Theory as a Material Force: Marxism and the Challenge of Academic Librarianship

A version of this paper was originally presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL) in Regina, in June 2018, that is, on Treaty 4 territory. Treaty 4 was signed in 1874 between the Cree and Saultaux First Nations and the Crown, partly as a way for John A. Macdonald to push through the construction of the railway; and Regina is where Métis leader Louis Riel was tried and executed after the Battle of Batoche in 1885. It was the railway that allowed the federal government to transport troops quickly to Fort Qu’Appelle, en route to the sites of the North-West Resistance. What is significant here, from a Marxist perspective, is the material foundation of all of these events: the physicality of resistance, the construction of the railway, the transportation of troops, the execution of Riel. It is out of these material forces that history is made. We must not overlook, in our discussions of community, diversity, and education, the violence that played such a large part in the creation of what is currently called Canada, a violence that many would like to ignore or forget.

Class Struggle in the Terrain of Librarianship

In proposing this talk to CAPAL, I have to admit I had some misgivings. I wanted to talk about the unquestioned, invisible monopoly of liberalism in librarianship. However, the charge of a lack of theoretical diversity tends to be heavily used by arch-conservatives, conspiracy theorists, flat-earthers, mens’ rights activists, the alt-right, and many other groups antithetical, I believe, to the values of “community, diversity, and education” that informed the 2018 CAPAL conference. Furthermore, as a member of the most over-represented demographic in most Western contexts, I was concerned about adding yet another white man’s voice to the discourse of librarianship. On the other hand, I possess power and privilege within the profession, power and privilege that come from the combination of race, gender, tenure, and academic freedom that are unequally

distributed across librarianship. There is a contradiction between being able to speak and having a responsibility to shut up and listen; a contradiction which has material causes and cannot be overcome merely through recognition and acceptance. The contradiction cannot be eliminated until the material reasons for it are abolished³.

What decided me in favour of presenting this talk was a sense that what is underrepresented in library discourse is what Louis Althusser called “the class struggle in theory”⁴, by which he meant not class struggle restricted or limited to the theoretical, but philosophy as an arena of class struggle. In other words, what is needed are interventions within theoretical work that are explicitly class-based and political. Rather than our oft-professed neutrality, class struggle in the terrain of librarianship requires that we take sides⁵. Indeed, in his introduction to Lenin and Philosophy, Fredric Jameson describes Althusser’s project as a denial of the neutrality of philosophy as such, “argu[ing] against a conception of philosophy as an autonomous realm of systems that evolve in time, and rather as an intervention into theory, and in his own case, as the intervention of class struggle and partisanship into theory”⁶.

The connection with library discourse should, I think, be clear, but what has any of this to do with the themes of the conference: community, diversity, and education? I want to address each of these themes in turn, but I want to start, first of all, with the state of library theory as it stands now.

The State of Library Theory

In the 1920s and 30s, librarianship made the switch from being a technical profession to seeing itself as a social science. Under the influence of people like Max Weber and Karl Popper, strict positivism was being adopted throughout the social sciences, and librarianship wanted to partake of the prestige of ‘scientificity’ that empirical methodologies and worldviews entailed⁷. It was in

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⁶ Althusser, op cit: viii.
⁷ For a survey of this development, see the complementary articles by Michael H. Harris: “The Dialectic of Defeat: Antimonies (sic) of Research in Library and Information Science,” Library Trends 34(3), 1986: 515 – 531 and
this period that “librarianship” became “library science”, later to become “library and information science”. This split was bound up, of course, with questions of gender, as men adopted the mantle of “library scientists” and women were relegated to the roles of ‘the faceless and exploited nonentities of the library community’⁸. In many ways, the coexistence of the Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS) and CAPAL is evidence of the enduring nature of the methodological dichotomy (if not, one hopes, the gendered one) in the field.

