

Neoliberalism, individualism, and the perceived value of labor in academic librarianship

Many of the issues surrounding GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) labor problems trace directly back to the neoliberalization project begun in the 1970s, and indeed are still exacerbated by its results today. For LIS (library and information science or studies) in particular, neoliberal policies and frameworks have had an impact on almost every aspect of the field. In recent years scholarship in the field has been more critical of the role of neoliberalism in LIS, but we must continue this analysis if we hope to properly understand these issues and affect change. A number of scholarly works discuss overarching impacts of neoliberalism in LIS, but this paper will focus specifically on neoliberal attitudes and policies towards labor, especially in higher education and academic libraries.

Neoliberalization has its roots in the economic upheaval of the 1970s, when the economic elite - particularly in the US and UK - were concerned by a rising middle class whose economic and political power had only grown in the post-WWII years: “a progressive majority that had been getting expensive and demanding as it lay ever greater claim to the country’s future.”¹ The solution arrived upon by the nervous economic elite and politicians was to wage a subtle but devastating class war under the guise of a culture war.

As has been the case throughout most of modern history, those in power found the easiest way to break down a multiracial progressive middle-class coalition was to use racism and exploit cultural fears. Per Newfield, although the tactics were of a sociocultural nature, “winning the battle over ideology was not the ultimate prize. The ultimate prize was the reduced cost and status of the middle class that the public university created. ...A roundabout way was found to

¹ Newfield, Christopher. *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class*. Harvard University Press, 2008.

downsize the new middle class, and that was to discredit its cultural foundations.”² The most effective method to discredit these cultural foundations was to attack the public good responsible for elevating the middle class in many ways - the public university. By framing public goods and infrastructure like public universities as “entitlements” (in the pejorative sense) rather than rights, politicians and business owners could manipulate many in the middle class to decimate the institutions that helped the middle class to even exist.

The framework of universities as a means to an end - that is, preparing people to be better and *more valuable* employees - draws directly from neoliberalism’s view of everything as a market and humans as “market actors and nothing but...who must constantly tend to their own present and future value.”³ This reduces a student to consumer and producer “who doesn’t have rights but does have choices.”⁴ and faculty, or more likely, adjuncts and short-term contract employees, must be oriented toward those choices and how best to maximize profit - that is, crafting students into better workers, sometimes even in the sense of actually generating revenue for the university through intellectual property rights or similar means.

Part of the way that the state and institutions like public universities implement neoliberal policies and practices is through a policy of governance. Wendy Brown describes how “governance forthrightly aims to substitute consensus-oriented policy formation and implementation for the overt exercise of authority and power through law and policing”⁵. By this she means that governance masks its authority, obscuring itself “through isolating and entrepreneurializing responsible units and individuals, through devolving authority and decision-

² Newfield, Christopher. 2008.

³ Shenk, T. 2015, quoted in Beilin, Ian. “Student Success and the Neoliberal Academic Library.” *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, vol. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 10–23.

⁴ Beilin, Ian. 2016.

⁵ Brown, Wendy. “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics: Wendy Brown.” *Constellations*, vol. 23, no. 1, Mar. 2016, pp. 3–14.

making, and through locally implementing norms of conduct”⁶. One of the ways in which the state asserts and maintains its authority with governance is by managing “debt crises” that the state itself has orchestrated in order to “rationalize the system and to redistribute assets.”⁷ These manufactured crises create a justification for slashing budgets and eliminating jobs; citizens, as market actors, are called upon to sacrifice - whether it be their jobs, or their pensions, etc. - in order to ensure the health of the economy.

This idea of “sacrifice” by citizens is essential to understanding not just neoliberalism writ large in the US, but also the current labor practices in the LIS field. Wendy Brown’s exploration of “sacrificial citizenship” and a “national-theological discourse of moralized sacrifice...required for the health and survival of the whole”⁸ gives us an excellent framework to discuss the concept of “vocational awe” particularly as it applies to the LIS field. Fobazi Ettarh describes vocational awe as “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.”⁹ The traditional religious idea of a vocation as a calling, one that may require its practitioners to live in poverty, is enmeshed in vocational awe in such a way that demanding adequate compensation for one’s labor as a librarian or archivist can almost seem gauche.

