In Resistance to a Capitalist Past: Emerging Practices of Critical Librarianship

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In Resistance to a Capitalist Past: Emerging Practices of Critical Librarianship

Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins

Introduction

In previous work, we’ve explored capitalism and neoliberal ideology in relation to oppression and inequalities, how consciousness raising as defined by Paulo Freire and Ira Shor can lead to informed action, and how the intersections of critical pedagogy and core values such as social responsibility, diversity, and the public good, can contextualize social justice work within the practice of librarianship. In this chapter, we revisit capitalism, by examining its inextricable historical connections to the proliferation of libraries and the growth of librarianship as a profession in the United States in the late nineteenth century. We find that the rise of capitalism and the “efficiency movement” during the Progressive Era (1890–1920) led to a replicating of libraries in the image and model of corporations, and the creation of an educational system that favored practicality and connections to the market, within which we locate historical tensions between theory and practice.

This chapter is neither historiography nor discourse analysis, but perhaps borrows from both. Our goal is to illuminate the economic and ideological contexts from which the library profession in the United States flourished, and has continued to be implicated. Despite the close alignment of American librarianship with a hegemonic economic ideology, there have been critical and

resistant voices within the profession throughout the past century. We urge librarians to continue to resist the conditions and values of laboring within a capitalist system, using critical theory to critique that system and to embrace an emergent critical practice that dreams of alternative futures.

The Rise of Librarianship, Capitalism, and “Efficiency” in the Progressive Era

The proliferation of libraries and the inception of library science as a field of study and as a profession correspond with the rise of corporate capitalism in the United States. The American Library Association (ALA) was established at a conference in Philadelphia in 1876, organized and attended by library leaders of the time, primarily white middle- and upper-class men, such as Melvil Dewey, Justin Winsor, Charles Ammi Cutter, John Eaton, John Langdon Sibley, William F. Poole, Lloyd P. Smith, and Henry A. Homes, and co-editors of Publisher’s Weekly, Frederick W. Leypoldt and Richard R. Bowker. The first conference indicated an interest in “practical and technical matters” over “philosophical questions,” and in the formative years of professional organizing, librarians upheld the ALA motto penned by Melvil Dewey in 1879: “The best reading for the largest number at the least cost.” This homogenous group of librarians “believed that public exposure to good literature would inevitably lead to a better informed, more orderly society,” reflecting the reformist perspectives of contemporary progressives. In order to staff the expanding public and academic library systems with trained professionals, the first library school, Dewey’s School of Library Economy, opened in New York in 1887 at Columbia College. Tensions between Dewey and the Trustees of Columbia College over the admission of women led Dewey to transfer the school to Albany in 1889 in order to retain enrollment of women students. It was renamed the New York State Library School (NYSLS) and it provided formal training for

2 The first conference of librarians in the United States took place in 1853 in New York City. The Smithsonian Institution’s librarian, Charles Coffin Jewett, ended his presidential address with the hope “that this Convention may be the precursor of a permanent and highly useful association.” No convention, or association, was organized until the 1876 convention in Philadelphia. George Burwell Utley in The Librarians’ Conference of 1853 points to the loss of Jewett’s leadership, the great depression of 1857, and the Civil War (1861–1865) and its aftermath, as events which affected the organization of another conference.


4 Weigand, 13.

5 Weigand, iv.

6 Weigand, 12.
The organization and expansion of librarianship in the United States took place during a tumultuous transition in American history. The Gilded Age (1870–1900), or the period of the “robber baron,” led to an unchecked rise of industrial and competitive capitalism, characterized by wealth acquired through unethical and even illegal business practices. Industrial growth and imperialist expansion during the Gilded Age was aided by invention in communications, agricultural and industrial technologies, and transportation, as well as an influx of immigrant workers. Alan Trachtenberg defines this era in U.S. history as the “incorporation of America,” a period in which “...the corporate form seemed to provide a stage for strong individuals, a field of struggle on which it was possible to entertain an ideology of social Darwinism even while piecing together structures which aimed to diminish risk and submerge the laissez-faire doctrine in cornered markets and controlled resources.”

