our daily life - from social media, to financial transactions, to industrial production and circulation - is data driven, perhaps there is something to this. The focus on metadata quality, linked data, and computation is, perhaps, nothing more than the necessary response to cyber-capital's use of data as foundational infrastructure. *But*, we have to remember that data is both "real" data and "metaphorical" data, just as a text was sometimes textual and sometimes non-textual. And we have to bear in mind not only the audience for our discourse, but the users of our data, recognizing when they have need for, or are already using, real data or metaphorical data.

In a sense, we have to work at several different levels at once. Jameson goes on to say that

> We may say that as a method, Structuralism may be considered one of the first consistent and self-conscious attempts to work out a philosophy of models (constructed on the analogy with language): the presupposition here is that all conscious thought takes place within the limits of a given model and is in that sense determined by it. (101)

We must be aware that while *we* think of things in terms of the model (either a specific data model or *data as a model*), scholarship, research, teaching, learning and other modes of life go on without an interest in our model. The tribes

studied by Levi-Strauss had no need for his structural model of their society; they were just living. So we don't need to force our "data turn" on other kinds of researchers; rather, we need to develop practices and construct systems that work on real data models that are flexible enough to afford many different kinds of engagement. This is not new, I think, to anyone who works with library systems and data, but it is important, I think, to bear the "unreal" nature of all models in mind as we go along.

And this is where I think the problem lies. There's a hermeticism to a lot of technical library work (whether that's systems, cataloguing, or metadata), that tries to ignore the broader social context of the decisions being made. We might be user-focused, we might try to future-proof our decisions, but fundamentally, we follow best practices that are based on professional practice and knowledge (metadata and cataloguing) or institutional culture (systems and development), all of which are slow to change and averse to changing too radically. If, indeed, we are going through a data turn, then in Marxist terms, our knowledge and practices are becoming fetters on the work that we need to do. But the main culprit, from my perspective, is an organizational culture that *has* no model, that is a collection of ad-hoc decision-making processes (almost exclusively top-down) that are focused on getting as much out of the neoliberal dynamics of a university or municipality as possible, rather than on leading an organization into a position where we can explore and support the data infrastructure which enables scholarship and research, and is both methdology and object of study.

Fundamentally, as Rachel M Fleming noted this morning we need a much firmer grasp on the economics of our situation, both at the granular budgetary level ("*are* digital initative units better funded than public service units?") and at the level of political economy. How we sign contracts, how we work with our vendors, how we engage with our administrations and our parent organizations, all of this is being done too positively, too hermetically, too naively. If we seriously want to change our library culture in order to support library work that will allow us to engage and work with researchers, teachers, students, we are going to have to make some serious changes, we have to recognize our collective power to force things to change (a lesson we need to learn on the labour front as well), and we will likely need to get our hands dirty. For, even if we are going through a turn towards (digital) data as the overarching model, we need to be materialists too, and understand, challenge, and employ the material conditions in which we work.

Review - The Left Hemisphere

2017-05-08

Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, Verso, 2014.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I started reading this; I worried that it might be simply be a checklist of thinkers and ideas on the left today, that it would be dry and schematic, or that it would be superficial. In a sense, I suppose, it *is* all of these things, or at least would seem so to some readers. In fact, once I picked it up I found it very difficult to put down.

Keucheyan is a professor of sociology in Paris and has written books on social constructivism, has translated some of Gramsci's prison notebooks, and most recently is the author of *Nature is a Battlefield: Towards a Political Ecology* (Polity, 2016). I get the feeling that *The Left Hemisphere* is the book that many of us interested in critical theory wished we could write; now we don't have to.

Keucheyan locates the rise of critical theory (more properly "critical theories") in the failure of the German revolution in the 1920s and the "glaciation" of Stalinist orthodoxy in the 30s and 40s which entered the European communist parties via the Comintern. Western Marxism, which arose in reaction to that, out of the work primarily of Lukacs and Gramsci, and achieving an organizational paradigm with Frankfurt School critical theory, saw Marxist theory divided from political activity and leadership. This marked critical theory off from the kind of hands-on experience gained by members of the 2nd international and (especially) the Bolsheviks, as their membership combined intellectual and political activity. This division explains the focus on "superstructures" noteworthy in Western Marxism and in its "New Left" successor.

The first half of *The Left Hemisphere* is devoted to context, history, and typology, covering what Keucheyan see as the "defeat of critical thinking" leading up to the victory of neoliberalism in the 80s and 90s; a brief history of the New Left which, as opposed to anglophone treatments, gives a much broader view of the topic than, say, that associated with the New left Review. Indeed, Keucheyan makes the point repeatedly that one of the things that characterizes critical theory today its its internationalism. The centre of gravity, it is true, continues to be in the Anglo-American world (and primarily US academia), but critical theorists come from all over the globe, and retain connections to their national

and cultural intellectual traditions.

The critical theories that Keucheyan seeks to map are those that arose out of the decline of Marxist hegemony which can be located around 1989, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fukuyama's "End of History", and the achievement of neoliberal/postmodern hegemony in politics and culture (Note: Following Jameson's view of postmodernism as the expression of late capitalism in the cultural realm, I see neoliberalism as the expression of late capitalism in the political realm). Keucheyan discusses various potential (and complementary) periodizations of the various left/socialist/critical projects, before delving into his "cartography" of current critical theories.

The second half of the book is devoted to the theories, but rather than a reference work, the theories are presented as part of an ongoing, developing narrative, as themes from various theories combine and cross-pollinate as the discussion goes on. It is significant, I think, that the "Theories" section begins with Hardt and Negri's *empire* and *multitude*, as these concepts allow for a broadening out and problematization as we work through the ideas of people like David Harvey, Benedict Anderson, Jurgen Habermas, Giorgio Agamben, Giovanni Arrighi, Jacques Ranciere, Donna Haray, Judith Butley, Gayatri Spivak, and Fredric Jameson. This list is about half the number of theorists covered, and risks characterizing the book as an encyclopedia if not a laundry list, but as I say, Keucheyan works through some of the main points of each thinker, connecting them back to previous ideas and notions.

One of the two main characterists of critical theory today, in Keucheyan's view, is the globalized conception of the socio-political field. Hardt and Negri's *empire* is a global system, which requires rethinking and reconceptualizing concepts like imperialism, nations and nationalism, labour and demographics. On the other hand, and this is the other main characteristic of critical theory today, the "subjects of emancipation" has broadened out from the orthodox Marxist focus on the working class. Again, Hardt and Negri's *multitude* provides a starting point for discussion what used to be called "secondary fronts": feminism, postcolonial studies, new conceptions of class, post-Marxists understandings of hegemony and domination, race, gender, and sexuality.

Keucheyan has done, I think, an amazing service to those of us interested in Marxism/critical theory, in providing an intellectually stimulating (and challenging) entry into the complementary and conflicting ideas of a very broad range of thinkers on the left. One of the citations that keeps coming up is Bidet and Kouvelakis' (daunting) *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism* (Haymarket, 2005) and it is tempting to view *The Left Hemisphere* as almost an introduction to that book. What Keucheyan has achieved here, though, is something different - a book that manages to be introduction, reference work, and contribution to theory all at the same time.

The Learning Factory

2017-05-10

On May 5 and 6 of this year, I attended a conference on "Precarious Academic Labour in the Age of Neoliberalism" at Okanagan College in Kelowna, BC. I had initially put in a proposal to talk about precarity and academic librarianship with a fairly broad view of what precarity entails. It turned out that the focus on the conference was contract academic staff/sessional instructors (the terminology varies). I was initially a little surprised, given that "neoliberalism" was in the title, at the level of political sophistication among the attendees and presenters; it seemed that few, if any, had a clear understanding of the characteristics, history, and causes of neoliberalism, even individually, never mind a shared understanding with anyone else. Part of the problem, I think, is the notion of "good capitalism", generally equated with the long boom/*trente glorieuses* of the post-war consensus and the welfare state. Neoliberalism is seen as an aberration, a (very new) retreat from what capitalism is supposed to be. At first, I was a little concerned that my paper might be too political; then I thought that perhaps it was good that an explicitly Marxist perspective be brought to the conference. In the end, my paper went over well, and I think provided a complementary, not antagonistic or competing, viewpoint to the other presentations.

However, I realized something else. This was perhaps the first time that these people (mainly from BC and Alberta) had managed to get together, to self-organize, and to at least begin the process of self-identification, which is a first step towards a) being able to struggle for their own needs and b) achieving solidarity with other groups who might identify differently, but who are after the same thing. Due to the lack of funding and support, there are very few opportunities for contract faculty to meet and formulate/discuss issues important to them. So, even though I felt that the group as a whole was a little naive ("aren't universities supposed to be meritocratic institutions of enlightenment!?") and unaware (or resistant to the idea of) their own privilege, I thought this was a valuable and beneficial event. I was very happy to be part of it, not only to talk about library labour issues, but to represented librarianship in another sector of academia. Part of the issue around all of these things is the isolation of various constituencies from each other, especially between the permanent, tenured faculty and the rest of us (who said class - or the labour aristocracy -

was dead?).

Here's the text of the talk I gave.

The Learning Factory, or, the Reserve Army of Academic Librarianship (pdf)

Ursula Franklin, The Real World of Technology

2017-05-14

Ursula Franklin, *The Real World of Technology* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1999)

The title of Franklin's 1987 Massey Lectures are an homage to C.B. Macpherson's 1964 Lectures, *The Real World of Democracy*. Macpherson saw the Soviet and Post-Colonial states of the mid-sixties as challengers to the Western Liberal Democracy to which he was committed:

> We in the West have built up a system which we value very highly. It combines a large measure of individual liberty with a fair approximation to majority rule. None of the other systems have managed this, and we don't indtend to be talked out of our achievement no matter how necessary a policy of co-existence with the other systems might be. (C.B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy*, Toronto: Anansi, 2006, p. 4)

This point of view should be familiar these days: it's the stubborn cry of liberals long-accustomed to the unquestioned supremacy (hegemony) of their values seeing those values attacked by subaltern activists under the banner, not of pluralism, but of equality. It is the cry of antediluvian liberal democrats arguing against "identity politics", "cultural Marxism", and relativism of all colours. Jordan Peterson is a good example of this, but examples are not hard to come by. The hegemony of the liberal ideology, which was so total as to seem like not an ideology at all, "neutral", "value free", is crumbling in the face of competing interests. Liberals call out for a renewal of the social contract, falling back on "fraternity" when the traditional call for "liberty" has failed.

Franklin's work calls back to Macpherson's in many ways, but especially in this defense of liberal values. It colours Franklin's view of "the real world" in ways I'm not sure she was aware of. Nonetheless, her diagnosis of the effect technological change has had on our lives is succinct and potent. She's not *wrong*, but in addition to being a liberal, she is also a positivist, and shares the positivist's bias for "explaining that" over "explaining why". Franklin's book explains *that* certain technological and social changes have occurred since the late 1970s, but it can't explain *why*.

Fundamentally, this is because - while claiming that nothing she writes should be taken as technological determinism - Franklin is in fact a technological determinist.

> Nothing in my survey or its highlights should be interpreted as technological determinism or as a belief in the autonomy of technology per se. What needs to be emphasised is that technologies are developed and used within a particular social, economic, and political context. (51)

And yet, on almost every page, technology takes an ontological priority over the social. Nothing is written about the social, economic, and political context in which Franklin understands technology to arise. For example she writes that "technology as practice has modified our culture" (26), "[the speed of communications technologies] so completely changed the real world of technology that we now live in a world that is fundamentally different" (34), "new technical means restructure social and economic activities" (41). While technology is seen as "modifying" and "restructuring" our society, this is not due to any internal logic of the socio-economic system itself, but only to "inadequate modeling" (21) and a failure of the social contract. It is this liberalism – of social contract theory and morality ("was it morally right that, in the name of trade, prosperity, and efficiency, the mode of work could change so drastically that many people became uprooted and deprived of their livelihood?" (58)) – that makes Franklin unable to understand, for example, the nature and cause of technological innovation, which in her view, simply happens:

> Inventions and innovations may lead to the development of a particular technology; this, in turn, can bring growth of the technology, social acceptance, and standardization of production as well as products. (92)

But what caused the inventions and innovations in the first place? Well, if inventions and innovations are technologies, then clearly they too were caused by inventions and innovations.

To my mind, this is due partly to the hegemonic nature of liberalism - the fact that liberalism is so dominant, so supreme, that it cannot see beyond its priorizing of individualism and the social contract. But it's also due to the idea that neoliberal capitalism - the state of affairs Franklin is criticizing - is a deformation of the "good capitalism" of the long boom (the post-War Keynesian Welfare State period) and of classic liberalism. Capitalism, like liberalism itself, is seen as "rational" and "neutral", a fact of life; therefore the problems of austerity and the cutting of social services (and all the other "deformations" of neoliberalism) can't be due to the mode of production; they have to be ascribed to something else. For Franklin, this opens the door to seeing technology as some kind of objective agent, a *thing* in the world that is operating in some kind of causal relationship with us. If we have allowed this to happen, this is due - not to the logic and power relations inherent in the system - but to

a failure of governance and the social contract. We have made mistakes, and "technology" has profited by those mistakes.

This is a classic example of what Marx called *fetishism* and Lukacs called *reification*, where the movement and dynamics of social relationships are mistaken for the movements and agency of *things*. The social consequences Franklin analyzes are definitely real, and problems we have to address, but the days of an unquestioned liberalism, of the free market, individualism, and the social contract, are over. Which all to the good, since it is precisely that liberalism which prevents Franklin from really getting to the heart of *The Real World of Technology*, and leaves the reader of these lectures fundamentally dissatisfied.

Jacques Rancière, "The Ignorant Schoolmaster".

2017-05-17

Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

There are books that you read at exactly the right time. I have been struggling with a long time with the feeling that libraries are without a mission, without a solid, concrete purpose. All our discussions around what to call our users/patrons/customers suggest it; the silos that exist in any library of a certain size, to my mind, prove it. I don't think that librarians or staff working in cataloguing, acquisitions, systems, public services, information literacy, etc, etc, have a set of goals that cross all those areas. Part of this is due to the privileging of technical knowledge in librarianship - some of this is rigorous in some units (like metadata and cataloguing), very weak in others (like public services), and in still others is rigorous but (if done right) not library-specific (like library systems units). The values and mission statements of libraries, which are primarily brand- and optics-related, only make the problem worse: the lack of actual values and missions is obscured by the fact that we have value and mission statements on our websites.

So, for what feels like a long time, I've been wondering about a possible unifying mission for libraries. What kind of thing would that look like. Many of the possibilities are predicated, unfortunately, on a liberal ideology that, to my mind, is in the process of collapse after a hegemony of two or three centuries. Individualism, pluralism, and self-improvement tend to be the values underpinning our mission statements (though, true to any hegemonic ideology, these are unstated and unconscious); these unspoken values lie at the heart of librarianships perennial argument over "neutrality". Would it be possible to come up with a mission (if only provisionally) that was not based on these unspoken and unquestioned values?

Rancière, in a way, is attacking liberalism in another area, that of education. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is a meditation on the radical educational strategies of Jacques Jacotot, a teacher and politician who, after the restoration of the French monarchy in 1815, went to Belgium and established a school. He spoke no Flemish, and his students no French, but Jacotot was able to develop a pedagogy by which *a pupil could be taught something the teacher does not know.*

Rancieère argues that Jacotot's method departs from the traditional view of education, which is *explication*: a teacher explains things to student with an aim to bringing their level of knowledge up to the teacher's own. For Rancieère, this model of teaching requires that the intelligence of the student to be subjected to the will of the teacher. A condition in which the intelligence of one is dominated by the will of another is a condition of subjection, and in the intellectual field, Jacotot and Rancière refer to this as "stultification" (*abrutissement*). What Jacotot's educational method aims for is not instruction, but emancipation; the condition of "an intelligence in the service of a will". The traditional pedagogy, too, is predicated on an inequality of intelligence (teachers know more than students, the middle classes know more than peasants), whil Jacotot's method is based on a fundamental commitment to the "equality of intelligence".

Now, Rancière's description of the world of the "Old [School]Master", the system of explication and instruction that result in stultification and self-contempt based on the belief instilled in students that they are stupid, fits to a t my own experience of education, at least in primary, secondry, and undergraduate level. The role of professors, for example, in my undergrad, was pretty clearly not to lead students towards any kind of intellectual emancipation, but was to impart a few facts (enough to pass a course), and induct students into the socio-political order (that is, an order of subjection and exploitation), and when challenged, generally responded in a way calculated to put the student in their (intellectual) place.

My education primarily took place within the library. Rancière describes the role of *the book* in Jacotot's educational method:

> By leaving his intelligence out of the picture, he had allowed their intelligence to grapple with that of the book. Thus, the two functions that link the practice of the master explicator, that of the savant and that of the master had been dissociated. The two faculties in play during the act of learning, namely intelligence and will, had therefore also been separated, liberated from each other. A pure relationship of will to will had been established between master and student: a relationship wherein the master's domination resulted in an entirely liberated relationship between the intelligence of the student and that of the book— the intelligence of the book that was also the thing in common, the egalitarian intellectual link between master and student. This device allowed the jumbled categories of the pedagogical act to be sorted out, and explicative stultification to be precisely defined. There is stultification whenever one intelligence is subordinated to another. A person— and a child in particular— may need a master when his own will is not strong enough to set him on track and keep him there. But that subjection is purely one of will over will. It becomes stultification when it links an intelligence to another intelligence. In the act of teaching and learning there are two wills and two intelligences. We will call their coincidence stulti-

> fication. In the experimental situation Jacotot created, the student was linked to a will, Jacotot's, and to an intelligence, the book's— the two entirely distinct. We will call the known and maintained difference of the two relations— the act of an intelligence obeying only itself even while the will obeys another will—emancipation. (p. 13)

So, my question became: what if the library recognized and took ownership of its etymological history as *a place of books*? What if it began to take seriously a mission not of "access to information" or "access to material", but of emancipation. What if instead of information literarcy, we thought about intellectual emancipation? Instead of the multiple goals of cataloguing, systems, or public services, we engaged seriously with a mission of emancipation? In an academic context, we could provide a counterweight to the traditional (explicatory) model of pedagogy dominant in the academy; in the public context, we could provide a liberation from the cultural dominance of neoliberal capitalism and its requirements for consumption. The value of libraries, to my mind, a motto we would do well to take really seriously, is how Rancière sums up the place of the book in this radical, emancipatory project: "The book *is* the equality of intelligence" (38).

Liberalism and Neutrality

2017-05-23

In discussing classical liberalism, the Oxford University Press *Introduction to Politics* (Second Canadian Edition) writes that "the liberal critique of fascism as ideologies is a reflection of a tendency among some liberals to regard liberalism as somehow above the ideological fray" and quotes Barbara Goodwin's *Using Political Ideas*. The full quotation from Goodwin runs:

> In Britain we imbibe liberal ideas effortlessly from an early age, with the result that liberalism appears as a necessary truth, the basis of reality, rather than as one political ideology among many. (35).

In thinking about this question of "neutrality" that plagues librarianship (and many other "liberal professions"), it occurred to me that the concept of neutrality could only apply to a phenomenon that is (or thinks it is) "above the fray". The State, for example, in liberal terms, is seen as neutral, as moderating between a plurality of views, standing above competing classes, rather than maintaining (through force) the hegemony of the ruling class (see, for example, Lenin's discussion of the state at the beginning of *The State and Revolution*). In terms of ideologies, "neutrality" can only belong to something that sees itself as non-ideological. The argument is circular: liberalism is neutral because it is not an ideology, and it is not an ideology because it is neutral. The pluralism of views that liberalism maintains is seen as proving its non-ideological nature.

David Harvey, in his first important work of theory, introduces two definitions of "ideology", one Marxist, the other liberal:

> Marx gives a specific meaning to ideology - he regards it as an *unaware* expression of the underlying ideas and beliefs which attach to a particular social situation, in contrast to the *aware* and critical exposition of ideas in their social context which is frequently called ideology in the west. (*Social Justice and the City*, 18).

This fits with Goodwin's characterization of liberalism appearing as a "necessary truth", something of which we might not even be conscious. Perversely, for liberalism, it is precisely the unconscious nature of its values and priorities that, in contrast to the all-too-conscious ideologies of both right and left, make liberalism central, neutral, equivocal, moderating. It seems to me that the

question of library neutrality comes down to this unconscious presumption of liberal values.

The problem with liberalism - as we are currently seeing - is that by being unaware or unconscious, it prevents questions being asked about it, it suppresses alternative voices, words, and ideas, precisely because those voices have nothing to speak against: liberalism is silent in its automatic presumption of the truth of the world. Not the least debt we owe to Marx is that he made the ideology of liberalism explicit, allowing all those who came after to challenge and question, to interrogate and cross-examine the presumptions of liberalism, including the presumption of neutrality.

In my recent posts on Franklin's *The Real World of Technology* and Pateman & Pateman's "Managing Cultural Change in Public Libraries" I challenged, on the one hand, the unaware ideology of Ursula Franklin and the aware but mistaken ideology of John Pateman.

Franklin epitomizes the unconscious, unaware ideology of Canadian liberalism. For her, the liberal values of individualism, reason, private-property, and self-improvement are so self-evident that she never needs to enunciate them - she can simply presume that her audience shares them. In Canada, where the Liberal Party has been called "Canada's natural governing party", perhaps this was a valid assumption, especially at Massey Hall to an audience of *Ideas* listeners in 1987. Franklin is very good at describing the pernicious effects of technology on society, but her liberalism prevents her from explaining *why* such effects take place, which make it impossible for her to explain how we might go about changing things. For Franklin, the social contract (another liberal idea) has become worn down through the effects of technology and must be renewed. For her, we must simply *decide* to do better, and we can change our world. The problems of "the real world of technology" are simply due to mistakes; if we make the right decisions now, all will be well again. There is no room in her analysis for anything beyond the liberal constellation of individual-social contract-private property. She admits to no domination, no exploitation, no rapaciousness, and she certainly would not admit that, for example, capitalists and workers might not share a set of values.

For Pateman, the problem is a little different. He believes he is a Marxist, and he is conscious of this ideology. However, he is unable to really connect the Marxist theory he espouses with the material existence of the organizations he is trying to critique. His models aren't founded in anything real, so his proposals for libraries are utopian more than anything else. He states things about libraries (both traditional and progressive) as if they are facts; whether they are or not is immaterial - they are not useful to actually existing libraries. This is mainly because for Pateman, as for Franklin, everything comes down to the rational decisions of a group of individuals with power*. For Pateman, the structure of the "needs-based" library involves a "reforging of the social contract" just as much as for Franklin. The problem with traditional libraries doesn't lie in the commodity form, exploitation, structures of domination, or systems of inequality

- it's just a mistake. Neoliberalism is a mistake, easily corrected as long as we resubscribe to liberal values. Pateman can dress his (utopian) proposals for libraries up in Marxist terms, but in the end he thinks that a rational reforging of the social contract will solve our problems. In the meantime, capitalism will get on with the job of exploiting people and destroying the planet.

Because what "reforging the social contract" means is neutrality - it means respecting pluralist views (which ensures that nothing gets accomplished), it ensures the rule of law that protects that pluralism (ensuring that nothing gets challenged) and it ensures the protection of private property, as the institution that guarantees the self-improvement of the individual by means of the free market. This is the "neutrality" of liberalism, that is, no neutrality at all. Neutrality doesn't exist, it is a fiction invented by the liberal ideology with an end to hiding the ideological nature of liberalism itself.

* It's ironic that, while Franklin denies being a technological determinist, she really is, and Pateman claims to be a determinist when he is not!

Pateman's "Cultural Change"

2017-05-23

I first wrote about John Pateman around this time last year, responding to one of his Open Shelf columns about what Pateman understands as the "true community-led library" (an example of the No True Scotsman fallacy). As I said in "Public Libraries, History, and the State", Pateman isn't exactly *wrong* in his understanding of Marxis theory (though I think his understanding of the concepts is simplistic), the problem is with his attempt to connect Marxist theory to his understanding, first, of how libraries currently are and, second, what need to be done to change them. Over the past year or so, Pateman has written in his column on many topics related to Marxism and libraries, public services, and organizational structure, and he has gathered those thoughts together into a co-authored piece in Public Library Quarterly called "Managing Cultural Change in Public Libraries".

John Pateman wrote this article with Joe Pateman who, according to the author bio, is "currently undertaking a Masters Degree at the University of Nottingham, with a specific interest in the disciplines of Marxist political theory and International Political Economy (IPE)". This co-authorship is felt, I think, in the weight given in the first half of the article to a reading of Maslow and Marx, using Marx as a way to correct Maslow's "idealism". Admittedly, this goes beyond the theoretical parts of John Pateman's columns, but is still presented in an over-simplified manner, as if there has not been 150 years of debate, disagreement, formulations, and reformulations around what Marx and Engels meant and how this might be applied to a given historical moment. I can't speak to the reception of Maslow, but I imagine there has been a lot of analysis and synthesis undertaken of his thinking since his hierarchy of needs first appeared in 1943. My issue is not so much with the interpretation of Marxism, though I find it oversimplistic and too black and white. For example, given the following statement:

> This article combines the ideas of Karl Marx and Abraham Maslow and their theories of human needs to construct an Analytical Framework based on a specific interpretation of historical materialism known as technological/economic determinism. (1)

This confuses a few conceptual categories. There are many kinds of technologi-

cal or economic determinism, and such a determinism is one possible criticism of historical materialism, but "technological/economic determinism" is not an interpretation of historical materialism. Indeed, few Marxists, I think, would agree that historical materialism *is* a determinism. In any event, this is the only mention of determinism, so it's difficult to understand exactly what is meant by the term here, and how it connects Marx/Maslow with the Analytical Framework.

Another example is the use of Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* to support the idea that the relationship between the base and the superstructure is not unidirectional or directly causal. Many Marxist theorists have dug into this topic (Gramsci, Althusser, and Jameson to name just a few), but in addition, to simply cite Stalin in support of a view that "the superstructure can exercise an important role in shaping the base" undercuts the contention that the "interpretation" of historical materialism is a determinism - a deterministic position would argue precisely that the relationship between base and superstructure was unidirectional and causal. There is a contradiction in the theoretical component of the article.

However, the main problem is with the sections on libraries, culled, it appears, from John Pateman's columns. The "analytical framework" used in the article is simply offered without explanation. If the framework is analytical, what was the empirical basis for the characteristics?; without a discussion of where the characteristics used in the framework have come from, it appears as if the framework was put together based on anecdote (or, to be charitable, personal experience). In any event we don't know.

Once again, I don't particularly *disagree* with Pateman's characterization of "traditional libraries", but I don't know where this characterization has been drawn from, which puts the other two categories - "community-led" and "needs-based" - on very shaky ground indeed, because they *look like* they have been invented for Pateman's theoretical purpose, as models to be used to uphold his argument. This isn't a bad thing in and of itself, but when they are present without justifcation or explanation in an analytical framework, they don't seem to be based on anything. And when - as has been discussed before - Pateman uses a term ("community-led library") that is *more widely used* to justify library budget cuts under neoliberal austerity, it muddies his methodology, and forces him back on the No True Scotsman fallacy, as mentioned above.

It is interesting, I think, that - while there are not many citations in the theoretical part of the article - there are *no citations at all* in the sections dealing with libraries. The argument isn't backed up by anything, which allows Pateman to say whatever he likes about "community-led" and "needs-based" libraries. He is able to make them sound as if they exist in reality and are not merely models. This rhetorical move allows him to argue that these two kinds of non-traditional libraries are based on Marxist/Maslovian theory while not, in fact, showing that anywhere. A statement like this

> The Culture ensures that the Library is continually evolving and changing for the better and the public library is an agent of social inclusion… (13)

looks like a statement of fact, when in fact it is a theoretical description of a model. As a result, Pateman is absolved of explaining *how* the following situation arises; he is able simply to propose that it does:

> Things are done in a spirit of curiosity and exploiration, and there are no hard and fast rules, which makes them easy to change. Staff know why the guidelines exist, had a role in deciding them, and can put forward suggestions for changing them. This makes distributing authority easier because everyone is following the same framework. (13)

Again, this is a theoretical postulation of a model state of affairs rather than a description of fact. It ignores questions like, for example, how those with authority react to its distribution? Again, a statement like this one (about "needs-based" libraries) ignores the entrenchment of power relationships within an organization *as well as the relationships of power and domination within society that work to ensure the maintenance of the status quo*:

> The Staff Structure is a Holacracy, which removes power from the management hierarchy and distributes it across clear roles, which can then be executed autonomously, without a micromanaging boss. (13)

No mention of funding bodies, fiduciary duty, the signing of paychecks, worker organization, etc, etc. For Pateman, the organization exists in a vacuum and there are - despite his insistence on the relevance of Marxist theory - no *material* obstacles to a rational restructuring of the organization. This absolves Pateman of the hard work of accomodating those obstacles within his model. (Aside: has anyone figured out what "non-users" means?)

Returning to the question of "determinism" (assuming that that *is* a theoretical construct worth attaching an argument to, the Patemans seem to disregard determinism (and historical materialism) completely when they state the following:

> The Culture ensures that the Library is in a constant state of transformation and disruptive innovation and the public library is an agency of social change.

In what Marxist framework can culture *ensure* this? The role of culture in society and organizations was pretty much the entire Frankfurt School project, but there is no engagement with that work here.

It may seem as if I spend a lot of time arguing with Pateman's approach. My issue is that I *do* see a valid place for Marxism in the deconstruction and (hopefully) reconstruction of libraries as institutions of social good, but in my view,

Pateman uses an oversimplified Marxism to underpin a vision of libraries that is not, in the end, based on any material interpretation of the mode of production. In this he risks, in the language and characteristics of his proposed library models, *reaffirming* and further entrenching the values of neoliberalism and inscribing those values in the fabric of libraries themselves. I think this is inadvertent, I think he is arguing in good faith, and I'm sure that social justice is a goal of his. But I think that what he is arguing for and the way he argues for it risks reproducing the dominant neoliberal values and methods, if only accidentally.

Tyler A. Shipley: Ottawa and Empire

2017-05-26

Tyler A. Shipley, *Ottawa and Empire: Canada and the Military Coup in Honduras*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 2017.

(Disclosure: I've known Tyler since we were both in a Russian history seminar taught by Oleh Gerus at University of Manitoba, sometime in the late 1990s).

NOTE: This is a pretty hot take, as I just finished the book last night. I'm hoping to revisit and write something more in depth in the near future, either here or in another venue.

