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Bales, S. (2015). ***The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach***.
Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press. ISBN 978-1-936117-89-5.

This book is valuable not only for what it accomplishes, but also for what it strives to accomplish. Bales asks librarians to step back and take a look at the big picture through a Marxist lens, i.e., the ever-changing “modern capitalist academic library” (to use his term) in the context of global neoliberalism. Readers need not be fully conversant with Marxist philosophy to follow Bales’s analysis as he also provides an overview.

A gallery of philosophers populate the book, ranging from ancients such as Heraclitus and Lao-Tze, through Marx, Engels, and Lenin (although Bales distances himself from Lenin’s Soviet period), to Louis Althusser and Paulo Freire. Of particular interest is Joseph Dietzgen, a comparatively little-known contemporary of Marx. In contrast to the base/superstructure division of human society used by Marxists for the purposes of analysis, Dietzgen emphasized the profound interrelationship between the two. That is, the psychological dimensions (e.g., habits of thought, religious beliefs) of the superstructure (which also includes political institutions and the state) are no less significant than the forces and relations of production of the base. Evidently, libraries are essential to the superstructure; Bales notes that they have been targeted for destruction at pivotal moments of upheaval. He also perceptively critiques S.R. Ranganathan’s five laws of library science, the preoccupation of library/information science with narrowly defined, quantitative surveys, and library neutrality.

The best chapter is on ideology and the academic library. Bales provides a succinct history of libraries to demonstrate that, from their origins in antiquity, they have been deeply invested in the established social order. Librarians were temple custodians functioning as a sacerdotal class. The academic library is a descendant of this mythic tradition. Fundamentally, it is a conservative institution. Yet in true dialectical fashion, it is also an arena of resistance and conflict (“an ideological hotbed,” as Bales puts it); indeed, the emergence of critical literature is a symptom of this trend.

Bales urges librarians to become “counter-hegemonic,” i.e., to position themselves counter to the prevailing wisdom that “the world is what it is.” Rather, they should seek to change the world. Their task is to reflect critically on the means by which transformative change can be achieved. The profession’s aspirations for humanity

(Bales points to Michael Gorman's *Our Enduring Values*) are comparable to those of law, medicine, and religion.

In the conclusion, Bales proposes that “academic librarians’ goal, at its most general, is to maintain humanity’s knowledge welfare by working to eliminate their alienation from information and knowledge, an alienation that the MCAL [modern capitalist academic library] has accomplished quite effectively and opaquely” (p. 153). However, the theory of alienation receives relatively little attention in the volume. More discussion should have been accorded to this profound insight that stems from Marx’s early period and for which there is a rich literature.

The book is thoughtfully written and the layout and presentation are quite readable. The appendix—an annotated, topical list of “resources for the counter-hegemonic academic librarian”—is excellent. The bibliography is also thorough. However, there are some proofreading slips in the notes and the index is sketchy (e.g., the Radical Librarians Collective is listed, but not Sanford Berman, Antonio Gramsci, or Bertell Ollman, all of whom figure in the text).

Overall, *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship* is a significant contribution to critical studies in the field. Highly recommended.

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