Libraries, Labour, Capital: On Formal and Real Subsumption

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ABSTRACT: This article looks at librarianship from a Marxist economic perspective, arguing that crises within the profession are due to material changes in the organization of production and labour relations. These changes are part of a transition from one "regime of accumulation" (industrial, Fordist, Keynesian) to another (neoliberal). The article suggests that any choice made to address these changes leads us further into relations of commodification which worsen the crises we face, and that only fundamental changes to the social, political, and economic system in which we work and live will solve the problems we currently face.

Keywords: capitalism, labour, libraries, Marxism, neoliberalism, value

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> It has been shown how not merely at the level of ideas, but also in reality, the social character of his labour confronts the worker as something not merely alien, but hostile and antagonistic, when it appears before him objectified and personified in capital.
>
> Karl Marx, "The Results of the Immediate Process of Production" (1864).

The Perennial Crisis of Librarianship

Is librarianship in crisis? If so, is the crisis cultural or material, organizational or political? How does a crisis of librarianship intersect with wider crises in capitalism itself? In the introduction to his 2003 book *Dismantling the Public Sphere*, John Buschman argues that librarianship has a "culture of crisis": "we have been declaring crises for more than thirty years"[1]. Buschman ascribes this culture of crisis to the lack of a unified understanding of what we now call neoliberalism and the changes to public discourse that entails, as well as to a curious lack of energy in librarians' responses to challenges and threats. "If librarianship is merely reactive," he writes, "we will continue to see the same rapid cycles of crisis-name and professional and institutional responses to the crisis of the moment"[2]. For Buschman, librarianship is in a constant state of crisis because it is unable to precisely formulate the nature of the challenges it faces. The initial step towards overcoming the culture of crisis, then, is understanding the nature of the challenge—that is, it is critique:

> If, as I have argued, we have a crisis culture in the profession and in turn have weakly defended librarianship in response to those ever-declared and poorly-analyzed crises, then our framework of analysis and defending librarianship must change and that change must begin in critique.[3]

The heart of this critique, Buschman writes, is to identify "the core of librarianship's challenge", which in his view is the decline of the public sphere and the dismantling of the public role of libraries. Buschman's thesis is that

> librarianship is a classic case study of the dismantling of the public sphere in an era of radically market-oriented public philosophy towards public cultural institutions (like schools and libraries).[4]

The goal of Buschman's book is to recuperate a notion of democracy and the public sphere (based, in the end, on Habermas) which would "connect [librarianship] to the project of democracy and cultural vitality" and place libraries "back in the 'contested terrain' of the critical and democratic public sphere"[5].

Buschman sees neoliberalism as a corruption of the golden age of the welfare state, rather than simply a response to falling rates of profit under the Fordist-Keynesian model of post-war capitalism. In a recent article on the connection between neoliberalism and identity

1 Buschman, John. *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003): 3.
2 Ibid., 7.
3 Ibid., 8.
4 Ibid., 8.
5 Ibid., 9.

politics, Buschman argues that there is a radical break between the modernist welfare state and the postmodern neoliberal period, which sees a "redistribution of wealth upward and elsewhere within the new economy"[6]. Buschman has elsewhere remarked that "what makes it *neo*liberalism is the infusion of economic and market principles into corresponding social arrangements and their extension into areas of society where we haven't normally seen them"[7]. For Buschman, this infusion and extension mark something new, in which democracy and the public sphere are dismantled and replaced by a logic of entrepreneurialism and market freedom. This strongly implies that there was a period of "good capitalism" prior to the neoliberal period, in which the "critical and democratic public sphere" was a "contested terrain" to which we can (and should) return.

What I will argue in this article is that, contrary to Buschman's position, neoliberalism is not something radically new, but is simply the latest reconfiguration of capitalism to meet the needs of capital accumulation and labour discipline[8]. This reconfiguration has many aspects, but I will argue that the "culture of crisis" within librarianship is due to what Marx called the subsumption of labour under capital. This process—which is incomplete, uneven, and ongoing—changes the material nature of the work of libraries, destabilizing and devaluing the labour of library workers. The crises that Buschman identifies—mainly around technological change and declining financial support—are *reflections* of a lower-level process of material transformation.

