

Theory as Material Force: Marxism and the Challenge of Academic Librarianship Sam Popowich
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The theme of “Community, Diversity, and Education” is a timely one. In addition to the obvious areas in which the field of academic librarianship falls short of adequate diversity - primarily around gender and race - it also lacks diversity in the area of theoretical approaches. This is especially problematic at the current moment because without rigorous theoretical positions, we often find it difficult to challenge processes that are occurring around us (such as the corporatization of the university, or the dangers of technology), or to justify our own aspirations and positions.

The ideas and work of Karl Marx have been informing pro-labour, egalitarian, community-focused practice for over 150 years, and continues to challenge the dominant socio-economic policies that drive our institutions, including academic libraries. My current research explores the intersection of Marxist political, social, and economic theory with librarianship and technology. In this presentation I will explore some aspects of Marx’s thought which can, and should, be used to bolster academic librarianship in a changing world. Far from being an obsolete or defunct theory, Marx’s thought can give us a rigorous foundation for supporting collaboration, differences, and professionalism, while providing a broader socio-economic context in which to ground our professional practice.

I will structure this paper around a few concrete examples of current professional debates and show how Marx’s concepts can help us understand and negotiate our positions within these debates. First, I will talk about academic freedom, tenure, and the deskilling/professionalization question. Marx’s materialist conception of history, and his insistence on the unity of the political and the economic are important here. Then I will discuss issues of algorithmic bias and technological change using Marx’s conception of innovation under capitalism and the economic function of technology. Finally, I will discuss the corporatization of the neoliberal university, looking not only at Marx, but at more recent Marxist theorists such as the Italian autonomists, and their ideas of immaterial labour and cognitive capitalism.

By providing an overview of the value of a Marxist approach, I hope to make the case for more theoretical diversity within librarianship, and to show how sociological, political, and economic theory is a requirement for understanding and engaging with academic librarianship in a changing world.