The crux of Shipley's argument can, I think, be summarized by saying that, at some point in the late 1980s, Canadian foreign policy turned towards an open imperialism, despite the maintenance by Canadian politicians and the culture industry of an image of Canada as 'the good guys'. Shipley argues that, having slowly emerged into at least a sort of relative autonomy with respect to both Britain and the US, having subjugated and consolidated its hold on Indegenous land, Canada turned first towards making itself a competitive capitalist nation, and then towards an imperial project of its own. The ignominious collapse of Canada's Peacekeeping operations transformed into a glorious military adventure in Afghanistan. In the meantime, Canadian politicians were greasing the wheels for Canadian capital throughout the world, with heavy interference in politics as a means for increasing and maintaining corporate profitability, notably in Central and South America.

Honduras is a case in point, as Shipley forensically uncovers the interlocking interests and maneuvers of the various parties involved in carrying out, legitimating, and maintaining the coup and its leaders. Honduran politicians, linked with drug traffickers and both public and private police forces, the Canadian corporations who are taking and ruining Honduran land through both quasi-legal and openly illegal methods, and the Canadian politicians who both interfere in local Honduran politics and legislation, and at the same time present the bright and shining, innocent face of Canadian "do gooderism" at home, representing the corrupt and rapacious Honduran state as good for Canadian business. They will also benefit from contact with Canada's record of human rights, democracy, rule of law, and good governance, etc - the collective Tooth Fairy of Canadian culture.

It was interesting to read *Ottawa and Empire* so soon after Nick Dyer-Witheford's *Cyber-Proletariat*. In many ways, Shipley's book read like a "zooming in" to a detailed part of Dyer-Witheford's global survey. The processes and mechanisms Dyer-Witherford describes at a global level, Shipley digs into in minute detail, fleshing out what can sometimes seem too high-level a view in Dyer-Witheford's work. On the other hand, *Cyber-Proletariat* allows us to situate the Honduran case within a global network of money and productivity (and profitability) flows. The two books share a concern with exposing how both first-world leisure and comfort (Dyer-Witheford) and national self-identity are predicated, founded, on a material substratum of exploitation and violence. The iPhone requires not only the rare-earth mines, but the political and corporate ecosystem for the transformation of minerals into the technology that has become so ubiquitous as to be invisible. Similarly, the docility of the Canadian populace and their willingness to go (or be sent) to fight foreign wars, is predicated on the increased (and increasing) profitability of Canadian corporations on foreign soil: all of which are resumed in the name of Imperialism.

Despite being an academically rigorous work, Shipley's book has two main advantages over the usual academic fare. On the one hand, it is exceedingly clearly written, something Shipley mentioned in an interview is vital to getting the book actually read, rather than simply sitting on a library shelf. On the other hand, Shipley was actually present for many of the things he describes. One expects this in a book of reportage, journalism or memoir, but in a work of recent history the effect of this can be quite shocking, as in the following passage:

> In addition to the 12,000 police and 11,000 soldiers on duty on election day, the coup regime called up 5,000 reservists on November 13, 2009, and brought on an estimated 15,000 private security agents from fourteen different companies, temporarily granted military fatigues, weapons, and powers. These heavily armed commandos patrolled the streets, the voting stations, and the highway checkpoints across the country. As I travelle with Honduran human rights observers through different cities and towns in the southern departments on electiond day, and in the days leading up to it, we were subjected to almost constant stops and searchers, and as we sat in community meetings, we heard story after story of intimidation and violence. (62)

The immediacy of this kind of writing is impressive, and cumulatively adds to the urgency of the work and its message. The 2016 murder of activist Berta Càseres provides a focus for Shipley's anger, as it does for the popular movements within Honduras. The book ends with an exhortation:

> An embattled social movement in Honduras has declared that 'Berta did not die, she multiplied.' It is imperative that her spirit live on, not just in Honduras, but in the activist networks of the North as well. The Canadian government is on the wrong side of history,

> but individual Canadians need not be. It is my sincere hope that this book will compel greater collaboration and solidarity between the social movements and organizations confronting imperialism in Honduras and those in Canada. The need has never been greater. (173)

This is an important book, especially right now, when the left in Canada seems to be at an impasse, caught between a completely bankrupt party system and (in my opinion) a directionless movementism. I really like the idea that the left in Canada might learn from the popular movement in Honduras by focusing on immediate issues and needs. How we decide what those needs are is a difficult question, but one that I think is vital to address right now. Highest on the agenda must, I think, be Indigenous rights (whatever that looks like) and real movement on climate change. The hard part will be getting people to recognize, given the success of the Canadian propaganda machine, that these are even issues at all.

Robots and the Organic Composition of Capital

2017-05-27

In her presentation at yesterday's session of Marx's Capital after 150 Years, Ursula Huws ridiculed the idea that increased automation (e.g. robots) will (soon) replace all human workers. She bases her argument on Marx's understanding of both the organic composition of capital and the *temporary* profitability gained from automation.

The organic composition of capital refers to the proportion of constant capital, including machinery, to variable capital (labour). The lower the organic composition of capital (i.e. the more human labour is used compared to machinery), the higher the rate of profit. But capital is always trying to lower the amount of human labour required in order, they think, to increase profits through not having to pay for labour. One of the contradictions inherent in capitalism is that capitalists are constantly attempting to automate (i.e. replace human labour with machine labour), in the attempt to lower labour costs, but this process ("the tendency of the organic composition of capital to rise") in fact lowers the profitability of a given capital.

Marx also argued that any gain in profitability due to increased automation could only be temporary. Because profitability is a social *average*, only an increase in productivity *above the average* makes a given capital more profitable. Once the increase in productivity becomes generalized, any profitability gain is lost, and the new level of productivity becomes the average.

So for Huws, the current round of mass automation (including robotization) is only attractive to capital as long as the effect on productivity raises it above the average. A mad scramble for automation up to and including "lights out" roboticized factories is currently taking place, and the logic of capitalism means that only the first will get the profits. Those who are too late will lose out, and at that point the average productivity of that organic composition of capital which equalize and no more profitability gains can occur.

What is interesting in this analysis is how difficult (impossible) it is to imagine what will come along to kickstart profitability again. Admittedly, we are very far from this point, and we will see robotic automation replace previously privileged sectors of labour (like immaterial and knowledge labour, for example) for some time to come. But at a certain point capitalism is going to reach the point

where the existing model of automation (Dyer-Witheford identifies robotics and networks as the key technologies here) will not allow any more increases in profitability.

This is precisely the point capitalism reached which led to the invention of digital technologies in the first place. That inflection point comes precisely during World War 2, when capitalism was finally nearing the end of a long crisis which began in 1914, and included the Great Depression. The purpose of this crisis, like all crises, was to wipe out a certain amount of value in order to allow capital accumulation to restart. Was the development of digital technology a cause or an effect of this recovery? I imagine that, for those whose technology was industrial, and which reached its apotheosis in the atomic bomb, digital technologies would have been more or less unimaginable except to some people like Turing, Von Neumann, Wiener, etc.

What this suggests is that when this equilibrium of productivity is reached, we will see on the one hand, a crisis on the scale of the First and Second World Wars and the Depression in order to wipe out capital value, and on the other hand, a change in technology (means of production) which we are currently unable to foresee. This new technology will not be a quantitative increase in computing power (e.g. Moore's law, and the basis for our current fad of machine learning). I don't even think it will be artificial intelligence/consciousness; these are too similar to our current model of technology. In reading Norbert Wiener, it is interesting that he (and others) looked at the human body as a new model for technological development (i.e. cybernetics), so perhaps what we are looking for is a new, completely different, model on which we can base our technological advances. Swarm nanotechnology may be a contender, but I think it is very possible that this future is currently outside the possibility of all but a very few of us to think.

I could be wrong about this. An interesting research question would be whether, and to what extent, engineers, mathematicians, and industrialists foresaw the rise of computing and digital technologies prior to the Second World War.

Rancière's 'Hatred of Democracy'

2017-06-03

Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, Verso, 2009.

From what I can tell, after reading just two of Rancière's books, his political project is based on a radical egalitarianism that I'm not sure I've seen to urgently expressed anywhere else. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, he argues for a recognition, or at least an *a priori*, axiomatic positing, of the equality of intelligence, the fact that anyone can learn anything. In *Hatred of Democracy* he argues that democracy is the political condition predicated upon the fact that anyone can govern. This, naturally, is not to the liking of all those oligarchs of birth, wealth, and expertise for whom government is good insofar as it is based on a natural legitimacy or "title to rule" which, of course, has typically been based on birth, wealth, and expertise. It is for this reason, Rancière argues, that oligarchs throughout history (including Plato) have hated democracy. Democracy is the government based on no principle of legitimacy, government based on the idea that anyone can be both governor and governed.

> The pairing of democracy viewed both as a rigid form of government and as a permissive form of society is the original mode in which the hatred of democracy was rationalized by Plato himself. (94)

Oligarchies of all kinds - including the oligarchies of representative democracy - are seeking at all times to find a principle of legitimacy to set up a "natural" distinction between governor and governed, and at the same time denigrate the excesses of democratic society. They see the ills of society not in domination and exploitation, but in the limitless desires, appetites and pleasures of the democratic consumer. It is this argument that justifies their attempts to curtail democracy. As Rancière puts it, it is the foundational fact of equality that supports inegalitarian societies.

This is not an easy book - it is extremely dense and allusive and, I think, presupposes a deep familiarity with French culture and recent history, as well as all the intellectual dynamics and polemics the circulate among them. However, close attention is repaid in the wealth of radical ideas - the concept of a fundamental, bedrock egalitarianism among them. The book also refers enigmatically to Ranci&egraves;re's complete political theory, laid out in *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, which I have yet to read, so I'm not sure I quite understand

everything that's going on.

Finally, it is a bleak book. After discussion all the ways in which democracy - the concept of radical equality - is undermined, exploited, and dominated by oligarchs of birth, wealth, and expertise, and the ways that this plays out in contemporary society, Rancière argues that the traditional beacons of political hope are illusions.

> The collective intelligence produced by a system of domination is only ever the intelligence of that system. Unequal society does not carry an equal society in its womb. Rather, egalitarian society is only ever the set of egalitarian relations that are traced here and now through singular and precarious acts. […] It is only entrusted to the constancy of its specific acts. (96-97).

But this only goes to show that democracy is precisely an activity of contestation, an ongoing struggle between egalitarianism and inequality.

> Democracy is neither a form of government that enables oligarchies to rule in the name of the people, nor is it a form of society that governs the power of commodities. It is the action that constantly wresrs the monopoly of public life from oligarchic governments, and the omnipotence over lives from the power of wealth. (96)

In the end, I think Rancière does, in fact, offer a very modest suggestion for how to act under the totalizing logic of the current system of domination. It is throughsmall acts of democracy, of total and fundamental egalitarianism, that the (re)distribution of public and private can always be contested, though this too is not without its risks.

> This can provoke fear, and so hatred, among those who are used to exercising the magisterium of thought. But among those who know how to share with anybody and everybody the equal power of intelligence, it can conversely inspire courage, and hence joy.

It is the mention of the equality of intelligence that ties this book (and political equality) with the equality of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Bit by bit I think I am starting to get an inkling, piecemeal, of Rancière's intriguing political and intellectual project.

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As with Rancière's positing of equality of intelligence, this radical egalitarianism has deep consequences for libraries. The current governance model of libraries (and universities) is one predicated on the title of expertise - whether that's defined as experience or "excellence", marking a clear distinction between governors and governed. This hierarchy also exists in the privileging of "leaders" and "leadership". What is interesting here is the absent terms in these "natural" hierarchies. We don't have a common term for "librarians who aren't managers", nor do we hear about the "followers" required for "leadership" to

have any material basis. Following Rancière, I would argue that this absence is based on precisely the same hatred of democracy present in society at large. The fiction of a natural hierarchy in our profession (of experts and… non-experts) is maintained precisely on the absence of the subservient term despite the physical presence of the people the term should describe. The principle of collegial governance, lacking but paid lip-service to, is predicated on exactly the capability of anyone to govern, which is exactly why it remains an impotent signifier within the structures of domination at play in academic libraries. The situation becomes even worse when we expand our scope beyond MLIS-holding librarians to the hierarchies of governance stretching "down" through library technicians to support staff and subcontracted service workers (labour which is, as we know, supported by "natural" hierarchies of race and gender). As Rancière maintains, the inequality of our profession - like the inequality of our society - is based precisely on a denial of equality which is - radically - enshrined in our very democracy itself.

Data Determinism

2017-06-13

Yesterday morning, I was at the Canadian Open Data Summit (CODS), where a lot of the discussion was around the benefits of open data for governance. Beth Blauer from Johns Hopkins discussed her experience working in various muncipalities in developing data infrastructure to support governance decisions. This led to the following tweet from the Edmonton Mayor's Office:

> "If we want to solve problems like healthcare or climate change, we need to do it from a basis of evidence. Open Data provides that" #CODS17 pic.twitter.com/eVL5B517TW
>
> — Edm Mayor Office (@YEGMayorOffice) June 13, 2017

The presumption here that open data *automatically* provides the evidence required to solve socio-political problems is, I think, too simplistic. It relies on a determinism just as dangerous as technological determinism, in that it removes the human relationships (i.e. the politics) from the questions of how the data is collected in the first place and by whom. How are data elements defined? What is considered *non-data*, with respect to the simplification of the empirical world to the data model? These are all political questions, implicated in dynamics of socio-economic power and domination. Ignoring the political questions around the creation of data makes it easier, I think, to ignore the political in the question of data use. Beth Blauer talked about "the intersection of personal and public data", essentially talking about behavioural control based on mining personal data (search history, calendars, medical records, school enrollment) with public data (neighbourhood information, school information, weather data, etc). The uncritical acceptance of the neutrality and truth of open data means that we trust this intersection in the same way that we trust the (filter-bubbled) Google results that are presented to us.

This feeds in to some thoughts I've been having about technology as the mediator of the transition from the society of discipline (Foucault) to the society of control (Deleuze). We can see in the recent US and UK elections how false or spun data can manipulate (control) populations. One effect of removing a visible human presence from the mediating of technology is that a) data and algorithms become obscured and more likely to embody "algorithms of oppression" (Safiya Noble's term) and b) technology is seen as both neutral and true

when the human determinations are made invisible. We like to think that a technological solution is unbiased, and data driven technologies are considered to be empirically sound and politically unmotivated. And data determinism - like technological determinism - makes data the active driver of behaviour and decision-making, by obscuring the political conditions of its creation.

There's also a rhetorical component to this. As with classic statements of technological determinism (Ursula Franklin's for example), data determinism puts data as the subject in sentences. So when Dark Horse Analytics tweets:

> Discussing ways #OpenData transforms society through innovation at @OpenDataEdm this week » https://t.co/gjxFGjlvhH #CODS17 pic.twitter.com/qcvn8v5yB1
>
> — Darkhorse Analytics (@dhanalytics) June 12, 2017

In this view, it is "Open Data" that "transforms" society, rather than the agency and decision making of people. Data, like technology, can be a tool in the transformation of society, but only people can do it. The rhetorical strategy of making data the *subject* of sentence, makes data seem like the subject of the acts themselves. From there, the invisibility of human, political dynamics plays out as above. This is a classic case of what Marxists call fetishism or reification, the method by which relations between people appear as relations between people and *things* (and often simply between things). In this way the social relations of capitalis, which are relations of domination, exploitation, and oppression, are hidden from view.

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When I tweeted this, during Beth Blauer's talk:

> Also an implicit assumption that open data is both neutral and true… https://t.co/otPaTiRPM6
>
> — redlibrarian (@redlibrarian) June 13, 2017

My friend [@chefquix](https://twitter.com/chefquix) asked what was wrong with data-driven decision-making. My argument is that if we presume data to be objective, we ignore the decision making that went into the construction and collection of the data in the first place. Just as we have begun to think critically about the social relationships and biases that go into algorithms[1] (something else engineers would like to think of as objective), we need to recognize that the same mechanisms of oppression and domination that are encoded in algorithms are encoded in the ways we design our data collection. "Data" is not a natural phenomenon, conveniently recorded, it is just as socially constructed as anything else, and represents a model, that is a simplification, of the empirical world that has been decided *a priori* (and often unconsciously).

A perfect example of what I'm talking about came up at the afternoon panel on "Open Data and First Nations in an Era of Reconciliation", which included three women - Leona Star, Mindy Denny, and Bonnie Healy [2] - involved in

indigenous health initatives in Manitoba, Alberta, and Nova Scotiat, and how assessment and measurement in this area relate to sovereignty in general and data sovereignty in particular. They argued persuasively about the ways in which cultural, racial, and socio-economic prejudices (in the strict sense of *judgements that come before* the collection of data) condition and constrain the ways in which data are collected and phenomena are described. In this case, the connection between the political decisions that go into *constructing* data and the very real social, economic, and political effects is starkly apparent. By presuming that "data" is an objective reflection of the empirical facts, we end up supporting and reinforcing the worldviews, biases and prejudices that create that world in the first place. It is in this sense that "data-driven" can easily elide into "data determinism", in which the data that we believe to be objective and value-neutral in fact props up the very world views we are hoping to investigate. What began as a spurious, rhetorical data determinism becomes a very real determinism, one which undermines many of the social justice initiatives that are a core part of the open data community.

[1] I honestly can't wait for Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* book, which looks like won't be out until next spring sometime.

[2] Interestingly, their names don't appear in the conference programme or on the CODS website.

Fitzgerald and McCarthy

2017-06-28

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*. Scribner's, 1941.

Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West*. Modern Library, 2000 (1985).

I decided to reread *The Last Tycoon* when I saw the trailer for the upcoming Amazon TV adaptation. Just as with the recent *Gatsby* adaptation, this really seems to miss the tone of the novel. It's as if the studios have a preconceived idea of Fitzgerald's milieu that has been filtered through a romanticized view of Flappers, Prohibition, Speakeasies, etc. Perhaps this comes from Fitzgerald's "Jazz Age" stories, I don't know. It seems more likely that it comes from a stylized, potted "structure of feeling" about the jazz age that isn't really based on anything at all. It's what Jameson calls pastiche, due to the fact that any real sense of the past that we might have is lost. You see the same kind of thing in Waugh adaptations, especially of the early novels, where the producers seem to miss completely the brutal savagery of the lives of the "pretty young things", even when their "vile bodies" are explicitly front and centre. What tends to be missing from Fitzgerald adaptations is how deeply sad they are. Gatsby, Diver, and Stahr are all subdued, deeply worn down figures, and they tend to drag everyone around them down with them. I find the end of *Tender is the Night* incredibly moving, as Diver's life has basically fallen apart but he has no choice but to just… go on with it. Gatsby's suicide is not the tragedy of that novel; the last two paragraphs display a momentary naive hopefulness on Nick's part, undercut by the last sentence and the eternal futility it describes. Even though we only have six chapters of *The Last Tycoon*, none of them finished to Fitzgerald's standards, reading those chapters is extremely rewarding. Everything seeming to allude to whole swaths of experience, realms of human relationships that we can only see peeking out above the surface. Beneath the banter and the wealth there are dark, heavy things going on. We'll see how the Amazon adaptation managed to deal with any of that, but as with the abysmally wrongheaded adaptation of Dick's *Man in the High Castle*, I'm prepared to be disappointed.

I wasn't disappointed in *Blood Meridian*, but I was a little dissatisfied. I read it pretty quickly - it took a week, which is pretty good when you're working

full time, I think - and despite the drawn-out nature of much of the action, the quality of the writing and the desperately eerie things going on keep it going. It *seems* as if everything in the novel is geared towards making the *extremely* ambiguous ending work, but this is belied by the fact that the novel is based on real events and much research on McCarthy's part. As everyone says, there's something of Melville in *Blood Meridian*, but with the exuberance of *Moby Dick* replaced by a tight, almost suffocating control over language and plot. In this sense, the novel conforms to the ideas of control and conditioning, of preordained order that lie, I suppose, at the heart of what McCarthy is trying to say. This fits with what Josh Moufawad-Paul mentioned on Twitter, which is that the equivalence between the violence of the colonizers and the colonized which McCarthy is at pains to show up is deeply reactionary, in that by supposing violence and war to be part of an eternal human order, it presumes that the savagery of the Indigenous peoples pre-existed the coming of the Europeans and in some perverse sense made them deserve their conquest and extermination. I wonder if this is an aspect of *Blood Meridian* which has changed over time. In 1985, when I was in elementary school, no-one spoke about Columbus and the rest of the colonialists in anything but glowing terms. Where I grew up, I don't think I heard anything about the violence of the conquest until the mid- to late-90s when I wasn in university. So it's possible that the depiction of *colonial* violence and savagery was new and shocking in 1985, and that at the time the point was not to show that two orders of violence (that of the colonizer and the conquered) that were known and admitted were the same, but was to show that the violence and savagery of the colonizers was *real*, in an America that was still in denial about that, and which was still trying to come to grips with the imperialist violence in Vietnam and Afghanistan. It bears pointing out that McCarthy started writing *Blood Meridian* in the mid-1970s, around the end of the Vietnam War, and that in 1985, the US-backed mujahideen were increasing their resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It's hard to condemn someone for imagining - in that context - the human universal of violence and war, and while that doesn't detract from Moufawad-Paul's critique of McCarthy's reactionary position, I'm happy to give McCarthy the benefit of the doubt, and say that *Blood Meridian* is a good faith attempt to come to terms with things that were happening within the dynamic of US imperialism.

So why was I dissatisfied? I loved the ambiguity of the ending, I thought that was a great technical trick to pull off. And the writing, obviously, is fantastic. But it never really seemed to add up to anything beyond what was there on the page. I've read reviews by people who have read *Blood Meridian* multiple times, but it doesn't feel like a re-reader to me. Going back to the *Moby Dick* comparison, there's something there that makes that novel feel larger and richer than what you're actually reading. I'm holding off on re-reading it until so that I can get the full effect, but I've been *feeling* like rereading *Moby Dick* since I finished it, which says a lot. *Blood Meridian* is a great technical exercise, and the ending is a fascinating achievement, but it hasn't left me *feeling* very much.

The Dialectic of Library Values

2017-07-13

The dialectic that Marx adapted from Hegel sees the world as categories which are constantly changing, dependent on history and the way in which they interact with other categories. Human perception can only "grasp" these categories at specific moments in time, freezing them and seeing only particular aspects of them rather than the whole. It is as if the a film was stopped so that we can see a single frame, but we lose the entire context provided by motion and the persistence of vision. What is important in the movement of dialectical categories is the contradictions that they hide when we freeze them momentarily. It is contradiction that makes the categories change over time, but since we are only able to see them, grasp them conceptually, at a particular moment, the contradictions are hidden from view.

For Marx, these categories were concrete: money, for example, or commodities. Indeed, the opening chapters of *Capital* concerning the commodities are an unpacking of the contradictions inherent in what seems like a simple concept, the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value that gives the commodity its dynamism. For Marx, the contradictions significant to the category are social, and so the category becomes representative of the very real contradictions of society at a given moment.

Which brings me to the library, which is itself a category produced out of contradictions, antagonisms, and mediations. It is not a simple *thing*, complete and unchanging - which would be the Platonic view of a category - but a snapshot of a constantly-moving system of social relations each in contradiction to another. So it is unsurprising that, at various moments, the social contradictions appear as crises within the history of the category. Often these crises are insufficient to completely revolutionize the category, but in the end radical transformation of the category itself is assured (this, in a nutshell, is the Marxist theory of revolution).

One such crisis, I would argue, attended the Toronto Public Library last night, when one of their bookable public spaces was used to host a memorial for Barbara Kulaszka, a lawyer who defended, among other people, the Holocaust-denier Ernst Zundel. According to the Torontoist, "The memorial will have speakers like Marc Lemire, former president of the Heritage Front, a neo-Nazi

group; Christian Klein, who says Germans were the real victims of WWII and that Jews ran camps where Germans were tortured and murdered; and Paul Fromm, Canada's most prominent white supremacist of the generation left standing".

The memorial has garnered criticism from the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre. A statement from the library states that a) "the library accepts bookings… that are in accordance with the law and the library's Rules of Conduct" and b) "using library space… does not imply any endorsement".

The fact that the event garnered criticism, as well as the fact that white supremacist organizations have recently become more public in their activities, are social antagonisms which, in their contradictions, effect changes in social categories, like the public library. The public library is *different* now than it was a day ago, just as society is different from when its room-booking policies were framed.

This is one of the difficulties involved in framing library values; it could be argued that values, if specific enough (and they need to be specific), are outdated almost as soon as they are set down. But another, more egregious problem, is that organizational values - *especially* those of a state institution - have to posit a universalizing view of society in order to create consensus and maintain hegemony. In this sense, institutional values are often (always?) little more than propaganda. Put another way, institutional values are ideological. But this raises yet another contradiction, since library values, for example, are specifically meant to be *non-ideological*. A good example is the ALA Code of Ethics, which purports to specifically exclude individual ideology from library work, implying that the library itself is above ideological considerations.

David Harvey, in his first major work, *Social Justice and the City*, distinguished between two kinds of ideology: "Marx gives a specific meaning to ideology - he regards it as an *unaware* expression of the underlying ideas and beliefs which attach to a particular social situation, in contrast to the *aware* and critical exposition of ideas in their social context which is frequently called ideology in the west" (18).

What we see in the value statements put out by libraries, or in the ALA Code of Ethics, is ideology in the first sense, ideology that is *unaware* that it is ideology, and that its ideology is liberalism. On the other hand, movements like PLG, #critlib, and unaligned work such as that on updating the LCSH headings to reflect something other than the dominant liberal ideology, are examples of the second kind of ideology.

Barbara Goodwin, in *Using Political Ideas* writes that "in Britain we imbibe liberal ideas effortlessly from an early age, with the result that liberalism appears as a necessary truth, the basis of reality, rather than as one political ideology among many" (35). In addition to underpinning the notion of "neutrality" that continues to underpin so many library narratives, liberalism also supplies the

concept of pluralism to the dominant ideology of librarianship. The notion of an "ideology of librarianship" must seem laughable to, for example, the framers of the ALA Code of Ethics, which attempts to enshrine the concept of value-neutrality by explicitly denying the relevance of ideologies to library work. The fact that the ALA Code of Ethics, like most normative ethics which support the status quo does not need to mention its liberal presumptions is merely a testament to liberalism's hegemony: it is such a "necessary truth" that it can allow itself to remain unmarked.

Given that the library is a state institution, perhaps the controversy over last night's memorial boils down to an antagonism between those who see the public library as a *social* institution with social responsibilities, and those who see it as an institution of the state with political responsibilities. This, naturally enough, is yet another contradiction contributing to the identity of the public library. The contradiction between social responsibility and political responsibility boils down, in my mind, to the question of contradictory values: communal, humanist values on the one hand, and liberal (i.e. individualistic, "value-neutral" values based on the sanctity of private property) on the other. These contradictions cannot be resolved through discussion, though we might seek to expose them, demystifying the library as dialectical cateogory, and making our positions known. They can only be resolved over time, that is through a historical process, of ever-increasing crisis leading eventually to fundamental social change.

It is futile to attempt to play it safe, to future proof, one's own social position through vague, unactionable "values", such as those which are typically propounded by library value statements. By default, vague values or values which pretend to neutrality support the unmarked, dominant, culturally hegemonic values of liberalism. One has to commit to a set of specific values while not losing sight of the fact that the world changes, moment after moment, and that we ourselves are the products of social contradictions and mediations. Understanding the dialectical nature of our relationships does not absolve us from taking a stand; "not taking a stand" means siding with the implicit values of liberalism and the state. But the values that we commit to, while specific and actionable, have to be capable of change. Five years ago, the open and unapologetic use of public spaces by far-right white supremacist groups was not something we needed to worry about particularly. That time has gone, and we need to decide whether our values are social ones, which would deny oxygen to such groups, or political ones, which prioritize the maintenance of hegemony and power above all else.

Class, Contract, and Copyright

2017-07-14

This post was inspired by a couple of tweets by Ryan Regier:

> Understand that authors want to get paid, maybe need to rework our fair dealing arguments so we show how fair dealing ultimately helps them?
>
> — Ryan Regier (@ryregier) July 14, 2017

These tweets got me thinking about the contradictions that underlie the modern concept of copyright. In many ways, copyright has to be understood as a mechanism for the protection of private (economically significant) property. Copyright is a provides legal limits on how material resources may be used with or without an economic exchange. In essence, copyright provides a framework for *contracts*.

The contract is one of the founding myths of capitalism, as a glance into Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* will show.

> In the complex enterprise and money-exchange economy, cooperation is strictly individual and voluntary provided: (a) that enterprises are private, so that the ultimate contracting parties are individuals and (b) that individuals are effectively free to enter or not to enter into any particular exchange, so that every transaction is strictly voluntary. (20)

The role of the state in this view is

> to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow-citizens: to preseve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets. (10)

This view of the primacy of the contract-relationship is predicated on another of the founding myths of capitalist society, that of the uncoerced, fully-rational individual.

> In summary, the organization of economic activity through voluntary exchange presumes that we have provided, through government, for the maintenance of law and order to prevent coercion of one individual by another, the enforcement of contracts voluntarily entered

> into, the definition of the meaning of property rights, the interpretation and enforcement of such rights, and the provision of a monetary framework. (31)

From this perspective, then, the problem with any kind of fair use/fair dealing provision is *not* - or not *only* - that creators go uncompensated (uncompensated creation is one of the cornerstones of capitalist production after all), but that it circumvents the contractual relation. Material resources copied and exchanged outside of a contract - either with Access Copyright or with the creators themselves - is seen as a failure on the part of the state to uphold its responsibilities as enumerated in the last Friedman quote above.

However, as the Supreme Court has maintained, fair dealing is a user right. However, even stating that fair dealing is a user right merely *exposes* rather than resolves the underlying property conflict. The relations between creators and users, if it is *not* contractual, has to be antagonistic - not necessarily in a moral sense, but in the sense of the sanctity of property and contract. As the Supreme Court said,

> Fair dealing is a "user's right", and the relevant perspective when considering whether dealing is for an allowable purpose under the first stage of CCH is that of the user.
>
> The purpose of the fair dealing exception [...] is to ensure that users are not unduly restricted in their ability to use and disseminate copyrighted works.

(Both Supreme Court quotes are from Michael Geist's blog post on *Access Copyright v. York*

What we have here, then, is a property-protection mechanism which is circumventing the contract, the main property-protection mechanism in capitalist society. The real reason authors and copyright "collectives" are up in arms about fair dealing and are trying to restrict it is not only - perhaps not even primarily - because of lost revenue, but because it undercuts the sanctity of the contract in capitalist economic relations.

But what about creators, those who, unlike Access Copyright, are perhaps losing income through a broader interpretation of fair dealing? Myron Groover brought up the question of representiveness of creators rights advocates. Do we hear more from them because they are louder/more vocal? What about the creators who believe their work *should* benefit from the wider dissemination and use supported by fair dealing.