Indeed, to take two recent examples, professional crises can be understood as manifestations of underlying contradictions in the process of production itself. Linda Christian's "A Passion Deficit: Occupational Burnout and the New Librarian: A Recommendation Report" (2015)[9] describes a process by which additional surplus labour is extracted from librarians under the guise of professional responsibility. Fobazi Ettarh's "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves" (2018)[10] is about the ideological disciplining of library labour through mystification and reification. These accounts of subjective responses to librarianship *as* labour describe, explicitly or not, *objective* conditions of labour exploitation under neoliberal capitalism. Stress, burnout, the psychological and emotional effects of structures of domination, exploitation, and aggression; these are all part of the crisis of librarianship, but the crisis has, I would argue, a deeper, more material cause. The crisis is no longer—if it ever was—restricted to "professional" elements like collections development, technological change, or cataloguing practices, though it continues to include these. It has expanded upwards into the subjective experiences of library workers, and downwards to the organization and discipline of library labour itself. These various levels are connected, in my

6 Buschman, John. "Between Neoliberalism and Identity Politics: Academic Librarianship, Democracy and November 8, 2016", *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 44(2), 2018. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2017.12.020

7 Buschman, John. "Librarianship and the Arc of Crisis: The Road to Institutionalized Cultural Neoliberalism", *MediaTropes* 5(2), 2015: 1-18.

8 For neoliberalism as "regime of accumulation", see Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1990); for neoliberalism as process of labour discipline, see Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

9 Christian, Linda A. (2015) "A Passion Deficit: Occupational Burnout and the New Librarian: A Recommendation Report", *The Southeastern Librarian* 62(4). https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol62/iss4/2

10 Ettarh, Fobazi. "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves", *In The Library With the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018. http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/

view, by the relationship of library worker to employer, to capital. Following the epigraph by Marx above, I will argue that the crisis of librarianship is fundamentally due to library workers' relationship to libraries *as capital*, a relationship that is of relatively recent advent, and is still in development. I will begin with a discussion of the shift from welfare-state into "post-industrial" capitalism and its effects on libraries and their parent institutions. I will then proceed to analyze Marx's concepts of absolute and relative surplus value, and formal and real subsumption of labour to capital, with examples from within librarianship.

The Library in 'Post-Industrial' Capitalism

It is clear, from the vantage point of 2018, that a transition within capitalism took place between roughly 1968 and 1973, which saw a shift from mass, Fordist, industrial capitalism to a capitalism that has been described variously as "post-industrial capitalism" or "the information-age". A recent account of this shift focusing on technological development and globalization of capitalist labour is Nick Dyer-Witheford's *Cyber-Proletariat*[11]. What is clear from all accounts, however, is that this shift moved from Keynesianism to neoliberalism in economics and politics[12], modernism to post-modernism in art and culture[13]. One of the effects of this transition was to reconfigure *as commodities* various artefacts that had previously resisted commodification. The most striking example is the commodification of money and financial transactions themselves (which led to the crisis of 2008), but the last twenty years have also witnessed the commodification of water, dictionary-words, education, and—with the advent of social media—people and identities. This process of colonization, of the transformation into commodities things that previously not been commodities, happens periodically under capitalism. Each new recomposition or refinement of capitalist production reveals previously untouched *kinds* of commodities. A good example can be found in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1894), which describes the lot of hack writers—that is, writers as commodity producers—and the epistemological challenges of thinking of written texts as commodities. A couple of examples from the book will suffice to show the crisis in writing at the end of the 19th century:

> "There was no need to destroy what you had written. It was all good enough for the market."
>
> "Don't use that word, Amy. I hate it!"
>
> "You can't afford to hate it," was her rejoinder, in very practical tones. "However it was before, you *must* write for the market now. You have admitted that yourself."[14]
>
> *
>
> "No, that is the unpardonable sin! To make a trade of art! I am rightly served for attempting such a brutal folly."