At the same time, however, that the transition from technical proficiency (or “library economy”) to social science was taking place, a younger generation of librarians was taking issue with the technical, instrumental (“value free”) focus of library work while also rejecting the abstract values of library science. Their agitation led first to the Library Bill of Rights in 1939⁹ and then to the Social Responsibility Round Table thirty years later¹⁰. Eventually, this tendency led to the current landscape of critical practices that includes PLG¹¹ and Critical Librarianship¹².

The positivist, scientific focus of librarianship adopted in the 1930s was part of a move away from the humanism of earlier librarians¹³ towards the kind of instrumental rationality critiques by Frankfurt School Marxists like Horkheimer and Adorno¹⁴. In his book on documentation, for example, Ron Day draws a distinction between the humanist, hermeneutic view of books and documents held by Martin Heidegger, and the instrumental use of documents to answer research questions exemplified by Paul Otlet¹⁵. Otlet’s position is essentially the instrumental view of resources or “information packages” we still hold in academic librarianship today. Heidegger’s position, which Day argues was superseded by Otlet’s, involved the close-

¹⁰ Ibid., 51-57.
¹¹ A good introduction to the PLG focus is Alison Lewis (ed). Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian (Library Juice Press, 2008).
¹² In addition to the many online resources, a good survey of Critical Librarianship can be found in Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale, The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship (Library Juice Press, 2018).
¹⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique can be found in Max Horkheimer, Critique of Instrumental Reason (Verso: 2013) and Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments (Stanford University Press, 2007).
reading and reciprocal engagement between reader and text that is a hallmark of hermeneutics\textsuperscript{16}, and which today we tend to associate mainly with the humanities.

Otlet, on the other hand, saw documents as being, essentially, works that contain facts, there to be consulted to answer questions. This view is predicated on a one-sided view of research as the marshalling of facts as evidence, and it is this approach which has survived and become dominant in academic research libraries, reaching its apotheosis in evidence-based research and practice, with its emphasis on systematic- and meta-reviews and its open appeal to “scientific rationality”\textsuperscript{17}.

Essentially, what Day describes is the antinomy between empirical or positivist modes of research and other modes we might variously describe as phenomenological, theoretical, etc. The fact that a simple antonym for “positivism” in research is so hard to come by marks, I think, the very dominance which positivist empiricism holds not only as a mode of enquiry but as an epistemological principle in advanced capitalism.

I will return to this point below, but I want to take a moment to point out that other disciplines display the same tension. International Political Economy (IPE), for example, “has tended to be divided into those scholars who focus upon empirical research questions in order to understand the dynamics of actors within the international system, and those who prefer to focus upon an ontological enquiry into its historical evolution”\textsuperscript{18}. IPE however, has achieved a certain modus vivendi (in fact a dissensus), the two approaches complementing each other rather than competing. I think the rise of Critical Librarianship offers an opportunity for such a theoretical situation to come about in librarianship, but at the moment we do not have it.

My own experience of performing academic research has been informed not only by this empirical-theoretical antinomy, but by an early (perhaps too-early) exposure to both Marx and Nietzsche. As members of what Paul Ricoeur has identified as a ‘school of suspicion’\textsuperscript{19}, Marx

\textsuperscript{16} For a critical Marxist discussion (not to say dismissal) of Heidegger and hermeneutics as literary theory, see Terry Eagleton, \textit{Literary Theory: An Introduction} (University of Minnesota Press, 2008): 53 – 64. For a more nuanced discussion, see Fredric Jameson, \textit{Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature} (Princeton University Press, 1971).

\textsuperscript{17} Andrew Booth, “The Un teachable in Pursuit of the Unreadable?” \textit{Evidence Based Library and Information Practice} 1(2), 2006: 51.