Incorporation prompted a transition from individual ownership to corporate structures, loose associations of people that act as “a single entity which might hold property, sue and be sued, enter contracts, and continue in existence beyond the lifetime or membership of any of its participants.” Such incorporations enabled the individual and familial dynasties that live on today: Carnegie, Morgan, Rockefeller. During this same historical period wage-labor came to define the working class, as it did around the globe in industrializing nations. Wage-labor was accompanied by strikes and lockouts, of which there were nearly 10,000 in the 1880s alone, ushering an intensification of the organization of labor.

The Progressive Era (1890–1920) is a period characterized by reform, as well as the intensification of American (corporate) capitalism. According to Martin J. Sklar, the emergence of corporate capitalism was evident

9 Trachtenberg, 83.
10 Trachtenberg, 87.
11 Trachtenberg, 89.
12 The intensification of corporate capitalism takes place in congruence with socialist ideas and labor organization, and aided by the administration of the state, rather than simply the free market: while "the new liberalism was heavily influenced by socialism, its prime thinkers sought to chart of middle way between individualism and statism, between competition and cooperation, and between innovation and stability," The intensification of corporate capitalism happens through increased regulatory structures of the state, where regulation attempts a “middle way” of both buttressing capitalism (avoiding recurring financial crises) and addressing the needs of wage labor (work conditions, social programs, preserving public spaces, etc.). Richard Schneirov, "Thoughts on Periodizing the Gilded Age: Capital Accumulation, Society, and Politics, 1873–1898," Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era 5, no. 3 (2006): 222.
not in advancing or retarded rates of growth, productivity, unemployment or profit; not in income shares, prices, debt, trade balances, monetary standards, or credit conditions; not in technologies of scale, market size, or market access; not in cycles of prosperity and depression; although all these were subordinate parts of the story and were invoked as reasons by contending movements for and against affirming corporate capitalism. The explanation lies, rather, in the empirical record of the social relations within and among classes, the modes of consciousness, and the social movements, comprising, and relating to the capitalist mode of production at the time.\textsuperscript{13}

In response to the Gilded Age a social “efficiency” movement formed, also described as “an efficiency craze,”\textsuperscript{14} that affected all aspects of life, and which sought to organize society after the upheaval of technological innovation, a series of economic depressions since the Civil War, and growing disparity between the wealthy and wage earning working class. The “efficiency movement” and ascent of scientific management (or Taylorism), sought to provide solutions to wasteful activity in divergent sectors of society such as finance, governance, education and ministry. For example, the Conservation Movement (1890–1920) and its embrace of efficiency was a response to wasteful exploitation of natural resources, and played a role “in the transformation of a decentralized, nontechnical, loosely organized society...into a highly organized, technical, and centrally planned and directed social organization which could meet a complex world with efficiency and purpose.”\textsuperscript{15} The movement enabled the development and preservation of public land and national parks, but it was nevertheless in service to the growth of corporate capitalism and the efficient management of natural resource exploitation. Efficiency in the form of governance during President Theodore Roosevelt’s tenure (1901–1909) led Roosevelt’s advisors to rebel against waste and exploitation caused by “unrestricted economic competition.”\textsuperscript{16} They sought to replace competition with regulation, arguing that this “would not only arrest the damage of the past, but could also create new heights of prosperity and material abundance for the future.”\textsuperscript{17} Thus efficiency in the Progressive Era, as it pertained to


\textsuperscript{16} Hays, 266.

\textsuperscript{17} Hays, 266.
economic development and governance practices, was not averse to large-scale corporate business but rather sought to regulate it.

Parallels may be drawn between the incorporation of American business, the adoption of scientific management (organization, standardization, and management of resources) and the gospel of efficiency in the development of the library profession. Specifically, libraries were often compared to businesses and encouraged to aspire to the model of corporations. Additionally, librarians’ success was often couched in terms of efficiency, and library training and education was designed to be practical and to create efficient, pragmatic workers, who were often underpaid (undervalued) women.