11 Dyer-Witheford, Nick. *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2015).
12 Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*.
13 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*; Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).
14 Gissing, George, *New Grub Street* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958): 48.

> He turned away in a passion of misery.
>
> "How very silly it is to talk like this!" came in Amy's voice, clearly critical. "Art must be practiced as a trade, at all events in our time. This is the age of trade."[15]

The "age of trade" see the commodification of art, and the proletarianization of the artist. The periodic recomposition of capitalism expands the realm of capitalist production. In Gissing's day, capitalist production had left the mills and factories of the industrial revolution, and moved into the cities to transform the production of art. As David Harvey explains in *The Condition of Postmodernity*,

> The commodification and commercialization of a market for cultural products during the nineteenth century (and the concomitant decline of aristocratic, state, or institutional patronage) forced cultural producers into a market form of competition.[16]

What we have seen since 1973 is yet another phase of this opening of new fields of commodification, with postmodernism as the "cultural logic" of the new period. It is a mistake, however, to understand these changes purely at the level of culture. The transformation of artefacts into commodities requires the transformation of the conditions of production. Following Marx, I will discuss later on the technical aspects of this transformation as a process of *subsumption* of labour under capital, but for now it is sufficient to say that, broadly speaking, libraries are included within the transformation of their parent organization into sites of commodity production (factories). Considerations of space prevent me from going into the details of the role of pre-neoliberal universities and public services as organizations of hegemony (ideological reproduction and the state), but under neoliberalism both universities and governments have—like art in *New Grub Street*—been fully absorbed into the market. From maintaining hegemony to producing commodities, libraries—both academic and public—have followed suit. "Librarianship must be practiced as a trade, at all events in our time."

The mystification and reification of the capitalist mode of production requires that we not see ourselves as producing commodities directly. "Vocational awe" requires that we focus on our transcendent values, our social mission, by ignoring the structures of domination and exploitation that allow the capitalist library to continue to reproduce itself and make profit. The closest we come to base, material considerations is when we admit to part in ensuring the university or municipality provides "good value" to tuition-paying students or tax-paying citizens. Examples of both these categories abound: from the focus on "the student experience" and student "success metrics" in academic libraries, to the differences in architecture, design, and services between inner-city and suburban branches of public libraries, or the various campaigns aimed at penalizing the homeless (i.e. non-taxpayers) in public library spaces. These processes are justified through appeal to "common sense" (i.e. liberal, bourgeois) ideology. Marx summed up the ideological effects of commodity production as follows: "In a social order dominated by capitalist production, even the non-capitalist producer is dominated by capitalist ways of thinking"[17]. Like the writers in

15 Ibid., 50.
16 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*: 22.
17 Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 3* (London: Penguin Classics, 1991): 130.

Gissing's Grub Street, library workers may like to think of themselves as engaged in a higher purpose than commodity production, but that is a classic example of ways in which capitalism obscures the real relations of society with a veil of mystification.

The reason such reconfigurations of capitalism are periodically required—the reason, indeed, that we can speak of "post-industrial" society—is that once the transformation of crafts, trades, and manufactures were converted to capitalist forms of production—once they were industrialized—the expansion of capitalist accumulation required finding new sources of surplus value and profit. This in turn required finding new sources of labour to exploit and commodities to exchange, even to the extent of creating commodities where there previously had been none (in government services, for example, or education). This transformation of previously uncommodified artefacts into commodities entailed bringing into being exchange-value where there had been only use-value.

Use-Value, Exchange-Value, and Surplus-Value

The heart of Marx's economic analysis is the commodity, which has the peculiar characteristic of possessing both use-value (e.g. socks keep your feet warm) and of exchange-value (e.g. socks can be exchanged for money). Artefacts which are produced for use have use-value: if I knit a sweater to wear myself, to satisfy a need of my own, that sweater has no exchange-value, only value through the use I make of it. Commodities, on the other hand, are produced *for exchange*. "To be sold" is an essential aspect of a commodity. If I produce a sweater to be sold in a shop, then I am aware of the costs of the materials and labour that I have put into its production, and how much, in the end, I need the sweater to be sold for. For Marx, use-value is the product of particular kinds of labour (knitting, cooking, welding, etc.), while exchange-value is the product of a universalized, abstract labour. The various *kinds* of labour can be compared in the abstract by measuring time: one hour of knitting may be worth five minutes of welding, etc. In conditions of generalized commodity production, these equivalences are abstracted away, and in the end all we see is the seemingly objective and simple equivalent of price. Price hides the social relationships whereby we, as a society, judge various amounts of labour to be equivalent.