\textsuperscript{19} Ricoeur referred to a “hermeneutics of suspicion” shared by Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, which is “not an explication of the object, but a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises”, in \textit{Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation} (Yale University Press, 1970): 30; the term ‘school of suspicion’ is from
and Nietzsche made me extremely doubtful of the claims of empirical research to transparent, value-free knowledge – a position which put me at odds with what I saw as the hegemonic view of research in librarianship. In my undergraduate and MA research, I employed what Day calls the hermeneutic approach to research, and which I would probably call “philological”: the marshalling of texts woven into a new text to support a position I had come to through prior reflection and consideration. Day describes this process as “argumentative rhetoric using cited texts for close reading and exegesis”, as opposed, for example, to the process of “critical appraisal” used by EBLIP, which I see as a direct descendent of Otlet’s instrumental approach and librarianship’s claims to scientificity dating from the 1930s.

For Day, the distinction between the instrumental and hermeneutic approaches also breaks down along disciplinary lines. He writes, for example, that

The contrast between science and humanities scholarship, when it does exist today, at least in terms of hermeneutics, is between documents as containers of information, which are consulted for the information they representationally contain, and texts, understood through close readings and a type of understanding that involves both a bridging of hermeneutic horizons and a critical and sometimes formally performative questioning of their topics by the style of these very texts.

Anyone who has spoken with humanities faculty about the rise of ebooks should recognize this situation. To my mind, the instrumental use of information – information science, if you like – is bound up with the classical liberal ideology that underpins industrial capitalism, as well as the drive to technological innovation and domination over the earth that is one of the prime mechanisms of capitalist accumulation. There isn’t room to go into this idea here, but I wanted to make this point explicit before moving on to address the three themes of this year’s CAPAL conference.

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22 Booth, op cit.
The hegemony of “embedded liberalism” in librarianship – positivism, instrumental reason, efficiency, and scientficity – that requires, I think, the kind of partisan interventions Althusser called for24. The unquestioned social, methodological, and political presumptions of our profession, which I tend to sum up under the name “liberalism”, are all predicated on an exclusion of the political itself. Drawing on the work of Max Weber, library theory is often understood as (at least aspirationally) “value-free”25. It is from this presumption that librarianship gets its perennial bugbear “neutrality”. Weber’s position was essentially that the scientist as scientist should not involve personal beliefs in scientific investigation. In an institutional sense science should be independent of social and political commitments.26

This view – that any kind of activity can and should be “independent” of social and political factors is precisely the view critiqued and rejected by Marx and the subsequent body of Marxist theory. In the 1857 “Introduction” to the Grundrisse, Marx critiques the view of 18th century economists that society is made up of individuals with no social ties who simply choose to come together for a common benefit. For Marx, the starting point is society itself; to conceive of people outside a social context is as absurd as conceiving of a language without at least one other person to speak and hear it27. As with language, we are born into a society; people speak a language or live in a community which comes before us and which we learn as we grow up. The political economy of Smith, Ricardo, and Proudhon sees socio-economic categories and phenomena as having no relationship to the social history that gave rise to them. For Proudhon, people propose socio-economic relationships to each other and are free to enter into them or not. Marx’s response is to demonstrate that we are born into particular socio-economic relationships – particularly classes – that determine and constrain our freedom. On the other hand, with the support of Weber and others modern scientific investigation, including information science and neoliberal economics, tries to maintain the fiction of independence from social and political commitments. Partisans – including Marxists – counter the charge that they are not “remaining”

24 Indeed, as Paul Blackledge argues in Marxism and Ethics, it is precisely the partisanship of Marx’s political project that validate’s Marxism’s ethical position.
26 Ibid., 337.
neutral by pointing out that neutrality, when it is not outright hypocrisy, is no more than a comforting fiction hiding repressed and uninterrogated social and political assumptions and positions.