In a nutshell, what individual creators think about this issue is not particularly relevant. Just as individual capitalist may not want to exploit their workers, but are forced into it by competition and other exigencies of the capitalist mode of production, so creators are forced by virtue of their class position to behave in certain ways and to take certain positions with respect to the protection, exchange, and use of their property. Creators who have day jobs that pay the

bills are primarily workers, their primary form of income is through the sale of their labour power, with all the coercive elements that comes with. Creators who are the heads of large business concerns, like Beyoncé and Jay-Z, are capitalists who will protect their property rights just like any other capitalists. It seems, though, that the majority of creators who are vocal about creators rights are those who are able to eke out a living by selling the product of their labour. Their opinion on whether fair dealing is a healthy and necessary part of any copyright regime is beside the point, which is that they are forced to protect what little economic benefit they gain from the sale of their work by any means possible.

Which brings me to my last point. The word "fair" in "fair use" and "fair dealing" is an obscene euphemism. Just as Friedman's insistence on the lack of coercion in capitalist exchange relationships would be laughable if it did not obscure such misery, the idea that anything connected to capitalist property relations might be "fair" is ridiculous. We - citizens of our liberal democracies - have to go to court again and again to try to maintain a little breathing room under the pressure of capitalist exchange relations, what Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto* referred to as the "cash nexus" to which every human relationship is eventually reduced. Dealing can only be described as "fair" within the context of the liberal pluralist model of governance that is our government's aesthetic, and it cries out for demystification at every turn. However, we too are forced by the logic of capitalist production and exchange to take what we can get. It may not be fair - to any of the parties involved - but it's currently all we have.

Addendum (July 15, 2017): I realize that in the above I didn't spell out the conclusion strongly or clearly enough. Given that creators and users are both exploited in the current situation, one through the inability to contractually exchange their work for revenue, the other through the prohibitive barrier to use caused by the prices of the resources being exchanged, it seems clear that the only way to resolve this contradiction is not to tinker with the details of copyright legislation or the fair dealing exception, but to fundamentally overturn the property relations that underpin them. Creators will always be at the mercy of exploitative market forces as well as being more and more alienated from the (very personal) products of their labour, and users will always be seeking non-contractual or illegal workarounds to use the resources they need for work and study. The only solution, really, is for both sides of to come together, recognize their common interest, organize, and work towards the overthrow of capitalist economic and social relations. dealing

Review - Hegel, Marx, and Dialectic

2017-07-17

Richard Norman and Sean Sayers, *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic: A Debate*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980.

First of all, I never intended to read this book. Last Thursday I was looking for a copy of Hegel's Shorter *Logic* in our Humanities and Social Sciences collection, which wasn't on the shelf, so I browsed through the other books on Marxism and dialectics, choosing a few at random. I read a few pages of *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic* on a break that afternoon, and quickly became pretty engrossed in it. It was certainly one of the most readable books on theory/philosophy I've ever read, and I imagine this had something to do with the fact that both authors come out of the Anglo-American philosophical approach, which relies more on accessibility and plain language than its continental counterpart (and Americans like Jameson who are heavily influenced by the continental tradition). In any event, I found this one of the most accessible introductions to and discussions of the dialectic I've ever come across.

When I was doing my undergrad in the mid-1990s, when Marx and Marxism was generally considered dead, buried, and of purely historical interest, the idea of the dialectic would occasionally come up, often dismissed as "simply" the idea that thesis + antithesis = synthesis. It took me a long time to get beyond this simplistic view and start to dig into what the dialectic really is. I have to admit that this was provoked by being the target of that traditional Marxist accusation, that I wasn't being dialectical enough in something that I'd written.

Hegel, Marx and Dialectic is framed as a debate between two philosophers at the University of Kent. It is organized into five chapters, beginning with a fairly straightforward introduction to the Marxist dialectic, with some discussion of Hegel. Each subsequent chapter engages with the previous one(s). What it interesting is that, while Sayers is clearly the more orthodox Marxist, and Norman the more solidly in the camp of formal logic, neither author dismisses the dialectic out of hand. Both understand and recognize the importance of Hegel's logical system and of dialectics more generally. This gives the debate more nuance and subtlety than it would have if, for example, eithe Sayers or Norman was an out-and-out opponent of dialectical thinking.

The crux of the debate is the relationship of dialectics as a logical system to the more widespread (not to say hegemonic) use of formal logic. This debate hinges on the question of *contradiction* which, to Hegel, Marx, and Engels, provided the motor of all change in both the natural and human worlds (whether the natural and human worlds can be so easily distinguished is another part of the present debate). In formal logic, the "law of non-contradiction" states that a thing cannot be both A and not-A at the same time. This leads adherents to formal logic often to dismiss dialectics as irrational, since dialectics insists on the importance and value of contradictions. Sayers and Norman come at this problem from various angles: does "contradiction" mean something completely different in formal logic than in dialectical logic? If the word means the same thing, does this make the two logics incompatible or not?

A lot of the debate is taken up by distinguishing dialectics, and Hegel's philosophy as a whole, from those "metaphysical" philosophies that rely on formal logic, namely those philosophies that can be described as either dualist or reductionist. For Sayers, dialectics is positioned between the dualist and reductionist models. Dualism, in his view, requires strict binary divisions between categories, things, and concepts. The natural world is *different from* the human world. Universals are *completely different* from particulars. Reductionism, on the other hand, *reduces* one side of the division to the other: the human world is *the same as* the natural world; universals *are derived from* particulars. Dualism insists on difference, while reductionism insists on identity. The dialectic, on the other hand, insists on the "interpenetration of opposites", that is that difference and identity are integral parts of any category, thing, or concept. The human world is both different from and a part of the natural world; universals can only be universals with respect to particulars, and vice versa.

The discussion of the distinction between the human and natural worlds leads to the question of whether there is a "dialectic of nature" separate from the dialectic of concepts and ideas that are only of human significance. Sayers takes a stronger line on this than Norman, insisting that, for Hegel, Marx, and Engels, natural processes are dialectical in the same way as human concepts: things in nature are constantly changing through the presence of internal contradictions, quantitative changes lead to qualitative changes, and all this movement constitutes history. Much of this discussion hinges on the definition of materialism, and precisely *how* Marx and Engels set Hegel's idealist dialectic on its feet. The discussion of dialectical materialism versus other kinds of "metaphysical" materialism becomes quite esoteric, but is never wilfilly obscure.

The presumptions of formal logic are widespread in the sciences and in daily life (the "law of non-contradiction" seems to be intuitively true), so much so that one might wonder whether dialectical logic still has any bearing on the way we look at and interpret the world. It should come as no surprise that as Marxist I think the answer is yes. An interesting example of how simply relying on formal logic might distort the true picture of reality and pose a potential danger is in the question of open civic data. If we regard empirical data only formally,

that is without recognizing its context, its contradictions, and how it changes over time, then we are not only providing an inadequate picture of the world the data is meant to describe, but we then use the data to make inadequate or incorrect decisions/predictions about the world. Formal logic provides easy to analyze models of the real world, but they cannot be the basis for policy and decision making.

An interesting example of how dialectical and formal logic can be seen as antagonistic is in Zeno's arrow paradox. For Zeno since, at any discrete moment in time, the arrow is at rest, the arrow is at rest at *every* discrete moment throughout its flight. The arrow is both moving and always at rest: a paradox. For Hegel, the problem is with halting the arrow in its flight in order to "grasp" it at every distinct moment, much as we do when we capture a "piece" of data. It is clearly impossible to build up motion from a collection of moments at rest. However, if you start from the fact of motion, it is obvious that every moment of rest is merely a convenience, a way to "grasp" the arrow for analysis, but does not represent the truth of the arrow in motion. From a socio-political point of view, whenever we try to "grasp" a concept, institution, or phenomenon, we have to hold it still, violating the fact of its motion (i.e. how it changes over time); we also have to make it distinct (A and not not-A) by shearing it of all its relationships. Both of these operations do violence to the complexity and reality of the phenomenon under analysis. It is to try to resist this violence that dialectical logic is still important.

To sum up, this book is perhaps a little dated, but for me at least, it gave me a much better sense of the scope and power of dialectical logic.

Review - Austerity Apparatus

2017-07-27

J. Moufawad-Paul, *Austerity Apparatus* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2017).

Moufawad-Paul, who blogs at M-L-M Mayhem is the author of two previous books: *The Communist Necessity*(2014) and *Continuity and Rupture: Philosophy in the Maoist Terrain*(2016). *Austerity Apparatus* rounds out a trilogy of sorts focused on the need to revitalize the theory and practice of an organized left.

> In *The Communist Necessity*, the polemical "prolegomena" to this book, I argued that there needed to be a "new return" to the concept of the revolutionary party - a reclaiming of the theoretical tradition marked by world-historical revolutions - and that this new return was to be found in the "three-headed beast" of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. (*Continuity and Rupture*, xii)

Austerity Apparatus is perhaps less explicit about its Maoist foundation, but in its place it has an exhilarating thrust that comes out of the richness and density of its ideas. Influenced to a certain extent by Semiotext(e) books like *The Coming Insurrection* or Tiqqun's *Introduction to Civil War*, *Austerity Apparatus* is, like them, deceptively brief (a view supported by the small format used in their publication). But *Austerity Apparatus* doesn't rely on the allusive style of the Invisible Commity or Tiqqun, it comes out and says what it is trying to say. Compare the following passages:

> Each body is affected by its form-of-life as if by a clinamen, a leaning, an attraction, a *taste*. A body leans toward whatever leans its way. This goes for each and every situation. Inclinations go both ways. (Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, 18).

> The moment it rears its defiant head communistm is dismissed as heinous and unethical by the very people who claim fidelity to its history. Marxism "lacks an ethics" we are told, simply because it challenges the rules and philosophies of morality imposed by the bourgeois order, and so something else must be tried. Even self-proclaimed Marxists abide by this narrative when they complain about "Stalinism" and use the word totalitarianism. The order of

> the ethical that is proclaimed by the austerity apparatus is all that matters: anything that attempts to violate business as usual is barbarism. (*Austerity Apparatus*, 110).

Austerity Apparatus drops ideas like this and then moves quickly on. As a result, not only is the forward momentum maintained, but there is a rush from such a rapid succession of interesting ideas andeven when the ideas aren't new, striking formulations.

It helps that Moufawad-Paul chose to focus the book around a concrete phenomenon, that of "austerity" - "What a mistake it was to recognize *austerity* - which leads through not only a diagnosis of the contemporary"state of anxiety" between the social peace of the Welfare State and the "state of emergency" which we are witnessing in the resurgence of fascism. This process leads to discussions of austerity as class collaboration and the domestication of the left, the anxiety of the contemporary subject, capitalist crisis, and, in perhaps the most explicitly "Maoist" section, the people's war and the partisan war machine. You don't have to be a Maoist to get a lot out of this book, and by the time the section on "The Partisan War Machine and its Counter-State" is reached, the groundwork has been sufficiently prepared that the revolutionary war machine, the "consummation of class war against capitalist hegemony" appears as the logical next step or conclusion of the process.

There are some things that strike me as deeply true, but expressed very succinctly. Take for instance, Moufawad-Paul's account of what we often refer to as "imposter syndrome":

> The austerity subject is not inaugurated in the same manner as other subjects because its interpellation is caught within a vacillation between a state of social peace and a state of emergency. It is a subject unsure of itself; this is both its strength and weakness. (86)

Austerity Apparatus seems very much a book of the moment, a book that puts into perspective the political and economic whirlwind that often seems so perplexing. It provides a history and genealogy for what we are experiencing now, a diagnosis of the afflictions present in our daily lives, and a prescription for a possible future. It is an urgent book, full of suggestions for where to go next. I may not agree with everything in it, but it is a book not to be dismissed lightly, but to be read (and reread) with attention. Highly recommended.

Yoga, Materialism, Dialectics

2017-07-28

Caveat: The dharma that can be spoken is no dharma at all.

I've been thinking/reading a lot about dialectics lately, especially the relationship between Hegel's idealist dialectic and the materialist dialectic of Marx and Engels. But I've also been doing a lot of yoga - this week, I did an intensive workshop from 6-8 every morning at Sattva School of Yoga, and I got to wondering what relationship - if any - lies between yoga, materialism, and the dialectic. When I first started doing yoga about three years ago, I was suspicious of the spiritual aspect of the practice. I'm not a religious person, and the materialist basis of Marxism tends more towards a critique of spirituality than its embrace. Not knowing anything about yoga, I was a little nervous about how much of the esoteric/spirital ideas and practices it would be necessary to engage with. (At Sattva, as it turns out, that aspect of yoga is there if you want to engage with it, and some of it does help to come to grips with the physical practice, but it's not a requirement).

It turns out that yoga can be thought of as a fundamentally material practice. Sutra 1.2 of Patanjal's *Yoga Sutras* is *yogas citta-vrtti-nirodhah*, which translates roughly to "yoga stills the fluctuations of the mind". By "yoga", Patanjali was referring primarily to meditation, but this can also be understood as the basis for the physical practice of hatha yoga (*asanas*). The exertions and discipline of the physical body, both in terms of postures and of breathing (*pranayama*) exercise a discipline and stillness on the mind. While Patanjali's philosophy is a dualist one – drawing a strict distinction between the physical, material world and the world of the spirit or mind – the practice of yoga treats the mind and the body as integrally related. Put another way, the mind and the body are in a dialectical relationship to each other. (This relationship is in the nature of an ignorance or a captivity which it is the end goal of yoga to transcend.)

In *Dialectics of Nature* (1883), Engels summed up the laws of dialectics as:

- The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*;
- The law of the interpenetration of opposites;
- The law of the negation of the negation.

Not only is the mind-body relationship in yoga a dialectical one - the inter-

penetration of opposites - but the laws of dialectics are present throughout the practice of yoga. Incremental *quantitative* changes of balance, posture, position, etc, transform eventually into qualitative changes in physical sensation and consciousness. The aspect of balance of opposites - sun/moon, inhale/exhale, left/right, up/down - which is often equated in an idealist fashion with the yin and yang of the Taoist tradition, can be understood both as the interpenetration of opposites, but also as the negation of the negation. Yoga is the synthesis of all these pairs of contradictions.

The question of mind is a tricky one. In yoga, as in Hegel, "mind" (*atman*) refers to the Universal and Eternal Self. Contrary to Hegel, however, Patanjali's yoga is a dualist (*dvaita*) philosophy, given that in understands the world (*prakriti*) and the Self to be separate things. Like the *vedanta* philosophy, Hegel's idealism is non-dualist (literally *advaita*), which means that for him World and Mind are one and the same. Like the mind of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, however, yoga distinguishes between the mind (*citta*) that sees itself as individual and the mind that is not tied to material things. The liberation of the mind through yoga can perhaps be equated with the progression of mind from mere consciousness to Absolute Knowledge in Hegel. In this sense, then, the progression from *citta* to *atman* through yoga is absolutely a dialectical one, in exactly the same way that the movement from mind to Mind in Hegel illustrates his idealist dialectic.

For materialists, then, the problem with yoga's idealism is the same as the problem with Hegel's: the dialectic it appears reversed. Rather than a procession of the mind from captivity to liberation, yoga can be understood as a procession of the body which - conforming precisely to materialism - affects and conditions the mind. And in fact, this is precisely how yogis talk about the process. In hatha yoga, we start with the body, that is the material foundation, and it is the disciplining of the body that leads to changes in the mind. Yoga's idealism is not as clear cut as it first seems, which makes it easier to enter into the practice from a materialist perspective.

On the subject of mind, I want to just say a little bit about the materialist theory of mind that seems to be prevalent in "consciousness" AI circles, the idea that increasing complexity must lead to consciousness. At first glance, this seems to subscribe to a properly materialist dialectics, in which quantitative changes (in computing power, for example) lead to qualitative changes (from unconsciousness to consciousness). The problem is, as Engels says in *Dialectics of Nature*, the laws of dialectics cannot be forced as a priori constraints on a given phenomenon, but must arise out of empirical experience. The quantitative changes, for example in increasingly sophisticated neural nets, do not *necessarily* lead to consciousness, because we do not yet understand the nature of the qualitative difference between unconsciousness and consciousness. It is fairly certain that the quantitative changes in neural nets will lead to *something* qualitatively different, but there's no reason to think that this will be consciousness. Not only does this put the cart before the dialectical horse, but it also relies on a literal equivalence between computational and mental power which may only

be metaphorical.

The most important thing, from a dialectical perspective, is the recognition that all things change over time. This is also a fundamental insight in yoga - not only does the body change, but consciousness changes, at least from our ephemeral perspective. Like Hegel's Spirit the Universal Mind is eternal and unchanging. For materialists, there is much to be gained from setting the dialectic of yoga on its feet, as Marx did with the dialectic of Hegel.

Antifa, Economism, and the Social Revolution

2017-08-19

In *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), Lenin wrote that without an organized party to push demands further, the working class would never move beyond 'economism', that is the demand for purely economic betterment: higher wages, benefits, etc. These demand would leave the social and economic foundations of society intact.

> Taken by themselves, these strikes were trade-union struggles, not yet social-democratic struggles. They marked the awakening antagonisms between workers and bosses; but the workers were not, and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system.

An intact capitalism leads, as we know, to increased alienation, ever-worsening economic crises, and eventual collapse. *In the meantime*, capitalism remains based on inequality and exploitation supported by domination and oppression. Our understanding of social forces is not as black and white as Lenin's; it includes different determinations alongside class: race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability… but the fundamental antagonisms are economic. The others - racist, sexist, ableist, unfold out of the consequences of the commodity form and the drive for profits based on exploitation and domination. The racist, sexist, and xenophobic ultra-right is a product of the insecurity and violence of capitalism, and it is only by attacking the socio-economic causes of fascism that we can defeat fascism. The focus on "punching Nazis" as an end in itself seems to me to be the equivalent in 2017 of economism in the early 20th century.

The last few years have seen an awakening of a radical social-justice worldview, including movements coming out of Black Lives Matter, radical feminism, Pride, and disability activism. This has coalesced, in parts of the US at any rate, in a strong current of resistance of neoliberal policy, especially that attacking social services and environmental protection. But the neoliberal policies that have produced left-wing resistance have also produced the rise of a far-right emboldened by what they see as the victory of a new political class committed to the return to a capitalist golden age in which the "old stock" white male will regain his privilege over the rest of the world. The violence of "austerity" and hyper-exploitation have produced both an enlarged (if incoherent) left and an open far-right. Merely identifying the far-right as the focus of our anger and

work leaves the real evil - the logic, structures, and policies of capitalism itself, to continue to operated without hindrance.

This has been apparent most clearly since last weekend when antifascists dispersed a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The rise of openly racist, sexist, and fascist white supremacists in the States has given many people a target to fight against - a target the left has sorely needed. Punching Nazis is on the agenda, and while punching people isn't my bag, it at least gives people on the the left the feeling that they are accomplishing something practical - something ostensibly "left wing" institutions (unions, the NDP, the Communist Party of Canada) have completely ignored for as long as I can remember.

Much of the impetus behind punching Nazis comes, I think, from a frustration with attempts (and I used the word advisedly) to argue with far-right fascists. They are experts at using the language and arguments of social justice against us, even when they are interesting in arguing at all, and not merely derailing argument. Punching Nazis carries the satisfaction of cutting through the sophistry and bullshit and seeing an immediate effect. But eventually we have to come to the realization that punching Nazis is not enough, just as arguing with them is not enough. In the end punching Nazis will seem just as tedious and pointless as arguing with them has been. We will need to continue to stand up against them, but we will feel like we aren't getting anywhere.

Because the far-right is a consequence of capitaism, and not a thing in-and-of-itself, fighting and even vanquishing this round of fascists without overturning capitalism leaves the causes of fascism intact. The social inequality and economic crises of a capitalism hellbent on the commodification of everything, ever-increasing profits, and the forced adoption of the capitalist mode of production all over the globe (colonialism, imperialism).

Punching Nazis is satisfying and worthwhile, but it can never be *enough*.

Fighting fascism might result, in the end, in a temporary setback, perhaps even in a political revolution - transfer of power in the US government, for example. But it would leave existing social and economic relations untouched. Racism, sexism, all forms of oppression and domination would remain precisely because the fundamental oppression of economic exploitation remains. What is required instead is a social revolution, in which the very relations of social and economic relationships of society are completely overturned.

I think what I'm getting at is summed up in this meme. The image is perhaps satisfying in its attempt to get at the long history of left-wing antagonism towards the right (seen, for example, in the resistance of anarchist and communist forces against fascism in Italy and Spain). But it obscures, even violates, some vital historical realities. In the first place, the majority of German and American soldiers were not ideological supporters of the regimes they fought for, except in the sense of having been targets of propaganda and the general capitalist worldview gained through what Althusser called the "ideological state apparatuses". They were neither alt-left nor alt-right. In addition, the clash of

ideologies obscures the socio-economic of the Second World War. Like the First World War - indeed, part of a single historical process along with it - the Second World War was between competing capitalist powers for control over economic space. Hitler's process of annexation and conquest was the move of an economic power blocked from colonial expansion by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The eventual "victors" of the Second World War (the United States) immediately expanded its imperial pretensions in a world suddenly free of (almost all) competing powers. To see the Second World War as a clash of fascist and liberal ideologies, with the liberals coming out victorious, is not only historically obtuse, but serves to further the interests of liberalism itself: the expansion of cqpitalist accumulation.

We need to be able to see beyond this kind of cynical manipulation. If you're going to go punch Nazis, do it with your eyes open. It is not only the far-right that is used to co-opting the language and arguments of its opposite. Capitalism itself has proven itself to be expert at turning the energies and organizations of the left to its own advantage. The only way we can create a new and better world is by social revolution. Nazi punching is a milestone on that road, but we can't stop there.

Data as Commodity, a Marxist Analysis.

2017-08-25

When I was in library school, we discussed the ways in which information is a commodity. We never actually decided on a definition of "commodity"; like pornography, we were expected to know it when we see it.

But anyone with a passing familiarity with Marx's *Capital* knows that the concept of "commodity" is complex. So when the CBC runs a story with the headline 'Data is the new oil': Your personal information is now the world's most valuable commodity I wondered whether the article would interrogate the concept of commodity used in the headline.

Firt of all, it's interesting to note that the term "commodity" isn't used in the article itself. The word "commodified" is: "The five most valuable companies in the world today… have commodified data and taken over their respective sectors". But where the headline refers to "world's most valuable commodity", the article refers to "the world's most valuable resource". This is an important distinction, as a commodity and a resource are not the same thing at all.

For Marx, a commodity is distinguished from other products of labour by having both a use value and an exchange value. All products of labour transform raw materials and are useful to those who consume them; they have a use value. When I cook a meal, I transform raw materials into something that has use value for me when I eat it. But this meal has no exchange value because I did not cook it in order to sell it; it is not a commodity. This is one area where bourgeois economics obscures and mystifies a concept. An exchange value can be assigned hypothetically to the meal I cooked, but because I did not produce it for exchange and do not exchange it, that exchange value is really a fiction.

For a commodity to have an exchange value, it must be produced *for* exchange (sale). Production requires - as I said above - the combination of labour power and raw material (my cooking and raw food in the example above). Under conditions of private property, those who do the work do not own or control the means of production for large scale commodity production. Individually, I can purchase some commodities (food) and I can prepare them (labour), but I can't compete economically with, say, Aramark, because I do not own and control the means of production at a sufficient scale. If I did, I would no longer be a worker, but a capitalist.

The separation of worker from the means of production means that the worker has no choice but to sell her labour on the labour market to the person who does own and control the means of production, the capitalist. Only by bringing together labour and means of production can a capitalist set commodity production in motion. According to the labour theory of value, only labour power can add to the exchange value of a commodity. Labour power is transferred primarily through the immediate labour of the worker put to work on means of production, but it is also transferred (at a lower rate) from the past labour stored up in the means of production themselves.

In terms of data, the means of production are: computer hardware, network infrastructure (both private and state-owned), software (which has the value of the labour of the software developers who produced it). I would argue that this is what Marx calls fixed capital, or infrastructure, like a warehouse or a factory - something that *supports* production, and transfers some value to the commodity, but is not itself transformed. What *is* transformed, what is the actual raw materials turned into a commodity, is pre-existing data. For example, the current state of Facebook's social graph can be thought of as so much raw material, like wool to be spun into yarn, or wood to be turned into houses. In Facebook's case, the moment of "primitive accumulation", the initial capture of capital which allowed Mark Zuckerberg to begin the cycle of capitalist turnover, was precisely the creation of an initial data set using data he gathered while at Harvard University ("We had books called Face Books, which included the names and pictures of everyone who lived in the student dorms").

So much for raw materials and the means of production. In order to bring labour power to bear on this raw material, a capitalist would ordinarily find labour for sale on the open market, negotiate an (illusory) free contract for a particular wage, and put labour to work. With the companies in question in the CBC article - Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, and Google (Alphabet) - the trick has been to find sources of *free* labour power. All that is required is the marketing of slick user-experience and the temptation of peer-sharing (for social networks) and convenience (for stores like Amazone) for people to start working on the raw material of data already stored within these systems. Every transaction, every click, within Facebook or Amazon is a piece of micro-labour, a virtual assembly-line of disparate, separated individuals. Not only is the work done for free, but because there can be no combination of workers in this situation, all of the *costs* for the maintenance of this workforce are borne by society, not by the capitalist.

The CBC article is coy about what exactly is being sold. They claim it is "access", but access to a commodity is not the commodity itself. Like all commodities, data has a socially determined exchange value based on the average, aggregate, and socially determined value of the labour power. Marx argued that the heart of capitalist accumulation was the concept of surplus value. A worker is *not* paid for the amount of work they do; on the contrary, they are paid for the amount it costs them to reproduce themselves, to be able to work again

the following day (and, in the end, to have children who can also become workers). The contract struck between capitalist and worker is for this much (the wage), but a worker can transfer more value to a commodity in a given working day than their wage; the rest of the labour is transferred to the commodity for nothing. We are all - as workers - unpaid for a portion of our working day.

The interesting thing about crowdsourced data as a commodity is that *none* of the costs of reproducing the labour force are borne by the capitalist; they pay no wages to anyone doing the work of transforming the data set which the capitalists sell as a commodity. *All* of the costs are borne by society ("privatize profit, nationalize risk"). This means that the rate of surplus value is 100%; *all* of the exchange value of the data sold by these companies is pure profit (minus whatever minuscule costs are associated with infrastructure).

It is in this respect that data is unlike oil. Oil is a natural resource, a raw material, and the labour that goes into it for extraction and transformation is handled by traditional industrial workers who have contracted for a wage. There is a limit to the amount of surplus value that can be extracted from the oil industry. Data-as-commodity theoretically has no limit on the amount of surplus value because labour costs (to the capitalist) are nil.

This is a different problem - in fact the complete opposite problem - we face with automation (e.g. robots taking jobs). One of the standard practices when faced with the requirement to reduce labour costs/increase productivity is for the capitalist to replace human labour with machines. But machines cannot and do not produce surplus value - only living labour can do that. So automation carries within itself the seeds of the collapse of capitalist profitability. Crowdsourced data work, on the other hand, can theoretically increase the amount of human labour to the limits of the global population without ever having to pay for it.

This, from my perspective, is what it means for data to be a commodity.

The Library: Pedagogy vs. Mathetics

2017-08-31

In my review of Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, I asked the following question:

> What if the library recognized and took ownership of its etymological history as a place of books? What if it began to take seriously a mission not of 'access to information' or 'access to material', but of 'emancipation'. Whaf if instead of information literacy, we though about intellectual emancipation?

I've been thinking more about these questions, and about Rancière's concept of radical equality, and it seems to me that these ideas could have a serious impact on coming up with a mission for libraries that does not merely see them as supportive of neoliberal goals and requirements (both in terms of universities and municipalities). Currently, despite the best intentions of library workers, libraries are adrift in a current of competing interests, as capitalism attempts both to recover from the previous economic crisis, prepare for the next one, and deal with the ever-worsening effects of climate change.

This round of thinking about this was sparked off by a few recent meetings with or about our Teaching & Learning Committee. As usual, the concepts of "learning styles" and "solid pedagogical principles" came up, but without a lot of critical interrogation of these ideas. And it occurred to me that the very basis of "pedagogy" violates Rancière's principle of equality (as he himself notes in the book). The word "pedagogy" comes from the Greek (child) + (I lead). By definition, then, pedagogy sets up an inequality between the child - presumed ignorant - and the one who leads, the teacher. This implicity inequality also turns up in narratives of library leadership which tends to ignore that to have leaders, one must also have followers; this is ignored in order to avoid difficult questions of the place of "collegiality" and hierarchy in a system which privileges leaders. In any event, "solid pedagogical foundations" must be based on an inequality, not only of knowledge, but of ability to teach/learn (or else the child could simply teach themselves).

This fundamental inequality is, obviously, the basis of modern universities (it seems to have been less prominent in older European universities where students were indeed expected to "teach themselves"). One could argue that this con-

forms with the hierarchical requirements of late capitalism, just as the school timetable and desks-in-rows inured schoolchildren to the exigencies of factory discipline in the 19th and 20th centuries. The academic library, in a mistaken (in my opinion) bid to be taken seriously by the academy, attempts to play the pedgagogical game by the academy's rules. We have "Teaching & Learning Committees", we teach classes, we have librarians who consider themselves teachers/pedagogues. But - going back to my original question - what if, rather than conforming to the teacher/student inequality that forms the basis of the academy, academic libraries went the opposite route, to become places where this inequality does not hold, a place - perhaps the only place in the university - where learning happens in the absence of a teacher, where students are precisely expected to teach themselves.

(Full disclosure: this was my experience of undergraduate university - I learned the most from unsystematic reading through the library; certainly much more than I learned from any of my classes).

Which brings me to "mathetics", a word coined by John Amos Comenius in 1680 to describe the science of learning (in contrast to "didactics", the science of teaching). What would an academic library look like that privileged mathetics over didactics/pedagogy? What if instead of teaching tools/technologies/information literacy, we focused instead on showing - hopefully by example - that learning can and must take place in the absence of a teacher. ("Must" if we want to dispense with the insidious cornerstone of inequality perpetuated by the universities). Not only, in my opinion, would providing a space for self-learning/self-teaching ("auto-didacticism") provide a fitting *complement* to traditional classroom teaching leading to better education ("leading out") overall , but it would also help dispense with the imperative of "passing classes" which, under capitalism is subsumed under the category of exchange value (and in a Freudian sense is subsumed under the category of pleasing the teacher). It might also foster more flexible, critical thinking, as students become liberated from the constraints of their disciplines.

From the libraries perspective, I think adopting "mathetics" as our mission would help to solidify our policies. Student space, collection development, IT services - all of which, in my opinion, suffer from a lack of focus, lack of direction, and lack of common vision, would, I think, be brought into high-relief if we were to reconceive our mission as supporting the self-learning of students *and of showing by example how such self-learning works.*

From a dialectical perspective, the pedagogical inequalities of the university are a thesis rife with contradictions. The current model of the academic library attempts to conform to that thesis, leading to the fairly dire position we currently find ourselves in (with respect to relationships with faculty and students, vendor exploitation, technological doldrums, lack of diversity, and reproduction of oppressive socio-economic structures). Rather than being part of the problem, dialectics suggests that by becoming the *antithesis* to the dominant pedagogical model, the university itself would benefit, by becoming a synthetic unity of the

two opposites, something richer and more well-rounded than it currently is.