A university education, up until the neoliberal period, was primarily a use-value. It instilled in the upper-classes the values, perspective, and ideology of their rule; it confirmed a distinction between the upper and lower classes (cf. the significance of Fred Vincy's university accent in *Middlemarch*); it maintained and reproduced a whole slate of hegemonic positions; and occasionally it actually educated someone or produced new knowledge. Under neoliberalism, education is primarily an exchange-value. In increasing the time and raw-materials that go into producing a worker, education increases the value of that worker's labour-power. A degree is proof of the value of a worker's labour, hence creeping credentialism and professional gate-keeping. Over the last thirty years or so, the university has gradually switched from primarily producing use-values to producing exchange-values, leading to a crisis in higher-education[18]. As with other kinds of workers—the writers of *New Grub Street*, for example—academic workers are often blind to the ways in which capitalism has already transformed their labour. Culture and ideology—subjectivity itself—lags behind

18 A simple search for "neoliberal university" will demonstrate the extent to which this is the case.

economic development. Academic workers—including academic librarians—hold to notions of transcendent use-value production and resist the idea that their labour and its products have already been commodified. Ettarh's conception of "vocational awe" applies here not only to the library but to the academy as a whole.

For municipalities, the logic of exchange arises in the idea that taxpayers exchange "their" money for particular services. We can see this in the idea that people shouldn't pay taxes for things they don't use, or that those who don't pay taxes shouldn't be allowed to partake of a given service. This is markedly different from the ideology of the welfare state, where the connection between tax dollars and government services was more communal. Attacks on the NHS[19], on public libraries[20], public schools[21], and government itself[22], all argue that tax dollars should not be wasted on public goods; indeed, the idea of taxation *in itself* has been attacked; better, it is argued by those on the right, to let everyone pay for what they want, and let the market sort it out[23]. Nationalization of government institutions is but the thin end of the wedge in terms of the commodification of the state. Even within government-run services the logic of exchange-value reigns supreme.

Marx famously described capital as "value in motion", but the motion that capital describes is not circular. If only the same amount of value returned to the capitalist/entrepreneur as she put in, there would be no incentive to keep going. David Harvey, in his most recent book, described the motion of capital as a spiral:

> Each time capital passes through the process of production it generates a surplus, an increment in value. It is for this reason that capitalist production implies perpetual growth. This is what produces the spiral form to the motion of capital. No sensible person would go through all the trials and troubles of organizing production… in order to end up with the same amount of money at the end of the day… The incentive is the increment which will be represented by monetary profit. The means is the creation of surplus-value in production.[24]

Marx argued that all class-divided societies were based on the extraction of surplus-value, one way or another, from a labouring class, by forcing it to work more than it has to in order to satisfy its own needs. Under slavery, this expropriation of labour is forced directly by the slaveowner. Under feudalism, it is coerced through relationships of right and protection. Under capitalism, the worker is theoretically free but compelled by the structure of the economic system (in the first instance, private property), to sell their labour power on the open market. The wage the worker contracts for is, fundamentally, the value of the

19 Lister, John. "The Neoliberal Epidemic Striking Healthcare". *OurNHS,* June 7, 2013. https://www.opendemocracy.net/ournhs/john-lister/neoliberal-epidemic-striking-healthcare

20 Swaffield, Laura. "The UK No Longer Has a National Public Library System", *The Guardian,* October 19, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2017/oct/19/uk-national-public-library-system-community

21 Pratt, Nick. "Neoliberalism and the (Internal) Marketisation of Primary School Assessment in England". *British Educational Research Journal* 42(5), 2016: 890-905. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3233

22 Hall, Stuart. "The March of the Neoliberals", *The Guardian*, September 12, 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/sep/12/march-of-the-neoliberals

23 Fanelli, Carlo. "Neoliberalism and the City", *Canadian Dimension*, September 5, 2014. https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/neoliberalism-the-city

24 Harvey, David. *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018): 11-12.

commodities needed to reproduce the worker as worker. But if the worker produced the value of their wage in four hours, but is contracted to work for eight hours, then four hours of value is given to the capitalist without payment to the worker.

