

Globalisation, Information and Libraries: The Implications of the World Trade Organisation's GATS and TRIPS Agreements by Ruth Rikowski. Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2005. 393 pp. ISBN 1-84334-084-4 (paperback), 1-84334-092-5 (hardback)

In her new book, *Globalisation, Information and Libraries: The Implications of the World Trade Organisation's GATS and TRIPS Agreements*, Ruth Rikowski, an information professional and an academic, lambasts the prevailing form of globalization, rooted in the World Trade Organization (WTO), and its two associated agreements, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS), as yet the latest examples of the slow ebbing of the formerly public domain. These agreements were negotiated through the Uruguay Round in the 1980s and 1990s. While GATS introduced sets of multilateral rules to oversee international trade in services owing to tremendous growth in the services sector, TRIPS "introduced intellectual property rules into the multilateral trading system for the first time" (World Trade Organization, n.d.).

Rikowski declares: "...the time has come for a book to be written on this very important topic that still relatively few people know about" (p.3). She argues that GATS and TRIPS are potentially detrimental to the survival of public libraries and to information access in general, since they aim to advance the WTO's neoliberal agenda "by transforming intellectual property rights (through TRIPS) and services (through the GATS) into international tradable commodities" (p.5). In her analysis of these agreements, Rikowski links GATS with a program bent on the commercialization, privatization and capitalization of state funded services, and describes TRIPS as "a significant shift in the balance in intellectual property rights protection that is too heavily in favour of private holders and against the public interest" (p.201).

Throughout her analysis, Rikowski derives much sustenance for her arguments from a Marxist framework, as she believes that globalization and all of its capitalist manifestations are fundamentally composed of sets of contradictions surrounding commodities, value and labor. Towards this end, Rikowski devotes the first part of her book to providing historical analyses of the dimensions, relationships, and structures that have sustained globalization and the WTO's global influence. While there has been much dispute about globalization as a theoretical concept, a basic tenet of Rikowski's argument is that globalization is actually synonymous with "global capitalism", a term she characterizes as "exacerbating international trade; enhancing global knowledge and information flows; increasing reliance on the Internet and information technology; the spread of democracy; and a global approach to norms and values" (p.11). At the same

time, Rikowski argues that while there is merit to these global arrangements as a whole, globalization entails other pernicious features that undermine its more positive contributions to the global community. In effect, globalization is better understood as a set of contradictions. For example, globalization may seem to advocate for the free flow of information, but at the same time may restrict its free flow through intellectual property rights agreements in which information becomes more of a tradable commodity.

Rikowski describes how the features of globalization manifest themselves in four contradictory dimensions. The first is the cultural dimension, acknowledging the world's cultural diversity but at the same time homogenizing different cultures into "one overall global culture" (p.12). The second dimension addresses the erosion of nation-state power "in the face of global capital" as the regulatory capacities of transnational organizations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the WTO have superseded the regulatory capacities of the nation-state. The third dimension reflects what Rikowski has termed "capital's rapid expansion"; a reference to the commodification of individual lives through the encroachment of the market. Rikowski's final dimension refers to the situation where "our labour takes on a particular social form: the value-form" (p.13). She argues in a provocative fashion that this fourth dimension is the essence of globalization since it ensures that the process of labor versus value and surplus is always strengthened to maximize profit.

Rikowski's analysis concludes with a critique of GATS and TRIPS and the potential implications these transnational policies will have for libraries, and information and cultural services. Given that 18 countries have already signed up to commit their library services to some provisions or schedules of GATS through the privatization and outsourcing of such services, Rikowski argues that governments should continue providing public goods and services, especially those that have commercial value and are thus excluded from the public domain via intellectual property rights. She also argues that the concepts of public and private goods have taken on "a new meaning and significance in globalization" (p. 54), but notes that the connection of "publicness" (global public goods) to "private"-leaning globalization is not clear since "the creation of global public goods will only ever really happen when it seems to be in the interest of global capitalism ... the aim of capitalism is to transfer public goods into private goods, i.e. turn all goods into commodities" (p.54, 55).

In the last part of her book, Rikowski returns to her original analyses on globalization, WTO, GATS and TRIPS, and their impact on libraries and information services, using what she calls an Open Marxist theoretical perspective, which she neither explicitly defines nor distinguishes from scientific Marxist theory. However, she relates them to the commodification of public libraries and services, as well as of knowledge, and she strongly believes her

perspective can be a viable solution to malevolent features of globalization. She concludes her book by calling upon the global community to stand up against the WTO agreements, stop global capitalism and substitute it “with a better, kinder, fairer social, economic and political system – to replace it with socialism, and eventually with communism” (p. 338).

Even though Rikowski decries the contradictions of globalization, it seems that her solution to those contradictions itself falls victim to contradictions: she acknowledges that communism has failed, but at the same time argues that “communism really needs to be the accepted world order” (p.297) and that it failed because it existed in only a few countries. Rikowski claims that reforming capitalism should not be an option, but at the same time she acknowledges that “although I am very critical of capitalism, this does not mean to say that I am not also aware of its qualities” (p. 299). Thus she seems to suggest that the good parts of capitalism be adopted while emphasizing development of a scientific/Marxist theory, a task which “can be left to those theoreticians themselves” (p.302). The reader may lose track – but Rikowski assures us that this is just a preliminary analysis and the details will be developed in a subsequent book. If that is the case, then I think raising people’s awareness of the potential negative aspects of WTO-related agreements could have been enough for this particular book (after all, those agreements are open to negotiations by WTO member nations). Also, some sections of the book are important but they lack details (such as the implications of GATS and TRIPS for the audio-visual industry).

Notwithstanding the last part of her book, and the aforementioned limitations, Rikowski has managed to develop her claim and evidence convincingly. It is a must-read account of globalization and its consequences for information professionals, political scientists, policy makers and the general public. It also provides an interesting and provocative starting point for future debates on the subject, in light of such questions as: What are the implications for GATS/TRIPS as it relates to information studies/library studies? Are there valid alternatives to "global capital" forms of globalization? How does Rikowski’s work contribute to our overall understanding of information and information access in our current "global information age?"

References

- World Trade Organization. (n.d.) Understanding the WTO: The Agreements. Retrieved January 26, 2006, from http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/agrm6_e.htm.

Reviewer

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