I haven't spoken about the public library here, as in a way it is in a better pedagogical/mathetic position precisely because it is not embedded in an institution which sees itself as the standard bearer for education. The constraints of neoliberal municipal requirements will always deform the mission of the public library, but I think this is one area in which the public continues (for now) to recognize the possibility and desirability of self-education.

I'm intrigued by the possibilities that Rancière's principle of equality holds for all kinds of social structures and situations, but this idea - of the "mathetic library" - seems like something worth pursuing. A commitment to a radical equality would also commit us, as I suggested above, to a mission of emancipation, both material and intellectual. Such a mission is something I think the library world desparately needs.

Towards a Marxist History of the Book

2017-09-16

In "Books and the Nation", her chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (2015), Trish Loughran writes that >the fact remains: there is no radical history of the book, no >comprehensively leftist or revolutionary or decolonizing tradition to >speak of. There is no queer history of the book; there is no Marxist >history of the book; and despite a massive global diffusion of the >field, there is very little (in English) that we might truly call a >postcolonial history of the book. (p. 50)

Loughran's diagnosis of the cause of this disciplinary gap lies in "how the field has historically mediated the universal and the particular". The relation of the universal to the particular brings to mind the particular insights enabled by dialectical thought. For Hegel, the Universal and the Particular were moments in a dialectical process, connected with and interpentrating esch other, rather than opposed to one another, as they are in formal logic (what Engels refers to as "metaphysics"). Dialectical thought, it would seem, has much to contribute to the history of the book, if only in the area of relating and contextualixing the moments of the universal and the particular.

But that's not all. The material emphasis of book history requires a *materialist* dialectic, the dialectic indeed of which Marx wrote: >My dialectical method is, in its foundation, not only different from >the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it… With him it is standing on >its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel >within the mystical shell.(Postface to the Second Edition of Capital, >Volume 1, 1873).

The application of Marxist theory to the history of the book in some ways seems like a natural development. The insistence on materialist, the multidisciplinarity of Marxist thought, and the commitment to social change and social justice, would make it a natural fit for the history of the book, which Loughran describes as

> a perfect location from which to launch… a trouble-making project because it's materialist, detail-oriented, and historical. (p. 50).

This is, of course, an apt description of that other "trouble-making project", Marx's *Capital*, and one could do worse than start where he does, with the com-

modity, recognizing that the intellectual "wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of' books, even if we have moved beyond the printed codex as the form of the book. The book as commodity has, of course, been looked at many times, but as with the commodity *tout court* it seems as if the contradictions within it have been overlooked. The book is both a material object and a cultural, intellectual artefact, and no amount of distinguishing between the"book" and the "text" can do justice to the interpenetration of this contradiction.

From the book as commodity, then we have typically been led down two separate paths. On the one hand there is the economics of book production and circulation, focusing on the material conditions of the lives of books, as exemplified by Darnton's commmunication circuit, which places the cultural aspects of print culture - what Marxists call the superstructure - at the centre of, but separate from, and seemingly subservient to, the material base.

On the other hand, there is the attempt at looking at "the whole socio-economic conjuncture", as in Adams and Barker's revision of Darnton's circuit, which tends to emphasis the superstructure over the material base.This is a circuit driven by readers and writers, workers in the superstructure, where Darnton's was driven by businessmen, workers in the base. One of the things a Marxist history of the book would need to do would be to show the ways in which these two models are in fact related as part of a social whole, two moments in a common dialectical process.

The dual nature of book as "book" and as "text" leads us to look at the question of reading, which opens up the world of Marxist cultural and aesthetic theory, from Adorno's culture industry and aestetic theory, to Jameson's "political unconscious" and beyond. Reading as both individual and social act, the history of reading and reading publics, the history of libraries; Marxism offers particular insights into both the social and structural determinants of these phenomena.

But Marxism is a theory of liberation, of the emancipation of the working class and the achievement of a new society, and I think that a Marxist analysis of print culture in the 21st century offers the potential for particular political interventions in, among other things, librarianship and academia, but also in such areas as the economics and culture of scholarly publishing, post-truth and authority, and academic culture. Insofar as print has also always been a popular culture, interventions in this area are supported by a rigorous Marxist history of the book as well.

J. Moufawad-Paul: The Communist Necessity

2017-09-16

J. Moufawad-Paul, *The Communist Necessity: Prolegomena to Any Future Radical Theory*, Kersplebedeb, 2014.

> Finally, after decades of post-modernism and capitalist triumphalism, it is no longer considered impolite for academics and popular intellectuals to speak the word *communism*. (15).

I started my undergrad in 1995, six years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and only four-and-a-half years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fukuyama's *End of History and the Last Man* was published in 1992, part of the triumphalist crowing of a capitalism that felt itself not only victorious, but morally and intellectually vindicated. I remember being shocked that the University of Manitoba bookstore carried the *Communist Manifesto*, but I was already working a telephone tech support job with all the mindless tedium that entails, and the *Manifesto* began to explain things to me. Nevertheless, at that time, you could not talk about Marx or Marxism with any seriousness or sympathy in a North American university. Communism and Marxism had been completely discredited. In 1999, I watched the "Battle for Seattle" from Winnipeg and felt that at least something was being done. Then there was Genoa in 2001, and other clashes followed. But none of it ever seemed to add up to anything. I delivered election flyers and went to a few meetings of the Communist Party; I went to a meeting or two of the Industrial Workers of the World, but all of that seemed intellectually bankrupt and directionless. Reading Marx or Lenin I would run up against chauvinists or Ukrainian nationalists who angrily took issue with anything that didn't fit the triumphal capitalist/nationalist/bourgeois order. So I more or less gave up, and for many years kept my reading of Marx more or less to myself. In library school I read Habermas and Foucault; in my MA I relied on Bourdieu, because even then I felt that there was no way to openly declare a Marxist perspective in the academy.

After 2008 this began to change, as capitalist crisis returned in a major way, and Marx became relevant and *persona grata* once more. Harvey's *Companion to Marx's Capital* came out in 2010 and Eagleton's *Why Marx was Right* in 2012. Along with this developed anti-capitalist movements that seemed to still be based in a liberal - rather than a radical - view of the way bourgeois society

operates and what must be done to change it. Moufawad-Paul's *The Communist Necessity* is a take-down of this kind of movementism, as well as the theoretical projects that support it, projects like Badiou's *Communist Hypothesis* and Jodi Dean's *Communist Horizon*, both of which, in Moufawad-Paul's view, posit a *future* communism that we just shouldn't concern ourselves with *right now*. The anti-capitalist movements, too, see communism as something that will come about by itself, magically somehow, once the right people and the right ideas are gathered in the right place. This, to my mind, sounds very similar to the liberal position that the problems and evils of capitalism are just mistakes, and that if we simply refound the social contract (as Ursula Franklin has put it), then the problems will simply melt away.

Moufawad-Paul argues, I think persuasively, that the various movements, horizons, and hypotheses, defang communism

> They refuse to examine the past revolutions just as they refuse to examine the revolutionary movements of today, in those zones that they claim to defend against imperialism, that had never been enamoured with this movementist praxis. They are willing to settle for reformism and pretend that it is revolution, acting as if a successful defense of the right to assembly and the ability to make one's complaint heard are the only victories the movement can achieve. (10).

Moufawad-Paul sees much of this liberalism posing as communism as due to s belief that simply "because capitalism is *mean, evil, immoral - because we don't like it*" it is doomed to fail. But from this perspective one cannot *commit* to communism, because there is no way to argue that it is a better alternative than capitalism. By standing on the argument of capitalism's immorality, communism can only be fully committed to if it can be proved to be more moral, an impossibility. Rather, communism must be committed to as a necessity because "otherwise capitalism, due to its intrinsic logic, will devour existence". Much of Moufawad-Paul's argument connects back to Rosa Luxemburg's stark formulation of the choice we have to make: socialism or barbarism. Moral justifications do not provide a reason to transcend capitalism, only a reason to try (a futile attempt) to blunt its excesses. The justification for a communist revolution cannot come from competing moralities. Instead,

> the necessity of revolution is due to the fact that the position of [capitalism] is, in the last instance, contingent upon the annihilation of the basis of existence. [...] Communism,then, is more than an ethical necessity: it is a historical and material necessity. [...] To claim that 'another world is possible,' after all, is not the same as claiming that another world is necessary.

Moufawad-Paul is a Maoist, and one of the most compelling aspects of his argument is that, while the left in North America continues either to argue over Stalin, or to march peacefully in the name of some vague anti-capitalism,

revolutionary organizations in the imperial periphery are engaged in the project of making revolutions. Whether these revolutions succeed or not is beside the point, in Moufawad-Paul's view, because even in failure we gain new insights, new theories, new experiences. A scientific experiment that "fails" still proves or disproves a hypothesis, adding to the sum of scientific knowledge. Why should political experiments be any different?

As with Moufawad-Paul's latest book, *Austerity Apparatus*, there's a lot to dig into and chew on here. There's a lot of thought condensed into every paragraph, and both books will repay rereading. Whether or not you identify as a Maoist or subscribe to the positions Moufawad-Paul takes up, these are ideas that *must* be engaged with by any self-respectng leftie. They are often uncomfortable ideas, predicated as they are on a rejection of the kind of common-sense bourgeois values and opinions inculcated in us since birth. But as Moufawad-Paul argues in a passage that had great resonance for me, we have to be prepared to draw lines.

> Political lines can and must be drawn: the enemy draws them, and thus understands that we are the enemy, and so we need to have the very same understanding if we are to survive. Only liberals, who imagine that there really is no enemy and that everyone will get along under the peace of welfare capitalism, believe that the drawing of these lines is a violent act that - like violence itself - is immoral because it is the way in which the enemy behaves. In this context, however, the liberal stands within the lines drawn by this enemy and is thus incapable of understanding that they are endorsing a reality determined by the most insidious and immanent violence.

I was criticized recently for holding an "us vs. them" mentality. But it's true, it is *us vs. them* - to believe otherwise is to believe that the Canadian government has traditionally been on the same side as indigenous peoples, that the police are on the same side as the Black people they murder with impunity, that those who own the means of production are on the same side as those who eke out a precarious living on the scraps of surplus profit. It is to believe that the wolves and the sheep are on the same side - a point of view that can only benefit the wolves.

FOLIO and Platform Labour

2017-10-01

On Friday, McMaster Rare Books rightly took issue with the erasure of archival labour coincident with the use of a letter written by Bertrand Russel, which is in their archives. This letter has "gone viral" several times over the last few years, variously claiming to have been "unearthed" by a researcher - in fact, it is located due to the work of acquiring, sorting, describing, encoding, and digitizing performed by professional archivists. This kind of erasure of the labour of library and archives workers both inside and outside academia.

But it occurs to me that the *erasure* of labour is not the only thing going on here. Under the current mode of capitalism, everything is a commodity, including one's online "brand" and "virality" itself. The value of the commodity, as with all commodities, is commensurate with the labour that goes into its production. The moment of erasure comes when the research attempts to pass off the labour of archivists as their own (using labour-intensive words like "unearth"). But the harnessing of another's labour power to increase the value of one's own commodity, while not sharing in the value of the object produced has another name: exploitation. In addition to the erasure of archival labour, in this case, the archivists are also being exploited. Now, working primarily (at least in Canada) in the public sphere, making a public salary, academic librarians and archivists tend not to worry *too much* about this kind of exploitation in general - we're making a public salary, and we're generally happy for our labour to contribute to the public good. But brand management and virality are typically *not* part of the public good, but private betterment, that is - profit. We tend to get pretty riled at the idea of our publicly funded work being used to further private interests.

A few years ago when the Future of Libraries is Open (FOLIO) project was announced, it caused a bit of confusion in the library world. Our ILS vendor ecosystem has moved rapidly towards cloud-based services, and Ebsco, which doesn't have an ILS project, seemed to be trying to move into this area. However, the FOLIO project was positioned as arms-length from Ebsco, an independent community-led project, built on the hoary Koali-OLE project, begun in 2008. Billed as a partnership between the "FOLIO Community", Ebsco, and Index-Data, FOLIO promises to be "a true partnership between libraries and vendors in which we are each making real substantive contributions based on our unique

strengths."

When we look at the FOLIO community members lists, however, we can see that of the 7 that are specifically mentioned, 4 are vendors and 1 is OLE, and the other is a vague "Libraries", whose contribution will be "Guiding, Discussing, Developing, Collaborating". So far, this looks like a pretty standard "Public-Private Partnership" so fond of neoliberal governance, in other words, a mechanisms for "privatizing profits and socializing losses".

Now, Ebsco has been making the rounds for the last few years - at the annual Access conference, for example - to push for collaborative work by librarians, library technologies, and library software developers to start building ILS modules on top of the FOLIO SaaS platform. This is described as seeking in kind collaborative contributions to an open-source library product. Leaving aside the question of who needed FOLIO in the first place (our ILS market is pretty much sewn up by proprietary vendors, and we have two mature open-source ILS products), this looks to me like an attempt by a group of vendors - with Ebsco in the lead - to tap into the large amount of open-source software development taking place in libraries which, from a vendor perspective, *no-one is profiting from.* From a capitalist viewpoint, this is wasted (i.e. unexploited labour).

For a while, I was uneasy with the FOLIO project, but couldn't quite put my finger on it. There was a suggestion of "open-washing" a proprietary product, but the FOLIO SaaS platform is open-source as well. Where is Ebsco's (or Sirsi's or IndexData's) skin in this game? Well, it turns out that the theoretical "way in" to properly thinking about this comes in form of recent writing around "platform labour".

In January, 2016, the labour theorist Ursula Huws asked whether platform labour was "sharing economy or wild west?", noting that

> For some idealists, [platform labour] is even seen as a way to bring about a post-capitalist society. Others, using terms like 'workforce on demand', or 'liquid labour' see it as a way of creating a just-in-time workforce, sometimes described as a 'human cloud' or 'crowd', that is available on tap for specific tasks.

Juliet Schor and William Atwood-Charles argue that platform labour "emerged from the wreckage of the 2008 financial collapse with multiple positive claims about its potential to change the world".

> Proponents of what was originally called "collaborative consumption" highlighted the ability of platforms and apps like Airbnb and Uber to use "underutilized" assets more efficiently, build social connection and trust through person-to-person economies, reduce environmental footprints and help ordinary people cope with difficult economic times.

In other words, very similar arguments are used to describe the FOLIO initiative as other labour platforms. It should come as no surprise that the exploitation

of platform labour is irremediably gendered and racialized, as Niels van Doorn has pointed out, but I think there's an additional angle to all of this, reflecting on neoliberalism's contradictory attitude to the state and the public sector.

According to neoliberal theory, state intervention should be minimized to allow the unfettered, unregulated, smooth movement of capital and commodities (except labour) wherever it can make the most profit. In reality, however, capital accumulation is shored up by strategic state interventions in particular areas (the "commanding heights" of the economy, for example, or in the suppression of unions, cf. Thatcher against the miners, or Reagan against the air-traffic controllers). One of the areas still - for the moment - subsidized and regulated by the state is post-secondary education, offering good salaries and benefits (for the most part) to relatively large labour forces. For neoliberalism, this labour is just as untapped as off-duty cab drivers were for Uber, or vacationing apartment dwellers were for AirBnB. There are profits to be made off this labour, and there are ways to get the labour for free. In this case, even the maintenance of the labourer themselves, which is ensured in the form of wages under capitalism, is avoided by the entrepreneur. The wages - including the social wage - are paid 100% by the state in the form of public funding for post-secondary education.

But why stop at post-secondary education? Ben Tarnoff writing in the Guardian argues that "Tech's push to teach coding isn't about kids' success – it's about cutting wages". In addition to adding to the "industrial reserve army" keeping down the wages of skilled workers in silicon valley, the training of these workers can be offloaded to the state (through schools) and the work itself can be paid for be *anyone else* in the form of platform labour. With corporations set to reap the profits, as always.

I'm still not sure what Ebsco, Sirsi, or IndexData's end-game is. I think at the moment they may not have one - they may be content merely to get other people's labour working for them, just as researchers who erase the labour of archivists mobilize archival labour for their own private interest.

Review: Remains of the Day

2017-10-02

Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, Penguin Books, 1989.

I read *The Remains of the Day* over a long-weekend shortly after Ishiguro won the Nobel Prize. I've been meaning to read Ishiguro for years; my friend Kyle listed it as one of the top three fiction books he read in 2014. In the end I enjoyed it; it was nice to read a good, classically constructed English novel, with nothing pomo or meta about it. But when it came to writing a review of it for this blog, I've struggled with figuring out what to say. I don't think I found it as affecting as others have; perhaps I just read it at the wrong moment. Anyway, an paragraph from an email I sent to Kyle will have to suffice.

> I've been struggling to write a review of Remains of the Day for my blog. I enjoyed it - I read it in a weekend - but I felt like it didn't quite add up to as much as I would have liked. I saw the movie not long after it came out, so I remembered the climactic moment being really emotional, but the ice only cracks for a second in the book. It's well done - maintaining the reserve for so long, the control in the style and way of presenting Stevens' views, and so the moment is pretty moving when it comes, but I felt like it came and went and it was hard to know what, if any, lasting consequences there were going to be. Or even if there weren't going to be any… Anyway, it was good; a colleague lent me a copy of The Buried Giant, which she really liked, so I'll give that one a try.

Hegemony and Overgeneralization: A Reply to Rebecca Lossin

2017-10-27

When David Camfield drew my attention to Rebecca Lossin's "Against the Universal Library" (*New Left Review* 1-7, Sept-Oct 2017) I was initially surprised that anything to do with libraries would appear in the NLR. The long-standing traditions of critique within modern librarianship, dating from the 1930s and the establishment of the Library Bill of Rights, through to the debates around intellectual freedom and social responsiblity in the 1960s and 1970s, and continuing to this day in the various forms and emphases of the Progressive Librarians Guild, the critical librarianship (#critlib) movement, and the work being done by Library Juice Press, to name just a few tendencies - tend to seem rather provincial against the backdrop of broader left critique. In some ways, Lossin's critique - an intervention in the name of the printed book - aligns with at least some of these movements. But Lossin's portrayal of a homogeneous, monolithic library profession is at odds with the presence of this trend of debate and these tendencies themselves.

Many of my colleagues, I know, would agree with Rossin's criticism of the transition from "library science" to "information science", and there is indeed much to criticize. The fact that what librarians think of as "information science" and what computer scientists mean by the term marks a disconnect between two modes of thought. And it is easy to point to a neoliberal fetishizing of the technological as one of the prime movers behind this transition. This critique of "iSchools" and "information science" programmes is widespread in the library world. And so when Lossin remarks that

> from what I observed during my studies, information professionals, true to their elastic and unbookish titles, were fans of just about anything that was not a book. They thought putting video games in the young adult section was a great idea. They talked constantly about 'rebranding' the library via Facebook - which still, unfortunately, has the word 'book' in it. They even found a way to rename books: as budding information professionals, we were encouraged to use the unsexy – if still suggestive – term 'information package' instead.

This makes it sound as if everyone except Lossin, professors and students alike, form a homogeneous bloc fully and enthusiastically in favour of the neoliberal colonization of librarianship. This is at odds not only with mine and others' experience of library school, but of the profession at large. "Information package" is not in common usage, certainly not to refer to individual e-books. The only time I hear it in the wild is, sometimes, from database vendors referring to a collection of aggregated electronic articles, which are indeed packaged up together. It is a mistake, I think, to argue that librarianship as an undifferentiated whole supports the technocratic instrumentalization of information. Like any other profession, some of us struggle against hegemonic logics and concepts that have been reified and overvalued within our institutions and society at large. At the risk of sounding like a Hardt-and-Negrian, libraries contain multitudes.

I also think that the root cause of this process is misidentified by Lossin, who argues that the renaming of "book" to "information package" (and all the attendant rationalizations and justifications) are due to a single technological moment:

> This name-change was the product of the rise of digitization. Books were being removed from the professional vocabulary because they were being removed from the shelves.

Leaving aside the fact that "book" remains an integral part of the vocabulary of librarianship (and the silent elision of "book" with "codex"), ascribing a (putative) devaluing of the book to a single cause - digitization - oversimplifies matters.

Have print codex collections declined, or at least slowed? It's likely - University of Alberta Libraries has an "electronic preferred" policy where, absent any counterargument, an electronic copy will be acquired if one exists. I'm not a collections librarian and I haven't done the number crunching, but it seems likely that some material formerly acquired in print is now only being acquired in electronic format. But this is less the result of "digitization" than of changes within the wider economy of book production, libraries' relationships to vendors, and the dynamics and constraints of parent institutions.

Electronic books acquired by collections librarians are rarely "digitized". Digitized material tends to be archival, special, or unique material that is digitized and put online both to broaden the use of that material, to protect the material (sometimes, *contra* Lossin, damage to books can be irreparable and the book itself irreplaceable). Making versions of unique items available beyond the walls of the physical library was one of the recognized benefits of print - a manuscript had to be laboriously copied by hand in order for anyone to be able to read it outside the location in which is happened to reside. Digitizing rare or archival material satisfies the same need. And these are not, as far as I know, destructive of the material being digitized; this would defeat the purpose.

The majority of electronic books acquired by libraries are born digital, that is, they exist electronically alongside a print version; indeed the print version is

often produced from - and after - the electronic version. In this sense then, the question of the shift from print books to electronic books becomes one of the lowering the cost of the means of production, and changing the nature of labour involved, that is, it becomes part of the ongoing process of capital accumulation. To posit "digitization" as the *cause* of a devaluing of the print book misses this aspect of the process.

Because book publishers have moved towards electronic books as cheaper and easier to copy and distribute, vendors push for libraries to acquire them rather than print books. I'm not denying that a similar logic is at play *within* libraries - electronic books don't require shelf space or workers to move the books around, for example - but that this logic is not particular to libraries, it is general to the mode of production that sees automation and digital production as a means to cheapen if not discard labour power in the centres of capitalism. It should not be surprising that libraries as institutions find it difficult to resist such logics; libraries too are subject to austerity and all the other dynamics of neoliberalism.

Academic libraries are embedded within universities, colleges, etc, and public libraries are situated within municipalities, all of which are subject to socio-economic and ideological pressure to conform to neoliberal structures of thought and behaviour. Decision-making in libraries is far from distributed or non-hierarchical, and decision-makers self-select through their conformity with the requirements of the capitalist university or the austerity municipality. This supports Lossin's contention that neoliberal changes have been and are being wrought within libraries, but it challenges her assertion that every librarian must be on board with these changes. We struggle, though the struggle often looks and feels futile.

Lossin argues that "Libraries, in their attempt to 'future-proof' themselves… are importing both commercial practices and logics into nominally alternative spaces". "Nominally" in what sense? Libraries have never been pure, alternative spaces safe from commercial practices and logics. There has been a lot of work done on the role of libraries in both the self-reflection of bourgeois ideology, the ideological conditioning of the working class, and the construction of canons and epistemes that support dominant power structures. Again, Lossin's view of libraries seems oversimplified, and she sets up a false dichotomy between a pure alternative space and a corrupt commercial institution. But there are no pure spaces untouched by capitalist logic, exploitation, and domination.

Lossin's account of the various destructive processes that have taken place throughout the history of libraries is not *wrong* - indeed, the destruction and repurposing of paper (and of rags to make paper) is as old as the book itself. I'm just not sure what her point is - librarians don't destroy books because we hate paper and love whatever the new technology is, and the process of destruction identified by Baker was never a uniform, homogeneous process either. We are all, always negotiating social, economic, political and, yes, epistemic changes like everyone is. Where I do take issue with Lossin's argument is the idea that the episodes she mentions

> are the logical conclusion of a set of techno-fetishistic practices that have shaped the culture of libraries over time.

I would argue that, with technology being such an integral part of the process of capitalist accumulation, both of value and of ideology and culture, we can't escape some form of techno-fetishism. Indeed, the very qualities of the printed book Lossin writes about mark a techno-fetishism of her own, since the printed book is itself a technology. All this may make it sound as if I am unsympathetic to Lossin's argument, but I'm not. I agree that reading something in print is different (and, in my opinion, worse) than reading it electronically. But Lossin's view seems to oversimplify and overgeneralize the process she is describing, and ignores the hegemonic realities librarians live, work, and struggle in. I think it also ascribes single causes to what are in fact overdetermined processes. Digitization of material aids in accessibility (a screen reader can read an electronic text; an electronic text can easily be converted to various accessible formats). The presence of electronic materials also allows for quick and easy satisfaction of a reader's immediate needs - patron-driven acquisition systems, for example, would be inconceivable in a print only world. And this, I think, is at the heart of my critique of Lossin's argument: she posits too many false dichotomies - information specialists vs. librarians, the status quo vs. her solitary voice, print vs. electronic. The truth is that both the symptoms which she diagnoses – which in general I agree with – and the causes of those symptoms are much more complex than she allows. Like librarianship itself.

This blog post can't do justice to everything in Lossin's article, which ranges widely, and certainly raises important points about the directions and dynamics of libraries (and librarianship) under capitalism. Libraries and librarianship continue to have major problems with respect to labour, gender, sexuality, class, and disability, many of which we are ill-equipped (culturally, politically, ideologically, and theoretically) to address. But librarianship is full of countertendencies, debates, argument, and critique, and to pose - simplistically - that librarianship is purely the preserve of philistines and crypto-fascists is, in my opinion, wide of the mark.

Marx, Clojure, and Values

2017-10-29

NOTE: I imagine there must be a way to connect "values" in programming with Marx's theory of value, but I'm not sure what that is, and it's beyond the scope of this post.

My friend Kyle let me know about this post on "Clojure vs. The Static Typing World", which was a reflection on Rich Hickey's keynote at Clojure/conj 2017. Kyle drew a particular passage to my attention: "Rich talked about types… as concretions, not abstractions. I very much agree with him on this point, so much so that I didn't know it wasn't common sense."

> But, on further consideration, I guess I'm not that surprised. People often talk about a Person class representing a person. But it doesn't. It represents information about a person. A Person type, with certain fields of given types, is a concrete choice about what information you want to keep out of all of the possible choices of what information to track about a person. An abstraction would ignore the particulars and let you store any information about a person. And while you're at it, it might as well let you store information about anything. There's something deeper there, which is about having a higher-order notion of data.

This brought to mind a passage by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, where he discusses his methodology. This passage has been commented on and discussed many times since the publication of the *Grundrisse*, but it seems to me that by connecting some of these ideas (political economy and data/software) we might be able to think through some of the aspects of immaterial labour and value in the works of, for example, Maurizio Lazzarato, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In the 1857 Introduction, Marx writes that

> The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception. (p. 101).

For Marx the concrete, that which is represented by a class or another non-primitive datatype, is what we begin with, what we see around us. We see a *Person* or a *Car* or we are faced with a *User*. The process of analysis allows us to break apart (, to unravel) these concrete phenomena into the abstract qualities or values that make them up. In this sense the abstractions *determine* the form of the concrete thing. My height is 5'4" - this is an abstract value that is one determinant of my concrete being; I am a *Person* with a *height* of 164.5cm.

Values do not change; they are immutable. 5'4" does not become a different value when I represent it in a different form (164cm). This doesn't mean that units of measurement are a- or trans-historical; the Greek, Roman, Chinese, French and English "foot" do not refer to the same absolutel length - but the length encoded in 5'4" in 2017 is an unchanging value.

> 42 doesn't change. June 29th 2008 doesn't change. Points don't move, dates don't change, no matter what some bad class libraries may cause you to believe. Even aggregates are values. The set of my favorite foods doesn't change, i.e. if I prefer different foods in the future, that will be a different set.

This immutability of value is one of the cornerstones of Clojure. As Chas Emerick, Brian Carper, and Christoph Grand wrote in *Clojure Programming*:

> Most programming languages, either through idiom or explicit design, encourage the use of mutable state, whether within the guise of objects or not. Functional programming languages tend to encourage the use of immutable objects—referred to as values—to represent program state. Clojure is no different in this respect.

In some ways the idea of immutable state would seem to support standard formal logic (what Engels calls "metaphysical" logic). A is always A and is never *not-A*. But Hickey's recognition of concretions as the "concentrations of many determinations" allows us to recognize the dialectical logic embedded within the Clojure view of types. The concretion, the *making concrete*, occurs at a particular moment in time. The Clojure documentation refers to *identity* (i.e. $A = A$) as an "entity that has a state, which is its value at a point in time". So we have, in a sense a "synchronic" view of state, where state is not changing historically, but is a sequence of static, immutable snapshots in succession (this is similar to the Saussurean view of language which informed Structuralism). In this view, we started with the concrete phenomenon – *A* or *Person* – and then we broke it down into its component values (height, for example). But we don't *work* with the abstractions, just as in the real world I don't appear as a height with brown hair, I appear as a person. By working back up from the abstractions to the concretions we can ensure the correctness of our modeling (does this type interact with other types as they would in the real world).

And the real world *does* change, it *is* mutable. The Clojure view of state, then, does allow for a dialectical unfolding of identities over time.

> Identities are mental tools we use to superimpose continuity on a world which is constantly, functionally, creating new values of itself.

State at one moment can contradict state at another moment, in the sense that the total state changes over time, and Clojure allows for working safely with this kind of contradiction. Indeed, it is precisely the immutability of the abstractions (values) that provide the ability for a program's state to change safely over time; a very dialectical view of the running of software over time.

There is, naturally, a danger in believing the world to always be synchronic, that is, ahistorical; this is precisely Marx's argument in the *Grundrisse*, that the classical economists did the work of analysis to come up with abstractions, but then stopped there: with a view of the world that they believed to be true, unchanging, and transhistorical. Marx's solution is to extend the methodology to return again to the concrete (this is the the method of presentation of *Capital*, for example). But the post I began with does a good job, I think, identifying a mitigating strategy, which is the pragmatism of solving real-world problems. If we want to set up a model of the way the world works or the problem we want to solve in software, that is only half the solution. The model must *work* in the real world; in many ways, software should conform to Marx's famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach, which is quoted only too often today: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." Useful software is effective software.

All of Rich Hickey's talks are fantastic - to find out more about his idea of programming with values, it's worth watching his 2012 Keynote "The Value of Values".

Class, User Data and Labour

2017-11-04

This week there was a lot of discussion about the ethics of tracking library users (specifically students) and passing that data along to university administrations to help support the "student experience", ensure "student success", and "prove the value of libraries". There was a lot there to get into - I recommend looking at the timelines of Dorothea Salo, Barbara Fister, Donna Lanclos, Meredith Farkas, and Angela Galvan for good, in-depth takes on why this is a problem.