From this perspective, then, theoretical diversity must challenge the hegemony of liberal, positivist epistemologies and methods. But this is only the beginning, because it is precisely the exclusion of the social and political that creates homogeneity and erases diversity in a larger sense. As Marie Hicks has argued, a lack of diversity is not accidental and it is not ahistorical:

Computing’s early beginnings as a feminized field presaged specific gendered labor hierarchies in peacetime – ones that put computing work at the bottom of the white-collar labor pyramid until the rise of technocratic ideals in the 1960s that reshaped the expectations and status of machine workers. Far from merely being artifacts of wartime pressures that appeared suddenly and disappeared with the coming of peace, these labor patterns defined British computing and its possibilities throughout the twentieth century, gendering the edifice of the technological state.28

In North America, the “gender flip” in computer programming and STEM more generally was due to “scientificity” having an unquestioned bias towards white, college-educated men in the math and engineering departments. As Miriam Posner has written, “The bearded savant of computer science lore only emerged as the field professionalized and gained prestige… And it emerged in order to push women out of programming as men moved into what had originally been female jobs”29. The same process took place in “library science”, which drew a distinction between the scientific work of men like Dewey and Otlet and the day-to-day work of keeping the libraries running, performed mainly by women. Indeed, the very value-free neutrality of library science made it difficult to challenge this state of affairs.

Another way value-free scientificity leads to a lack of diversity can be seen in contemporary work on algorithms being done by Safiya Noble and others. In Algorithms of Oppression, Noble writes that

while we often think of terms such as ‘big data’ and ‘algorithms’ as being neutral, or objective, they are anything but. The people who make the decisions hold all types of values, many of which openly promote racism, sexism, and false notions of meritocracy.\textsuperscript{30} 

Perhaps the clearest expression of this kind of phenomenon in librarianship are the issues surrounding Library of Congress Subject Headings. Critiques such as those by Hope Olson\textsuperscript{31} and Sanford Berman\textsuperscript{32}, as well as work currently being done to address these issues, such as the “Decolonizing Description”\textsuperscript{33} project, are necessary interventions into library theory and practice from a position that questions and often rejects scientific objectivity and value-neutrality. This critique of the unacknowledged values inherent in value-free research and practice from a partisan position in solidarity with oppressed and exploited peoples are vital to efforts to diversify the profession, if diversity is to be something more than just “bullshit”\textsuperscript{34}, but a real strategy of including all those who are currently marginalized or excluded. Indeed, Noble exhorts us to this kind of critique when she writes:

\begin{quote}
We have to ask what is lost, who is harmed, and what should be forgotten with the embrace of artificial intelligence in decision making. It is of no collective benefit to organize information resources on the web through processes that solidify inequality and marginalization.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

I would argue that this dynamic of exclusion pre-dates the digital, pre-dates the advent of what we might call algorithmic capitalism and has its roots in the turn to positivist scientific methods that purport to remain – just like the so-called “meritocracies” they serve – independent of social and political concerns and allegiances. In my view, the extension of artificial intelligence into

\textsuperscript{31} Hope Olson, \textit{The Power to Name: Locating the Limits of Subject Representation in Libraries} (New York: Springer, 2002).
\textsuperscript{34} Jane Schmidt, “Innovate This! Bullshit in Academic Libraries and What We Can Do About It”, Opening Keynote, CAPAL 2018.
\textsuperscript{35} Noble, op cit., 14.
decision-making domains is simply the latest stage in the (futile) attempt to separate human values from political processes.

**Education**

The process of interrogating, demystifying, and – hopefully – overcoming the unquestioned social and political assumptions in our work is, to me, the very definition of education. For education to really be a leading out (ex-ducere) of ignorance, the first step must be to recognize the necessity of critical enquiry especially in areas that claim to have no social or political stake. For the student, nothing can be too sacred to interrogate, nothing should be taken at face value. However, with this we come up against the difficult problem of ideology. Knowledge and values are not transparent, they can’t be comprehended directly directly, but only through such mediations as language and texts. As well, ideology places an additional obstacle in the way of the construction, interrogation, and evaluation of knowledge. To return to Althusser, we can understand ideology as the way people represent the contradictions of the world to themselves in order to allow them to understand their position within it\(^\text{36}\). In Althusser’s analysis, children at school don’t just learn whatever is in the curriculum. “Besides these techniques and knowledge, and in learning them, children at school also learn the ‘rules’ of good behaviour… and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination.”\(^\text{37}\) The library, in this respect, is like a school; is an apparatus of ideology. Its function is to inculcate in its members the proper ideas and attitudes towards information, knowledge, social structure, political institutions, etc. The emphasis may differ between academic and public libraries, with the former aimed at producing ideologically sound graduates ready to take on managerial and administrative duties; the latter aimed at the very real discipline and respect for property required by capitalist relations of production. “In other words,” Althusser writes, “the school (but also the other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches ‘know-how’, but in forms which