Bear in mind that this is an economic model of what goes on under capitalism, abstracted from the concrete reality and lived experience of individual workers. What constitutes "commodities necessary to reproduce the worker" is different now than it was when Marx was writing. For example, entertainment commodities are required now in part to keep the working class pacified, whereas in Marx's time, the pacification of the working class was a matter, not for the commodity market, but for state and private repressive violence. Below a certain stratum of the working class, even today, violence rather than commodities are employed to keep workers' bodies docile, and this repression clearly breaks down along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and disability—as movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo clearly indicate. The physicality of violent repression is also different in the centres of capitalist production—the global north and west—than it is in the global south and east.

Having said that, the two ways in which the capitalist can expand the surplus-value extracted from labour is either a) to extend the total amount of work time (e.g. making the worker work for twelve hours, so that four hours of labour is paid while eight is unpaid) or b) to increase the productivity of labour, so that the value required to repay the worker is made up in a shorter amount of time (e.g. the worker not makes up the value of the wage in two hours, but continues to work for eight, rendering six-hours unpaid labour to the capitalist). Marx called these two kinds of surplus value—that achieved by extending labour time and that by increasing the productivity of labour—absolute and relative surplus-value, respectively. We will discuss these concepts in the next section, as they figure heavily in Marx's analysis of the formal and real subsumption of labour under capital.

Formal and Real Subsumption

In the published version of volume one of *Capital* (1867), Marx makes only one reference to subsumption, in his discussion of "Absolute and Relative Surplus Value" (Chapter 16):

> A merely formal subsumption of labour under capital suffices for the production of absolute surplus-value. It is enough, for example, that handicraftsmen who previously worked on their own account, or as apprentices of a master, should become wage labourers under the direct control of a capitalist.[25]

What Marx is talking about here is the process by which scattered forms of industry were initially brought under the control of the capitalist. The labour of craftspeople were *subsumed* under conditions of capitalist production; they may have been brought together into a single factory, for example, while the actual labour they were engaged in remained much the same. The capitalist achieves economies of scale without transforming the labour process itself. As a result, the capitalist *can only* increase surplus value by absolute means, i.e. the extension of the working day. Without transforming the practice of labour, the capitalist cannot increase the productivity of labour, and so an increase of *relative* surplus-value is ruled out.

25 Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (London: Pelican Books, 1976): 645.

Until the 1960s, there was no further insight into the nature of the subsumption of labour under capital. Only when a manuscript draft of *Capital* was made available in Western Europe between 1969 and 1971, and published in English in 1976, was more attention paid to this idea[26]. "The Results of the Immediate Process of Production" has much to say about the connection between absolute and relative surplus value and formal and real subsumption[27].

I have written above how exchange-value was combined with use-value in the process of commodifying artefacts that had previously not been commodities. The way this takes place is, in fact, through the formal subsumption of labour under capital. Formal subsumption is based on the strict separation of raw materials from workers, brought together only under the auspices of the capitalist. Without this separation, in pre-capitalist modes of production for example, the producers themselves chose when and how to produce, whether for use or for exchange. The formal subsumption of labour under capital, by alienating the producer from the raw material and the results of their labour, forces production *only* for exchange, in other words, the production of commodities alone. The production of commodities is required for the production of surplus-value. In Marx's terms, with formal subsumption

> the labour process becomes the instrument of the valorization process, the process of the self-valorization of capital—the manufacture of surplus value. The labour process is subsumed under capital (it is its *own* process) and the capitalist intervenes in the process as its director, manager.[28]

The actual process of labour does not change, but by being placed under capitalist management what was produced before is not produced solely as a commodity, as part of the cycle of surplus-value production. Marx writes that "technologically speaking, the labour process goes on as before, with the proviso that it is now subordinated to capital"[29].