What sparked this conversation was a presentation at Educause 2017 on "Closing the Data Gap: Integrating Library Data into Institutional Learning Analytics". Two of the questions posed in this presentation was "Are there correlations between library use and student success measures? And how do you measure success?" The presenters argued that by integrating library use(r) data with other campus data, we could prove the value of library use. One of the slides contains the following quote:

> [The Libraries] are critical to supporting student success, which is one of our highest priorities at the University. Libraries researchers have gathered compelling data that indicate that undergraduates are more successful (as gauged by higher GPAs, higher retention rates, and higher 4-year graduation rates) when they use our Libraries. (Provost Karen Hanson Remarks at the Libraries IMLS National Medal Celebration, July 19, 2017)

The twitter conversation was often critical of the political naiveté of this position, exemplified in these two tweets (taken more or less at random):

"They're panopticons, so let's do the same!"I reject this argument utterly. It is evil. https://t.co/qswCPrFYli

— Ondatra iSchoolicus (@LibSkrat) November 3, 2017

"Create user value" "improve the customer experience" "protect the Homeland" - epic lies of our era.

— barbara fister (@bfister) November 3, 2017

What this particular discussion reminds me of are the debates around industrial rationalization that took place on the Italian left in the 1960s. There was

a sense that "rationalization" was objective, neutral (sound familiar?) - that the increased efficiency produced by, say, automation or time-motion studies (i.e. taylorism) were somehow independent of the class relationships integral to the capitalist organization of labour. Many on the left in Italy in the sixties - enjoying an enormous boom in productivity and standard of living following the difficult years of post-war reconstruction - argued that improvements in productivity should not be seen as integrally connected with capitalist exploitation or the domination of capital over labour. Raniero Panzieri, editor of the "Quaderni Rossi" (Red Notebooks) journal, argued that this point of view stripped particular developments (time-motion studies, user-tracking) from their concrete position and function within the struggle between labour and capital, which led to seeing these things as objectively valuable, useful, and good, and only put to bad use by exploitative capitalists. The dominant federation of labour unions at the time maintained this position, seeing "time and motion studies, 'human relations', even the restructuring and parcellisation of the labour process [i.e. the assembly line]" as possessing "an intrinsic rationality and necessity which their current use by capital could never obliterate" (Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven*, p. 42).

This view is mirrored in the library and higher-education world by those who think that the good we can do by tracking and aggregating user data outweighs the risk of that data being "misused" by (neoliberal) universities and the corporate interests that are so embedded within them. I put the word "misused" in quotes because the use of user/student data to increase the exploitation of students - to turn them into workers, to rank, to order, and to condemn the lowest performers - is *precisely* the proper use of such data under capitalism. It isn't so much that librarians are afraid that this data may be handed over to the government or corporations (though of course we *are* afraid of this, and rightly so), but that our data is used to deepen and extend the quantification of education and educational performance, and thereby the relations of neoliberal capitalism itself.

Another tweet I came across which sums up the political naiveté of those who think that any user tracking can be innocent is the following, which contains a slidefrom ARC17:

Food for thought as #oclcarc17 winds down today. pic.twitter.com/dTw48P99K0

— Barbara Snead (@BarbaraJSnead) October 31, 2017

This point of view might have been innocent in the early days of the welfare state, before the transformation of society into one large immaterial factory took place, but in a world in which both data and the algorithms that operate on them are being used to broaden, extend, deepen, and solidify social control, inequality, exploitation, and domination, in particular by previously "enlightened" or "progressive" institutions like libraries or universities, such a position is no longer innocent, but actively culpable.

Part of this innocence is, as I see it, due to a misrecognition on the part of

librarians (especially academic librarians) and faculty members that we and the students are all part of the working class; we do not own and control the means of production that we use every day - the means of production are owned by the university or the government (what Mario Tronti calls "the collective capitalist"), and we are brought together with them every day in buildings they also own. The decline of industrial production in North America has tended to mystify this fact; we can imagine that because we aren't industrial workers that we aren't workers at all. But in fact, the opposite has taken place. As Tronti argued in his 1962 essay in Quaderni Rossi, "Factory and Society", "When all of society is reduced to a factory, the factory - as such - seems to disappear". What we do when we participate in logics of rationality such as integrating our user data with other "learning management" data is to spread the "factoricization" of the library and the university. We have to learn that we are not, despite appearances, *outside* the logic of domination and exploitation of capitalist production just because it is hard to see what our commodity is or because we have more autonomy and better benefits than other members of the working class. Labour is not just a part of the capitalist relationship, it is "the truly active side of capital, the natural site of every capitalist dynamic" (Tronti). So we have to be vigilant with respect to our complicity in the processes and dynamics of capitalist social reproduction.

Eventually, of course, vigilance will not be enough; we will also have to see that increasing our standard of living relative, or our autonomy, or our benefits, with respect to others (especially students and marginalized users) is not a goal worth pursuing. Eventually we too will be completely proletarianized. In the words of Tronti, what needs to occur, in libraries and universities as part of the social factory, is that "labour must see labour-power, as *commodity*, as its own enemy" - improving the "value" of our commodity, our labour-power, is not enough, we have to end the fact of labour as a commodity completely, as part of the total abolition of the commodity-form in general.

Review: The Man in the High Castle

2017-11-05

Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, in *Four Novels of the 1960s* (Library of America, 2007). First published in 1962.

The Man in the High Castle is a book about racism. Racism imbues every interaction, every relationship in the novel. But racism, while the most immanent, is simply a particular case of essentialism, and it is essentialism that is the underlying concern of the whole novel. The question of what characteristics are essential to a person or object, what is immutable and what can be changed, is almost an obsession throughout the book. The most obvious example is the question of historical necessity; what, for us, is *alternative history* is common sense and historical fact for the characters in the book. They feel towards *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* the way we feel towards *The Man in the High Castle*, the eerie feeling of a history - that most personal, subjective, and powerful feeling of belonging - that has been perverted, sent off course. Essentialism is a concern of many of the characters.

"Historicity" - a particularly ubiquitous essentialism - is a common concern and an important plot point:

> 'This whole damn historicity business is nonsense. Those Japs are bats. I'll prove it.' Getting up, he hurried into his study, returned at once with two cigarette lighters which he set down on the coffee table. 'Look at these. Look the same, don't they? Well, listen. One has historicity in it.' He grinned at her. 'Pick them up. Go ahead. One's worth, oh, maybe forty or fifty thousand dollars on the collectors' market.'
>
> The girl gingerly picked up the two lighters and examined them. 'Don't you feel it?' he kidded her. 'The historicity?'
>
> She said, 'What is 'historicity'?'
>
> 'When a thing has history in it. Listen. One of those two Zippo lighters was in Franklin D. Roosevelt's pocket when he was assassinated. And one wasn't. One has historicity, a hell of a lot of it. As much as any object ever had. And one has nothing. Can you feel it?'

> He nudged her. 'You can't. You can't tell which is which. There's no 'mystical plasmic presence,' no 'aura' around it.'

We are introduced to one element of essentialism on the first page - an element bound up in the racial essentialism that looms so large throughout the novel. In this case, the idea of "place" has become a cultural norm within the Japanese occupied Pacific States of America, to the extent that Robert Childan, an American who subscribes to the racial essentialism that has become common place in the world of the novel, is extremely conscious of maintaining, gaining or losing place, until - later in the novel - he achieves a sense of hope in American culture.

But there is also *wabi* and *wu*, essential elements that belong to particular object and play important roles within the novel.

> Tasteful in the extreme. And — so ascetic. Few pieces. A lamp here, table, bookcase, print on the wall. The incredible Japanese sense of wabi. It could not be thought in English. The ability to find in simple objects a beauty beyond that of the elaborate or ornate. Something to do with the arrangement.
>
> 'It does not have wabi,' Paul said, 'nor could it ever. But —' He touched the pin with his nail. 'Robert, this object has wu.'

Of course both wabi and wu are elements within the larger essentialism of race contained within the larger essentialism of historical truth. What Dick has constructed is a *matryoshka* - nesting doll - of essentialisms in order to play them against each other and to interrogate both the ideas of free will and historical necessesity.

This is the world Dick has has constructed, a world which takes racial essentialism so seriously as to make it common sense, a world in which racism is both always-present and always-contested due to the shifting dynamics of power in the uDick has has constructed, and in which racial essentialism (racism) is taken for granted because it is part of a network of other essentialisms. Frank F(r)ink, a Jew who has managed to survive both the Holocaust and the Nazi race laws that now govern most of the US, has had to change his features and name in order to pass as non-Jewish. Dick shows how anti-semitic essentialism is essentially contradictory: anti-semites place great stock in the "essential features" of Jews, but also maintain that there is some essential "Jewishness" that inheres despite outward features.

It is the unquestioned nature of essentialisms that I think horrified Dick, and provide an undertone of horror to the novel. Essentialism forces people into patterns of behaviour that never have to be questioned or challenged… or changed.

There are two elements from outside the essentialism that makes the novel so claustrophobic. The first is the novel written by "The Man in the High Castle" himself, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, which describes an "alternate history" in which Germany and Japan lose the war. The novel disturbs all of the characters who read it, challenging their common sense about the essential and eternal

truths of their lives. The second elemetn is the *I Ching* itself, which on the face of it seems to be simply a hippie affectation of Dick's. But the cleromancy of the *I Ching* takes decision away from the characters' reliance on essentialism. Of course, the idea is that the Classic of Changes taps into some lower level of essentialism of which the characters are unaware, from from the perspective of the novel and Dick's writing of it, it adds an element of chance - randomness being diametrically opposed to essentialist determinism.

This was a reread for me. Two years ago, when I finally ot into PKD, this was the first novel I read. It stands up as one of his best, along with *Ubik* and *A Scanner Darkly*. It repays rereading in many ways, and challenges the reader's preconceived notions of what PKD is about.

Bloody Legislation

2017-11-17

Yesterday, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) voted overwhelmingly to reject an offer by the College Employer Council that the union argued was made in bad faith and an attempt to do an end-run around negotiation by putting the offer directly to a ratification vote by the membership. The offer made by the CEC was basically the same as the one made prior to the OPSEU strike five weeks ago, and was a step back from the few concessions negotiated since then. OPSEU president Warren Thomas said

> Calling for this vote was a bully move by Council. [...] At a time when we were only a few steps away from getting a deal, they overplayed their hand and robbed students of two weeks of their education.

86% of voters rejected the offer, with voter turnout at 95%, which is amazing; bourgeois elections can only dream of such levels of participation.

Friends of mine who are members of OPSEU, striking college faculty, were clear that the rejection of the offer opened the door to back-to-work legislation, but the feeling was that the Ontario government would wait until Monday to see what, if any, progress was made in negotations over the weekend. However, only hours after the CEC offer was rejected, Kathleen Wynne tabled back-to-work legislation, effectively looking to abrogate the constitutionally-protected right-to-strike of OPSEU members. The provincial NDP has refused to support the legislation, meaning that the bill will be debated over the weekend, rather than being pushed through immediately.

As I've been following the strike, I've also been reading around in Volume 1 of *Capital*, making connections where possible. When the back-to-work legislation was tabled yesterday, it seemed clear that there are direct connections between such state intervention on behalf of the employer, and the history of what Marx calls "bloody legislation against the expropriated", Chapter 23 of Volume 1. Marx is writing in the context of "So-Called Primitive Accumulation", that is, the process by which the capitalist mode of production came to exist in place of the feudalism (Part Eight of Volume 1). Marx argues that two processes were required for capitalism to develop: the creation of a proletariat who had no means of subsistence (land, tools, raw materials) and who were therefore forced to sell their labour in order to live, and the concentration of land, tools, raw

materials and other forms of capital in the hands of a new ruling class. Because the peasantry under feudalism possessed - if only by use and tradition - their own means of production, the first step in the creation of the proletariat was the expropriation of the peasants, sweeping them off the land, privatizing it, and making it impossible for anyone to work with it or on it without selling their labour-power to the developing capitalist class.

The "bloody legislation" Marx refers to are the acts of monarch and parliament against the expropriated peasantry in support of the capitalist class. Fundamentally, such legislation had two broad goals. On the one hand, ex-peasants who found themselves unable to support themselves had to be forced into the labour market, either in the new capitalist farms, or into the cities to work in manufactures. Hence the legislation against "vagabondage", etc.

> The fathers of the present working class were chastised for their enforced transformation into vagabonds and paupers. Legislation treated them as 'voluntary' criminals, and assumed that it was entirely their powers to go on working under the old conditions which in fact no longer existed. (896).

On the other hand, legislation was required to keep wages low during this period when the working class was being constructed.

> The rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state, and uses it to 'regulate' wages, i.e. to force them into the limits suitable for making a profit, to lengthen the working day, and to keep the worker himself at his normal level of dependence. (899-900).

The laws against vagabondage extended even to slavery (897) and to death for repeat offenses (898).

> Anyone wandering about and begging is declared a rogue and a vagabond. Justices of the peace… are authorized to have them publicly whipped and to imprison them for six months for the first offense, and two years for the second. […] Incorrigible and dangerous rogues are to be branded with an R on the left shoulder and set to hard labour, and if they are caught begging again, to be executed without mercy. (898-899).

> Thus were the agricultural folk first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labour. (899).

Legislation around wages set a legal maximum wage, and imprisoned or branded anyone working at a higher wage. Penalties for paying a higher wage were less than penalties for accepting a higher wage (901).

> In the sixteenth century… Real wages… fell. Nevertheless the laws for

> keeping them down remained in force, together with the ear-clipping and branding of those 'whom no-one was willing to take into service'.

One of the most telling aspects of this legislation is that infractions committed by the employer was a civil matter (i.e. tried in a civil court), while infractions by workers were criminal.

> The provisions of the statutes of labourers as to contracts between master and workman, regarding giving notice and the like, which allow only a civil action against the master who breaks his contrcact, but permit, on the contrary, a criminal action against the worker who breaks his contract, are still in full force at this moment. [Until 1875, in fact]" (902-903).

We see here the early history of state intervention into labour disputes *on the part of the employer*. Back-to-work legislation, a legal way to abrogate the hard-won right to strike, is simply the modern form of state power wielded on behalf of the capitalist class. Let there be no mistake: illegal or wildcat strikes, refusing to obey back-to-work legislation would bring the full force of the law down on non-complying workers. The Spanish state recently used military force to put down rebellion in Catalonia; such is the real face of the power of capital.

Obviously we will see in the next week or so what comes out of any of this. Hopefully OPSEU will be able to gain some concessions from the CEC, but the CEC's commitment to good-faith bargaining seems to be fairly minimal, and this will likely reach a legislated, rather than a negotiated or arbitrated settlement. Good luck to all the faculty, librarians, and staff involved.

Review: The High Window

2017-11-18

Raymond Chandler, *The High Window*, in *The Big Sleep/Farewell, My Lovely/The High Window*, Everyman, 2002 (originally published 1942).

I was glancing at this omnibus volume on my bookshelf and realized that I hadn't gotten around to reading *The High Window*. My dad has always been a Chandler fan, and I got into him sometime in my 20s, reading *The Long Goodbye*, which I still think is the best. Chandler's alienated romantic detective is a bit harder to swallow now than in the 1940s, but there is something there, I think, in terms of interrogating masculinity (toxic and otherwise), but you do have to wade through a lot to get to it - a lot of casual racism and sexism that, while not as brutal or gratuitous as in other pulp fiction, still make for unpleasant moments, getting shocked out of the fictitious world, thrust into the very real problems and ugliness of the real world. Maybe that was part of Chandler's project, his attempt to make of pulp something more than just action, action, and more action. His characterization of himself as primarily a stylist is, I think, both a little more and a little less than self-deprecation. Like Philip K Dick, there's a lot here to work with, it's just hard to know if it's worth the effort.

The High Window is, I think, not as successful as the best of Chandler's work; it probably falls somewhere between *The Big Sleep* and *The Lade in the Lake* (which I have a soft spot for). (In my estimation, the apex of the Marlowe saga is *The Long Goodbye* and its nadir is *Playback*). I found the unbroken succession of interview/interrogations felt very static, and I wished that at some moment the narrative would break loose, that something would actually *happen*. All the deaths (and other crimes) take place, as it were, off-stage, and there's a strange claustrophobia that hangs over the novel as a result. It doesn't help that the opening interview with a prickly client takes place in much the same setting as in *The Big Sleep*, with Mrs Murdock's port taking the place of General Sternwood's orchids. In fact, Marlow's description of the effect of the orchids could describe the arid hothouse feeling of *The High Window*:

> The air was thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom. The glass walls and roof were heavily misted and big drops of moisture splashed down on the plants. The light had an unreal greenish color, like light filtered through an

> aquarium tank. The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and talked like the newly washed fingers of dead men.

From *The High Window*:

> It was so dark in there that at first I couldn't see anything but the outdoors light coming throug thick bushes and screens. Then I saw that the room was a sort of sun porch that had been allowed to get completely overgrown outside. It was furnished with grass rugs and reed stuff. There was a reed chaise longue over by the window. It had a curved back and enough cushions to stuff an elephant and there was a woman leaning back on it with a wine glass in her hand. I could smell the thick scented alcoholic odor of the wine before I could see her properly.

Given that there are only six novels in the Marlowe canon (does anyone include *Poodle Springs*?), I may take the time to reread them all and try to work out what's really there versus what's been layed on Chandler that he my not deserve. Jameson wrote a short book on Chandler last year, *The Detections of Totality*, so it might be worth starting with that.

Beyond IP Authentication in Libraries

2017-11-23

I haven't paid much attention to developments going on in the vendor world around alternatives to IP authentication until recently. Yes, the current duct-tape-and-glue solutions libraries have are broken, but that's nothing particularly new. And yes, Shibboleth has been around at least since I started in libraries, but vendors have never really gotten behind it before now. It seemed that the EZ-Proxy/IP-based authentication status quo was here to stay.

But recently all that seems to have started to change. In response to a problem with one of our vendors, we managed to get a few databases to configure Shibboleth as an alternative to use when IP/proxy authentication fails. This introduced uncertainty not only into the systems, but into public service, where users now had a choice to make, and instructions were no longer as straightforward as they were under a pure IP/proxy regime.

Next, our collections unit received a few emails referring to Google's Context-Aware Scalable Authentication (CASA). An example is this announcement from HighWire, the gist of which is:

> CASA enables Google Scholar users to see the same subscribed resources off-campus as on-campus, so that no off-campus login is necessary. HighWire and Google combined expertise to develop and test the CASA protocol with the goal of simplifying verified user access to subscribed content. A faster, easier user experience for legitimate users to access content on publishers' platforms will help libraries serve their patrons and may influence researchers who have developed a preference for Sci-Hub.

As I understand it, what CASA does is assembles a profile of what a user (in this case, a Google user) has licensed access to, based on various "passive" characteristics, one of which *may* be "is currently at an institution with licensed access". This profile then follows the user around even when they are outside that institution, i.e. off campus. The authentication is associated with the Google profile, so that Google user can have access whether or not they are on an allowed IP. This access can be time-limited, so that a user would have to return to a licensed campus to reenable their CASA access, but I don't think this is part of the spec.

(This raises some questions around how this will work in practice. Since members of the public are generally able to access library resources on campus, this would give someone unaffiliated with the university - someone who would not normally have EZ-Proxy access, a member of the public - the ability to access licensed resources simply by visiting the campus occasionally. This isn't something I'm particularly worried about, but vendors will have to figure out a way to close that hole).

More technical details on CASA can be found here.

Third, we have ra21, which stands for "Resource Access for the 21st Century:

> RA21's mission is to align and simplify pathways to subscribed content across participating scientific platforms. RA21 will address the common problems users face when interacting with multiple and varied information protocols.

ra21 is spearheaded by the International Association of Scientific, Technical, and Medical Publishers (STM) and the National Information Standards Organization (NISO), and has *lots* of library vendor support (the steering committee contains many vendors and organizations familiar to libraries). It's clear that a sea-change is coming in the move away from IP-based authentication.

When I mentioned this in a public service committee yesterday, I was asked why vendors would want to to do this and what they would gain by it. It's clear, I think, that the main impetus is the simplicity and usability of SciHub. As I've written before, access to licensed library resources is barely usable, extremely fragile, and frustrating to users (even when they *are* able to get access to a desired resource. SciHub, on the other hand, is basically the simplest access tool around: type in a title or identifier, hit enter, read PDF. We know the vendors and publishers are terrified of the ramifications of SciHub, and it looks as though rather than working with libraries to come up with a solution, they are simply taking it out of our hands.

But there are other reasons vendors and publishers would be behind these systems. More granular monitoring of usage will make it easier to quash abuse (rather than, as now, reporting possibly abusive IPs to libraries to have them deal with). Linking access to profiles rather than IPs or IP ranges will make it easier to track and target individual users (both for marketing and for "filter bubble" purposes). Vendors probably also hope that linking usage to a vendor (as opposed to a library) profile will help uncover accounts which have been compromised (i.e. to SciHub), as well as being able to monitor and block access *from* SciHub using a compromised profile. I'm sure there are other benefits, but these alone are likely sufficient to make moving in this direction worthwhile for vendors and publishers.

From the library perspective, however, things aren't quite so simple. Our access systems might be broken but they are a) well-understood and b) fairly standardized. Most libraries use EZ-Proxy, for example. The new non-IP ecosystem

currently has three major players: Shibboleth, Google's CASA, and ra21. More alternatives may develop, fracturing the authentication landscape and causing a massive headache for systems libraries, electronic resources, collections, and public services. In addition, the implications for user privacy are frightening. Recent debates in the library world around user monitoring pitted "pragmatic" views on tracking/monitoring against a (happily very vocal) majority who are unwilling to compromise user privacy for the sake of some assessment metrics. Putting authentication firmly in the hands of our vendors will throw all that out the window. Google's CASA, for example, will link a user's scholarly research and reading with everything else in their Google profile, including location, and all of this will be a complete black box to libraries and their users.

To my mind, this constitutes a major, major change in the way we provide access to electronic resources. I think the end result is likely to be positive, as almost anything must be better than what we have now, but in the short term, the ramifications for all areas of the library, especially public services, are enormous, and the implications for privacy unnerving.

Update 24/11/2017:

In a conversation last night, Ruth Collings pointed out that another way vendors can/will benefit from the fracturing of authentication systems is by continuing the trend of building walled-gardens. As we've seen over the last few years, the library vendor ecosystem has been consolidating into fewer and fewer hands. One strategy in this consolidation seems to be to acquire as many user tools as possible (discovery system, citation management, knowledge base, etc) in order to keep libraries, faculty, and students locked in to a single vendor's system. In this sense, the vendors are simply following the model of, say, Apple or Google, in which proprietary hardware and software, and closed protocols and applications, serve to lock users in to a single corporate system. By fracturing the authentication/access landscape, it is only too plausible that vendors will use their own, proprietary, authentication system to lock a particular library into their own suite of closed systems and services.

Update 27/11/2017:

Hey Sam. As I recall, RA21 is effectively an application profile of Shibboleth, so really there are two: straight-up Shibboleth and an RA21-profiled Shibboleth. Thanks for the mention of Google's CASA; that was a new one for me.

— Peter Murray (@DataG) November 27, 2017

Review: The Winnipeg Strike: 1919

2017-11-29

Kennet McNaught and David J. Bercuson, *The Winnipeg Strike: 1919* (Longman, 1974).

I grew up the North End of Winnipeg, not far from the Ukrainian Labour Temple and the Winnipeg headquarters of the Communist Party of Canada. I played soccer at R.B. Russell Vocational High School, but never knew anything about him. I don't remember anything about the strike being mentioned in elementary or high school. Danny Schur's musical *Strike!* didn't premiere until the year I went to library school, when I was 28. This despite the characterization of the city as "Radical Winnipeg".

And I think, now, I know why the history of the strike is played down, not to say ignored, despite the fact that now, in 2017, a memorial has been unveiled near the site of "Bloody Saturday". Not only was the strike defeated through a combination of government interference, employer intransigence, and the terror of Winnipeg's bourgeoisie (and the strike committee's own confusion), but if it's true that "when the strike was labeled revolution and crushed, the future of Winnipeg as a city of growth and industrial vitality was also crushed" (120), then it makes sense that the history of the strike would be sanitized and co-opted into bourgeois entertainment or chaste memorial, but that even the geography would be erased and forgotten.

In reading this book, I had to look up where Victoria Park was, since it doesn't exist anymore; like the Labour Temple, it has vanished beneath successive waves of development. Now, what was once Victoria Park is a set of high-rise condos, part of the gentrification of downtown Winnipeg that has been proceeding for the last 10-15 years or so. There's not much *left* of the built environment of the strike. The streetcar system, which proved so contentious, and which occupy such an important place in the outbreak of State violence on Bloody Saturday, is long gone.

What's interesting to me is the idea that the strike was part of a Bolshevik plot to spark Communist revolution in Canada. Whether Winnipeg's bourgeoisie and the provincial and federal government's honestly believed this, or simply used it as a pretext not to negotiate with the strike committee, to call in the militia and the mounties, we will perhaps never know. But the class divisions

described in this book ring true to me as someone who grew up in class-divided Winnipeg:

> Reading of the hundred's of 'alien' [= Slav] workers making their way through frigid, snow-bound streets to applaud 'Bolshevik' agitators, the affluent citizens of Wellington Crescent and Fort Rouge could almost see their own blood added to the foreign red which was besmirching their wintry scene. (42)

These stories were stirred up primarily by the newspapers (of which more later), but also - for political purposes - by the mounties themselves:

> What the mounties were looking for was any sign of seditious conspiracy, and what the reporters were looking for was exciting news - especially if it could be inferentially linked to 'Bolshevism' and the dreaded foreigners of the city's north end.

It made sense, then, that the strike committee should "pressure" the typographers of the three Winnipeg daily newspapers (the *Winnipeg Tribune*, the *Winnipeg Telegram*, and the *Winnipeg Free Press*) to walk off the job and contribute to special strike editions of the *Western Labor News*. This was, in the *Labors News'* opinion, "a case of simple justice to muzzle for a few days the enemies of freedom and truth".

> While it is beyond question that the three newspapers in Winnipeg had always shown a pronounced anti-union partisanship, their temporary suppression induced in them a yet tougher attitude marked by daily predictions that violence was just around the corner. (53).

One of the fascinating things about the strike was how the strikers maintained a discipline of non-violence even when roused, even among demobbed veterans of the first world war. The violence that ended the strike was brought on by the State and executed by the state, spurred on by the fears of the Winnipeg bourgeoisie and the employers. Those fears were stoked by the newspapers.

> According to the strike committee, 'had it been possible to keep the newspapers closed up for the duration of the strike there would have been no disorder…' (53).

Which brings to mind a letter written by Lenin to Myasnikov on 5 August 1921 - two years after the Winnipeg strike - regarding "the freedom of the press":

> All over the world, wherever there are capitalists, freedom of the press means freedom to buy up newspapers, to buy writers, buy and fake 'public opinion' for the benefit of the bourgeoisie. […] To place in its hands yet another weapon like freedom of political organizaton… means facilitating the enemy's task, means helping the class enemy. (Slavoj Zizek, Lenin 2017, p. 6-7).

In today's world of fake news and perennial clashes over freedom of speech, it is important to remember that the clashes are not new, they have been with us

for a very long time now. It's easy to forget that when, like the geography of the strike itself, historical knowledge is allowed to fade away. It is important to study, to read, and to remember.

Review: The Winnipeg Strike: 1919

2017-11-29

A few years ago, I began mentioning to colleagues a tension I felt in my work which I described as a tension between projects and services. No-one I brought it up with ever really seemed to understand what I was getting at, and so I tried articulating things differently or expanding on what I meant, but I still never really gained any traction. What I thought the problem was that systems work involves both *its own* projects (designing and building a website or discovery system, for example) as well as support services (writing code or reports for staff, acquiring, configuring, and maintaining hardware, infrastructure, responding to staff requests, updating hours, etc). The issue, I felt, was that we didn't really have good processes, procedures, guidelines, or priorities to help with managing these two kinds of work. Projects and support services are very different kinds of work, and without solid guidelines, responding to staff support requests tend to trump project work, which requires dedicated time and energy, but tend to have longer timelines and perhaps less tangible outcomes at certain moments of the project lifespan. Staff support requests tend to be more discrete, urgent, and concrete, in that there is a staff member waiting for the request to be fulfilled. Staff support requests are, compared to project work, low-hanging fruit. My frustration was with not having clear guidelines on how to manage the work (and the expectations) around these two kinds of activity.

But more recently I've had a minor epiphany. The reason colleagues didn't seem to share my concern around what I saw as an unacknowledged tension in the work that we do is, quite simply, because that tension is not present in their work. The vast majority of the work my systems unit does is in support of staff work and initiatives. I may be the only one in the unit whose work includes both direct user-facing projects and staff support requests. There are internal IT projects, of course, but these are always part of the support function, not systems-initiated projects with an unmediated user-focus. Even in website design and implementation, for example, which seems like it would be the equivalent to a user-facing project in other units, staff voices are privileged: they are closer, louder, and have access to privileged channels of communication like an internal help-desk. Our website design and implementation is governed by a staff committee. As much as we try to be user-focused and user-centred, staff concerns and desires drown out student and faculty voices. This is why talking

about UX from the perspective of a systems librarian is so different from talking about it from the perspective of someone in, say, a digital scholarship or RDM or scholcomm role.

But what's the problem? Isn't this just the nature of library systems? Perhaps it is - perhaps during my ten years as a systems librarian, I've been naive. Certainly my library school experience didn't prepare me at all for what actual library systems work was going to be. But I think until very recently I nurtured an idea that library systems work had a user-focus and an intellectual content akin to other library units: cataloguing and metadata, or public service, or - and this might be the best example - something like GIS librarianship. I envisaged my particular skills - an intersection of librarianship training, technical knowledge, and critical thinking - as positioning me for a particular *positive and constructive* role in the lives of students, researchers, and faculty. But after ten years I realize that systems work - at least in my experience - really just needs someone with the technical capacity to support the work of *other* librarians and staff units (or to supervise those who do). This is not to denigrate that kind of systems work, but it's not what I signed up for. And I have to admit I'm envious of other librarians who are putting their intellectual command of a particular field of librarianship - again, I think of GIS - to work with students, researchers, and faculties as an equal participant, as a teacher, or to do their own research in support of the intellectual goals of their own area of librarianship.

I recently applied for a secondment to be a branch head in our library system. When the AUL in charge let me know that I had not been successful, she admitted surprise that I had the experience and skills to branch out from systems work. Perhaps this is another area of frustration borne out of the position of library systems as (primarily) a staff support service: being seen as a technician or IT-geek, rather than as a librarian, with the same concerns, perspectives, and experience as other librarians.

Review: Endnotes 1

2017-12-13

Endnotes, *Endnotes 1: Preliminary Materials for a Balance Sheet of the Twentieth Century* (Endnotes, October 2008).

