Book Review


At the very beginning of his essay on Roy Bhaskar, John Budd writes, “[t]he aim here is to demonstrate . . . that [Bhaskar’s] ideas are important” to library and information science, despite rare engagement within LIS (29–30). In his essay on Antonio Gramsci, Douglas Raber admits that “[a] search of LIS literature quickly reveals that [Gramsci’s] work . . . has had almost no influence on LIS research,” and “[s]ince there has not been research along these lines, it is impossible to tell if Gramsci’s thought has influenced library practice, but the odds are good that it has not to any great extent” (151). Will Wheeler writes of Bruno Latour, “[his] theories have been used more or less frequently in the LIS literature, depending on whether you count mere citation, what you count as LIS, and what you consider subjective engagement” (200).

If there is a common theme here, it is that LIS and critical theory may or may not have anything to do with one another. It is difficult to find firm footing, since no one seems to agree on what critical theory is; nor is anyone quite sure what a library is; or information; or science. When we get down to it, the definition of reality itself is up for grabs as much as anything else. *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines* is, as a text, reflective of the general aporia surrounding both critical theory and LIS.

We have to start somewhere, though, and Ronald Day and Andrew Lau provide as good a definition as any for the first part of our title: “critical theory is a product of critical philosophy (a term first used by Kant in his rejection of what he characterized as positive, dogmatic, medieval, and naive empirical philosophies, and his attempt, instead, to articulate the a priori grounds for knowledge, ethical actions, and judgments of taste)” (112).

Critical theory is a sort of reactionary philosophy; its practitioners make it their business to ferret out assumptions, within language, social interactions, economies – wherever humans operate, which is the same as saying wherever there is a system of implicit, tacit knowledge and protocol – and then making those assumptions explicit, questioning them, and, sometimes, coming up with better ways of thinking and operating. Critical theory asks, as Day and Lau put it, how does psychoanalysis, for example, “as a critical (rather than as a strictly clinical) discourse – turn us away from current theoretical dogmatisms in LIS . . . and how does it articulate conceptual problems in these fields in other ways?” (112).
Critical theory goes anywhere. My own introduction was as an undergraduate English major in the context of literary criticism. Foucault, Barthes, Derrida were all talking to me by way of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. This text introduces them via bibliographic control, digital access, and information literacy. Either way works: critical theory is meant as a lens to look at the world – to look at anything involving people and their interactions and assumptions. Critical theory has just as much to say about Victorian novels as it does about picture indexing.

What counts as critical theory is up for debate. Sanna Talja presents a fine discussion of Jean Lave’s knowledge management work – work that is certainly socially conscientious and democratically inclined. But since most intelligent work is aware of its environment and the assumptions that surround it, I wonder how much of Lave’s efforts fall under critical theory, and how much of it is just plain good work.

Martin Heidegger makes an appearance in this volume, and even Ronald Day writes, “Heidegger’s project throughout his œuvre was ontological – or to be more precise, it was a critique of ontology understood within the Western metaphysical tradition” (177). Here we have a philosopher, in Heidegger, who certainly has ties to LIS, who is cited everywhere, from metaphysics to ontology and systems work, and everywhere besides, but comes up far less in critical theory proper (as far as there is proper theory). Critical theory is an amorphous, flexible web of thinking, and newcomers would do well with a patient guide.

Much of the applied theory in this text – as far as there is or ought to be any – is brief, though there are plenty of calls for research. Gloria Leckie and John Buschman explain in the introduction to the text that “major areas of practice [in LIS] conduct a great deal of research that is pragmatic, but highly uncritical. A better understanding of critical-theoretical approaches would serve to sharpen the research lens when we examine problems relating to professional practice and real-world applications” (xii). Lisa Hussey asserts that “[t]he discussion of LIS education can further benefit from a frank and critical analysis of the role of habitus and social capital on LIS education” (50). Statements like these are found throughout the book, and as much as the authors doubt that there is any current linkage between LIS and critical theory, there is just as much enthusiasm for new research and an acquainting of the two fields. Indeed, this text does much to spark discussion, which ought to be welcomed in LIS.

At the very least, this book will expose readers to thinkers and writers they have previously not encountered, or have heard mentioned elsewhere but never engaged (have a free weekend? Try jumping into Derrida; people make careers out of untangling some of these folks), but a knowledgeable guide is necessary. Even unqualified reading of these introductory pieces could mean that some more dense thinkers, or some represented more opaquely in this text, will scare readers away; or that some editorializing in the text is taken as fact.

Some issues require proper framing. Usability issues, collection development questions, bibliographic control – these are all common issues up for discussion and debate in LIS. But other issues – science versus Science; positivism versus subjectivism or relativism or whatever else (if only it were that simple), deserve
more voice, space, and context than they are given in *Critical Theory*. The real effects and applications of where we fall philosophically should be understood and discussed before diving into a critical take.

There are some real gems here. John Budd shines with clear, concise prose and a solid list of references (not a daunting bibliography). Though I found much to disagree with, Budd is not imposing or argumentative. He presents the framework of Roy Bhaskar’s ideas and follows up with some suggested applications. Will Wheeler’s prose is much the same – unassuming, friendly, and immediately interesting. To this point, I had not heard of or read Bruno Latour. At Wheeler’s recommendation, Latour’s name is now in capitals at the top of my reading list.

This is not to slight the other authors of this volume. After all the unpacking necessary to even a cursory understanding of thinkers like Foucault and Heidegger, Budd and Wheeler are almost fun, and I did enjoy their essays.

There is little solid ground in the text of *Critical Theory*, as there is little surety within critical theory and LIS themselves. The text is a reasonable guide to theory and thinkers, with many calls for research and engagement in the context of LIS. There is much more theory than practice here. Depending on the way this book is used, a good guide and a lot of patience could mean the difference between a reader becoming utterly lost and discouraged, and getting excited about these ideas. The danger is twofold: a discouraged reader is one less warm body doing any thinking or talking, let alone research, when it comes to critical theory and LIS, and second, a reader who approaches these issues without context and only from the critical perspective risks reducing these complicated debates without even being aware of it. As with anything, this text should be approached with patience and an open mind.

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