Much in the way that teaching is thought of as a self-sacrificing career to better the lives of others with little compensation, so too is the field not just of librarians or archivists but anyone who works in those institutions. If one has found one’s “calling” to serve others, how could one

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2005.

⁸ Brown, Wendy. 2016.

⁹ Ettarh, Fobazi. *Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves – In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>. Posted 10 January 2018.

possibly concern themselves with such earthly or even greedy things as adequate pay? This moralizing framework is “easily weaponized against the worker, allowing anyone to deploy a vocational purity test in which the worker can be accused of not being devout or passionate enough to serve without complaint.”¹⁰ This application of vocational awe functions as an individualizing and rights-denying practice. Along with the idea of “citizen virtue” in regards to sacrifice - virtue that, above all else, is “uncomplaining accommodation to the economic life of the nation”¹¹ - vocational awe leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation by capital. Rather than sacrifice to ensure economic health through union tactics like strikes, that sacrifice is now borne on an individual level through things like slashing of benefits and salaries, short-term contract work, or layoffs.¹²

That individual sacrifice is ensured through the manner in which the state guarantees rights. Harvey writes, “If political power is not willing, then notions of rights remain empty. Rights are, therefore, derivative of and conditional upon citizenship.”¹³ Freedom, in the neoliberal framework, is not “freedom from want,”¹⁴ but rather freedom from regulation - that is, the unrestricted ability to engage with a free market as an individual market actor - and freedom of choice. Under neoliberalism, only those who are willing to be sacrificed for the good of the free market are fully recognized as citizens. Thus their rights do not include to be protected by the state, despite their enmeshment with the economic health of the whole, but rather to freedom, in a seemingly broad but actually very particular sense of the word.

¹⁰ Ettarh, Fobazi. 2018.

¹¹ Brown, Wendy. 2016.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Harvey, David. 2005.

¹⁴ Harvey, David. 2005.

This “freedom of choice” guaranteed under neoliberalism is one of the strongest and most persistent quasi-myths in the US, as well as one of the most indirectly damaging to democracy and collective action. Maura Seale notes that “dominant discourse within librarianship, as well as in broader society, tends to elide distinctions between different varieties of freedom and so consumer choice becomes synonymous with democratic choice, and freedom in the market becomes democracy.”¹⁵ This elision provides cover for neoliberalism’s weakening and dismantling of unions under the guise of individual choice, as well as the explosion of short-term contracts and low-wage jobs based on the “flexibility” of workers. The neoliberal insistence on freedom of choice assists in deepening the pre-existing American tendency towards individualism and weakening collective action, as well as helping to mask negative outcomes from neoliberal policies.

Through practices like governance, externalizing costs, and cultural attacks, the neoliberal state undermines public goods and infrastructures at the same time as using them to deflect criticism and obscure the source of unpopular outcomes like rampant inequality or debt. “To ensure that these outcomes of neoliberal policies and institutions are removed from the dominant discourse, the media, schools, and other ideological institutions are utilized to hide and distort the true impact of neoliberalism,” Daniel Saunders writes.¹⁶ Politicians and the economic elite can point fingers at institutions like public universities when forced austerity measures (implemented due to debt crises manufactured by neoliberal policies) result in negative outcomes like student debt, reduced services, or job loss - the responsibility for these outcomes is shunted as low down the ladder as possible in order to protect capital and the upper classes; Brown refers

¹⁵ Seale, Maura. “The Neoliberal Library.” *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*. Library Juice Press, 2013, pp. 39-61

¹⁶ Saunders, Daniel B. “Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education in the United States.” *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, Aug. 2010, pp. 42-77.

to this technique of holding the individual accountable for both their own failure and the failure of the whole as a “bundling of agency and blame”¹⁷. With public institutions underperforming as a result of these austerity measures imposed upon them, the neoliberal state can enact further cuts by referring back to this underperformance as justification for defunding or privatization. Thus, a cycle of defunding and underperformance is set into motion and one of the major tools to break this cycle - organized labor - has been weakened or destroyed.

Neoliberalism plays off of this tension between strong individualism and responsibility for the whole as a means of undermining any sort of collective power that may attempt to form:

A contradiction arises between a seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire for a meaningful collective life on the other. While individuals are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose to construct strong collective institutions (such as trade unions) as opposed to weak voluntary associations (like charitable organizations). They most certainly should not choose to associate to create political parties with the aim of forcing the state to intervene in or eliminate the market.¹⁸

Again, we see this very specific definition of freedom that neoliberalism prescribes that focuses on the rights of the individual at the expense of the whole. American culture has always been enamored of the strong, individualistic, “boot-strapping” identity and has infused that identity into its particular brand of capitalism; neoliberalism has only exacerbated it in order to restore and maintain class power for the elite.