According to their website, Endnotes is a discussion group based in Germany, the UK, and the US "primarily oriented towards conceptualising the conditions of possibility of a communist overcoming of the capitalist mode of producction… starting from present conditions". They situate themselves within the current of "communisation theory", which came out of the ultra-left currents after 1968. Since 2008, Endnotes has published four "issues" (really monographs) of their journal.

Left-communism has, at least since Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder* tended to be overshadowed either by authoritarian forms of Marxism (e.g. Marxism-Leninism, Maoism) or by those forms of Marxism interested more in cultural studies (e.g. the Frankfurt School or the New Left). Still, there has always been a strong current of theoretical work on the more "anarchist" side of Marxist/communist theory, including the work of Tiqqun, The Invisible Committee, and some strains of workerism/autonomism. The approaches of these groups can tend towards the kind of movemenism Moufawad-Paul critiques in *The Communist Necessity*, but I think that there's plenty to engage with here.

Endnotes 1 isn't really written by the Endnotes collective, as issues 2 - 4 are. Other than a brief introduction and conclusion, the text is composed of articles in a debate between Gilles Dauvé and the group Théorie Communiste, which took place between 1998 and approximately 2008, over the categorization of and reasons for "failed" revolutions (1921 in Russia, 1923 in Germany, 1936 in Spain, and 1968 in France and Italy). For Dauvé, these revolutions failed because they did not go far enough - enough of the capitalist relations remained for the counter-revolution to take hold. In the long essay which opens the volume, "When Insurrections Die", Dauvé analyzes these revolutionary moments and explains how, in his view, the opportunity for a successful revolution was lost in each case.

Théorie Communiste takes issue with Dauvé in three main areas. In the first place, they argue that he posits an essential nature of the proletariat, of communism, and of the revolution against which each concrete instance can be

measured (and found wanting). This is a trans- or a- historical view of these categories that TC rejects: each revolution is what it is at its particular moment in history, and nothing else. Secondly, TC argues that, since 1968, changes in the relations of production (i.e. from Fordism to the mass-worker), produced changes in proletarian consciousness, and therefore of the nature of the revolution itself. This is marked particularly by the transition from seizing the means of production, to "the refusal of work" on the part of workers in revolt. TC argues that this period also marks a change in the conception of proletarian revolution, moving from a "programmatism" (e.g. the Gotha Programme, or the Erfurt Programme) towards a conception of revolution less focused on the factory and the industrial worker, and more on the social-factory, and proletarian society more broadly.

Thirdly, and I think most intriguingly, TC identifies the foothold of the counter-revolution in the persistence of the commodity form itself. As long as the commodity (the product produced for sale) remains, its dual nature (use-value and exchange-value) will engender the persistence of *all* of the capitalist relations of production. It is the reproduction of the proletariat as proletariat, that is *as* a class within capitalism, that communisation seeks to abolish. Whereas the seizure of the means of production sees the *victory* of the proletariat over other classes - and for Maoists, it is important to recognize the continuation of class-struggle under socialism or the dictatorship of the proletariat - communisation means the abolition of the proletariat as a class (since the proletariat can only be defined as a relationship within capitalism). This is reminiscent in some ways of the distinction drawn by Lenin in *State and Revolution* between the socialist State, seized in order to wither away, and the immediate smashing of the State as a necessary element of the communist revolution.

Communism, then, for communisation theorists, is not a posited future state, but a process to be adopted *now*. It is this that brings them closest, I think, to the anarchists, and which can lead to movementism rather than revolutionary struggle. But the idea that the seeds of the counter-revolution are necessarily present in the structure of the commodity is, I think, an important one.

I read this in a white heat. I've always felt suspicious of authoritarian Marxism, though I have to admit that I don't think there's necessarily a non-authoritarian alternative. Rationally, I have to come down on the side of the Leninists or the Maoists, but temperamentally I am closer, I think, to the anarcho-communism of Endnotes. For me, the revolution cannot simply be the dictatorship of the proletariat - all the capitalist relations intact but with the workers as the ruling class; it must be the complete and fundamental transformation of society down to its most fundamental element, the commodity itself. Only by abolishing all capitalist relations up to and including the commodity-form can we hope to eradicate the counter-revolution and the resurgence of capitalism. Capitalism is good at co-opting radical movements, and being aware of the tools it uses to that end is an important theoretical contribution. This issue of *Endnotes* sets the stage for the elaboration of Endnotes' own position in *Endnotes 2*.

Review: Vile Bodies & A Month in the Country

2017-12-13

Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (Penguin, 1973) [1930]

J.L. Carr, *A Month in the Country* (Harvester Press, 1980)

> 'My private schoolmaster used to say, "If a thing's worth doing at all, it's worth doing well." My Church has taught that in different words for several centuries. But these young people have got hold of another end of the stick, and for all we know it may be the right one. They say, "If a thing's not worth doing well, it's not worth doing at all." It makes everything very difficult for them.'

I've subscribed to something very similar to this for a very long time, which I think informs many positions I take with respect to the place and value of work in society, communism, and librarianship. Nothing frustrates me more than "make work" or the implementation of someone else's decision when I can't make out the goal, design, or purpose of the work itself. In a way, both *Vile Bodies* and *A Month in the Country* are books about work, but they approach the subject in very different ways.

The Bright Young Things of Waugh's novel are the children of the (very slowly) declining aristocracy and upper middle-class. Things have changed from, say, the bourgeoisie of *Pride and Prejudice* for whom work is complete mystery. The Bright Young Things are living off their parents' debt and accruing debt of their own, and the breakneck speed and disjointed rhythm of the novel suggests that crisis is just around the corner. Indeed, the counterfactual war which breaks out at the end of the novel is justified by the very real fact of war as a means to defuse crisis under capitalism. Waugh isn't someone I would ordinarily ascribe such perspicacity to - and it's as likely due to his misanthropy as to any economic insight - but the coming of the second world war nine years later certainly bears out Waugh's point.

It took me a long time to like Waugh, though my dad was always reading him. I felt Waugh's comedy was shallower or less important than, say, Greene's heavy novels. I finally grasped the depth of Waugh's savagery when I read *A Handful of Dust* in library school - I still haven't mustered up the courage to re-read that one. *Brideshead* is, I think, clearly his best, but the satire has been dulled and

something akin to a warm nostalgia suffuses that book, even as he occasionally skewers its subjects. *Vile Bodies* is a good book to read, as Melville writes in *Moby Dick*,

> whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off.

Judging by conversations I've had with many people recently, a lot of us are feeling this way at the moment; Waugh's comedy is a better restorative than Greene's tragedies, no matter what my nineteen-year-old self would have argued.

The connection to work is much clearer in *A Month in the Country* than in *Vile Bodies*. I decided to read this after stumbling upon the film version on YouTube on the weekend (which stars a very young Colin Firth, Kenneth Branagh, and Natasha Richardson). It's one of those *very English* things which makes a liar of every high school English teacher who insists that every story must have a conflict.

Tom Birkin, still recovering from his experience of the first world war (and Passchendaele in particular), has been contracted uncover a medieval wall painting in a Yorkshire church. He spends the summer of 1920 sleeping in the belfry, working on the restoration, and making friends with the locals, including the rector's wife Alice Keach, and Charles Moon, another demobbed soldier with a job of his own to do. The novel is about the restorative capacity of a simple life in the country, good weather, friendship and, most importantly, of unalienated labour. Like *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*, *A Month in the Country* falls into a subgenre we might as well call "salvation by work". Some of Birkin's impressions have to do with the meaning of professionalism - a much different "professionalism" from either Austen or Waugh:

> You know how it is when a tricky job is going well becuase you're doing things the way they should be done, when you're working in rhythm and feel a reassuring confidence that everything's unravelling naturally and all will be right in the end. That's about it: I knew what I was doing - it's really what being professional means.

(Note: "being professional" rather than "being *a* professional). Compare this passage to what Ivan Denisovich experiences building a wall in Solzhenitsyn's novella.

I don't think I would argue that *A Month in the Country* is any kind of first-rate literary artefact, but it's competently - professionally - done, and it has a charm

that really fits with the dead, grey end of the year when we all feel like stepping into the street and knocking people's hats off. And it has ambition, I think, of a quiet kind. If a thing's not worth doing well, it's not worth doing at all.

Books in Review, 2017

2018-01-02

Last January, I resolved to finish as many books as possible. I'm a chronic book-abandoner, and I thought that perhaps putting a review up of each book I finished would be an incentive to finish more things. As a result, I read (to completion) 27 books (11 novels and 16 non-fiction). I'd say I still abandoned about as many books as I finished - some of them after only a few pages, but a few (which are still weighing on me) within 50 pages of the end. The last 5% takes 95% of the effort, or something like that. Following on Stungeye's annual "reading and listening lists", I thought I would collect the reviews I wrote over the last year here in one place.

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Poor Folk*
- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
- Simone Weil, *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*
- Philip K. Dick, *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*
- Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*
- Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex*
- William Gibson, *The Peripheral*
- Neal Stephenson, *Seveneves*
- V.I. Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*
- Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*
- Ursula Franklin, *The Real World of Technology*
- Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*
- Tyler A. Shipley, *Ottawa and Empire: Canada and the Military Coup in Honduras*
- Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*
- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*
- Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*
- Richard Norman and Sean Sayers, *Hegel, Marx, and Dialectic: A Debate*
- J. Moufawad-Paul, *Austerity Apparatus*
- J. Moufawad-Paul, *The Communist Necessity*
- Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*
- Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*

- Raymond Chandler, *The High Window*
- Kenneth McNaught and David J. Bercuson, *The Winnipeg Strike: 1919*
- Endnotes, *Endnotes 1*
- Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies*
- J.L Carr, *A Month in the Country*

One book is missing from this list: William Clare Roberts' *Marx's Inferno*, which I've reviewed for International Socialism, but the review hasn't appeared yet. It should be published sometime in January, so when it's available, I'll update this post.

I'm not sure whether I will stick with trying to review *every* book I finish this year. I'll still keep track of completions, but sometimes there wasn't really much to say about a given book.

I still hope to finish some of the lingering things from last year - Dostoyevsky's *House of the Dead* and Margaret Laurence's *Stone Angel* are within a stone's throw of completion. I'll probably review those two as, despite not finishing them (yet), I think there's stuff to comment on in both books.

EDIT (January 21, 2018): My review of Roberts' *Marx's Inferno* has appeared in International Socialism

Wuthering Heights

2018-01-10

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, (Heron Books, 1966) [1847/1850]

> Wuthering Heights is a strange sort of book,—baffling all regular criticism; yet, it is impossible to begin and not finish it; and quite as impossible to lay it aside afterwards and say nothing about it. – Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper, January 15 1848.

Well, this was a surprise. I've been trying to get my head around "literary criticism" lately - having managed to avoid it throughout all my years of schooling - and I had picked up a couple of weeks ago a copy of Terry Eagleton's *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*. I was interested in what his Marxist criticism would look like, but I hadn't read any of the Brontës before. Partly, I think this was due to a general lack of sympathy for any novel written between Jane Austen and, say, Joyce; I was pretty sure I knew what kind of novel *Wuthering Heights* must be - Romantic, clichéed and not as good as Austen. To tell the truth, there was probably something of an anti-Brontë prejudice I inherited from my father. At any rate, when I saw a decent hardcover edition in my local Wee Book Inn, I picked it up.

Reader, I couldn't put it down. Jerrold's newspaper has it right: it's been a long time since I was so invested in a novel from page one. Not only does Emily Brontë know how to keep her pot boiling, but the world she creates is so weird, so strange, so violent, that you have no choice but to keep reading if you want to make any sense of it.

According to the Wikipedia article, initial reviews were not kind to *Wuthering Heights* - the violence, the seeming amorality, the complexity of the characters all made the novel seemingly intractable to the criticism of the time. I think, too, there's something else afoot here. *Wuthering Heights* is not, I think, a *realistic* novel in the sense that, say, *Pride and Prejudice* or *Middlemarch* are. But it's unrealism is not sentimental and moralizing, like Dickens', so it makes sense that critics at the time might have had difficulty with it. I don't think readers would have had difficulty with it at all - it must count as one of the most readable novels of the Victorian period!

Strangely, it reminded me a lot of Steinbeck's *East of Eden* - another novel I

put off for a long time but ended up loving. Brontë's characters are, so to speak, modern archetypes in the same way that Steinbeck's are. The interlocking pairs of characters, the multigenerational struggles, the circumscribed society, even the name and complexity of "Cathy" are shared between the two books. Steinbeck's is perhaps more explicitly biblical, but *Wuthering Heights* shares a certain Old Testament ruggedness and violence. Neither are "Good Christian Books" in the New Testament sense. Both books exist in a world where "an eye for an eye" takes precedence over "turning the other cheek".

Anyway, there's much to digest here, a lot to think about and chew on. I look forward to reading it again in a couple of years.

Is there such thing as a library?

2018-02-28

Yesterday evening, I made an off-the-cuff tweet about university central administrations abdicating responsibilities which libraries then pick up out of a sense of confusion around the role of the library in the university, and the consequent necessity to keep proving our "value". Under some probing by Lisa Hinchliffe, I realized that my initial tweet was either ill-thought-through or too compressed. The following is the result of thinking about this further.

I've been thinking lately about the idea that there's no such thing as "a library", that librarianship is composed of a multitude of professions, activities, jobs, and perspectives that while not necessarily antagonistic, at least do not share a goal or an understanding of the business and role of the library or librarianship. We have documentationists (under which I include bibliographic services, search/retrieval and web/discovery workers), records managers/archivists, IT-specialists and developers, teaching and learning specialists, scholarly communications/publishing specialists, designers, instructors, logistics, project managers, etc, etc. Within each of these groups it is doubtful you could find consensus on the goal of their work, and certainly between groups this must be nearly impossible. And this isn't simply a theoretical problem - we can see the effects of this lack of consensus, this lack of purpose and direction, both in the crisis of library "leadership" (whither are we being led?) and in regular communications breakdowns and cross-purposes across the institution and the profession. Rather than deal with the problem, however, we tend to repress it by appeals to ever vaguer mission statements, values, and strategic directions, and we rely on people's sense of responsibility to "keep the lights on".

So, I don't think that confusion over the role of the library exists simply in the minds, to be overcome by better explanations, more transparency, or improved understanding. I think this confusion exists in reality, as a consequence partly of trying to do too much, and partly to the lack of focus of library work: all of the different areas of work listed above are resumed under the title of "librarianship", which gives each area of work a sense of being able to speak for the whole profession, when they are really speaking from the perspective of their own professional practice. (This perspectivism is not insurmountable, but it is more common in practice than we would like to believe).

In thinking about criteria for judging when an activity or service should rightly be the responsibility for the university rather than the library, I don't think there *is* a way to come up with general criteria based on professional perspectives; and my sense is that everyone recognizes this problem while perhaps applying their own judgement as to the role of the library and what properly falls under its purview, rather than more properly belonging to central administration.

To be completely open about this, I hold the view that the role of the library ought to be to promote *reading* and unregimented self-learning as a complement to the instructional activities of the faculty. Ronald Day, in his book *Indexing it All* (about documentation), distinguishes between a "hermeneutic" approach to texts exemplified by Heidegger and an instrumental approach to documents exemplified by Paul Otlet,arguing that Otlet's approach became dominant in documentation and, by extension, in librarianship. As a Marxist, I think the primacy of instrumental reason is a consequences of capitalist alienation, and so I tend to come down on the side of "readership" rather than consultation of documents-as-evidence. As a result, any activity of the library that, from my perspective, undermines its role in supporting reading and self-education, falls outside the scope of the library and should more properly be taken up by the university administration. Note that I have moved from "is" language above to "ought" language - I'm proposing a normative definition of librarianship, though I don't expect it to gain wide support.

The question then becomes how do we get past the perspectivism of the various practical attitudes of library work? Jodi Dean, in her book *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, argues that one of the requirements of politics is "raising the particular to the level of the universal", and so I think one way to think ourselves out of this impasse is to ask the question of who a particular service is meant to value - individuals, or the whole? Rather than focusing on whether or not a new service is "library work" (as I've been arguing we should do, but cannot), perhaps we need to ask ourselves whether the beneficiaries of the service should be individual users, or the whole population of our users. Take, for example, the idea of a subsidized bus-pass. In universities I've attended, this is usually a student-union initiative, with a student levy on all students to cover the cost of a transit pass. This tends to raise complaints from students who don't use public transit (mostly, those who drive), but the justification is the same as taxes: everyone should be able to benefit from the service, not just those who need it. Everyone subsidizes it even if use isn't universal.

Now take laptop-lending programmes run by libraries. These *look* like a service for all (we don't limit who is allowed to use a laptop) but in practice, we can't supply enough laptops for all students, and usage of the programme is high enough that the small amount of laptops tend to be in use almost all of the time. In practice, then, this is a service for a subset of our user-group. In addition, adding laptops increases staff time taken in (for example) circulation and imagine, security and privacy concerns, storage space, etc, etc, all of which is a cost to the library. If we think this service ought to be a service for all, then

it *cannot* be laid at the door of the library and its operating budget. In my view - and this might be taking things a step too far - if students need laptops, then it should be treated like a transit pass: a service open to all.

[Note: the reason I think services like laptop lending should be open to all is that services open to subgroups - even if that subgroup is not defined - tend to benefit those who understand and work within the system best. Only universalized services are able to resist the workings of various forms of privilege, even if that makes them open to "abuse", a charge which, to my mind, is nothing but a right-wing strawperson.]

So there's one criterion that might get us beyond the contradictions inherent in perspectivism that comes out of the crisis of role and leadership in the profession at large: the political requirement of serving the universal rather than the particular. I don't insist on it; I'm sure there are objections to looking at the issue in this light (issues of identity and privilege perhaps foremost). But I do think that asking ourselves questions like "are we serving the whole or a part" is useful in asking whether something should be a library's responsibility or the university's.

One final word about "mission" (or role of the library). We hear a lot these days about "student success", but in my opinion this is misdirection on the part of university administrators. It is formulated so as to allow educators (faculty, instructors, librarians) to believe that "student success" lies in achieving an education, while for neoliberal university administrators it simply means the successful, ongoing, and complete extraction of tuition. The slippage between the two interpretations opens the space for university administrators to maintain their hegemony over "higher education" while obeying the imperative to profitability required of all capitalist organizations.

The Value of Degrees

2018-04-07

Two interesting tweets showed up in my timeline today, one by April Hathcock and a reponse by @hayzeus89. The gist of the tweets was that, given the increasing recognition of a PhD in place of an MLIS, then we should also accept years of service in non-MLIS positions, in effect being able to convert non-MLIS years of service into the equivalent of an MLIS. On the face of it, this is similar to the proposals for automatic conversion from contract faculty to tenure track positions after a certain number of years of service.

What this ignores, though, is the economic (that is, the exchange) value of the degree itself. Foucault's view of education under neoliberalism is that education is an entrepreneurial investment. Like any commodity, one's labour power increases in (exchange) value with the value of the commodities that go into it. We can split the component commodities - following Marx - into constant capital (means of production and raw materials) and variable capital (labour power). In this view, the variable capital expended on one's education is both one's own and the labour of the professors, TAs, library staff, support staff, etc, etc, that make up one's career as a student. This labour is measured in labour-time, so the more years of work tied up in one's degree, by *all workers involved*, not just oneself, add to the value of one's degree. On the other hand, the value of the buildings, the value of one's professors' degrees, etc, also feed into the value of one's degree. The value put into building the building, or the value of one's professors' degrees are transferred, to a certain extent to the value of one's own degree. It stands to reason, then, that a *longer* time spent "investing" in one's labour power will command a higher price on the labour market.

On the other hand, time spent as non-MLIS staff is not, according to neoliberal logic, investment in one's labour power. It is labour, the transferring of value into a commodity. The value transferred by a non-MLIS worker to the commodity we produced is *less* than that of an MLIS holder or a PhD. It makes sense, then, according to neoliberal logic, that PhD holders are more desirable in MLIS positions (because a PhD takes more labour time to produce/acquire) than a non-MLIS holding staff member. The price of our commodity goes up if we put a PhD holder in an MLIS position, and goes down if we put a non-MLIS holder in the same position. In terms of the value of the commodity (degrees, labour power), a PhD has higher value than an MLIS and an MLIS has a higher value

than, say, a library technician certificate. If we want to transfer more value to the commodity (ie. cause the price to go up), then we want to underpay PhDs, rather than overpay library technicians.

In this view, of course education is not about educating citizens, education is not *even* the commodity universities are selling. What is being sold is the "graduated worker" or the "worker-with-degrees. Library labour can then be understood as itself a value-input into the exchange-value of this commodity.

What I find interesting in all these discussions in the library world is that we substitute "is" language for "ought" language. The theme of this year's ALC conference is a good example: "We stand up: we inspire hope, create change, and empower individuals and groups. We listen, we learn. We stand for human rights, for dignity, and for access to information." This is *is* language, it says that we *are* doing these things. Any consultation with the critical or progressive or social justice wing of librarianship will disprove that idea. That we *ought* to be doing these things is a much more supportable argument, but for whatever reason in librarianship (and perhaps more widely) we succumb to this elision of *is* and *ought*.

I think it's important for a critical theory of librarianship to insist on the strict separation of is and ought, just as we have to maintain a strict vigilance about why we *say* we do certain things (e.g. "hiring PhDs to MLIS positions is an act of inclusion"). This is all part of the de-mystification process that I think lies at the heart of all critical analysis. I don't like the neoliberal logic expressed in the analysis above, and I think the social and economic conditions that give rise to it *ought* to be abolished, by force if necessary, but I think it's important to be able to recognize the logics that *are* at work in contemporary social phenomena.

Politics of Libraries Conference, April 23, 2018

2018-04-24

Note: what follows are my own impressions and evaluations, and don't necessarily represent the views of the other organizers, presenters, or attendees.

Yesterday was the first annual (we hope) *Politics of Libraries* conference, held at the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta. The conference was organized by myself, Michael McNally of SLIS and a group of SLIS current students and recent grads. The idea grew out of an informal conversation Michael and I had last year about having something at around the same time as the annual Alberta Library Conference that questioned some of the assumptions of the dominant discourse of librarianship. Given that it's the 50th anniversary of the 1968 protests we felt it would be good to connect the politics of libraries to the 1968 moment.

From the initial announcement and call for papers earlier this year, I think the idea of the conference touched a nerve. Despite criticism (often anonymous!) of things like the critlib movement, the interest in things like the "#critlib" twitter conversations and Nicholson and Seale's recent *Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, indicate that there's a need for places and forums to ask critical questions and discuss things more critically than we are usually able to inside our organizations. I think our conference fit into that niche as well.

The proposals submitted all touched on interesting topics - we had a little overlap, but no two papers ended up being on the same topic. We were able to accept all the proposals submitted, which is always nice. Subjects included in the proposals were: colonialism and its effects on international librarianship; the monopolization of third-party library services; neoliberalism (both from a Marxist and a Foucauldian perspective); academic freedom and research; fair dealing, copyright, and open access; and freedom of expression and the "marketplace of ideas". What was especially interesting to me was this: the theme of the conference left space open for the support or championing of mainstream views of librarianship and its attendant technologies, structures, cultures, etc, but without exception every paper was, to some extent, critical of the dominant library discourse. I think this indicates a far more generalized discomfort with the cultural hegemony in effet in librarianship than many within the profession

would like to admit. (And in this, it is in line with the participation of the "#critlib" conversations, for example).

We had presenters from many different parts of Canada (from BC to Ontario, and even a remote presentation from Halifax), and we even had a presented fly in from Jamaica, for which we are really grateful. Perhaps unsurprisingly, but still dishearteningly, the presentations were dominated by academic librarians - only one of the presentations was by someone currently working in a public library - this imbalance is one of the ongoing problems within our profession and especially, I would say, within critical librarianship. I don't really know how we overcome this imbalance, but we recognized and talked about it yesterday.

Another aspect that was lacking in the conference was much discussion of specifically Indigenous issues. We tried hard to acknowledge our presence on Treaty 6 territory in a way that was more substantial than what often seems like a rote repetition of standard, university-sanctioned language, and the issue of Indigeneity was part of some of the discussions of difference and how we accomodate or support difference/diversity within librarianship, but none of the speakers addressed the issue head on. And I'm torn on this point. On the one hand, I don't want to pressure any Indigenous colleagues into the affective and emotional labour of presenting to a group of predominantly white librarians; it ought to be *on us* to address Indigenous issues, but then at what point are you speaking for someone else? And I know the answer to this is to speak with Indigenous people about their experience, but even that involves a level of affective labour that it's unfair to impose, I think. It's a hard question to resolve - hopefully we will do better in this regard next year.

As expected from this kind of conference, there were many critiques and grievances expressed, but very little in the way of concrete, practical proposals for change. After the presentations, the attendees broke into three groups according to themes that had arisen through the course of the day: Colonialism, Language/Terminology, and Hegemony. I think these three themes offer an important, overarching set of obstacles to resistance and positive change. All three things - colonialism, language, and hegemony - are so deeply embedded in our culture and society, that it is difficult to think ourselves outside or in opposition to the dominant ideologies they support. We can do worse than bear all these things in mind as we move forward, but as Archibald Macleish (whom I quoted in my paper) said, "we must do more".

The plan is to have another conference next year, probably on the topic of labour (since it will be the 100th anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike, which grew out of labour dissatisfaction and organizing across the prairies), and we have an even more provocative topic waiting in the wings for 2020.

I want to thank all the members of the organzing committee, all our presenters, and all 40 or so people who attended for making this a modest, but engaging and useful event.

Website for the conference Programme Organizing committee

Copyright and Property

2018-05-09

Yesterday, I finally had a chance to read the CFLA Position Statement on Indigenous Knowledge and the Copyright Act. What I took away from the Statement - and subsequently tweeted about - was that CFLA promoted the protection of Indigenous Knowledge within the existing regime of Copyright Law and (European) concepts of private property, including intellectual property. This reading could be challenged - the Statement does argue the difference between Indigenous and Canadian notions of property ownership ("Who holds 'legal' copyright to [Indigenous] knowledge or cultural expression under Canada's current *Copyright Act* is often contrary to Indigenous notions of copyright ownership"), but to my mind the framing of this issue as in relation to the Copyright Act situates the Statement within existing property relations that the Copyright Act is intended to uphold.

This is especially clear, from my perspective, in the opening sentence of the Statement, which begins: "Canada's *Copyright Act* does not protect Indigenous knowledge…" This, to me, takes for granted that the Copyright Act is *intended* to protect knowledge, which it isn't. It's intended to protect (private) property rights in a particular category of property (intellectual property). The property rights it is intended to protect are rights that constitute the institution of bourgeois (that is, capitalist) private property. By positioning the Copyright Act as an instrument for the protection of knowledge, the CFLA Copyright Committee is able to argue that Indigenous knowledge - in all its particularity of expression - can and should be protected by the Copyright Act. But once we recognize that the Copyright Act is *not* intended to protect knowledge, but to protect a *single* kind of property relationship (bourgeois private property), then the protection of Indigenous property and property relationships (in all their particularity) becomes impossible. By tacitly placing Indigenous knowledge protection under the aegis of an instrument for the protection of bourgeois private property, the CFLA Statement leaves the door open for the recuperation, exploitation, and eventual erasure of Indigenous property and ownership relations by the single, overarching institution of capitalist property.

Why do I think this will happen? Because it's precisely what happened in Europe with the development of capitalism. As capitalism spread, it either coopted or destroyed alternative property relationships (including, but not lim-

ited to, communal property), destroying the sovereignty of communities, and allowing only the outward manifestations of culture to survive, as long as these did not challenge the fundamental private property relations of capitalist Europe. To my mind, the only hope of maintaining and protecting Indigenous knowledge, culture, and ownership relations is by combating the dominance of capitalist relations. If not, if First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples adopt - as the Canadian government would love them to - "Indigeneity plus commodity production", this will quickly turn into "capitalism with Indigenous characteristics". Only the outward manifestations of culture and society that do not challenge the economic basis will be allowed by the State. In this sense, then, I believe that there is a fundamental coincidence between Indigenous sovereignty and anti-capitalism.

To make this argument a little more concrete, let's talk about land, which is recognized as one of, if not *the most* significant aspect of Indigenous sovereignty claims. From the perspective I've laid out above, land sovereignty - in addition to its social and cultural importance - is a requirement for the maintenance of all the different kinds of Indigenous economic relationships. As such, it provides a *direct* challenge to the dominance of capitalism promoted and protected by the Federal government. This is why government or private control over the land has been such an important aspect of Federal policy for so long. First, it gained control over sovereign territories through treaties (which, to my mind, it never had any intention to honour), then it cleared much of the land of making way for European and immigrant settlement as well as future development. And finally, when push really comes to shove, the government has not been above using its monopoly of the use of force to protect capitalist private property rights - when I was a kid, the most important event in this category was the Oka 'crisis' of 1990. More recently, we have seen Indigenous sovereignty claims ignored in the case of the Trans-Mountain pipeline. The government has been careful (so far) in not being seen to use force against Indigenous activists protesting the pipeline, but when it comes down to a choice between Kinder-Morgan and an Indigenous economic challenge, the government will bring out its goons. We saw this at Standing Rock and other NODAPL protests last year.

Anyway, all this to say that my critique of the CFLA statement was not intended to minimize the importance of Indigenous knowledge protection or conceptions of ownership, simply that by tacitly presuming the validity of bourgeois property rights (which the Copyright Act represents), the door is left open for the *re-colonization* of that knowledge and those conceptions by capitalist social, economic, and political relations. If we want our society to really change - and change in this case must include a meaningful reconciliation - then we must fundamentally transform the property and production relationships forced upon us all by capitalism. Otherwise we will always be stuck beneath the exploitation and domination of capitalism, which will always be worse for Indigenous peoples than for Settlers.

To conclude, I want to answer one of the questions I was (tacitly) asked on

Twitter: what solutions would I propose? In the first place, I don't think that any solutions are possible within a capitalist context. Reconciliation and sovereignty are impossible under capitalist conditions of production. So we have to challenge those conditions. In the meantime, however, I've come around to left-wing strategies that came to the fore in Italian workerism, and especially its feminist wing. As Italian workers began to recognize that capitalist domination did not *only* exist within the factory, but in society at large, they expanded their notion of factory sabotage to the broader society. Factory sabotage, sometimes as subtly as slowing down an assembly line, was a way to challenge capitalist domination and cut into capitalist profits. Outside the factory, the self-reduction of prices (bus fares, for example, or the amount paid for an item in a chain grocery store) and other forms of small-scale challenge to bourgeois private property, became widespread. We can and should be doing this with respect to Copyright. And before people get upset at the idea that I'm advocating breaking the law, I will just say this: *we are already doing it.* Librarians, faced with an article their institution doesn't have a license for, will often ask someone at another institution for a copy. This is small potatoes *but it violates capitalist property relations.* We should keep doing it. And we should do more things like it (like the quiet waiving of fines, for example). Yes, there are legal options like Interlibrary Loan, and there are options which appear to be illegal on a mass scale (like SciHub). But if we want eventually to challenge capitalism on a larger scale, we need to get comfortably challenging, subverting, and violating it on a smaller scale first.