The capitalist cannot be satisfied merely with extracting *absolute* surplus-value, however, for they rapidly run not only into the real limit of the length of the working day (24 hours), but into political limits as well. In the stirring tenth chapter of *Capital*, Marx lays out the history of struggle around the length of the working day[30]. Facing both natural and political limitations on the extraction of absolute surplus-value, the capitalist *must* figure out how to extract *relative* surplus-value by increasing the productivity of labour. This involves changing the process of labour that until now had only been formally subsumed under capital; thus arises the real subsumption of labour[31].

Given the capitalist requirement of always-expanding value, the process of deepening and

26 Murray, Patrick. "The Place of 'The Results of the Immediate Production Process' in Capital", in *The Mismeasure of Wealth* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2018): 325-340.

27 For an account of the philosophical background of subsumption as well as more current usage of the concept, see Endnotes. "The History of Subsumption", in *Endnotes 2: Misery and the Value Form.* London: AK Press, 2010.

28 Marx, *Capital*, *Volume 1*: 1019.

29 Ibid., 1025.

30 The capitalist continues to extract absolute surplus-value even today, through the extension of the working day through overtime and cultures of overwork. See, for example, https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-I-Collapsed-on-the-Job/242537.

31 "There now arises a technologically and otherwise *specific mode of production – capitalist production* – which transforms the nature *of the labour process itself and its actual conditions*. Only when that happens do we witness the *real subsumption of labour under capital*." Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*: 1034-35.

broadening the subsumption of labour, the transformation of the labour process, never ends. It becomes a part of the history of the industry or profession in question. As the Endnotes collective writes,

> Real subsumption has a historical directionality, for it entails a constant process of revolutionizing the labour process through material and technological transformations which increase the productivity of labour. From these secular increases in productivity follow broader transformations in the character of society as a whole, and in the relations of production between workers and capitalists in particular. Real subsumption, as the modification of the labour-process along specifically capitalist lines, is exemplified in the historical development of the productive powers of social labour as the productive powers of capital. This occurs through cooperation, machinery, and large-scale industry.[32]

This ought to sound familiar, as the processes involved map directly onto librarianship, with cooperation (e.g. shared-cataloguing and resources via OCLC), machinery (library automation and data initiatives), and large-scale industry (the rapidly monopolizing vendor ecosystem). These three processes are all aspects of the real subsumption of labour leading to the disruption (through capitalist rationalization and the extension of value-production) of the industry in question. In the next section we will look at the way these component parts have been implemented in librarianship.

What I want to argue is that the disruption of librarianship, the ongoing feeling of crisis—both professional and subjective—that has attended the profession for the last thirty or forty years, is due to the material disruption caused by the gradual unfolding of subsumption of labour. For libraries, this is part of the same process unfolding within our parent institutions as they are brought in line with market forces under neoliberalism. The process is uneven: in some areas the process of real subsumption began before the formal subsumption was completed in other areas. The process of commodification of library work radically transforms both the work that we do, our relationship to that work, and the social relationships within which the work is performed. The cause of the crisis is not—as per Buschman—a lack of a unified identity or position, but rather the fundamental material disruption of the conditions of production in which library workers are engaged.

Formal and Real Subsumption in Libraries

To demonstrated the uneven way in which subsumption has taken place in libraries, I want to look at the history of catalogue cards, MARC, and online library systems. These interrelated technologies demonstrate, in my view, the three processes at work in subsumption (cooperation, machinery, and large-scale industry). According to Henriette Avram, the Library of Congress (LC) began to investigate automating its catalogue-card production processes in the late 1950s[33]. By the mid-1960s—that is as the Fordist/Keynesian regime of accumulation was entering the period of crisis that would lead to neoliberalism—LC was reviewing various automation initiatives:

32 Endnotes: 140.

33 Avram, Henriette D. *MARC: Its History and Implications.* Washington: Library of Congress, 1975: 3. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED127954.pdf