The Corporate Ideal

In the first issue of the *American Library Journal*, published in 1876, Melvil Dewey wrote an article titled “The Profession,” where he referred to the library as an educative force in the community that worked in tandem with schools, in which the librarian would lead “his pupils” from “good to better” reading, to teach them to “select their reading wisely” and to “largely shape the reading, and through it the thought, of his whole community.”

The educative mission of libraries remains a central and vital role in supporting an informed citizenry. Yet, Dewey also compared the library to a business:

> The time is come when we are not astonished to find the ablest business talents engaged in the management of a public library. Not that we have less scholarship, but that we have more life. The passive has become active, and we look for a throng of people going in and out of the library doors as in the markets and the stores.  

Linking education with business is a problematic narrative, because it reduces interactions between librarians/library workers and patrons/community members to mere transactions in a marketplace (the kind of banking model of education that Freire, many years later, would caution educators against). And yet, according to Bernd Frohmann, locating librarianship within the market was exactly what Dewey intended:

> Dewey’s goal — the deliberate creation of a specific professional “commodity” that librarians could offer, be seen to offer, and be valued for offering — complied more fully with forces of production in the service of a rapidly accelerating consumer culture. He spoke of commodities and

19 Dewey, 6.
markets, realizing the issue was control of a new mass market for a specific kind of educational service.\textsuperscript{20}

Francis Miksa refers to Dewey’s reliance on organizing librarianship in relation to the “means of production and distribution, marketing and revenues” as “the corporate ideal.”\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, further examination of the language Dewey used to describe libraries and librarianship supports the idea that Dewey saw business practice as the ideal for the organization and practice of librarianship. Susan Maret and Ben Eagle trace the history of customer language in libraries, identifying the effect Progressive Era values of efficiency had on the language of the profession, and suggest that the “use of customer language is not only a policy issue, but reflects political questions of the deepest kind.”\textsuperscript{22} Referring to our patrons as customers “challenges how we think of libraries and the individuals who support them.”\textsuperscript{23}

Dewey’s focus on efficiency, on the mechanics and mechanization of library work, was met with some resistance among early leaders of librarianship.\textsuperscript{24} Namely William Frederick Poole, Justin Winsor, Charles A. Cutter, and William I. Fletcher, all of whom served as previous presidents of the American Library Association (ALA) before Dewey’s service in this same position, felt Dewey’s “conception of efficiency to be an assault on the scholarly image of librarianship.”\textsuperscript{25} In 1886, Fletcher criticized the role of the library as an “embodiment of the labor-saving, time-saving and superficial spirit of the age.”\textsuperscript{26} Criticism of this same nature also arose outside of the United States, most popularly in the words of prominent British librarian, James Duff Brown, who stated in his text, \textit{Manual of Library Economy}, that American libraries were “conducted on lines which closely resemble those of ordinary commercial practice, in which everything is subordinated to the furtherance of profits and economy.”\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{23} Maret and Engle, 30.
\bibitem{24} See Dee Garrison’s \textit{Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876–1920} and Wayne Weigand’s \textit{The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876–1917} for an in-depth discussion of the politics within ALA and elsewhere.
\bibitem{25} Dee Garrison, \textit{Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876–1920}, 2nd ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 143.
\bibitem{26} Garrison, 144.
\end{thebibliography}
The exploitation of women’s labor further connects libraries to a capitalist commercial practice. At a 1877 conference of librarians held in London, Justin Winsor explained the value of women’s work in America’s wage-labor economy: “they are equal to our work, and for the money they cost—if we must gauge such labor by such rules—they are infinitely better than equivalent salaries will produce of the other sex.” Dewey also believed that women would “usually have to accept something less than men...on account of her sex.” His belief that men’s labor was worth more than women’s labor was widespread and reflected by the practice of paying men more for the same work, as well as in the division of labor in libraries, which awarded men with top, administrative positions. Most libraries were governed by white “male-dominated boards” who “thought it wiser to hire men as directors.” The narrative that women were not suitable for managerial positions was shared even among practicing women librarians. For example, Frances B. Hawley, in a speech to library students at Pratt Institute School of Library Science in 1904, told her audience to recognize that “at the very top there is no room for us. We may become as logical, as business-like, as executive as any man...we cannot produce the same results as a man of equal ability.”