On the Erasure of Labour

2018-06-14

Yesterday, a blog post by Kevin Seeber was making the rounds, and while it struck a chord with a lot of people, I think there are some problems with the way Seeber frames the question of collections. Mainly, I think the problem is that while Seeber is right that "libraries have been moving collections and discarding stuff for a long time now", without engaging with the specifics of moving and discarding now, in the neoliberal conjuncture, Seeber risks ignoring the ways in which processes which have been part of librarianship for a long time are increasingly subsumed within a capitalist regime of labour. While collection management and weeding may be basically the same activities that they were a hundred years ago, the socio-economic conjuncture in which those activities are situated has changed, and to ignore that change, and the ways in which librarianship (like all academic labour) has become subject to commodity logic - and fetishism - plays into the hands of the capitalist subsumption of academic and library labour itself.

There are other reasons to quibble. When Seeber says that he "didn't think that speed of access was as much of a concern for humanists who spend years preparing a monograph", he seems to betray, I think, a misunderstanding of the *writing* process, an artistic process (yes, even scholarly writing) that is intuitive and extremely sensitive to the kinds of flows and disruptions Seeber discounts.

But the part of the blog post I really want to focus on is what Seeber says about "serendipity". He writes:

> It's not "serendipity" that put those books there and you're not "discovering" them. There's a lot of nerve on display when faculty question librarians and lament the decisions we make, but maybe the most galling is the repeated insistence that the forces of fate have connected them with these books. It's not the heavens smiling on you when you browse the stacks and find a relevant item, it's the labor of a bibliographer, a cataloger, and a shelver. This stuff ends up where it does because people are doing the work of putting it there. And oh yeah, another part of making it "discoverable" is removing all of the stuff that's no longer relevant. Librarians call it "weeding" for a reason.

In the first place, this mistakes the serendipity of the library user with a non-existent or illusory serendipity of the books on the shelves. When library users talk about serendipity, they are referring to a subjective experience, the discovery of a book they didn't know about as a happy coincidence, due to its presence next to a book they knew about. Or the discovery of important books in a location (stack) they thought to visit. The presence of the books on a particular shelf in a particular order, devoid of the noise of outdated or irrelevant material, is of course no accident, happy or otherwise. But the subjective experience of the browser is no less real for all that. There are two kinds of serendipity being employed here, and Seeber's dismissal of the subjective experience of the browser is due to his only recognizing one of them.

As I mentioned on twitter, even if we agree that "serendipity" is the wrong word, we would still need to come up with another word that properly describes that sense of a "happy accident" by which one discovers a book one wasn't looking for. I've been using the word "discover" deliberately here, because it is the aspect of "discovery" that touches on the question of the erasure of labour.

Very often when something is "discovered" in an archives, archivists and librarians make the valid point that it was not discovered in the sense of a discovery in the natural sciences. Active human labour went into the organization and "discoverability" of archival material, the finding aids, the organization of physical space, the maintenance of the building, the organizational entity in which the archives is situated. We are embedded in a chain of labour that stretches from my own individual subjective experience of work horizontally throughout the world of human life, and vertically through larger and larger abstractions of labour organization and management. We are right to speak up for the labour of all those who organize and make available documents, records, books, and all other kinds of information. But there is always a sense that the ignorance of all that labour that goes into one act of subjective discovery is simply a moral failing, that if only researchers or faculty would just *smarten up* then they would see all the labour that goes on around them.

But this is an idealist view of the world. Many of the complaints made by librarians and archivists that our work is not valued - as if any workers' labour is valued under capitalism - seems to suggest that the question of how labour is valued is only a question of knowledge or ignorance. The idealism comes in when we expect that if people *think differently* then the material conditions of our labour - our lack of recognition, in many cases poor conditions of work, lack of prestige, feelings of alienation, etc - will be *solved* by people thinking differently. This ignores the *material* reality of the capitalist system in which we work, a system which is structured (physically, mentally, ideologically, culturally, politically) to erase the work of labourers.

It may seem as if I am contradicting myself: how can the subjective feeling of serendipitous discovery on the part of a browser be legitimate and *at the same time* the erasure of labour be taking place and be a significant aspect of the capitalist labour regime? I am contradicting myself, but as Georg Lukacs

has argued, contradictions exist in capitalist reality; they cannot be overcome except by overcoming the material conditions that give rise to them.

For Marx, the increased (and today almost universal, at least in the capitalist centre) socialization of labour was a product of the division of labour (as in Adam Smith's (in)famous pin factory) reaching such a pinnacle that no worker sees the raw materials they work with as the product of another's labour. The very logic of capitalist production, the very mystification of the commodity-form itself, leads to what Marx calls "fetishism" (and is often nowadays called reification): mistaking the relations between people for the relations between things. Because we are alienated from the products of our labour, from each other, and from ourselves, it is *impossible* for us to see commodities that we work on, produce, purchase, or consume as the products of an almost infinitely complex web of labour relationships. And while I think it's good to try to constantly remind people that all of the *things* they engage with in their lives, including stacks and books and finding aids and records, are the products of human labour, we mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that one day, if we just convince everyone, if all these misguided fools would just free their minds, then all will be well. The contradictions of capitalism can only be overcome when capitalism itself is overcome, and this can only take place through organization and resistance. Resistance, if it is to mean anything, must include a resistance to the forces of commodity logic, and this requires a critical perspective on how and why the context of library work has changed and is changing for the purposes of increased capitalist exploitation and oppression.

Transcendentalism, Social Reproduction, and the 'Value' of Libraries

2018-06-17

In a recent Guardian article on the state of Canada's libraries, Vickery Bowles, the Chief Librarian of TPL, is quoted as saying, "Access to information and pathways to learning were the great equalisers of the 20th century." According to the writer of the article, Bowles "sees a vital role of the public library in strengthening civic discourse and enabling political participation". This view has a long history within librarianship, as can be seen in ALA President Nancy Kranich's 2001 collection of essays *Libraries and Democracy: The Cornerstone of Liberty*, in which Kranich takes her cue from a 1941 speech by Roosevelt. Library historian Sidney Ditzion saw libraries as *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture*. In *Barbarians at the Gates of the Public Library*, Ed D'Angelo argues that the foundations of the public library are an "intellectually rigorous commitment to democracy and appreciation for the public record", now threatened by what D'Angelo calls "postmodern consumer capitalism'. In her introduction to D'Angelo's book, Kathleen de la Peña McCook writes that from the mid-19th century on, "libraries were established in hundreds of US communities as a means to provide people with access to the cultural record and to provide the resources to support an enlightened population for participation in the democratic process."

What all these positions on librarianship entail, to my mind, is a liberal-democratic view of industrial capitalist states of the global North and West. When Bowles speaks about "great equalizers of the 20th century", she is presuming that anything like equality existed in the 20th century, a presumption central to the liberal-capitalist bourgeois view of the world. Indeed, the equation of libraries and democracy, especially in the American context, only makes sense if we uncritically suppose and affirm that the American republic is now or has ever been in any sense democratic. It is even more ironic that Bowles can talk about a supposed 20th century equality in a country that is still not even a republic but a constitutional monarchy – a political system predicated on a fundamental inequality and social hierarchy.

But why does all this matter? Where's the harm in insisting on what I think of as a "transcendental" view of libraries, an understanding of librarianship which

insists on idealistic values like liberty and democracy? There are, I think, two closely connected problems here. In the first place, by promoting a vision of capitalist society as egalitarian and democratic, transcendental library discourse obscures the very real mechanisms of power and exploitation that are fundamental to capitalist society. By insisting that the mission of libraries is to provide educational opportunities and access to information to support a well-informed citizenry capable of participating in democracy, we tell our patrons/users that the society they live in is a democracy, that their participation matters, and that being well-informed is the correct path for making change in our society. This view of capitalist "liberal democracy" is dangerously false, as the history of capitalism attests: from the imperial exploitation of non-capitalist countries, to the lucrative slave trade, to the attempted extermination of Indigenous peoples the world over, capitalism is founded on violence done towards those who are not considered "citizens". But even for "citizens", capitalism has brought endless war and cyclical economic crises, all of which increases poverty and oppression for the bottom while increasing wealth and luxury for the top. In addition to being an inherently racist process, capitalist development has also created and taken advantage of other kinds of inequality: sexism, ableism, and the many injustices perpetrated upon various gender and sexual identities. Bowles view of an "egalitarian" 20th century becomes not just ironic but perverse when one thinks of the brutality of that century, a brutality that has continued – in a particularly postmodern fashion – into this one.

So what happens when citizens are fed the message that they live in a participatory, egalitarian democracy where their voice matters and the path to democratic participation is education and being well-informed? In the first place, they don't revolt: they try to counter the unconscionable, horrific separation of families under racist immigration and Indigenous policies with more information, by being better-informed, by voting. As an institution that keeps telling citizens that by being better informed and voting, they can change society, the library operates as an institution of social reproduction, a mechanism by which capitalist society in fact does not change, but keeps itself going, generation after generation. Because of our focus on information and ideas, librarianship is an institution of ideological reproduction (as in Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Althusser's "Ideological State Apparatuses"), but the information we provide, which we like to think about as neutral or at least balanced, but which as Allana Mayer reminded us, is always politically constructed with a view to the maintenance of inequality, also informs a much more material social reproduction. This social reproduction, the reproduction of labour power and its social context, is a core element in much Marxist feminist theory. As Sylvia Federici said in a recent interview:

> There is also a political side to the devaluation and consequent naturalization of reproductive work. It has been the material basis for a labour hierarchy which divides women and men, which enable capital to control the exploitation of women's work more effectively through marriage and marital relation, including the ideology of ro-

> mantic love, and to pacify men giving them a servant on whom to exercise their power.

This, of course, not only applies to the work of sexual reproduction, but is woven through the labour regime of capitalism as a whole, including the predominantly female work of librarianship (I owe the phrase "predominantly female", as opposed to "female dominated", to Amy Buckland). This particular problem with the transcendental view of librarianship has a long history. At an early ALA conference, there was a motion from a contingent of women librarians to discuss the material aspects of library work: wages, working conditions, etc. This motion was denied by Melvil Dewey (whose own history of sexual harassment has once again recently been exposed Dewey argued that librarianship was a transcendental profession, librarians had a "mission" (Dewey's word) and shouldn't be concerned with tawdry materialist issues. Of course, this distinction between high-minded, transcendental, male librarians (later library scientists) and female library workers whose physical and emotional – but ostensibly unskilled and certainly devalued – work kept the library going, is a fundamental one in librarianship. Again, this undercuts Bowles' insistence on library work as egalitarian. So, by ignoring the material inequalities of our own profession, we set up a false image of an egalitarian (and meritocratic) society that keeps capitalism going, both in an ideological and in a directly physical sense.

But the second problem with the transcendental view of librarianship came out in a discussion yesterday on Twitter. I argued that we shouldn't be focusing our energy on "communicating our value" (which the Guardian article and the Bowles quote are an example of), because capitalists don't care if we can communicate our value – they only care how little we will work for. In addition to great, valuable responses from various people, including Jessica Schomberg (whose tweet sparked its own interesting discussion) and Lisa Sloniowski, who linked the question of value to the very troublesome issue of metrics, I was asked a really good question about the context for my tweet and whether we should be concerned with the question of monetary value. If our user constituencies understand our value, shouldn't that be enough?

This goes back, for me, to the fundamental distinction between use-value and exchange-value. By focusing on a transcendental mission for librarianship (support for democracy, for example), we tend to ignore the material realities of capitalist social relations. By excluding any question of exchange (or exchange value) from our discussions, we deny or obscure the realities of capitalist economic relationships. It's for this reason, by the way, that I think the opening of the books and honest discussion about how much we are paying for things, and the decision not to sign NDAs for licensing contracts is a step forward; even the fact that the OA movement has put costs and financial inequality on the agenda is positive progress. But by excluding questions of exchange and exchange value, by focusing on the transcendental, we lose any ability we have to fight a capitalism which excels at paying lip-service to transcendental values (democracy) while carrying on its corrupt business-as-usual (to wit: the Donald Trump and

Doug Ford elections). If library workers insist on believing in libraries as democratic institutions of knowledge and self-development, then we have no defence against either against our role in ideological reproduction or against the cuts and restructuring that are currently hitting libraries and other social agencies. If we lived in a non-capitalist society, in which transcendental (use) values were all that mattered, then libraries would likely live up to a transcendental mission. But we live in a world of austerity, fascism, cruelty disguised as freedom, and a set of economic relationships that no-one controls but everyone is subject to. Our response can't be to rely on an idealistic view of the mission of libraries, but nor can it rely on beating capitalism at its own game – which often seems to be what chief librarians are trying to do – the only way to win is to overthrow the game itself, to change the rules, to bring about a new world. But until then, I think trying to support a transcendent view of libraries in order to try to convince people that they are morally worth saving is a foolhardy position to take. As I said the other day, the only option we really have, I think, in the face of austerity, is to get organized, negotiate strong collective agreements, and be prepared to strike, if necessary illegally and in solidarity. (I recognize the many and varied problems with unions as well as the additional problems faced by unionized and precarious workers. I guess all I can say to that is that have to make do with what we have available).

I realize that the problem with this view is that, without giving us something transcendental to work towards, we have to ask why work in libraries are opposed to anywhere else. Indeed, under capitalist conditions of labour, where we have no choice but to sell our labour power to survive, this question doesn't have an honest or unconstrained answer. But I think that working for a better society is something that we can bear in mind; that must mean, however, more than simply repeating platitudes about democracy and participation.

create

(I use "create" here in the sense intended by various Marxist theorists in race and gender, that while racism and sexism may pre-exist capitalism, capitalistm produces particular forms of both).

This post is dedicated to Emily Drabinski, from whom I continue to learn a lot, not least about the value of organizing.

Marxism and Intellectual Freedom

2018-07-12

NOTE: What follows are a few notes on one aspect of the current ALA debacle. April Hathcock and Carrie Wade have both written more important and significant contributions, which you should read before (or instead of) mine.

> The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper… The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond [the sphere of necessity], though it can only fourish with this realm of necessity as its basis.

Marx, *Capital*, Volume 3: 958-9.

From a Marxist perspective, freedom is impossible as long as we live in an unfree world. But Marx's concept of "unfreedom" is more nuanced than at first appears. The world is unfree not only because of the existence of ICE, the monstrous separation of children and families in what has looked like a police state since *at least* Ferguson, the draconian race-based travel restrictions, or the active and passive censorship conducted by government agencies. It is unfree because the material foundation of society is built on coercion, exploitation, and oppression. The history of colonialism and imperialism, the effects of both on Indigenous people and transported slaves, are moments of primitive accumulation that allowed capitalism to become the self-reproducing socio-economic system we see today. But primitive accumulation, as Silvia Federici reminds us, is not in the past. Unpaid internships, zero-hour contracts, housework, etc, are all elements of a continuing process of uncompensated labour, not to mention slavery itself. Ta-Nehisi Coates' (and others') arguments in favour of reparations for slavery, like the "Wages for Housework" movement itself, is most significant in the way it brings this primitive accumulation out of the shadows where capitalism has consigned it.

Apart from primitive accumulation we still live in a society of compelled labour. As workers we have no choice but to sell our labour-power in order to survive. In what sense can any kind of freedom, including intellectual freedom and freedom

of expression, be said to exist? In no meaningful sense.

Then there is the social aspect of intellectual freedom. Historical materialism argues that social institutions, norms, cultural expressions, "structures of feeling" and "forms of life" arise from the material - primarily economic - basis of society. As long as we live in what might be called "pre-post-scarcity" world, our thoughts, our speech, our expressions are in no sense "free", unencumbered, unconstrained.

It seems to me that the peculiar attachment many American have to this idea of "freedom" stems from the concept's place in their national myth (and it is a myth). The freedom of the American republic ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal…") is predicated on the *inequality* of some men and of most women. The "freedom" of the republic has always been limited; an unlimited, absolute freedom has only ever been *at best* a rhetorical move. In other parts of the world we are less likely to evoke "freedom" as any kind of absolute value or justification. There is also something here of the "return of the repressed", in that American freedom still today relies on less freedom for some, from slavery, through Jim Crow, to Ferguson, and beyond. "All men are created equal," as Orwell wrote, "but some are more equal than others".

So it is hard to see the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom hiding behind this absolutist sense of intellectual freedom and freedom of speech without thinking that they must not be as sure of their position as they would like us to believe. Why was the wording of the amendment seemingly rushed through? Why do so many ALA councillors feel that they have been misled? The charitable view is that this was simply a mistake, an inability to "read the room", compounded by an inability to acknowledge the mistake and make it right. But it's also possible that the absolutist view of intellectual freedom *really* does hold sway within the OIF.

This too, could be a mistake, but it could *also* be an expression of something altogether more troublesome: the weaponization of intellectual freedom to protect a status quo that the defenders of the amendment are perfectly comfortable with. I've written about the "aristocracy of labour", but I want, this time, to refer to a perhaps surprising source.

In "Marxism and the Negro Problem"(1933), W.E.B. Du Bois writes about the distinction between the Black and White proletariat:

> This black proletariat is not a part of the white proletariat. Black and white work together in many cases, and influence each other's rates of wages. They have similar complaints against capitalists, save that the grievances of the Negro worker are more fundamental and indefensible, ranging as they do, since the day of Karl Marx, from chattel slavery, to the worst paid, serated, mobbed, and cheated labor in any civilized land.

But this division amongs the working class is what contributes to the worst condition of the Black proletariat:

> The lowest and most fatal degree of its suffering comes not from the capitalists but from fellow white laborers. It is white labor that deprives the Negro of his right to vote, denies him education, denies him affiliation with trade unions, expels him from decent houses and neighbourhoods, and heaps upon him the insults of open color discrimination.

The amendment to the Bill of Rights interpretation is yet another example of this - expanded, in this case, to *any* group that serves as the target for one hate group or another. But equal opportunity to be harassed, attacked, and discriminated against isn't "equality" or "freedom" either.

Du Bois' prognosis is not positive; he sees no change in the condition of the Black proletariat coming from socialism:

> The reformist program of Socialism meets no response from the white proletariat because it offers no escape to wealth and no effective bar to black labor, and a mud-sill of black labor is essential to white labor's standard of living.

My own hope is that this division, too, is the product of economic necessity and exploitation, and that it may be overcome with the achievement of a new society. But the prospects are not heartening.

To be a white librarian arguing for an intellectual freedom that only existed to serve white people; an intellectual freedom that never existed outside the ideology of the white ruling class; an intellectual freedom now weaponized for the benefit of those who would drive us *further away* from what little freedom has been won over the generations, is unconscionable.

Give up the fig-leaf of "absolute freedom", look to other countries as examples of how hate speech can be handled *without* calling down unlimited government censorship, *listen* to what others are telling you about *their* experience as people who have never been able to assume or rely on freedom, intellectual or otherwise. Or, as someone else put it on the OIF blog, get out of the way. Because if "intellectual freedom" does not really exist, then what matters is to fight for something else.

EDIT:

ALA OIF Responds to Library Bill of Rights Meeting Room Interpretation update

Letter to ALA OIF by Katie Elson Anderson

The American Library Association: Neutrality, Civility, and What Comes Next

UPDATE: I focused here on the question of race, as that seems to me the clearest historical example of the fallacy of "freedom" in a "free republic", but I should

make it clear that the hate groups in question are not only racist, but sexist, anti-semitic, homophobic, and in general against anything that marks people as *different*.

Preprints, Property, and Epistemology

2018-08-13

I don't normally weigh in on scholcomm discussions, as that isn't really my area. However, reading Aaron Tay's interesting blog post "Can posting a preprint be morally wrong?" got me thinking. The issue Tay is investigating is the bioRxiv preprint wall of shame and hinges on questions of what constitutes a preprint, what the purpose of a preprint is, and when is the ethically appropriate point to deposit a preprint (i.e. make it publicly available). None of these questions are settled and they are still points of contention. It seems to me, however, that there are two points which I don't see discussed in the literature. The first is the question of (private) property, and the second is an epistemological question around texts and truth.

These two notions tend to get confused: bioRxiv's policy of allowing preprints only of articles that haven't yet been accepted to a journal can be seen as an assurance of quality (peer-review as truth-procedure) but also a protection of a journal's IP (publishers are always talking about the value they add to an edited, published version of an article or monograph). So by increasing the temporal distance as well as the material qualities between the preprint and the published version, a publisher decreases the competition between manifestations of the same work (to use the vocabulary of FRBR).

There are disciplinary differences at play here. In the humanities, articles are texts whose form is integral to the value of the content; they are rhetorical in a way that scientific articles are not. Peer review of humanities articles tend to focus on argumentation, textual coherence, communication/communicability, etc. Preprints are less common in the humanities precisely because the "final form" of the text is integral to the communication of the argument. In the sciences, in principle, the content of the article is distinct from the form that it's in (of course any humanities or social sciences scholar would take issue with this claim). Peer-review takes account of knowledge claims, methodologies, reproducibility, etc. In principle, peer review of scientific articles acts as a mechanism to ensure methodological guarantees of validity. A preprint exists on one side of this mechanism, marked by a kind of *caveat emptor*. It makes sense, then, for scientists to expect the provisional knowledge claim of their article to be replaced (epistemologically) by the peer-reviewed version when that comes to exist. The peer-reviewed version *supersedes* the preprint in a way that makes

little sense for humanities articles (where revisions tend to be thought of as drafts or refinements of argument and language). But this idea of supersession in terms of knowledge claims ignores the question of property (as indeed, it should): to a scientists, the knowledge produced by their research ought to be independent of considerations of property; peer-review is a mechanism of externally validating a knowledge claim, and is (in principle) independent of the editorial work done by a journal.

For journals, however, peer-review is a step in the editorial workflow; it is a way to *add value* to a commodity, hence the requirement from their perspective a) to distinguish between preprints and published version b) quash competition between preprints and published versions (i.e. through policies preventing accepted manuscripts from being deposited as preprints) and c) through selective manipulation of open-access mechanisms such as Creative Commons licensing (as the recent Elsevier discussion illustrates - see the ALA Scholcomm listserv archive for details).

This is all a good example of how capitalism coopts non-capitalist procedures and values (e.g. peer-review as knowledge validation) for private profit. It relies on the multivalent aspects of peer-review: it can function as an epistemological mechanism (for scientists) *and* as an editorial, value-adding workflow component (for publishers). In this way, scientists submit to peer-review for their own disciplinary and methodological reasons, but thereby end up contributing to an ecosystem of private property and profit.

This all becomes clear when we consider the vilification of postprint deposit (again, relating back to the Elsevier CC "loophole"). For instance, when Jordan Anaya writes that "the fact that you can post a bunch of postprints to bioRxiv, then list them on your resume as evidence for your dedication to open science is disgusting", he is arguing for the disinterested promotion of open science (i.e. with peer review as methodological validator); but by decrying the open-deposit of postprints, Anaya is supporting bioRxiv's property rights in the articles it publishes. The insidiousness of capitalism is laid bare when Anaya argues that "our goal wasn't to publish a paper, it was to share our results and code, which is what open science is supposed to be" *at the same time* as he is supporting bioRxiv's property claims to accepted manuscripts.

I don't know if there is something like an unaffiliated peer-review network in the works; this would be the peer-review equivalent of the open knowledge base discovery and e-resources librarians are waiting for, a way of taking methodological mechanisms out of the hands of vendors, separating an infrastructure from its matrix of private property and profit. Until then, I think, the ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions present within the scholcomm world are not only going to remain, but are likely to get worse as new forms of competition (i.e. SciHub) challenge the processes and profits of corporations; such is the way capitalism is designed to work, after all.

Update

2018-09-09

I'm not sure anyone will be interested in this, and it feels a little narcissistic to write this post, but I wanted to capture what's currently going on in my life.

As of August 1, 2018, I have gone on a one-year research leave from University of Alberta Libraries. I recognize not only the *huge* privilege I have of being able to take such a leave, but also the struggles of previous generations of workers to a) have "librarian" recognized as an academic position and b) to have research leaves included as part of the librarian collective agreement at University of Alberta libraries. If you're interested in the history of academic librarianship and labour in Canada, I highly recommend *In Solidarity: Academic Librarian Labour Activism and Union Participation in Canada*, edited by Jennifer Dekker and Mary Kandiuk (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2014).

What am I doing on this research leave? I have two main projects and a few smaller ones on the go.

- I'm working on a book for Library Juice which is going to be a Marxist critique of the mainstream liberal discourse of librarianship.I've been working on it since March, and the manuscript is due next March (2019). I guess publication date will depend on how much needs to be done to the manuscript after that part. Things are going well, and I'm working on it steadily.
- I've been accepted into a part-time, distance learning research PhD programme in the School of Government and Society at University of Birmingham (Department of Political Science and International Relations). My research project will look at "Italian Theory" (primarily autonomist Marxism) and Knowledge Representation in Artificial Intelligence, with an application to financial technology. The details of the empirical part of the project still need to be worked out, but I'll be spending two weeks in Birmingham at the beginning of October for induction into the programme.

In terms of smaller, but still significant, projects, I've submitted a poetry manuscript to the University of Alberta Press, and I'm working on an article for *Library Trends* on immaterial labour and academic librarianship, which will build on my reading in Italian marxism. I'm not hugely hopeful about the poetry, but we'll see what happens. I also have a couple of presentations on

the horizon. The first is for (my first ever) OLA Superconference, where I'll be presenting a critique of the discourse of democracy in librarianship. The second - and something I'm really excited for - is a presentation as part of a conference in Winnipeg on the 100th anniversary of the 1919 strike, in May of next year.

I think part of the reason for setting out these projects in this update is to keep myself honest. Now that I've put them out there, they need to get done.

Intellectual Freedom and Virtue Ethics

2018-09-11

This morning I went to the Edmonton Public Library's Leader-in-Residence panel on Intellectual Freedom. Toni Samek, Jim Turk, and Gail DeVos were the panelists and it was moderated by Alvin Schrader. I didn't know Gail DeVos, but Toni, Jim, and Alvin have all been active participants in the intellectual freedom sphere - in libraries and academia more broadly - for a long time.

I found the whole experience highly demoralizing. As Toni pointed out, this debate comes to a head about every thirty years, dating from the Library Bill of Rights in the late 1930s, through the Social Responsibility movement of the late 1960s, the late 1990s, and again today. And it appears that every time this cycle comes up, the same arguments are rehashed again and again.

To a certain extent, this is unsurprising. Both the mainstream, hegemonic, liberal position on intellectual freedom *and* the social justice perspective on social responsibility are partial viewpoints caught within the limits of capitalist society. The racism, sexism, ableism, hatred of trans people, or Muslims, or Jews, are not accidental deviations from a "free" society of civil liberties and rational debate, but are structural requirements of a capitalist social order that profits off division, violence, and hate.

So when intellectual freedom proponents speak of civil liberties, freedom, democracy, and self-fulfillment/realization - when they are not in bad faith - they presume that these things somehow exist in capitalist society, that they are defending their existence in the face of extremism on one side or the other. But freedom does not exist in a society based on coercion; self-fulfillment/realization is precisely what is denied to workers alienated from the products of their labour, themselves, and each other. No amount of defense of "both sides" or "objectivity" or "fairness" can bring into being something so fantastic.

On the other hand, the social justice critique of the hegemonic liberal position is often little more than "yes, buts" - taking the liberal perspective for granted, but trying to get the other side to see the error of their ways. This is a classic example of a dialectical contradiction. More information or better arguments will not solve this problem, because the problem exists in reality, it is part of the fabric of capitalist society. Proponents of the hegemonic, liberal perspective are untroubled by the social justice arguments. When we bring up "safe spaces" they

can take the broad middle road and ask us to have a bit of sober perspective.

The reason, I think, that we go through this "debate" every thirty years or so is that the problem of the contradiction between intellectual "freedom" and social responsibility is insoluble under capitalism; it can only be solved in a future society, one separated from us by revolution, and which can only be reached by way of revolution. That society would require us to take a larger perspective on the question, a perspective broader than either the partial viewpoints of intellectual "freedom" or social responsibility. A viewpoint that would take advantage of a new social structure to overcome the limitations of this one.

What would that look like? I think it would have to recognize that if libraries claim to have values, those values can either be progressive or reactionary (leaving out the discredited claim to value-free "neutrality"). Reactionary values would indeed require a radically different kind of library, but since libraries never claim to hold reactionary values, we can focus on the other alternative. Progressive values have long been part of the library discourse (whether that be in support of democracy itself or merely - as a recent New York Times article has it - civil liberties). But to have values means that we think those values are important enough to actively promote, support, and maintain. We can't be satisfied simply with *saying* we hold progressive values. And yet, this is what we do when we give bandwidth, air-time, or oxygen to hateful, corrupt, or reactionary values. To claim a set of progressive values but to do nothing to uphold them is not having values at all - it is a return to the discredited notion of neutrality, but this time in bad faith.

And we don't need to give bandwidth to other perspectives. Like collections, we needed to be comprehensive when there was no other communications channel, when information could be had through the libraries and almost nowhere else. But this is no longer the case. The Steve Bannons and Jordan Petersons of this world don't need our help getting their message across. This is a change that clearly librarianship (like journalism) has found it difficult to deal with. In a world of limited bandwidth, an attempt at fairness, balance, "both sides"-ness might have been laudable. We did not have the luxury then, perhaps, of living up to our values. Now that bandwidth is abundant, to pay lip service to progressive values without doing more to uphold them is unconscionable.

Ideally, every library would decide for itself, among the collectivity of its staff, what its role is and what values it decides to uphold. However, we (library workers) are not in charge of our libraries. Our libraries do not serve their publics, they serve the universities and municipalities in which they are embedded, and who have goals which may be (often are) not in line with our professed values. But workers don't have the luxury of quitting a workplace that doesn't share their values (despite what proponents of the free exchange of the labour market maintain).

The hegemonic, liberal perspective might be understood as a deontological ethics - there are rules to liberal society (like the fairness of representing both sides)

and we must uphold them. The social justice perspective is often a form of consequentialist ethics (if we host Jordan Peterson then we are causing harm to our public). Interestingly, I think this is the same distinction at play in arguments over the Williams-Osaka USOpen final. On the one side, we have those who claim that "there are rules in tennis that must be followed" (deontology), while on the other side we have arguments around the effects of structural racism and sexism (consequentialism). To take a larger view, we could say that professional tennis is a multi-billion dollar industry predicated on certain structures of race, gender, and class, which will never be overcome within the constraints of either the sport or capitalist society at large.