> During this same period, motivated by the increasing attention given to automation in libraries, CLR [Council of Library Resources] awarded a contract for a study of the possible methods of converting the data on LC cards to machine-readable form for the purposes of printing bibliographical products by computer.[34]

The **Ma**chine-**R**eadable **C**ataloguing (MARC) pilot project took place between 1966 and 1968, and the MARC distribution service was launched in 1969. Avram sums up the benefits of MARC and its distribution service in the following manner:

> Although the primary advantage of the distribution service is considered to be the cost savings resulting from the centralized cataloguing and from centralizing editing and transcription of machine-readable records, another byproduct of MARC is often overlooked. It is impossible to estimate the resources (people and time) saved by national and international organizations implementing automated systems through the use of MARC publications… thus, through the efforts of a dedicated LC staff, significant cost savings have been effected throughout the world.[35]

Here we have an explicit acknowledgement that the three processes involved in subsumption (cooperation, machinery, and large-scale industry) have increased the productivity of labour. The centralization of resources is both cause and effect of increased division of labour within library work; the automation of process is seen as a core means of increasing labour productivity; and economies of scale contribute to cost-saving across the industry. We must also take note how the language of commodity production (cost-saving) takes priority over the kind of "professional" concerns identified by Buschman, record-quality or local control, for example. David Harvey has described the process whereby social actors get drawn into the language of commodity exchange, are forced to be "shamelessly market-oriented because that is the primary language of communication in our society". Harvey argues that even though "market integration plainly carried with it the danger of pandering to the rich and private consumer rather than to the poor and public needs"[36], we are powerless to resist such integration. In the case of the Library of Congress, we have a clear example of a public institution drawn into the logic and language of market integration.

Subsumption did not proceed evenly from the mid-1960s onwards, however. The automation of catalogue-card production as an act of only *partial* subsumption, somewhere between the formal and the real, for MARC provided an automated way to produce cards that were the same as those produced by hand; the artifacts and the processes associated with them (filing them in card catalogues, search processes, etc.) remained unchanged. I suggest that this phenomenon of partial or incomplete subsumption is characteristic of technological development within librarianship. The partial nature of subsumption in one area leads, however, to the transformation of labour in another area. Karen Coyle, in her book on the Functional Requirements of Bibliographic Records (FRBR), described how the need for an online library catalogue grew out of the backlog in filing MARC catalogue cards at University of California. Considerations of cooperation were also important in this development. As Coyle writes,

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 14-15.
36 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*: 77.

> The primary motivators for that catalog were the need to share information about library holdings across the entire state university system (and the associated cost savings), and to move away from the expense and inefficiency of card production and the maintenance of very large card catalogs. At the time that the library developed the first union catalog, which was generated from less than a half dozen years of MARC records created on the systems provided by the Ohio College Library Center (later known solely as OCLC) and the Research Libraries' Group's RLIN system, the larger libraries in the University of California systems were running from 100,000 to 150,000 cards behind filing into their massive card catalogs. This meant that cards entered the catalog about three months after the book was cataloged and shelved. For a major research library, having a catalog that was three months out of date, and only promising to get worse as library staffing decreased due to budget cuts, made the online catalog solution a necessity.[37]

Here we see the combination of cooperation, technological innovation, and the need to cut costs, all combining in a change to the process of labour taking place within an academic library. The processes of subsumption take place in increments, unevenly across library systems, but they have a single goal: the increase of first absolute then relative surplus-value produced by the library system. One the results of these processes, of course, is to reduce the amount of human labour required, automating away library jobs. Marx calls the ratio of human labour to raw materials and infrastructure the organic composition of capital, and argues that capitalists always seek to reduce the amount of human labour, because they see in labour not the source of their profits, but as the most expensive part of their capital outlay. Indeed, once automated and online library systems became large business concerns in the late 1970s and early 1980s, staff complements in cataloguing departments began to decline:

> The years from 1983 to 2000 witnessed a decrease of 46% in the hiring of cataloguing professionals. These hiring reductions, coupled with technological advances, have caused many cataloguing departments to shrink.[38]

This process continues today, of course, with the prevalence of precarious or voluntary positions taking the place of full-time permanent positions which were more widespread during the period of the post-war consensus that ended with the advent of neoliberal labour discipline in the 1970s. 1983 was the year of the first Dynix implementation, joining a growing number of proprietary software vendors that continues to be part of the library ecosystem. It is no coincidence that the interest of private capital in library work developed alongside the subsumption of library labour under capitalist conditions of production.