\(^{36}\) Jameson characterizes Althusser’s understanding of ideology as “a representational structure which allows the individual subject to conceive or imagine his or her lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History”. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981): 30. Jameson later describes ideology as “the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” that exist in the world (Ibid., 77).

\(^{37}\) Althusser, op cit., 89.
ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology*”\(^{38}\). I would add libraries to this list of ideological apparatuses.

Education, then, cannot rely simply on the transmission of facts – the instrumental use of documents, to return to Otlet – but must also rely on the demystification of the real, social, economic, and power relationships within society. A diversity of theory, like a diversity of methodologies, is necessary in order to intervene within the process of ideological reproduction if there is to be a hope of real education in this sense. And even this can only be the first moment in a movement towards real human education described by Freire:

> Education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become Subjects of their educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables people to overcome their false perception of reality [ideology]. The world – no longer something to be described with deceptive words – becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization.\(^{39}\)

**Community**

Community is, I think, really the core issue. In the same chapter on ideology, Althusser asks “what is a society?” In the neoliberal mode, we might quote Margaret Thatcher who, echoing the 18\(^{th}\) century political economists, stated baldly that

> There’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.\(^{40}\)

We are back in the liberal fantasy of people pre-existing society and social relations, people somehow existing outside of society and subsequently choosing to come together. In such a model, there can be no such thing as “community” except in the most superficial sense. The very

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\(^{38}\) Ibid. See also Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000): 73: “The capability of [the banking concept of education] to minimize or annul the students’ creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed.”

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 86.

\(^{40}\) Margaret Thatcher, “Interview for *Woman's Own* (‘no such thing as society’)” *Women's Own*, 23 September 1987.  https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689
depth of the word community is lost in such a view. One of the nuances that is lost is the idea not just of the commons, which is easily recuperated as a regime of private property, but of the commune, of holding social space in common with each other. In preparing to work on the Communist Manifesto, Engels drafted “a communist confession of faith”, which connects the three themes of CAPAL 2018.

What is the aim of the communists?
To organize society in such a way that every member of it can develop and use all their capabilities and powers in complete freedom and without thereby infringing the basic conditions of this society.

How do you wish to achieve this aim?
By the elimination of private property and its replacement by community of property.

How do you wish to prepare the way for your community of property?
By enlightening and uniting the proletariat.41

We have here an explicit connection between enlightenment – education and librarianship – and community. A very specific form of community, to be sure, but one on which a larger and more social form of community is meant to be built. Any intervention of theory into the unquestioned philosophies of librarianship must have such a notion of community – such a social and political concept – at its heart if it is to counter the value-free protestations of positivist science and have any material effect in countering the ideological function of libraries and librarianship in society. As Marx wrote in his critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right in 1843, “the weapon of criticism certainly cannot replace the criticism of weapons”. In other words, theoretical interventions are necessary but not sufficient for the establishment of a community. “Material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses.”42 Here we have, in a nutshell, a Marxist confirmation of the value of the three themes of the conference. “The masses” must be understood, not as a homogeneous bloc, but in all their diversity; to “seize the masses” requires education and theoretical intervention; and the whole aim of the project is to “overthrow the material force” that underpins capitalist society in order to

establish a free and democratic community – with the library and librarianship appropriate to that society – once and for all.
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