Neoliberal ideas and practices manifest in the LIS field and discourse in ways that are both mirrored in wider society and in ways that are particular to LIS. Within LIS literature and scholarship, there is often the risk (and some would argue habit) of “the uncritical adoption of ideas that seem authoritative and obvious.”¹⁹ Neoliberalism’s appeal to expertise and hierarchy

¹⁷ Brown, Wendy. 2016.

¹⁸ Harvey, David. 2005

¹⁹ Seale, Maura. 2013.

can often too easily find a home in LIS language and structures. Seale notes, “These [neoliberal] ideas of better service, increased access, more choices, and greater freedom are powerful, and strongly resonate with the core values of librarianship (ALA, 2004),” thus their easy integration into the LIS field. From the public library as site of Americanization and cultural inculcation to the role of librarians as educators and custodians of information, librarianship - like other social and governmental institutions - “plays a role in creating and sustaining hegemonic values.”²⁰ The hegemonic values in most cases today are those of neoliberalism; we see this in the valorization of LIS labor-as-vocation and, as will be discussed in short order, in the idea of “professionalism,” the reactionary nature of universities to budget cuts and the LIS field to library-as-business, and the commodification of information.

Professionalism, in the context of LIS, has many connotations and histories. Viewed within the framework of neoliberalism, professionalism can be used as “a powerful form of social control,” notes Howard Zinn. Zinn continues on to describe professionalism as an “*almost-total* immersion [in one’s job], because if it were total, we would be suspicious of it. Being not quite total, we are tolerant of it, or at least sufficiently confused by the mixture to do nothing.”²¹ This mirrors the difficulty of naming and describing neoliberalism - and thus imagining life otherwise - because of its diffuse and changeable nature and practices. Invoking a nebulous ideal of professionalism can also be used to stifle any swing towards “politics” within one’s work; numerous debates have taken place (particularly over the past few years) in the LIS field about this supposed ability to separate one’s job from one’s politics. This ability, of course, is predicated on the assumption that one’s work is inherently apolitical or, as many LIS

²⁰ Ettarh, Fobazi. 2018.

²¹ Zinn, Howard. “Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest.” *The Midwestern Archivist*, vol. II, no. 2, 1977, pp. 14-26.

practitioners would like to or do believe, “neutral.” The corollary assumption is that “part-time commitment to political involvement...assumes a basically just society,” as articulated by Zinn.²² The championing of professionalism in LIS can be seen both as a means of ensuring job security (ideally, although this doesn’t always work) as well as an embrace of neoliberal economic structures and practices.

The development of professional organizations and standards within LIS has been an effort to not only elevate the field status-wise - once a job largely entrusted to women, more and more men have entered LIS, especially at the management level, and have sought to raise the occupation’s perceived integrity and standards - but also to assure job security through specialization. This tension between professionalism as a safeguard against neoliberal employment practices and as a tool of neoliberalism itself is particularly apparent in university libraries. On the one hand, there has been a massive increase both in short-term contract labor in university libraries and archives as well as non-faculty support staff throughout academic institutions, due to universities either embracing the model of or being forced to operate as businesses. The increase in support staff leads logically to “increased managerial control of faculty,”²³ thus further solidifying the university-as-corporation model. On the other, professionalism can be used to bolster some worker rights, such as intellectual freedom, which will be discussed later.

Running universities as profit-making enterprises is the epitome of a neoliberal vision of higher education. Within a capitalist framework - in other words, the overwhelming economic and political discourse throughout US history - higher education has “always served the interests

²² Ibid.

²³ Slaughter, Shelia and Gary Rhoades. “The Neo-Liberal University.” *New Labor Forum*, no. 6, Spring-Summer 2000, pp. 73-79.

of capital and the ruling class” through “the vocalization of the curriculum, corporatization of governing boards, and the focus on marketable technologies”²⁴; neoliberalism’s rise has simply strengthened and emphasized these capitalist practices. As Nicholson notes, “under the new capitalism, worker empowerment, participation in corporate culture, and the inculcation of corporate values have become a *business strategy*, a new soft-touch hegemony.”²⁵ This strategy also exists in the world of higher education within the neoliberal university paradigm.

