

Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across Disciplines edited by Gloria J. Leckie, Lisa M. Given, and John Buschman. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010. 326 pp. ISBN 978-1-59158-938-9.

Critical Theory for Library and Information Science claims that information studies and its accompanying professions have largely neglected critical theory and that a more critical–theoretical approach is necessary for correcting epistemological assumptions within the field, particularly those relating to power and social justice.¹ In their Introduction, Leckie, Given, and Buschman cite three reasons for encouraging information studies to engage with critical theory: to oppose further incursion of neoliberal *grand récit* (such as the market or managerialism), to be more in tune with scholarship in other disciplines, and to enable sophisticated responses to current issues facing the field. This volume reflects a trend within information studies that questions the scientific and positivist views that have long dominated the field. It offers alternative methodologies for studying information phenomena, particularly those employed within the humanities and qualitative social sciences. In short, this volume represents an important and reasoned contribution at the advent of critical theory to metatheoretical discourse within information studies. The necessity of its intervention cannot be overstated.

Leckie, Given, and Buschman’s volume introduces readers to a wide range of critical theorists, including such notable thinkers as Roland Barthes, Paulo Freire, Jacques Lacan, Martin Heidegger, Bruno Latour, Jean Lave, and Gayatri Spivak, to name only a few. The volume assembles roughly two dozen scholars within information studies to compile 23 essays, each of which explores the ideas of a particular critical theorist or theorists and the potential implication of their ideas for information studies. Perhaps the most remarkable accomplishment of this volume is the ability of its contributors to offer cogent, clear, and digestible summaries and examinations of complex ideas within critical theory. Each of the essays offers equally intelligible explanations of the potential interventions critical theory can make within information studies; to highlight only a few topics: new ways of thinking about classification and power, correctives to cognitive and psychoanalytic assumptions, a reexamination of everyday life information activities, the examination of social-constructivism on institutions and administration, a reexamination of the role of libraries and archives in the public sphere, and the centrality of representation and the benefit of humanistic methods to understanding cultural institutions. The volume in no way attempts to be a compendious study of all of critical theory’s potential for information studies; instead, it provides a concise examination of the ideas of those theorists who receive attention. That each of the contributors accomplishes such lucidity is not a

coincidence; it surely must reflect the immense skills of the volume's editors. As an introduction to critical theory within information studies, this volume is highly instructive and will prove valuable to a wide variety of scholars and practitioners.

In certain ways, however, the volume does not live up to its potential. Most of the essays are largely formulaic: introduce a theorist, summarize a few of his/her ideas, and suggest ways in which future research within information studies might engage with those ideas. With a few exceptions, the effect of such a formula is to argue persuasively for an engagement with critical theory without doing the work of that engagement in a substantive way. Most of the essays point to future potentials rather than accomplishing the tough work of such critical analysis. Where, for example, in a discussion of the importance of interpretative analysis of representation as a corrective to empirical methods, is such a sophisticated analysis of an object of representation?

One can imagine, of course, that as an introduction, this volume does not seek such a level of analysis; its goal, instead, is only to locate potentiality and to digest such potential in intelligible ways. Perhaps, too, I am responding to a pattern I have noticed of some scholarship in the field to point to the potential of this idea or that, of this method or that, without doing the actual work of undertaking such analysis, of offering, say, humanistic arguments and interpretations. I must immediately acknowledge that this is certainly not true of all critical scholarship within the field, and there are a great many scholars doing the work of critical analysis and humanistic methods. Yet I do question what it means, substantively, to summarize ideas and cite the potential of a particular methodology, rather than to offer the analysis itself. In a certain sense, then, *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science* marks a moment in which the potential for such intervention has been well articulated. Perhaps it is now time to accomplish the work that this volume champions—to begin engaging with critical theory, and its methods, in a substantive way. This volume has shown that critical theory and information studies have a lot to offer each other.

The volume also runs the risk of encouraging what I call “theory stencil”—when one “applies” theory haphazardly, rather than treating theory as an idea that develops out of a particular structure or object under analysis. When one *uses* a theory as a stencil, it becomes merely instrumental, reused repeatedly to create a desired pattern of ideas that get “applied” willy-nilly to any object or structure. Deconstruction is a popular concept that has succumbed to the fate of theory stencil. It has been applied so haphazardly to describe and explain a wide variety of phenomena that its popular understanding has lost its relation to language, the object of its analysis. In their Introduction, the editors do take some pains to address such a problem. They encourage information scholars and practitioners to adapt theoretical perspectives from other disciplines with a critical or complete understanding. Yet a few of the contributors in this volume verge on

the edge of theory stencil by articulating an application of critical theories with situations specific to library science or archival studies, rather than developing concepts in relation to existing theory that might help examine the structure of a particular phenomenon. It might be useful for a book on critical theory in information studies to emphasize more emphatically that theory is never merely applied and to discuss what an adaption of concepts from other disciplines entails.

Finally, I want to suggest that part of a critical-theoretical approach to information studies must include a history of the field in relation to the neoliberal *grand récit*. A few of the contributors to this volume briefly trace such a history, but a more in-depth examination is necessary for understanding some of the epistemological assumptions this book seeks to correct. It might be useful, for example, to understand the evolution of the field from its inception as “library economy” (Melvil Dewey established the first library school, the School of Library Economy, in 1883 in New York), through the time it came to be known as “library management” and, eventually, “library and information science.” Such a history might help us understand what cachet economics, management, and science had (and still have) in the status of the field. It seems to me that such a proto-history of the field has been at least as much neglected as critical theory and should be part of a critical project in information studies.

Space limitations have allowed me to sketch out only the most basic outline of *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science*. Despite some of the quibbles I mention above, this volume is a distinguished work that is well worth reading. Perhaps the highest compliment I can pay to it is to say that one does not have to be theoretically inclined in order to admire it and learn from it.

Note

¹ It should be noted that several monographs, edited volumes, journal articles, and paper presentations that engage critical theory within information studies have steadily appeared over the past two decades. The volume under review is not the first such publication within the field; it merely reflects a trend. Following Ron Day (2006) and Jonathan Furner (2004), one can argue that information studies first engaged critical theory with the publication of Suzanne Briet’s (1951) *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* and Margaret Egan and Jesse Shera’s (1952) “Foundations of a Theory of Bibliography.”

References

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Reviewer

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