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The profession of librarianship has long contended with an inherent tension between its dedication to bringing order and the recognition that systems of order inevitably generate social injustices, whether or not by design. In response, progressive librarians have organized themselves around issues of intellectual freedom and racial equality—notably with the 1969 creation of the American Library Association (ALA) Social Responsibilities Round Table—while drawing attention to the position the institution of the library holds within systems of oppression. Over the past decade and a half, these efforts, both scholarly and activist, have coalesced under the banner of *critical librarianship*, a praxis that involves taking into account the “historical, cultural, social, economic, and political forces that interact with information in order to critique, disrupt, and interrogate these forces” (Garcia 2015).

Critical librarianship (or *critlib*, as it is often called) represents a wholesale rejection of the value of neutrality, once not only taken for granted in the profession, but also vaunted as a virtue. As Meredith Farkas argues, this rejection is born of the realization that “in a world that is fundamentally unequal, neutrality upholds inequality and represents indifference to the marginalization of members of our community” (Farkas 2017). The influence of critical librarianship is being increasingly felt online, especially through the Twitter discussions regularly held since 2014 under the #critlib hashtag, and at conferences, a recent example being the ALA 2018 conference in New Orleans which promoted no fewer than 24 sessions as being of interest to critical librarianship (ALA 2018).

Sacramento-based Library Juice Press has been particularly active in promoting critical LIS scholarship. One such recent title is *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, edited by Karen Nicholson and Maura Seale, which collects 14 essays by scholars and practitioners from Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The editors are well-positioned to produce this offering, having
previously contributed to critlib scholarship: Nicholson (University of Guelph), who recently obtained her PhD from Western University, has focused on the role of the academic library and librarians, most recently in terms of the threat of the neoliberal university, while Seale (University of Michigan) has focused on matters of information literacy, race, and gender.

The book’s title, *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, may at first seem an ungainly one, but it does reflect the tensions, addressed in a number of the essays, concerning the degree to which the use of (or need for) theory is accepted among fellow professionals and administrators, when our institutions are far more interested in practical solutions to service problems and measurable outputs. Indeed, it is the reaction on the part of critical practitioners against the neoliberal and dominating focus on instrumentality that underscores the entire project.

The book is organized according to four main themes concerning the intersections of critical theory in workplaces, library schools, and the community, as well as an introductory section situating it as a rejection of what David James Hudson (2017) calls the “practicality imperative,” a concept to which a number of the authors return. The eclectic mix of topics includes the concerns of Indigenous librarians (two essays), systems librarianship, disabilities in the workplace, archival practice, information literacy, the practice of reading groups (also two essays), ‘zines, critlib in the academy and in research, and #critlib as a critical community.

In her forward, Emily Drabinski reminds the reader that theory is something with which we need to be actively engaged in order to disrupt our assumptions, noting her own initial acceptance of a separate “Filipiana” section in a library she visited in the Philippines to house the works of Filipino authors, only to realize later how perverse this was in that local context. Nicholson and Seale's introduction then situates the book in equally explicit racial grounds: following Hudson (2017) they stress that a professional dedication to instrumentality, pragmatism, and practicality is not just unresponsive to injustice, but actively “reproduce[s] patriarchy, neoliberal ideology, neutrality and white supremacy” (5). Their goal in the book is to articulate a dialectic between institutional compliance and critical resistance, though noting that the mainstreaming of critical librarianship within neoliberal and globalized power structures holds its own risks.

The first section, “Librarianship and the Practicality Imperative,” includes two chapters offering valuable historical and theoretical overviews of the field, showing both the origins of critical librarianship in the American progressive era and the profession’s obsession with identifying and uncritically adopting so-called “best practices,” which are rarely examined theoretically. In the second section,
“Theory at Work: Rethinking our Practice,” the emphasis is on theorizing various aspects of the library, including information literacy practices, library systems, and accessibility issues. The third set of essays, “Theory and the iSchool,” considers the transformative potential of liberatory praxis in the academy by problematizing librarians’ relationship with critical theory, their own whiteness and privilege, and their scholarly identities on campus. Finally, in the fourth section, “Critlib and Community,” four essays theorize the practice of critlib itself, asking such questions as: Does the mere ability to be able to theorize about LIS require a position of privilege, making the practice itself elitist? To what extent does or should LIS theory integrate critical theory in general (Marxist, feminist, queer, etc.), when few LIS students are actually exposed to such content in the course of their degrees? Can a critical focus on inequalities and injustices inform quantitative research?

The diverse selections in The Politics of Theory provide an excellent and fascinating foundation for understanding critical librarianship’s implications, applications, and tensions. Contrary to commonly-held assumptions regarding the profession’s “practicality imperative” (Hudson 2017) and the transferability of “best practices,” the authors in this book make abundantly clear that no aspect of the academic library and its operations may be viewed as unproblematic or theory-proof.

However, not all the chapters are as informed by theory as they could have been. The chapter on the Foucault reading group might have been more compelling had it actually related to and referenced Foucault’s ideas; instead, its focus on the authors’ intersubjective experiences and their own trials and errors results in a chapter that is more instrumental than idea-driven. As well, one might quibble with the book’s organization: the two chapters on reading groups are in two different sections based on the groups’ respective locations in the academy and in the workplace, as are two chapters on decolonization and Indigeneity. Essays by Jessie Loyer (Cree-Métis) and Nicola Andrews (Maori) both speak to the Indigenous experience and to trauma, and might have benefitted from adjacency.

As well, it is worth noting that the collection does emerge from an overwhelmingly Anglo-European frame of reference—Loyer’s and Andrews’ Indigenous perspectives being exceptions—and conspicuously lacks voices from the Global South. A sequel volume informed by the professional, scholarly, and pedagogical experience of librarians contending with globalization and the legacies of international extractive colonialism would have even more to contribute to the radical and liberatory potentialities of critical practice.

The editors and authors situate their engagements in terms of diverse settings and constituencies and with relevant LIS scholarship and other critical theories,
providing the LIS scholar and practitioner new theoretical pathways into their own work. In its collective attention to focusing our attention across a broad spectrum of functions and roles in the academic library, *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship* succeeds in interrogating and repositioning long-held assumptions regarding our theories and practices, making it essential reading and offering a rich and promising foundation for further critical theorizing.

**REFERENCES**