This “soft-touch hegemony” manifests itself a variety of ways. One of these ways is through “transformational discourse in academic libraries,” which Nicholson asserts “is based on the flawed and reductive binary model - ‘innovate or die’...”²⁶ This type of misleading transformational discourse is a common feature in neoliberalism, particularly in the technology and labor sectors (and most often where those two sectors meet). Universities “innovate” labor practices such as eliminating full-time positions and replacing them with short-term contracts in the name of “flexibility.” “Flexible specialization,” with its “asymmetries of information and power,” per Harvey, “can be seized on by capital as a handy way to procure more flexible means of accumulation.”²⁷ That is to say, flexible in the sense of job precarity - if the health of the market demands the outsourcing of labor or cutting jobs entirely, it’s much easier for universities to accomplish this with short-term contractors rather than full-time, unionized, and/or tenured workers.

This hegemonic soft-touch business strategy is also embodied in the management of universities. It’s become more and more frequent over the decades, particularly as public

²⁴ Saunders, Daniel. 2010.

²⁵ Nicholson, Karen P. “The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change.” *College & Research Libraries*, vol. 76, no. 3, Mar. 2015, pp. 328–38.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Harvey, David. 2005.

universities have been forced to turn to private funding due to federal- or state-level budget cuts, that trustees and board members at the highest levels of university administration are pulled directly from the business world. Many of these selections have little to no experience in higher education but are deemed valuable or appropriate choices because of their business expertise and/or ability to procure funding.²⁸ This inexperience or unfamiliarity with university functions and purposes has created an ever-widening “gap between what high-level management (especially at [the University of California Office of the President]) thinks and what front line people actually do,”²⁹ as is evident in the ongoing union negotiations between the University of California and its librarians, as represented by the UC-AFT union.

UC librarians have requested that the University of California recognize their right to academic freedom³⁰, which UC affirms for faculty, lecturers, and students, but has decided is “not a good fit” for library units.³¹ Michael Meranze wonders whether this is a result of the administration not knowing “what librarians actually do at the university”³² - perhaps an overly charitable interpretation, considering UC’s support for academic freedom among other units in the university system, and the fact that the existing MOU (memorandum of understanding) refers to librarians as academics - or if the UC’s refusal to guarantee the protection of academic freedom is an attempt “to restrict the professional claims and status of librarians in order to gain greater control over their activities.”³³ This possible - perhaps even likely - attempt to

²⁸ Saunders, Daniel. 2010.

²⁹ Meranze, Michael. “UC, Librarians, and Academic Freedom ~ Remaking the University.” *UC, Librarians, and Academic Freedom ~ Remaking the University*, 28 Aug. 2018, <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2018/08/uc-librarians-and-academic-freedom.html>.

³⁰ Brennan, Martin. “Academic Freedom and Copyright Ownership Bargaining Proposal.” *UC-AFT Librarians Blog*, 24 Apr. 2018, <http://ucaftlibrarians.org/2018/04/24/academic-freedom-and-copyright-ownership-bargaining-proposal/>.

³¹ Meranze, Michael. 2018.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

“deprofessionalize” librarian positions within the university is in fact not an uncommon tactic within neoliberal institutions. Tami Oliphant and Michael B. McNally document a similar situation within the Library and Archives of Canada, wherein a neoliberal restructuring and implementation of a “draconian employee *Code of Conduct*”³⁴ has restricted librarians’ and archives workers’ freedom of expression: “It deprofessionalizes them in two ways: they are unable to fulfill their obligation to guarantee access to information; and they are unable to express unpopular or unconventional ideas and opinions in their own practice and workplace.”³⁵ This move to strip workers of their professional rights can be seen being played out again and again under neoliberalism as a way to induce labor precarity and reduce labor bargaining power. Whether it’s simply out of misunderstanding of the actual work being done or as an attempt to destabilize collective worker power, tactics like these are part of the university’s arsenal of reactionary measures to budget cuts and neoliberal policies.