This network of private corporations looking to profit from public funds is a major component in the integration of public institutions into commodity exchange and the market. In his discussion of capitalist modernization, Harvey writes that

> the common material languages of money and commodities provide a universal basis

37 Coyle, Karen. *FRBR, Before and After: A Look at our Bibliographic Models* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2016): 51.

38 Boydston, Jeanne M.K. and Joan M. Leysen, "Observations on the Catalogers' Role in Descriptive Metadata Creation in Academic Libraries", *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 43(2), 2006: 11. https://doi.org/10.1300/J104v43n02_02

> within market capitalism for linking everyone into an identical system of market valuation and so procuring the reproduction of social life through an objectively grounded system of social bonding.[39]

Put simply, the more we "do business" with library vendors, the more our own processes, values, and views conform to the market logic of profit-making. It is through this process of bringing public institutions into the discipline of the market, of subsuming labour under capitalist relations of production, that we can best understand the feelings of crisis that plague librarianship. Take, for example, the problem of credentialism and (de-)professionalization. On the librarian side, we have fear of competition—from both new graduates and non-degree holders—competition which might drive down wages and benefits, but which also leads to a reduction of agency and an increase of alienation in our work. Our response is typically protectionism: calls to reduce the number of graduates, or to protect professional positions. But protectionism always fails against the inexorable process of capitalist rationalization and innovation (i.e. technological change and the real subsumption of labour). On the supply side, the inflation of the number of qualified graduates and the creation of alternative degrees within library schools attest to the schools' own subjection to market forces, commodification, and subsumption. The commodity relations into which they are now forced by university administrations require that they, like libraries, "prove their value". Under neoliberalism, such proof can only take the form of commodity exchange value: tuition dollars for degrees. "Success metrics" like student satisfaction are there to ensure that the flow of tuition dollars remains secure.

In this question of professionalism and credentialism, we can clearly see the double bind of capitalist relations. The library degree becomes signifier of the value of professional labour, an indicator of the investment made by the student-entrepreneur in themselves, which is all the value the employer needs to recognize. Concerns within the profession around diversity, treatment of non-degree holders, gatekeeping, etc., stand for nothing against the power of the "cash nexus" which is all that now connects us both within the profession and in society at large.

The double bind consists in this: that whether we try to resist or embrace technical innovation, we make ourselves more attractive to private capital. If we are slow to change, there is more profit to be reaped by our modernization; if we are at the cutting edge, then the profitability of our commodities is higher. Whether we try to dismantle professional power imbalances or we try to protect them, we end up further enmeshed in the logic of labour and competition. There is no way out of the double bind short of changing the entire system of production and the social relations that arise from it. In order to truly change the nature of librarianship and the social relations in which we find ourselves, we must fundamentally change the way labour, production, and social life are organized.

I don't think there are any easy solutions to this problem. The kernel of the double bind is, to my mind, located within the dual nature of the commodity itself. If, as Harvey insists, "access to, and control over, information, coupled with a strong capacity for instant data analysis, have become essential to… corporate interests", if "knowledge itself [has become] a key commodity, to be produced and sold to the highest bidder, under conditions that are

39 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*: 102.

themselves increasingly organized on a competitive basis"[40], then we must be suspicious of any solution or act of resistance that does not deal with the commodity question. Any act of resistance or progress must be analyzed with a view to whether it draws us further into the network of commodity relationships. It will take time—the revolution cannot occur overnight—but only by abolishing the commodity form itself can we free ourselves from the social relationships which maintain and reproduce the culture of crisis that afflicts not only libraries, but capitalist society itself.

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40 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*: 159-160.

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