The model of efficiency provided by the business world, including the value of educating and employing women at lower cost, pervaded all aspects of American life, not just the Dewey vision for libraries. Businesses provided a model of success that could be imitated, and efficiency became a “standard” of “professional competence.” A business model “allowed focus, less demandingly, on process over purpose. It was much the surer thing to prove a library had reached more people or had circulated more books, one year...

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to the next, than it was even to suggest that the library had transformed individuals or their communities.”

This focus on “process over purpose” which pervaded libraries can also be found in the early educational efforts to professionalize librarians.

**Theory and Practice: “At the Risk of Falling between Two Stools”**

American formal education of the time was also affected by efficiency-minded progressives, leading to pedagogical tensions. James Elmborg identifies tension “between various kinds of learning. Practical learning for common people was designed to help them get jobs” and “liberal learning,” which was designed to help people become more fully developed as human beings.”

Elmborg further connects these two kinds of learning to “administrative progressives” and “pedagogical progressives,” or learning for employment vs. student-centered learning. Practical learning is clearly the mission of administrative progressives, who emphasize “practicality, efficiency, and standardized testing and placement.” This is the kind of learning that is tied to the market economy, “to commerce and industry” (and what looks eerily similar today as neoliberalism in higher education).

It should be no surprise then, that in the formative years of the profession, library education would mirror the same tensions occurring in the broader educational movement. In this case, we see tensions between librarians espousing practicality and those urging for a theoretical and philosophical approach to library work. Indeed, several library scholars have examined the years in which library education formed, noting the focus on practical work “to the almost complete exclusion of the theoretical.”

The early tension between theory and practice is evident in the development of the first library schools, specifically, between Melvil Dewey, the ALA, and Mary Salome Cutler Fairchild (Dewey and Fairchild served as Director and Vice Director, respectively, from 1887–1905) in relation...
to curriculum matters at the New York State Library School (NYSLS). Library historian Wayne A. Wiegand in *Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey*, describes how Fairchild’s “Reading Seminar” was criticized by the “ALA committee assigned to monitor the library school...for emphasizing ‘theoretical teaching rather than practical work.’” In 1890, Fairchild described the seminar as a “place to air pet theories” and further, in 1897–98, that the seminar encouraged students to approach book annotations “practically as well as theoretically.” According to Wiegand, Fairchild valued librarians trained to be knowledgeable, because of the books they have read, and hospitable, insofar as they knew/understood the communities they served as opposed to “men’s stereotypical orientation toward commerce and management.” Indeed, Fairchild’s resistance to such an orientation was shared widely in a public address in 1895, in which she blasted the ALA motto, “The best reading for the largest number at the least cost,” as “smack[ing] of arithmetic and commerce.”

A marked difference in the pedagogical preferences between Dewey and Fairchild can be found in the reflections of student Isabel Ely Lord, NYSLS class of 1897, who describes Dewey as “giving us in terse, vigorous, staccato phrases, practical directions and ideals.” Her description of Fairchild is quite different, remarking on “her insistence on a philosophic, an ethical, and an economic basis for our work, her never-failing sense of justice...it was all of these that made the largest influence of the New York State Library School.” According to Lord’s reflection above, it was Fairchild who inspired women training to become librarians to think more deeply about the implications of their work for their communities, and the historical and cultural contexts of their work.

In 1901 Dewey embarked on a revision of the NYSLS’s curriculum, which prompted the NYSLS Alumni Association to send a questionnaire out to its members. Among others, the following question was posed:

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41 It is not our intention to cover the complex history of library education in its entirety here. Please see White (1976) and Vann (1961).
43 Wiegand, 207.
44 Wiegand, 208.
45 Wiegand, 208.
46 Wiegand, 207.
48 New York State Library School, 50.
If you could take your library school education anew, would you choose to have more time spent on technical training and in practical work?... Or, on the other hand, are the technicalities given too much attention at the expense of inspirational training, or of the learned, the theoretical, and the historical side of librarianship?  

