Stephen Bales. *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2015, 194pp., \$35.00.

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In his 1992 paper, “Dead Germans and the Theory of Librarianship,” Sidney Pierce criticizes academic programs in librarianship for their relative lack of focus on internal, core theorists when compared to other disciplines (such as sociology’s Karl Marx and Max Weber) and calls on the profession to educate students about its own internal intellectual forebears.

Stephen Bales, too, is adamant about the need for a more theoretical foundation to librarianship, but in his new book, *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship*, it is to the classic “dead Germans” that he instead turns. Drawing on the writings and ideas of Marx, Weber, Friedrich Engels, and Karl Mannheim, Bales articulates a coherent and accessible (but at times overly elaborated) Marxian dialectic aimed at identifying, situating, and challenging what he sees as the largely unrecognized neoliberal excesses and hegemonic tendencies of the contemporary academic library.

The humanities and social sciences librarian and assistant professor at Texas A&M University, Stephen Bales is an accomplished scholar with a doctorate in communications and information and an extensive publishing history that focuses on issues of professional identity and progressive responses to social challenges. His writing, while extremely erudite, is also highly readable, making what could easily have been intimidating theoretical content very approachable.

For Bales, the academic library is not (and should not be seen as) a static, solely physical and independent repository of books and journals but must instead be understood relationally, as a dynamic institution embedded within and functioning as a significant part of a neoliberal, late-capitalist society—what he calls the “modern capitalist academic library” (MCAL). The “ultimate reality” of the academic library is, according to this view, “the material interaction of both mental concepts and physical objects as they mesh together in human culture and history as a material presence” (p. 23). In both embodying and reproducing the social relations of a neoliberal society, the MCAL is driven by the “market,” and its students are “consumers” largely focused

on achieving—preferably in as short a time as possible—an education that can respond efficiently and profitably to neoliberal priorities.

To assist the critical scholar, (or as he puts it, the “analyst,”) in naming and hopefully countering these forces, Bales advocates the use of dialectical approaches. As the study of continuously transforming inter-relationships, dialectics emphasizes the transactions between material entities over time, recognizing that these entities and their inseparable ideological foundations are bound by and within their contexts and historical circumstances. The MCAL and its transactional processes are therefore always incomplete, always in the process of becoming, and, taken together, understood as constituting a unified whole—a philosophical stance known as monism.

By contrast, the conventional view of the academic library, one with which librarians, administrators, and recent library-school graduates may be more familiar, is correspondingly non-dialectical, rational, bureaucratic, and viewed dualistically—that is, separate and distinct from other institutions and forces. It is also, he argues, problematically devoted to the uncritical acceptance of a number of “Big-T Truth” ideals, such as democracy, equity, diversity, and intellectual freedom—abstractions with which the materiality of the MCAL is at present not necessarily synonymous.

Bales cites Ranganathan’s *Five Laws of Library Science*, for example, for its particularly bourgeois conceptions of individuality, private ownership, and efficiency. As well, the widespread institutionalized orientation to an abstraction such as “diversity” disguises that term’s origins in and dependence upon the socioeconomic arrangements of contemporary capitalism, making it therefore incapable of recognizing (let alone addressing) the structural sources of the problems it is intended to address, such as racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. “Lifelong learning,” too, may sound like an intuitively positive and benign service goal, but in the non-dialectical library it will not be understood for what it so often is: a rationale for continual retraining to serve the human-resource needs of the global economy rather than the aspirations of the individual.

The academic library thus conceived has, according to Bales, “an ambivalent relationship with change” and can both drive societal transformation or contain and thereby delay it (p. 5). Absent a dialectical understanding of the MCAL, he argues, library scholarship and practice are ill equipped to contextualize our institutions, collections, and services—and indeed our ideological foundations. The political economy of information, the ideological foundations of knowledge organization, the inter-sectionality of race, class, and gender within an increasingly interdependent society and how these forces play out in geographical space—all these factors and

more are difficult to discern and act upon non-dialectically, rendering our profession less capable of recognizing its support of an unjust neoliberal status quo.