In his book *Marxism and Ethics*, Paul Blackledge argues that - despite Marx's own claims to the contrary - Marxism holds a position of virtue ethics, in other words, what is the right thing to do? Blackledge writes, "Instead of focusing on the intentions of actors or consequences of actions, virtue ethicists insist that they key ethical question should be 'what kind of person should I be?' " (p. 33). If we claim to hold progressive values, then we need to live up to those values, not sidestep them. If we want to be moral librarians working in moral libraries, then we need to take a perspective broader than both the deontological and consequentialist perspectives while, at the same time, bearing both those perspectives in mind.

Regarding a proposed Marxist ethics, Blackledge writes:

> Marxist ethics therefore presuppose an unbreakable unity between the facts and the condemnation of exploitation and alienation on the one hand, and the means to an end of socialism on the other. While modern moral philosophy is a reified reflection of our alienated existence under capitalism, Marxism, both as an explanatory account of the dynamics of capitalism and as a condemnation of this system, is rooted in the collective struggle of workers for freedom. Practice does not and cannot follow theory in the way that modern moral theory would have us supposed, for it is universally true that we can theorize only from specific standpoints. Marx thus criticized liberal moralists for being unable to offer an adequate account of human action. By contrast, because he made his own standpoint explicit he revealed not only the limitations of modern moral theory, but also the unity, but not identity, of socialism, social science, and moral realism. (p. 97)

As I've done before, I'm calling for a *partisan* librarianship, one which decides on what a moral profession looks like, and acts according to that decision. But that decision has to be a collective one, a social one, and I'm afraid it will never happen within a capitalist economy, politics, and culture. A partisan librarianship must, therefore, also be a revolutionary librarianship.

Now, this in itself might sound complacent, as if we will need to wait for the revolution before doing anything. But I don't think that's the case. What we

need, in the absence of a socio-economic structure which will allow for collective life, is an "intellectual politics" (in place of a non-existent intellectual freedom). We have to *reject* the rules of liberal society - the rules of fairness and "the marketplace of ideas"; indeed, we need to reject the market itself. And we need to reject the framing of the problem that we inherit from liberalism and from our parent institutions. For example, so many of our intellectual freedom discussions focus - as it did today - on the intellectual freedom of our users, the public; intellectual freedom is outward-facing. We should reject the exclusivity of that framing, and insist on dealing with the huge problem in our profession of the intellectual freedom of public library workers being sacrificed in favour of a liberal hegemony or the market (the library's "brand"). An intellectual politics would insist on trying to live up to our values, even if we fail. A lot was said today about allowing different voices to be heard; we have to start with the voices of public library workers, or we can never hope to approach the kind of collective action needed for the thorough transformation into the society to come.

Tronti, "Marx Yesterday and Today"

2018-09-20

As part of my PhD research, I'm investigating what's become known as 'Autonomist Marxism', a Marxist tendency that grew out of workers' struggles and theoretical positions outside the Communist Party in Italy in the 1960s. In its early days, this tendency was known as *operaismo* (usually translated as "workerism"), and its leading theoreticians were Romano Alquati, Raniero Panziero, and Mario Tronti. In the early 1970, the movement split and evolved into a loose agglomeration of "extra-parliamentary" (and sometimes violent) groups under the umbrella term *autonomia operaia* (Workers' Autonomy). The best-known figure of this tendency is, arguably, Antonio Negri. The idea of "workers' autonomy" comes from the idea, based on a particular reading of Chapter 10 of *Capital*, the *Grundrisse*, and the unpublished sixth chapter of *Capital*, that the working class, far from being structurally determined by capital, has its own autonomy, its own agency. In this view, technical innovations carried out by capital are part of a *political* as well as an economic attempt to subdue the autonomous power of workers' struggle. For Negri, the development of capital is a continuing attempt to free itself from the power of labour.

One of, if not *the* most important text of the early years of *operaismo* is Mario Tronti's *Operai e capitale* (Workers and Capital) of 1966. This is a collection of essays that Tronti wrote for the newspapers of the early workerist movement. Despite its importance in the history of Italian Marxism, and despite the rise, in recent years of an "Italian Theory" comparable to the "French Theory" of the 1960-80s, *Operai e capitale* has never been fully translated into English. I need to read it as part of my research project, so I thought I might try my hand at translating some of it.

The first essay in the book, "Marx Yesterday and Today", interrogates the relationship between Marxism as an analysis of contemporary capitalism and as a critique of ideology - *all* ideology, including the reformist ideologies of the workers' movement as well as vulgar Marxism. In this essay, Tronti lays out in ideological terms the autonomy of the workers from capital.

I'm not a professional translator, and there are some areas where Tronti's tricky prose was probably beyond my capacity, but I think this translations gets the gist of Tronti's argument across.

Read the Translation Here (pdf)

Grants and the Debt Economy

2018-10-18

The other day the results of the National Heritage Digitization Strategy funding competition were announced, and it got me thinking about the place of grant-funding in librarianship and in academia more broadly. When I was applying for a PhD at University of Alberta last year, it was *presumed* that I would apply for SSHRC funding for it - indeed, disclosing SSHRC funding is a key component of the application process. Going after available funding is considered "common sense" in academia. To argue that, as a full-time, tenured, salaried professional, any grant funding should go to someone else goes against this common sense; when I mentioned the idea to faculty members, I might as well have been speaking Greek. More and more, grant funding is becoming a core part of library practitioner research as well, to the extent that we have training sessions on how to apply for and manage external funding.

This reminded me of when I worked for AT&T in my 20s. AT&T brought in private life- and health-insurance which you could not opt out of unless you provided proof of coverage through another private insurer. This was in Manitoba, a province with universal public health insurance. Arguments that, because one was covered by the public insurer, one should not have to sign up for public insurance were disregarded.

The connection between these two examples became clear while reading Maurizio Lazzarato's *The Making of the Indebted Man*, in which he argues that neoliberalism has created a society in which the debtor-creditor relation is the primary power relation. Because of the financialization of neoliberal society - the securitization of everything, including risk and debt - more and more people have to be enrolled in the relationship (as debtors, obviously). This explains the easy enrollment of undergraduates into credit card debt, but it also explains why the *model* of all economic exchanges is the debt relationship (as opposed to other kinds of economic relationship). Grant funding is modeled on a debt-credit relationship, along with everything else.

Lazzarato further argues that the debt relationship *creates* the kinds of people who will keep the debt economy going: people who live the kind of responsible lifestyle that will allow them to repay their debts, people for whom *not* paying off their debts is seen and felt as a moral and personal failing, people who

are trained to follow all of the rules required to *prove* their trustworthiness in matters of debt repayment. Obviously, shame at not repaying a debt applies only to workers, not capitalists, for whom either bankruptcy or national bail-out remain viable alternatives.

One might argue, however, that one doesn't repay a grant. Lazzarato's argument - using employment insurance as an example - is that

> Unlike what happens on financial markets, the beneficiary as 'debtor' is not expected to reimburse in actual money but rather in conduct, attitudes, ways of behaving, plans, subjective commitments, the time devoted to finding a job, the time used for conforming oneself to the criteria dictated by the market and business, etc.

Not only does one have to be the kind of person who knows how to follow the instructions required to *apply* for funding (and here we come up against the perennial debates in librarianship on professionalism, class, race, and gender), to *convince* the funding agency of one's worthiness to receive and hold their credit, but one also also has to be the kind of person who will tailor their life, work, and behaviour to the reporting requirements of the agency. Grant funding becomes a form of biopolitical control, constraining the range of decision-making, choice, response, and agency of debtors through the very mechanism of credit.

It is precisely at these "obvious" points of "common sense" (why not have someone else pay for your work?) that we become most tightly enrolled in the system of domination of financial capitalism, that we become forced to adjust our very subjectivity to conform to the requirements of exploitation and dehumanization. Therefore, it is precisely these obvious points of common sense that we have to challenge, even if it's hard for anyone to understand the challenge. As Dostoyevsky argued in *Notes from Underground*, the right to "go against our own interest and profit", as perverse as it seems, is one of the most fundamental rights of a human being.

The Good Place and methodological individualism

2018-10-29

NOTE: This post contains some details about a recent episode of The Good Place that could be construed as a spoiler.

In season three, episode four of *The Good Place*, Simone tries to help Eleanor understand what's wrong with her by explaining that she never really got past the "me vs. us" problem ("The other possible medical diagnosis is that you're just a bit of a dick.") Simone explains the "me vs. us" problem as follows:

> As humans evolved the first big problem we had to overcome was me vs. us - learning to sacrifice a little individual freedom for the benefit of a group. Like sharing food and resources so we don't starve or get eaten by tigers - things like that.

This nicely illustrates the liberal assumption about how human society formed, i.e. by *individuals* coming together for their own mutual benefit. This assumption is known as "methodological individualism", the idea that, as Margaret Thatcher put it, "there's no such thing as society, there are individual men and women". Methodological individualism is an assumption in that it's a starting point that is not based on empirical experience, but on a particular theory of what constitutes society (social ontology) that is pre-empirical. Unless you're a dyed-in-the-wool pure empiricist, this isn't really a problem, as long as the assumptions of social ontology are recognized as exactly that: assumptions.

The social ontology by which individuals come together to form society is a hallmark of liberalism. Not only did the classical liberal political economists like Adam Smith subscribe to it (with his view of human nature as a propensity for individuals to "truck, barter, and exchange"), but even socialists like Proudhon subscribed to it. In his 1847 response to Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty*, Marx argued that Proudhon's assumption that individual producers freely come together to exchange the products of their labour was incorrect. Proudhon writes that

> Since a very large number of things I need occur in nature only in moderate quantities, or even not at all, I am forced to assist in the production of what I lack. And as I cannot set my hand to so many

> things, I shall propose to other men, my collaborators in various functions, to cede to me a part of their products in exchange for mine.

This is a statement that places the origin of an exchange economy precisely in the "me vs. us" context of *The Good Place*. At this point, Marx criticized Proudhon's view from the perspective of class struggle. Rather than individuals, coming together for mutual benefit, Marx writes, "the very moment civilisation begins, production begins to be founded on the antagonism of orders, estates, classes, and finally on the antagonism of accumulated labour and actual labour. No antagonism, no progress." (Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, 53). Rather than an individualist assumption, Marx is making a collectivist assumption, that the "social ontology" is composed mainly of classes interacting with each other.

In the 1857 "Introduction", however, Marx makes a different argument. Against the "individual and isolated hunter and fisherman" of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and against the "naturally independent, autonomous subjects" brought together by social contract (as Rousseau saw things), Marx argues that, rather than the starting point of a historical process, the individual is rather a result of particular historical (economic, social, political) dynamics. "The more deeply we go back into history," he writes, "the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole… Only in the eighteenth century, in 'civil society', do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, an external necessity" (*Grundrisse*, p. 84). The starting point is *society*, and exchange between individuals came afterwards.

Indeed, this is one of the arguments that David Graeber makes in his *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Against the view of many mainstream economists, that money arose out of the need to make barter (i.e. direct exchange) more efficient, Graeber argues that pre-capitalist, communal societies had no need of money because they did not barter; indeed, there was no exchange within the community at all. Graeber writes that anthropologists have found no evidence of a society with barter as its main or exclusive form of exchange; barter tended to be an external exchange, between communities. Within communities, distribution of produced goods were handled without exchange.

There are two conclusions to be drawn here. The first is simply a methodological one. It is important to bear in mind one's epistemological and ontological assumptions. It is easy to reassert the hegemonic (liberal) assumption rather than questioning it. Lately I've been digging into Roy Bhaskar's "critical realism", a methodology which seeks to overcome the limitations of both positivism and hermeneutics, the contradiction between agency and structure. As Andrew Collier writes in his introduction to Bhaskar's work, *Critical Realism*,

> Societies (composed as they are of relations between people, and ramifications of thos relations) can only exist as the outcome of human

> agency. If we were not reproducing/transforming social relations all the time, they would not exist: that is the truth of 'humanism'. But all human action presupposes the prexistence of society and makes no sense without it. Its social context determines what actions are possible and what their outcomes will be. That is the truth of structuralism… [however] the total social process is… the interaction of two distinct kinds of entity, societies and people." (145)

Burnham et. al., in *Research Methods in Politics* argue that critical realists "are united in their rejection of pure forms of individualism and collectivism, pointing instead to notions of ontological depth, stratification and emergent group properties" (35), which aligns critical realism, I think, with the case Andreas Malm makes for historical materialism in *The Progress of this Storm*.

The wider, and more important, point, I think, in insisting on the original communal society over the primacy of the individual, is that it opens up whole vistas of choices and alternatives to the individualistic, economistic status quo we are constantly being told is either natural or optimal (or both), but which has not only brought us to the brink of climate catastrophe, but has opened the door (yet again) to criminal regimes which look to murder anyone that does not fit their definition of a human being, all while relying on "exchange between individuals" to line their pockets (and the pockets, as CBC has demonstrated, of their foreign investors). Rejecting methodological individualism, at least until the historical and anthropological evidence is conclusive, should help us open our minds to new possibilities, to imagine worlds different than this one. But as long as cultural artefacts like *The Good Place* continue to offer up individualism as gospel, those of us who take a different view have a hard road ahead.

Artificial Scarcity, Exchange, and Communism

2018-11-04

I've been thinking a lot lately about alternatives to exchange economies, prompted by David Graeber's analysis of the mythical origins of exchange and money in his book on debt. One thing that Graeber discusses is that, contra the bourgeois economists and contemporary hegemonic thinking on the subject, members of ancient societies did not exchange amongst each other - they didn't barter within a community, which then led to a search for efficiencies in the form of money and asynchronous exchange. Rather, ancient communities had various ways to handle the distribution of produce that did not use exchange, and exchange (primarily barter) was employed *between* societies or communities, not within them. Graeber, an anthropologist, mentions a few specific examples, but the clearest illustration for my purposes is probably the Iroquois matriarchal form of centralized distribution. Graeber writes that while Adam Smith erected his theory of barter leading to money on books found in Scottish libraries, he ignored the anthropological work of Lewis Henry Morgan, which had been widely published by the middle of the 18th century. According to Graeber, what Morgan found was that

> the main institution among the Iroqois nations were longhouses where most goods were stockpiled and then allocated by women's councils, and no-one every traded arrowheads for slabs of meat. (Debt, 29)

Now, I haven't followed up to see what other anthropologists or Indigenous peoples themselves currently think about Morgan's work, but it's a good illustration of one possible way a community can exist without exchange. Such a system should also dispense with the mystification around scarcity that exists in capitalist society. Because of the division of labour, the mystification of the labour process, the three-fold alienation which Marx identified in the *1844 Manuscripts* (in capitalist society, a person is alienated from the product of their labour, from society, and from themselves), "abundance" and "scarcity" become impossible to see directly, mediated as they are by the market (i.e. supply and demand). This allows for scarcity and abundance to be manipulated - hoarding, surge pricing, etc, all being examples of this. But perhaps the most insidious result of the mystification of abundance and scarcity is the idea of scarcity itself. As Marx and Engels wrote, capitalism is the most productive economic system

every created, and yet it is plagued by this idea of scarcity. Not enough jobs to go around (blame immigrants), not enough money for government services (blame scroungers), not enough money in an individual's bank account (blame taxes). And this economic logic seeps into other areas of life, as the capitalist mode of production increasing restructures human society in its own image for its own purposes.

There was an interesting thread on Twitter last week about how the idea of scarcity affects marginalized communities. For example, the transmisic justification for arguing that trans women are not women or trans men are not men appears to be based on some strange equation between scarcity/abundance (in terms of opportunities, rights, etc.) and identity. This arithmetic is both dangerous and unnecessary, and is imported wholesale from our understanding of market (that is, exchange) relationships. The idea of exchange underpins many (but not all) of the ways we attempt to justify social exclusion, marginalization, and hatred. This isn't surprising because capitalism profits from precisely those things as it pursues ever-expanding accumulation. If we can think of our social relationships as an economic equation in terms of who gets to consume (scarce) resources in exchange for what, if we seek to maximize efficiency and utilization of resources in our non-economic relationships, then we are turning them into economic relationships, making them - all of a sudden - prime targets for capitalist profitability. (Side note: this is what has happened / is happening with the neoliberalization of higher education: the more we employed capitalist assessment criteria and metrics, the more we became easily assimilable to the capitalist mode of production, and guess what… that's where we are now).

In his analysis of Volume 1 of *Capital*, Fredric Jameson argues that "Marx's version of the labour theory of value dramatically solves one of the age-old mysteries of the market (how can anyone make money out of a fair exchange?)" (*Representing Capital*, 12). Of course, Marx's answer is that the exhanges that *seem* fair under capitalism (labour contracts, especially) hide a structurally necessary power imbalance and mechanism of exploitation. It would not be wrong to say that under capitalism there *are no fair exchanges*, just as there's no such thing as ethical consumption. But what is significant here is the idea of "fairness" itself. As Graeber says with respect to debt, it is *immoral* to not repay a debt. Maurizio Lazzarato, drawing on Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* shows that neoliberal financialization has in fact not only produced people who are universally indebted (an economic situation), but who are defined by their ability to keep their promises (a moral situation). Economics and morality are thus bound up with each other: morality becomes one of the tools of economic reproduction, capitalist reproduction.

I don't want to spend more time on Lazzarato's *The Making of Indebted Man*, but it's a really fascinating book, and I recommend it. Instead, I want to turn to a source that most people will likely find odd for me to use: The Gospel of Matthew. There are a lot of political lessons to be drawn from Jesus (I'm especially partial to "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath",

which to my mind stakes out a position against rule-based ethics), but two moments in particular are significant for this discussion. First, Matthew 14:15-21:

> And when it was evening, his disciples came to him, saying, This is a desert place, and the time is now past; send the multitude away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves victuals. But Jesus said unto them, They need not depart; give ye them to eat. And they say unto him, We have but five loaves, and two fishes. He said, Bring them hither to me. And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude. And they all did eat, and were filled: and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full. And they had had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Notice how the disciples' response to scarcity ("this is a desert place") is to break up the community and to send the multitude to engage in exchange ("buy themselves victuals"), while Jesus argues that, for a community, there can be no scarcity, because of the means by which a community centralizes and shares (distributes) its produce. Community thus takes ethical and ontological priority over economic relationships like scarcity and exchange.

Next, in Matthew 18:22:

> Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

I read this as Jesus arguing against the idea of fairness in exchange. Peter wants to know what the going rate of exchange is between sin and forgiveness, he is looking for a calculus, a criteria for default. Jesus' position is that a relationship of love and forgiveness can and must exist beyond such logical calculus of value and exchange.

These examples illustrate that not all economic and ethical issues are new to capitalism, but they achieve particular resonance under capitalism. For me, the kind of communism that Marx and Engels argue for can be thought of in this way (taking care to avoid the utopianism of the early-19th century socialists): that in order achieve a society not based on exchange, the tyranny of economic "fairness", and exploitation, we have to give up this idea of debt, repayment, value, equality, measure, etc., and live together as a community rather than - as the bourgeois economists would have us believe that we are - an aggregation of individuals bound together solely by economic bonds (that is, exchange relationships). Jesus argues for this kind of perspective time and time again. Turning the other cheek is not (or not only) about meekness, but about abdicating a particular form of repayment. The political thought of Jesus, while wrapped

in a mystical shroud I have difficulty accepting, can still be understood as providing particularly radical illustrations of the unnaturalness of economic logic, especially when it seeps into our social relationships.

It is important, I think, to continue to imagine utopian solutions to these kinds of quintessentially practical problems. Practical solutions are always conditioned by economic logic, the logic of scarcity, exchange, and value. As a different Twitter thread discussed this weekend, the failure of our political solutions is often a failure of imagination. It's important to keep the unrealistic, utopian ideas in play so as not to abandon the field to the domination of economic logic and the dehumanizing calculation of human lives.

Books in Review 2018

2018-12-20

Last year, I resolved - as a chronic book non-finisher - to finish reading as many books as I could. I didn't particularly succeed at that, but I did manage to slog through some books to the end that I would ordinarily have given up on. This year, partly because I relaxed my resolution, and partly because I was doing a lot of "reading around" (articles, book chapters, sections), as part of my PhD planning, not only did I not read as many books to completion, but what I *did* finish were mainly relatively light distractions from the political theory I was concentrating on. Since I've been on research leave since August, I've also done a lot of writing, which contributes both to not reading quite as much, and reading a lot more lighter fiction as a way to unwind at the end of the day. Also, as opposed to last year, I didn't resolve to write a review of each book I finished. I've therefore included some brief notes on each book here. I realize how many of these books are written by white men - I obviously have more to think about here.

Total books read: 24 (7 non-fiction; 17 fiction) This is only slightly down from 27 books read last year, but the breakdown is quite different. Last year, the majority were non-fiction (16 non-fiction; 11 fiction).

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*.

I *really* enjoyed this. Perhaps like most people, I inherited a lot of reading prejudices from my parents, and one of these was an antipathy towards the Brontës. It didn't help that what I had picked up over the years about *Wuthering Heights* was that it was a Victorian romance novel - which is about as far from the truth as you can get. This is a wild ride: raw and violent and exceedingly modern. The people who live in and around Wuthering Heights are not genteel; even Jane Austen's most despicable characters (i.e. everyone in *Mansfield Park*) hide it through gentility; in *Wuthering Heights* there's no hiding how terrible most of the people in it are. At the same time, the novel seems to be precisely about how conditions of violence, cruelty, racism, and intolerance reproduce themselves from generation to generation.

E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View*.

This one was a bit slight. It was entertaining enough, but it didn't really seem

to add up to much.

Chester Brown, *Louis Riel*.

This graphic novel biography of Riel was really big when it first came out in 2003, but I passed over it at the time. It was OK, but neither the artwork nor the writing particularly did it for me. Again, it didn't particularly offer anything of significance to the bare facts of Riel's resistance, trial, and exectution.

Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation*.

I read this after seeing the movie, and because people whose taste in books I respect really like the whole trilogy. Again, it was fine, but didn't do much for me. I have yet to read the second volume.

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

This one was interesting for a number of reasons. I love reading Baldwin's essays - there's something about Baldwin's language and turn of phrase that makes his writing really compelling even before you turn to the ideas he is expressing. Additionally, it was interesting to read what is essentially a Parisian ex-pat novel of the generation after, say, Henry Miller. The bloom is off the sexual rose by this time, and the whole story has a shadow cast over it that has little to do with the execution that lies at its heart.

Henry Miller, *Quiet Days in Clichy* (re-read).

Miller-Lite, if you like. A short novella covering a lot of the same ground as *Tropic of Cancer*, but with a certain darkness or nostalgia that I find a bit more interesting.

Will Eisner, *A Contract with God*.

Now *this* to me shows what graphic storytelling can do. Every page of artwork is stirring in a way that I found Chester Brown's was not. It's as if the drawing is in complete harmony with the text, supporting, reinforcing, and adding nuance and context to it. In the frame I've included below, the rain and the old man seem to flow together until you don't know where one ends and the other begins, giving the whole thing a sense of eternal endless dreariness. The simple text ("… after all, this was the day Frimme Hersh buried Rachele, his daughter") lets the image do most of the heavy lifting, allowing the text itself to make a virtue of its simplicity. The whole volume was fantastic to read.

Philip K. Dick. *The Divine Invasion*.

Part of Dick's *Valis* trilogy (with *Valis* and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, which I still have to read) and connected to the posthumously published *Radio Free Albemuth*, *The Divine Invasion* is Dick's attempt to come to terms in fiction with the psycho-religious experiences that began in 1974, and which he poured into his *Exegesis*. What Dick actually thinks happened to him is not particularly clear, but it's connected to a lot of the themes of his earlier fiction (the unstable nature of reality and our perceptions of it; a manichean

view of good and evil, with our reality the creation of a devil or demiurge; the sense of struggle against evil unseen forces controlling the world…). Not up to the standards of *Man in the High Castle* or *A Scanner Darkly*, but fun to read nonetheless.

Robert Cormier, *The Chocolate War* (re-read).

I took some time this year to revisit writers I really liked as a kid. Cormier was always a writer who a) described a world of violence, cruelty, and intolerance that seemed much more real than a lot of other YA work at the time and b) didn't condescend or sugarcoat anything for kids (see, for example, the horrific *Fade*). I think in some ways this is the appeal of Stephen King to a lot of teenagers (at least, this was true when I was in high school), but Cormier's books are always firmly grounded in the real world.

Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Dispossessed*.

Le Guin died in January, and so many people I knew were talking about how much her writing meant to them, that I wondered why I had completely ignored her, even in my heaviest science-fiction phase. I was given a copy of *Always Coming Home* for Christmas when I was 12 or 13, but I couldn't get into it - the ethnographic element was too dry for me. A few years later I read *The Left Hand of Darkness*, but didn't feel compelled to read anything else. *The Dispossessed* is really great politically - it's easy to see how it's become an anarchist favourite - and I enjoyed reading it, but it still seemed to be missing something…? Anyway, I will read more to figure that out (I should probably reread *Left Hand* first).

Ian Fleming, *Casino Royale* (re-read).

This was just entertainment, something to read to clear Italian Marxist theory out of my head. I have a soft spot for the James Bond books because I grew up with them, but I wouldn't recommend them to anyone (it will be interesting see whether Bond holds any kind of fascination for my nephews as they get older).

Michel Tremblay, *Thérè et Pierrette à l'école des Saints-Anges*.

Slowly working my way through Michel Trembley's *Chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal*, this is book two of six. I read the first volume last year (*La grosse femme d'à coté est enceinte*) and absolutely loved it - there's a humanity to Tremblay married to amazing writing (both technically and stylistically) that manages to turn what seem on the face of it to be fairly prosaic accounts of working-class Montreal life into full and rich portraits of the development of real people. This second installment of the chronicles is just as good. I find it slow to read novels in French in Edmonton, when I'm not surrounded by *la francophonie* (I don't have this problem in Montreal), but hopefully I'll make it through another of Tremblay's books in 2019.

Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*.

A critique of different strands of contemporary social theory with respect to climate change and a compelling defense of historical materialism (Marxism) as the social theory we need right now. Highly recommended.

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*.

I have been trying to read Vonnegut for years. A lot of people whose opinion I respect really get a lot out of him, but every time I tried to read him it all just felt too light, too frothy. I'm afraid *Slaughterhouse Five*, now that I've read the whole thing, is just more of the same. How do you make the firebombing of Dresden - an event which *clearly* deeply marked Vonnegut's mind and emotions - seem… trivial? Maybe it's just me - I don't really get Vonnegut's schtick. So it goes.

Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man*.

I read this as part of my PhD research. Very interesting, if a little slight - if you want to understand the financial crisis and the current culture of debt from a Marxist perspective, this is a worthwhile contribution.

Alan Garner, *Elidor* (re-read).

Another re-read from my childhood. I remembered *Elidor* being better than it was. It's a darker, more working-class version of the Narnia idea, but it doesn't really seem to pull it off. Garner's *The Owl Service* is one of the best YA fantasy books I've ever read, but this one doesn't live up to the memory I had of it, unfortunately.

Monica Hughes, *The Keeper of the Isis Light* (re-read).

I must have read all of Hughes' science-fiction when I was a kid (at least, all that she had written up to that point - she kept publishing until 2002). I even enjoyed her non-SF work (*My Name is Paula Popowich* and *Blaine's Way* especially). This one really lived up to what I remembered about it (which turned out to be more about setting and character than plot). It's a bit dated now, but still worth reading; I have the other two books (*The Guardian of Isis* and *The Isis Pedlar*) in an omnibus volume from Edmonton Public Library, so I'll try to read those again soon.

Philip K. Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

Apparently Dick thought that with this and *Martian Time Slip* he finally managed to figure out and pull off what he wanted to do in science fiction. Not as good as *Man in the High Castle* and very similar to *Ubik* - definitely worth reading for an introduction to Dick's style and concerns.

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

Not having grown up religious at all, I'm interested in religions. This book is (apparently) one of the classics of Christian apologetics. I hated it. It was distasteful, intellectually dishonest, condescending, and the arguments didn't hold water - at least, not from this side of the 20th century. I find it hard

to believe that Lewis could not see the changes taking place in English society during and after the war; instead, he held to a white, patriarchal, aristocratic image of English Christianity that was never particularly accurate and nowadays seems dangerously archaic. If contemporary Christians are taking this as an example of apologetics (it continues to regularly make Christian "best book" lists), then no wonder it's in such trouble.

Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (re-read).

This one starts out in classic (or typical) Dick style, but then becomes something else, something darker with more to say about human beings' interior emotional lives as opposed to the the relationship between perception and reality. Apparently Dick wrote it in response to first person accounts written by Nazi guards in concentration camps which he read while researching *Man in the High Castle*. One of the constants in Dick's writing is his very humanist empathy; in reading the guards' accounts, Dick could not understand how human beings could feel/think/behave so inhumanly - he felt that perhaps they weren't human at all, and so the idea of exploring the *emotional* distinctions between human and android was born.

Patrick Malcolmson, Richard Myers, Gerald Baier, and Thomas M.J. Bateman, *The Canadian Regime: An Introduction to Parliamentary Government in Canada*, Sixth Edition.

This is more of a textbook than anything else, but I read it cover to cover quite quickly. It's really good on covering the details of Canadian government (what's the difference between "responsible government" in Canada and "separation of powers" in the US?). It seems pretty exhaustive, and up to date (it covers the 2015 election, and goes into a decent amount of detail regarding the debate over proportional representation, for example). It's interesting to read this as a Marxist, though, because the liberal presumptions and biases stick out like a sore thumb. Still, better to be transparent about that kind of thing than to appeal to some kind of neutrality.

Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*.

I had heard of Geuss before, but I decided to read this based on a series of lectures on Nietzsche that he gave in 2013, which I found really informative (they're up on YouTube). This book lays out the principles for "realism" in political philosophy, countering realism to various kinds of unrealistic theorizing - Geuss uses Nozick's anarchism and Rawls' theory of justice as examples of this - and makes the case for not relying on abstractions ("rights", "justice", "democracy") when talking about politics, but actually looking at what people do in particular conjunctions. I'll need to re-read this to make sense of it properly, but it helped clarify a bunch of things that had been floating through my mind.

Peter MacKinnon, *University Commons Divided*.

Basically lays out the hegemonic liberal conception of academic freedom, using a set of case studies from the last few years. Nothing particulary new here - I

have a CJAL review forthcoming.

Raymond Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods*

Geuss continues his critique of liberalism by performing a "genealogy" of the concept of public and private. Looking first at three historical case studies (Diogenes of Sinope, Caesar, and St. Augustine) and the different ways they conceived of and problematized the distinction between the public and the private, Geuss moves on to critiquing liberal views of a *unitary* dividing line between the two (looking specifically at Mill and Dewey). In the end, Geuss' realist view is that deciding on a theoritically singular (and likely abstract) dividing line and then making political decisions gets things the wrong way around: we need to decide what concrete context private/public is necessary for, and then build on that basis. A very short book, but quite interesting.