Although alumni responses indicated that theoretical and philosophical content was valued in the curriculum, Dewey largely ignored this, and in 1901, the *Handbook of the New York State Library School* was issued, urging for a curricular focus on “practical subjects.” Soon after, several philosophical and/or theoretical-minded courses were dropped for more practical ones, including Fairchild’s “Reading Seminar” for “Selection of Books.” Practical matters which supported visions of efficiency prospered. Dewey’s crusade for practicality, for “applied efficiency,” in libraries meant an emphasis on mechanical work rather than on the humanistic qualities of librarianship.

This complicated relationship between two kinds of learning is further exemplified in the preface for *Classification: Theoretical and Practical* by Ernest Cushing Richardson, Librarian at Princeton University, who explains that his invitation to deliver a series of lectures for the NYSLS Alumni Association served two purposes:

on the one hand from a representative of the school who wished something on the philosophical order, which should be a contribution to the theory of library science, and on the other hand from a representative of the alumni who wished something very practical. The lectures are the result of an attempt to meet both wishes even at the risk of falling between two stools.

Richardson further explains that a “true librarian” would consider both the theory and practice of their profession, and that “the most highly philosophical treatment...has important bearing on progress in the most

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50 Weigand, 209.
51 Weigand, 210.
54 Ernest Cushing Richardson, *Classification*, v.
practical details of the art” of librarianship. Describing theory and practice as “two stools” which one could fall between illustrates the divide, or the separation of opinion among librarians during this time period, between those who favored theory, and those who favored practice; a kind of practice which, in most cases, served to completely exclude the theoretical. Tensions between theory and practice continue to persist in current library literature and discourse.

**Historical Context, Continuity, and “Incipient Directions of Society”**

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian critical pedagogue Paulo Freire explains the importance of considering historical context. Human beings “simultaneously create history and become historical-social beings” in their production of “social institutions, ideas, and concepts.” This transformative process leads to “epochal units” which “are not closed periods of time, static compartments within which people are confined. Were this the case, a fundamental condition of history—its continuity—would disappear. On the contrary, epochal units interrelate in the dynamics of historical continuity.”

Thus, examining our historical context can lead to a greater understanding of our present. And the ideas and concepts that we formulate in our present may shape the future. Freire asserts that the ideas and concepts of each epoch are “in dialectical interaction with their opposites,” and that domination is “the fundamental theme of our epoch...which implies its opposite, the theme of liberation, as the objective to be achieved.”

In the transition from the Gilded Age to Progressive Era, “dialectical interactions” regarding labor and exploitation, efficiency, a corporate ideal, and educational tensions between practicality and theoretical concerns, are evident in the historical record of librarianship in the United States. During this time, libraries and librarianship were closely aligned with corporatist capitalism: female workers were exploited as cheap labor, Andrew Carnegie’s philanthropy created public libraries that served to develop a well-disciplined labor pool and reproduce elite culture by providing the “best reading” to uneducated and lower economic classes, and practices in vogue with business were adopted. Standardization, mechanization, and efficiency permeated

55 Cushing Richardson, vi-viii.
58 Freire, 101.
59 Freire, 101.
60 Freire, 103.
not only business operations but also educational efforts for the purpose of creating a skilled workforce.

Despite a record of reproducing domination, historical records also show that there were and have been librarians who labored in resistance to this kind of reproduction. Even in the early years of the profession of librarianship in the United States, librarians advocated for the importance of a more theoretical education, and a move away from the consumerist and managerial language and processes of capitalism in libraries. Some preferred to view the library as a space for education and liberation outside of the “superficial spirit of the age.”61

Examining our past in relation to capitalism raises our awareness of historical and economic contexts within which our practice still occurs. Many of the ideas and concepts briefly discussed in this essay—such as efficiency, the corporate ideal, the tensions between theory and practice—have endured, in some form, into our present, supporting Freire’s idea of historical continuity. We continue to labor within complex structures of power, which suggests the usefulness of a practice informed by critical theory, to better critique these structures, and to form an opposition that liberates and resists.