Higher education has been put on its heels in terms of obtaining adequate funding for decades now; neoliberalism, “debt crises” and forced austerity have put universities always on the defensive. Christopher Newfield, in his analysis of the “unmaking” of public higher education in the neoliberal era, notes, “With the partial but continuing privatization of public universities, the market [has] become the medium and the message. Administrators [look] to private funding to solve the problems that the ascent of private over public funding helped create.”³⁶ This cycle keeps universities always on the hunt for more outside funding and for new ways to slim down their expenses, which almost always means finding ways to obtain cheaper labor. Positions are cut, full-time becomes part-time, part-time becomes short-term contract

³⁴Oliphant, Tami, and Michael B. McNally. “Professional Decline and Resistance: The Case of Library and Archives Canada.” *Radical Teacher*, vol. 99, May 2014, pp. 54–61.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Newfield, Christopher. 2008.

without benefits. Newfield urges universities and states to operate from a position of offense, rather than operating reactively, and to “fund public higher education at the levels required by their full educational missions - missions that must again come from concrete educational aims rather than from reactions to permanent austerity.”³⁷ Newfield also emphasizes that this budgetary-seeking strategy must “be tied to reversing the growth...of academic permatemps [positions],” and that instead of “trimming their labor standards to fit their budgets, public universities need to seek the budgets that will uphold their labor standards.”³⁸

Now, of course, this is easier said than done. Public universities have become large generators of profit for the upper classes even as traditional public funding has been cut or redirected, and it is not easy to reroute that flow of capital from the owners and administrators to the workers. Part of this difficulty is due to the fact that the majority of the capital generated by universities is by way of commodifying and commercializing information. Christine Pawley’s work on the “reification” of information, which allows it to operate as a product, is essential for understanding the landscape of information technology and markets today.³⁹ In its transformation of all interactions and relationships into markets, neoliberalism requires the valuation - ultimately, monetary valuation - of every product, whether that product is a human being or something as ostensibly ephemeral as information. Pawley notes that “for consistent and fair valuation, the products must be susceptible to measurement, standardization, and aggregation”⁴⁰; thus, neoliberalism is highly concerned with these activities as both a means and an end.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Pawley, Christine. “Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling.” *The Library Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 4, Oct. 2003, pp. 422–52.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Pawley also emphasizes that this reification of information as a quantifiable thing - particularly as a supposedly *neutral* thing - helped libraries and their activities to become institutionalized (in the sense of standardization and legitimation), but that it has also led to the “decontextualization of information, obscuring the specific conditions of its production.”⁴¹ This decontextualization not only ultimately devalues the work of trained LIS practitioners but has serious ramifications for the field of information technology as a whole. As Harvey explains, information technology “is far more useful for speculative activity and for maximizing the number of short-term market contracts than for improving production.”⁴² Obscuring the production of information devalues the labor producing and working with it; we can see this vividly in the struggles of technology laborers and LIS workers to secure adequate compensation and even a minimum of job security.

The neoliberal imperative to behave as individual market actors has thus far, both in American society in general and in the LIS field in particular, dominated the discourse and political imagination. There have been attempts to counteract this but, as Zinn reminds us, “let’s resist the characteristically American trick of passing off fundamental criticism by pointing to a few reforms.”⁴³ Continuing to critically investigate and analyze the LIS field’s role in and embrace of neoliberalism is essential to imagining a political, economic, and social reality outside of the neoliberal hegemony. Beyond just scholarly discourse, however, we also need to focus on actual labor organizing. Rebuilding and strengthening unions after decades of attempts to destroy or hobble them is not and will not be easy, but it’s necessary to do so to protect and uplift workers both in and outside of the LIS field. John Budd, as quoted in Nicholson, emphasizes

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Harvey, David. 2005.

⁴³ Zinn, Howard. 1977.

“that the language of consumerism and commodification dominates beyond the sphere of libraries is not sufficient reason to accept it uncritically.”⁴⁴ Neoliberalism has had many years to enmesh itself both globally and in the US as “common sense,” but that doesn’t mean that it can’t be shifted. A critical scholarly discourse as well as on-the-ground organizing can work to open the possibilities for a life outside of the neoliberal framework, and part of that task is to speak openly and frankly about our worth as humans and as workers. Harvey prompts us thusly: “The first lesson we must learn, therefore, is that if it looks like class struggle and acts like class war then we have to name it unashamedly for what it is.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Nicholson, Karen. 2015.

⁴⁵ Harvey, David. 2005.