Bales builds this argument in seven chapters over a lean 154 pages. He begins by introducing his dialectical conceptions of the MCAL, which he then contrasts with the conventional (non-dialectical) view of the academic library. This is followed in chapter three by a lengthy overview of dialectical materialism. This content, which is rather overlong and for the better part of 20 pages contains few explicit references to libraries, might have been more effective had it been truncated and situated earlier in the book, so that the reader had a grounded understanding of Bales's preferred theoretical perspective early on. Chapter four situates the MCAL in terms of its ideological and hegemonic roots in classical civilizations, in terms of supporting what Harold Innis called "oligopolies of knowledge" in empires, but, rather disappointingly, Bales chooses not to carry this analysis into the West's medieval, Renaissance, imperial, Enlightenment, and industrial periods. Instead, he focuses on the MCAL's role in Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses (or ISAs): conservative institutions that provide "ideological scaffolding" for the larger institutions of state, including the church, and a safe means to "vent" tensions arising from sociocultural contradictions within the state (p. 109). According to Althusser, ISAs use non-coercive means to foster acceptance of and consent to a society's political and economic superstructure; Bales suggests that the MCAL performs this role as a primarily educational institution (which Althusser saw as dominant ISAs under capitalism), but one also imbued with cultural, communications, and religio-mythological ISA functions and which reproduces dominant capitalist values as it prepares students to take their place in a neoliberal society.

In chapter five, Bales depicts his normative ideal of the "counter-hegemonic academic librarian," who, because she works in full awareness of the dialectical and monist MCAL (Bales adopts female pronouns throughout), is able to counter its hegemonic tendencies by working in full awareness of her professional role as a "functionar[y] of the neoliberal state" (p. 128). These politically conscious librarians reject the notion of professional neutrality and instead "*actively work[] to alter these underlying social relations by means of [their] professional labors,*" with the ultimate goal of shifting the MCAL away from its conservative roots (p. 137, emphasis in the original).

In chapter six, Bales posits what a counter-hegemonic response to key emerging library issues would look like, citing as examples both the transition to open-access journals and the potential for our paperless dependence on databases to lead to a "digital dark age" in which current and past formats are no longer readable by future technologies. He points out that the first of these qualitative transformations to our work has been anticipated by library professionals, while the latter potential

crisis appears to have been foreseen by librarians “intuitively aware” of dialectical principles and who “have begun initiating change to countermand the digital dark age as a result of this intuition” (p. 146).

Chapter seven concludes with a reiteration of his case for dialectical materialism, for seeing the academic library as being forever in process of becoming, so as to support his normative goal for the profession to “maintain humanity’s knowledge welfare by working to eliminate their alienation from information and knowledge” and thus “transform society in a progressive fashion” (pp. 153–4). Finally, in a 12-page appendix, Bales provides a helpful annotated and classified bibliography to introduce the uninitiated reader interested in counter-hegemonic work to core literature on dialectical materialism from within and without librarianship.

For all its theoretical and discursive thoroughness, the book suffers from a sense of incompleteness, and not only because its author admits that it is but a “point of entry” into a broader discussion (p. 152). Given the brilliance of what precedes, the concluding two chapters are rather disappointing and get us no nearer to moving beyond critique. The transition to open access, which Bales describes in chapter six as the sort of issue that could be addressed dialectically, has surely been accomplished by most academic libraries without any reference whatsoever to dialectical materialism, while his suggestion that the issue of the digital dark age is being “intuitively” addressed dialectically comes across as rather dubious. Some real-world examples of how the author’s ontological approach to academic libraries might be practically applied to effect change regarding a particular issue would have helped enormously.

As well—and as if to underscore just how difficult his prescriptions likely are in practice—Bales himself appears to fall into a non-dialectical, objective idealist trap of his own making, when in chapter seven he promotes dialectical librarianship as a path towards “progress” as well as “equality and freedom” (pp. 153–4): three very “Big-T Truths” offered without dialectical qualifications of any kind.

These limitations do not diminish Bales’s accomplishment, however: his critique is both important and necessary and should be required reading for practitioners and LIS students planning a career in the academy. In situating our institutions dialectically and in challenging us to rethink our professional dedication to abstractions—even seemingly unquestionable ones, such as intellectual freedom and diversity—he has provided a lens by which we can become much more thoughtful and deliberate in our practice.

REFERENCES

Pierce, S. J. (1992). Dead Germans and the theory of librarianship. *American Libraries*, 23, 641–43.