Although the enduring sense of critical and criticism has been that of fault-finding and judgment, Raymond Williams notes that critical “has another specialized but important and persistent use,” that of a “turning point.”62 For Ted Striphas, in considering the critical in critical/cultural studies, “[c]ritical thus refers to a specific—often oppositional—mode of engaging with social facts, but it also refers to a clinical mode of speculating rigorously about the incipient directions of society.”63 and for Henry Giroux, critical theory “contains a transcendent element in which critical thought becomes the precondition for human freedom” and “openly takes sides in the interest of struggling for a better world.”64 When considering Williams’ and Striphas’ definitions of critical together with Giroux’s statement on the purpose of critical theory, critical librarianship should provide the possibility of both critique and development of incipient, or “emergent” values, which direct our profession toward an open struggle for a better world. What practices are emerging, and

61 Garrison, Apostles of Culture, 144.
64 Henry Giroux, Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 19.
what practices do we hope to create, to resist complex structures that are increasingly dehumanizing?

Emergent Practices in Resistance to Capitalism

Even while libraries, and models of education, have been restructured in the image of neoliberal values since the 1980s, there have been resistant voices. For example, the formation of the Progressive Librarians Guild in 1990 was in response to “our profession’s rapid drift into dubious alliances with business and the information industry.”65 and feminist librarians such as Roma M. Harris, Jane A. Hannigan, and Hilary Crew, called for a feminist anti-capitalist practice of librarianship: a practice that resisted privatization and professionalization66—a critique not unlike Mary Salome Cutler Fairchild’s regarding a masculine practice focused on commerce and managerialism, ninety years later. Librarians continue to warn of the damaging effects of capitalism and neoliberalism on the values that libraries work to support.67 These practices demonstrate a willingness to imagine libraries, library workers, and library communities in resistance to a continued alliance with, and reliance on, capitalist regimes.

Karen P. Nicholson notes information and library science (LIS) scholars have illuminated the library profession’s adoption of corporate strategies as well as desires for alternatives; a look back at the birth of librarianship as a profession in North America confirms that “contrary to their self-proclaimed ‘radical’ outlook, calls for libraries to change according to corporate values and models are neither unprecedented nor


revolutionary.” Given our origins were deeply embedded in corporate capitalism of the Progressive Era, it is not surprising that libraries and librarianship have continued in association with capitalist ideologies such that our “preoccupation with accountability and return on investment” aligns perfectly within current neoliberal philosophy. What we need are more and amplified voices within the profession seeking alternatives, for “acceding to economic models as a public philosophy results in an active deconstructing of the public sphere discourse that libraries represent.” We see the profession in an emergent moment in which a growing number of librarians are encouraging each other to resist normative structures and dominant ideologies, and to support social responsibility and community building, rather than the market.

Critical librarianship moves us from critique to a transformative practice. Instruction librarians who engaged in critique of ACRL’s Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education and the recent Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education are transitioning to critical practices for teaching information literacy and library research. Librarians are moving from critique to critical practices in other areas, as well, such as supporting open access publishing projects like Lever Press, a consortium of forty liberal arts college libraries publishing open access, digitally native, peer reviewed scholarly monographs; turning away from privatized and corporate owned systems for collaborative open-source alternatives; advocating for teaching critical theory in library schools; cancelling or refusing to subscribe to exploitive publications; fighting for wage parity and equity for library workers; developing collections beyond the canon; providing social spaces in order to facilitate the commons, a “shared

69 Nicholson, 330.
social space where real people engage in real struggle for meaning and purpose…and social change.”\(^73\)

Thus, we identify emerging practices of critical librarianship as resisting capitalist conceptions of library work, neoliberalism, and other dominant ideologies and complex structures which serve to oppress. Critical librarians are “refract[ing] back into the heartland of neoliberal and neoconservative capitalism a completely different set of values: those of an open democracy dedicated to the achievement of social equality coupled with economic, political, and cultural justice.”\(^74\) In effect, critical librarians are resisting a capitalist past (and the present consequences birthed from this historical context) and seeking liberatory alternatives.

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Bibliography


The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship


