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"The Integrity and Obstinacy of Intellectual Creations":  
Jurgen Habermas and Librarianship's Theoretical Literature

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## **Abstract**

Librarianship and library and information science (LIS) has struggled with its theoretical and epistemological basis - or lack thereof - for a long time. While this lack continues, there have been renewed efforts to explore various theoretical and philosophical positions and their meaning for librarianship and LIS research. This article explores the framework that Jurgen Habermas offers the field in terms of his interlocking work on history, epistemology, and social/economic critique and theory as part of that effort. Before addressing Habermas's thinking and its application to librarianship, a review of recent and relevant literature on epistemology and/or philosophy of librarianship and LIS is undertaken - much of which is grounded in the work of Michael Harris. That literature demonstrates an interrelated circle of problems, and the ability to address that circle is why it will be argued that Habermas's work forms a useful and compelling theoretical framework for the field.

Philosophy does not stand outside  
the world any more than man's brain  
is outside of him....

Philosophers have merely interpreted  
the world in various ways; the point,  
however, is to change it.

Karl Marx [1, pp. 253, 306]

## **Introduction**

Librarianship<sup>1</sup> has been struggling with its *raison d'etre* for quite a long time now. To adapt the introduction to a recent bestseller, "Everyone knows this ... but we tend to take the situation for granted. [T]he phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, nor attracted much sustained inquiry" relative to the prominence of practical and theoretical efforts in the field. "In consequence, we have no clear understanding" of our philosophical basis as a field, "or what functions it serves. And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, we have no theory" [2, p. 1]. While this would describe the situation in the main, there have been renewed efforts to explore various theoretical and philosophical positions and their meaning for

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<sup>1</sup> The terms librarianship and LIS are used interchangeably. They are inclusive of the people and institutions of the three traditional areas of public, academic and school libraries as well as those who research and theorize about them. This is an inherent argument against common artificial divisions between practice, theory, and research.

librarianship and library and information science (LIS) research.<sup>2</sup> This article is a contribution to that effort, specifically exploring the framework that Jurgen Habermas offers the field in terms of his interlocking work on history, epistemology, and social/economic critique and theory.<sup>3</sup> Before addressing Habermas's work and its application to librarianship, a review of some of the relevant literature on epistemology and/or philosophy of librarianship needs to be undertaken. That work demonstrates interrelated problems that tend to circle around one another. The ability to address that recurring circle of theoretical and philosophical problems is precisely why it will be argued that Habermas's work forms a useful and compelling theoretical and philosophical framework for the field.

### **Theoretical work: recent antecedents and a problematic circularity**

Much of the recent theoretical work in librarianship begins with a variation on an old theme: Michael Harris noted twenty years ago that "something appears to be dramatically wrong in library science," our theories "not only fail to explain the problem but actually tend to mask its real nature. [N]one of the earlier analysts of research in library and information science have gotten it right" [4, p. 514]. Informing this critique are fundamental criticisms Harris cites of the intellectual bases of the field covering the *preceding* twenty years [4, pp. 526-27]. More recently John Budd has raised the issue of

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<sup>2</sup> These efforts have been spurred and influenced by the work of John Budd and Wayne Wiegand over the last decade or so.

<sup>3</sup> This is in contrast to previous work based in large part on Habermas attempting to establish a critical framework for, a public language about, and a defense of the field [3].

the centrality of "self-understanding of purpose" [5, p. 315]; that a good deal of our intellectual and philosophical assumptions are "hidden," in need of "critical investigation [to] know... where we came from and how we got here, as well as where we're going" [6, p. 2]; and that there is a "chasm" between theoretical work and practical training "that stands in the way (necessarily) of their intermingling. To the extent to which such thinking exists, librarianship and information work will always be prevented from realizing the goals of ... critical, rational, interpretive, epistemic, and ethical work of a discipline or profession" [7, p. 20]. In more polite language, Budd is restating Harris' frustration that "we have no theory."

Efforts to explore and construct an LIS epistemology and philosophy have taken on that spirit of critically uncovering and exposing to scrutiny the hidden assumptions guiding our work and research. Much of this is broadly grounded in a critique of positivism established long enough in our literature that it need not be repeated at length here. There are already numerous and excellent summaries of the relevant issues for librarianship<sup>4</sup>, and so common is this grounding that it has drawn responses that have raised questions "whether positivism ever really was the philosophy of LIS [and even if it was] it was not really followed, and was not an appropriate one to follow" [16, p. 105] or whether too much of the theoretical work in LIS focuses on "conflicts with positivism

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<sup>4</sup> [See for example 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15] Trosow [12, p. 362] provides a summary description of positivism paraphrased here as embodying the goals, means, and ideas of the sciences which has been translated to the social sciences; reality can be known and represented by correct measurements and methods; social research so conducted can discover universal laws of human behavior (beyond history and culture); a neutral and objective form of knowing is posited without inherent values interwoven into theory and epistemology, nor does that theory in turn influence observation, investigation, and/or measurement.

instead of developing alternative epistemologies" [11, p. 311]. The critique of positivism in LIS work as a basis for a new/different philosophy of librarianship has in turn been grounded largely in Michael Harris's work from the mid-1980's [4, 15]. To be clear, LIS scholars do refer to others who have philosophically critiqued positivism, but Harris's contention that he is the first in the LIS field to systematically do so [4, p. 526-27] is essentially unchallenged and his work is widely cited within the efforts reviewed here. Additionally, some who have not taken an explicit philosophical or epistemological approach (and therefore did not discuss positivism *per se*) in their arguments for critical conceptions of libraries and the profession also relied on Harris's work grounded in his critique of positivism [for example 17, 18].

Harris's work is foundational to the efforts to formulate a philosophical and epistemological foundation for librarianship. While there is not space to cover all that he surveyed, Harris combined a revisionist historical perspective with a theory of cultural reproduction for librarianship that came to some rather stark conclusions based on his analyses:

Libraries are marginal institutions embedded in a hierarchically arranged set of institutions designed to produce and reproduce the dominant effective culture in print form.... The library's structural and functional characteristics are determined by its definition as an institution contrived



to consume, preserve, transmit, and reproduce high culture in printed form [15, p. 242].

The conclusion that is relentlessly pressing forward is the fact that the library is an institution embedded in a stratified ensemble of institutions functioning in the high cultural region ... dedicated to the ... reproduction of the hegemonic ideology [19, p. 352].

Librarians appear incapable of acknowledging the extent to which the idea of information as a public good in American society has been discredited or completely abandoned.... It is as if discussion of the role of the library in the twenty-first century could be carried out in terms that ... rehearse the founding myths in order to survive [20, p. 74, see also 21, 22].

While Harris avers that positive possibilities must remain theoretically open [15, p. 242], that we must “avoid mortgaging a working past to a non-existent future” [quoting Hughes 23, p. 129], and that he still sees “a significant opportunity [for librarians] to play a meaningful role in America’s difficult transition to a genuinely multicultural polity” [24, p. 233], it is difficult not to conclude that the overall thrust of his critique and analyses is very pessimistic, strongly leaning toward determinism. Raber notes that the twenty six propositions for librarianship that Harris draws from his analysis “have serious implications for the everyday practice of librarianship” and that “a persistent pessimism

characterizes" the tone of his work, reflecting an environment that discourages critical LIS research [17, pp. 46-48].

In his program of research and analysis (both historical and theoretical), it is argued here that Harris replays the "dead end" of Critical Theory (closely related to the Frankfurt School) [25]. That is, the unity of his historical revisionism [21, 22] with his rejection of positivism led him to a critique of the Enlightenment [12] ending in a version of the radical pessimism that characterized the endgame of Critical Theory. Critical Theory was the precursor to this and other work critiquing positivism and its offshoot, instrumental reason. Its endpoint of radical pessimism is capitalism analyzed as a "total system [wherein] mass deception ... manipulated individuals into accepting the current organization of society. [C]ulture industries were engaging in sophisticated forms of ideological indoctrination ... to sugarcoat oppression while eroding cultural standards in order to quell any forms of expression which might contest the given order" [26]. In the end Critical Theorists "seemed ready to admit that capitalism and tyrannical government were not just distortions of the Enlightenment, but integral to it" [27, p. 100, see also 28, pp. 2-4, 29 pp. 209-222]. It is hard to escape a similar conclusion. After more than two decades of scholarship which posited a theory that the foundation of public libraries was an exercise in class, cultural, and ideological domination and merely spouted a democratic dogma, and that the field relentlessly concentrated its theoretical and practical development on a false neutrality and technicist implementation of unproblematic social ends which have obscured its foundations, and that libraries are weak players in the game

of reproducing the hegemony of the dominant ideology, Harris arrived at the same dead end.

Harris's reinterpretations form a place-marker in LIS theoretical work and are a foundation for much of the subsequent philosophical and epistemological work. It also poses the first of our problems: a critical cul-de-sac of LIS philosophy, epistemology, and history which is theorized as so total as to preclude possibilities to transcend it. Conclusions like “library use and nonuse is stratified by class [and] libraries reproduce these class relationships” [15, p. 244] and that library research is “nearly all ... policy-oriented, designed for immediate professional consumption..., reductionist..., unwilling to challenge conventional wisdom [and] complacently descriptive...” [4, p. 525] do not lead to charges on the professional or theoretical ramparts with gusto. This cul-de-sac is very much on the minds of current LIS theorists in their search for a philosophy, an epistemological foundation, or a viable and critical social theory. For instance, John Budd’s important 1995 article reviews in detail the critique of positivism in LIS (using Harris as one foundation) and the parent philosophical debate in the social sciences. He notes bluntly that “It is not sufficient to cast off positivism. For a discipline to advance inquiry and to be reflexive it must have an epistemological foundation” and he proposes hermeneutical phenomenology as such, quickly noting that it is “not a method or set of methods ... nor a set of problems to be addressed” – thus distancing his proposal from the pitfalls of positivism and the pitfalls of the critique of positivism [5, p. 304]. Budd elsewhere addresses (with a coauthor) the charge of the circularity of “attacking

positivism [as] a positivist thing to do” with the response that “the legacy of positivism is the persistence of its claims” and that there is value in “generat[ing] an awareness within LIS that such an epistemological foundation is present at all, and that there are alternatives” [30, pp. 317-318].

Budd is not alone in perceiving this need to avoid a dead end of pessimism while critiquing positivism. Trosow [12, p. 366] notes that “Alternative epistemological projects ... have much to offer the development of research and scholarship in LIS. [T]he critiques provided by Michael Harris and others can be enriched and refined in order to provide powerful epistemological resources for future work” – going on to identify possibilities for research which address the marginalized in society, “the role of conflict, stratification, and the imbalance of power relations” [p. 380] in order to move the field and its research forward. Archie Dick similarly reminds us that we cannot rest on the laurels of anti-positivism [10, 11], and he proposes a meta-theory to end the practice of competitive “epistemology elimination” since “disagreement presupposes a fundamental background of agreement” [11, p. 319]. Raber’s work seeks to redeem the “possibility of a kind of political action that might at least counter the excesses of capitalist hegemony” through a Gramscian reconceptualization of library work and practice [17, p. 48]. In her proposal that LIS education and research adopt a class perspective, Christine Pawley notes that “complete hegemony is rarely attained” [18, p. 128] and while “the class perspective is not cheering..., it also does not encourage fatalism” [pp. 138-139] – and she

goes on to outline a critical, positive role for the field and to cite some research and curricula which address that program.

Some of the analyses which can be characterized as postmodernist in perspective seek similar ends: that “the library becomes an instrument of possibility” [9 p. 420], to “give new impetus ... to the undefined work of freedom” through critique [Foucault quoted in 8], and to address our systematic “tunnel vision and blind spots” [Wiegand quoted in 31, p. 16]. Another author in this vein has called for an “ethical imperative upon those who construct IS theories [since] theories ... are instruments through which power is exercised. The ethics of IS theory therefore consist in disclosing rather than occluding the ways in which those theories exercise power...” [32]. The same author notes elsewhere that, in advocating discourse analysis as a research method for LIS, the investigation “will not limit itself to ... its theories, but at this stage, theory construction is perhaps a most promising place to begin” [13, p. 135]. The inherent assumption is that uncovering the dominance inherent in discursive practice will lead to more effective critique – primarily of the practices of capitalism [33] - and thereby improve librarianship and LIS research. Much of this work seeks to avoid the analysis of a society and history characterized as totally dominated by economic instrumental rationality (positivism) in order to keep possibility open.

In doing so, much of this work has taken what has been called the “linguistic turn” tapping into a vein of philosophy which, broadly speaking, does not consider

language as a list of names which stand for objects [and instead posits]  
 language as a ... self-contained game with rules which allow some moves  
 but not others. [W]ords get their meaning not from their relation to  
 objects in the world, but from the other words in the language game...; it  
 is the total linguistic system that determines the meaning of its individual  
 parts, not their relation to something outside the system [such as “reality.”  
 The] meaning of a word is determined by its “use” [and] it doesn’t make  
 sense to think that any language or description gives us an accurate picture  
 of the world, no matter how logically precise or scientific [34, pp. 22-23,  
 see also 11].

This perspective is based in Wittgenstein's attack on the Augustinian conception of language and his subsequent deconstruction of it. The conclusions he came to are far-reaching in that "the interpolation of a *meaning* between a word and its correct use is otiose," therefore "dissolv[ing] or deconstruct[ing] the abstract idea of meaning" which is "exposed as a fiction" [14, p. 15].

The critiques which have flowed from this philosophical and epistemological perspective – of the human subject, of historicism, of meaning, and of philosophy in general [35, pp. 1-5] – placed a heavy burden on similar work in LIS. Essentially, the task of constructing a philosophy of librarianship now had to “include the formal and

structured interpretation of the expression of being (through behavior, text, speech, or other means) [as] a process of examination into history, context, language, reference, etc.... The goal is to provide us all with a way to look at LIS and a way to *act* within LIS” [6, p. 246-47]. Put succinctly, along with avoiding the field’s version of Critical Theory’s dead end, LIS theory now had the problem of avoiding the charge of epistemological naïveté resulting from the deconstruction of language:

High-flying LIS researchers swoop indiscriminately down upon the theoretical terrain, colonising Popperian worlds, or cannibalising hermeneutics, phenomenology, general systems theory, symbolic interactionism, decision theory, existentialism, structural-functionalism, cognitive science, or philosophy of language [with] extraordinary license.... The curious and continued coexistence of figures of sterility and fecundity in LIS theoretical narratives might be sufficient reason for pausing to reflect on LIS discourse as a phenomenon.... [38, pp. 366-67].

The authors examined here all take the linguistic approach and the critiques it has engendered seriously and/or have consciously adapted it as method or epistemological framework [for example 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 30, 32, 33, 36, 37, 38]. In the process, the linguistic construction of a technically defensible epistemology has taken a place of primacy in this work.

Harris previously explored some of these ideas when he frequently focused on the contested meanings of freedom, equality, and especially neutrality in librarianship and when he vigorously attacked the constructed dominance of the Book and the canon in American society, education, and not least, libraries [15, 19, 20, 24]. While not a centerpiece of his work, he explored and applied some of the essential concepts of the linguistic approach to the field from an “opportunistic reading of research in the social sciences” as he put it [15, p. 244]. However, his primary focus remained always “capitalism, capitalism, capitalism” [20, p. 73] and in the main, he explored the meaning of librarianship and LIS research in a capitalist society:

The emergence of a new commodity form-information-and new means of producing and marketing that commodity form, and the displacement and elimination of old commodity forms [is] part of the “perennial gale” of Creative Destruction at the very heart of the capitalist system. ... What now appears necessary is a critical examination of fundamental philosophical and political commitments in the context of these changing times. As a beginning we must critically examine the very purpose of the library in American society [20, pp. 74, 76].

[We need to] understand the extent to which asymmetrically distributed political and economic power determines the nature and extent of the knowledge forms we acquire, preserve, and disseminate; the social



relations that inform library service, the library as a mechanism of cultural reproduction; and the ideology of librarians themselves [15, pp. 245-46].

Once such a theoretical knowledge is in place, the librarian-researcher will be able to undertake emancipatory work that is conscious of the contradictions inherent in the delivery of “free library service” in a capitalist society [and] the way in which libraries and their contents have always been linked “to the power and privilege of certain classes...” [19, pp. 353-54].

Harris maintained a focus on the normative and democratic deficits of a capitalist, market-oriented society and the role (historical and otherwise) that librarianship and LIS research played in that society. However, this overarching and normative focus is much less present in the LIS literature which has built on and evolved from his critique of positivism, forming another problem in this literature. As Archie Dick [10, p. 226] put it, "Efforts at infusing the knowledge base of the profession with normative approaches are ... marginal and poorly understood [and too] loosely connected...."

It is not as if current LIS theorists are unaware of the issue. Budd acknowledges this concern implicitly in most of his work [see for example 7], and explicitly when he argues that “value should be conceived as more than merely economic or political expediency” [40, p. 516] and critiques of notions of profitability in the ubiquitous use of

the catchphrase “customer service” [39, pp. 73-74]. But it would be fair to characterize Budd as in the main concentrating more on the technical aspects of an LIS epistemology (and on unpacking LIS discourse) than philosophically situating librarianship within a systematic critique of capitalism. Others exploring more linguistic and postmodern theoretical approaches have moved away from earlier explicit critiques of IS theories “entirely congruent with the interests of capitalistic monopoly control over the *commodity* form of intellectual capital” [32, see also 33, 38, 41] to work that focuses deeply and almost exclusively on linguistic and documentary practices [14, 42]. Still others utilizing some of Foucault’s ideas largely avoid librarianship’s relation to capitalism and democracy altogether [8, 9, 31, 36, 37]. It would appear that these authors have chosen to focus on an approach Harris only partially explored, placing in the background economic issues paramount in his work.

This intellectual distance from the juggernaut of market capitalism and consumer society has been tartly noted by Archie Dick: “epistemological discussions in LIS ... deflect attention from secular or worldly circumstances that condition the production of knowledge in society [like] the narrowing of the range of public discourse in a market-dominated information industry” [11, p. 311, see also 10]. This viewpoint is variously adopted in the work of Raber [17], Trosow [12], and Pawley [18] too: LIS work that focuses too intently on the technical construction of a linguistically defensible epistemology or on the construction and meaning of its discourse misses the bigger picture of totalizing, media-driven market capitalism [43] and its normative meanings for

people and the field's purpose in a democracy. This constitutes another of the circle of problems facing LIS theoretical work: technical philosophical and discourse considerations place it at a remove from normative, economic, and democratic needs and realities.

Lastly, the current vein of theoretical work has not seriously tackled the historical development of the field and its institutions. As noted, Harris's theoretical work began in a revisionist history of the development of American (primarily public) libraries, spawning at the time a vigorous debate about the nature, purpose, and meaning of American librarianship [see his summary in 22, p. 2225, see also 44, pp. 62, 76]. Throughout, Harris continued to argue that "our commitments must be consistently debated and reassessed, and this cannot be done when the profession blindly adheres ... to uncritical and idealized version of American library history" [45, p. 283]. Current fashions - economic, intellectual, or as so often occurs now, some synergistic combination of the two - "represents in itself an historical interpretation, and ... is heavily freighted with ideological baggage [S]ome *conscious* attention to the history of library and information services" is essential to intelligent debate within and guidance of the profession [23, p. 129]. In contrast, Wayne Wiegand's work - while not primarily concerned with exploring philosophical or epistemological issues in LIS - is an example of the study of library history to identify historical gaps and the need for revision and historiography. In the process, he draws conclusions as to the paucity of theoretical approaches which could address our "tunnel vision and blind spots" [46] and he outlines

possible avenues to explore. Both Wiegand's and Harris's work point to a continuing theoretical disengagement from the historical development (good and bad) of librarianship. This is another of the problems in current theoretical LIS work, and the outline of the problematic circularity is thus completed.

Briefly recapped, the lack of a theoretical basis has been long bemoaned in librarianship and LIS research. The primary efforts to address are grounded in a thorough critique and rejection of the epistemology of positivism begun by Michael Harris two decades ago. Harris's foundational scholarship powerfully combined revisionist history and an analysis rejecting the positivist epistemological base in LIS to form a thoroughgoing critique of consensus history and research in librarianship, framed within a theory of cultural reproduction and a critical analysis of capitalism. His critique followed the path of Critical Theory and came to a similar pessimistic dead end: a totalized theoretical cul-de-sac with no means of breaking out. Current LIS theorists are conscious of the need to avoid this radical pessimism and mere rejection of positivism, but in so doing, the linguistic turn - a focus on the construction of meaning through language and discourse - took a place of prominence. This approach places a premium on the dissociation of language from meaning, thus allowing the deconstruction and critique of broad theories and schools of thought. Consequently, constructing linguistically-defensible epistemologies and analyses became a prime value within this critical tradition. However, this work drifted far afield from Harris's grounding - the normative critique of an unjust socio-economic system and its historical development in

relation to librarianship - as a result. LIS theories which focus on linguistic analyses only occasionally touch upon the overwhelming dominance of capitalism and historical explanations of freedom and unfreedom in librarianship, and are subject to the charge of being remote from the realities of the field. Thus we complete the circle and are back where Harris began: the need to account for critique, norms, history, and an epistemology without ending in radical pessimism. It is the thesis here that the work of Jurgen Habermas addresses this problematic circularity, and it is an introduction to and outline of his thought to which this paper will turn.

### **Habermas: a system of thought**

Born in 1929, Jurgen Habermas is consistently described as among the most influential of recent public intellectuals, philosophers, and social theorists. He continued the tradition of the earlier Frankfurt School serving in a variety of distinguished German academic posts and his work spans over four decades. It continues still with more theoretical writing, teaching invitations, and his engagement with German political issues like unification, democratization in light of the historical legacy of the Holocaust, Green Party politics, and a unified Europe. Anthony Giddens describes Habermas as intellectually combining

Frankfurt critical theory, hermeneutics, and Hegelian philosophy, as well as Marxism. To attempt to a mix of all these sounds formidable enough,

but Habermas's compass in fact extends much more widely. ...The extraordinary range of [his] writings defies easy analysis, [but] two leading, and massive, themes recur throughout ... and give his works their continuity. One is a concern with metatheoretical problems in social theory, especially in respect of the relation between theory and critique. The other is the objective of placing such a critique in the context of an interpretation of the main trends of development in Western capitalism... [47, pp. 82-83].

The essential importance of the "lifelong project of establishing the preconditions of open and free communication" [48, p. 162] should be added to this. His intellectual project has been frequently described as rescuing the unrealized rational and democratic potential of modernity and the Enlightenment [see 49, 50]. Yet while his work is well known, it is not known well within LIS theory. While not a comprehensive review of Habermas's influence (or lack thereof) within LIS literature, it is fair to characterize it as partial: raising relevant questions [46]; a source in the critique of positivism and scientific understanding [5, 6]; defending rationality [6]; part of an ensemble of thinkers in support of "communitarian" [51] or "dialogue" [52] democracy; a framework to analyze librarianship within the public sphere [53, 54, 55]. Only recently has a study of the profession utilized portions of Habermas's overall thought and its application to the field [3]. More important than prior oversight or an incomplete view for the purposes here, Habermas's project is relevant to the circularity of problems within LIS theoretical

literature just reviewed. In an integrated career of thought, he has attempted to approach the meta-theoretical versions of those same issues in a coherent and comprehensive way.

Habermas' writing output is immense - almost all of it dense. In his concern to connect his epistemological thinking with his historical critique, his writing forms a thick network of ideas and references which requires more than casual reading. Further, his work was slow to be translated into English. His seminal study of the public sphere was originally published in 1962, but only translated and published in English in 1989 [56]. The public sphere thesis was known largely via a précis he wrote in 1964 - itself translated and published in English only ten years later [57] along with a translated excursus by another scholar [58]. Still, the (non-LIS) literature on Habermas is extensive (the *Philosopher's Index* database listed 1,541 separate articles and books retrieved with the keyword "Habermas" as of this writing). As a result, any presentation of Habermas's work is by definition selective - leaving out multiple layers of subtlety and nuance of reasoning (and his debates with and responses to critics and fellow theorists). This attempt will not escape that shortcoming either. For instance, these summaries do not necessarily represent the latest iterations of Habermas's high-theory thinking, nor do the ideas presented trace the historical development of his thinking. However, all the output by and about Habermas has tended to explain, clarify, and hone in on a cluster of central ideas. Those will be presented here as: the theory of knowledge as social theory; communicative action as an epistemology; the public sphere and history; and the critique

of capitalism. Since Habermas's work is so interrelated, these categories bleed into one another, but they give some notion to the sweep and depth of his thinking.

### **The theory of knowledge as social theory**

Habermas makes a crucial link between the historical/social and epistemological realms when he argues that Marx was right and wrong at the same time. In addressing Hegel's notion that "history is the expression of the expanding human consciousness of human beings of the circumstances of their action" [47, p. 85], Marx was correct in his view: "the subject of world constitution is not transcendental consciousness in general but the concrete human species." History is and was more than pure thought and meta-understanding. Utilizing Hegel's identification of the dialectic and the "self generation of man as a process," Marx grounded that process in the social and economic world and "the dimension of power relations that regulate men's interaction among themselves." Thus he arrived at his analysis of historical development and his critique of capitalism - "a social form that no longer institutionalizes class antagonism [via] immediate political domination and social force; instead, it stabilizes it in the legal institution of the free labor contract, which congeals productive activity into the commodity form" - in Habermas's formulation. The normative claims within Marx's approach to historical knowledge and critique is what Habermas seeks to capture. However, Habermas argues that Marx unwittingly adopted an epistemology in the process: "an instrumentalist translation of [the] philosophy of absolute reflection [by positing] the self-constitution of the species



through labor." The materialist critique of philosophy was conceived by Marx as a form of natural science [59, pp. 27, 43, 51, 59, 62, 63], but turning Hegel on his head was highly reductive, and in the end "Marxism merge[d] with the rising tide of positivistic philosophy" [47, p. 85]. Habermas notes that, while philosophy as "pure epistemology [is] robbed of all content," Marx's scientific materialism contained within it the problems of positivist epistemology: masking a theory of knowledge and validating the claims of the "unchained universal" of scientific, instrumental reasoning. "[W]e can no longer understand science as *one* form of possible knowledge, but must rather identify knowledge with science" [59, pp. 4, 63].

Again, though this represents only a slice of an analysis that has been substantially simplified, there are important insights for our purposes here. Habermas's process of mapping his agreement and disagreement with Marx leads him to identify "the interest-bound character of knowledge in general" while preserving critical reflection on historical and social development for normative purposes: "the liberation of human beings from their domination by forces constraining their rational autonomy of action" [47, pp. 88-89]. This correction of Marx explored aspects which Habermas firmly established as coequal. In plain terms: social and historical theories have built-in epistemologies (whether explicitly recognized or not); epistemologies have built-in normative assumptions about society and history; and normative claims can be made on both. This represents his fundamental contribution here: in sum, "the nature and basis of human knowledge can only be pursued as a social investigation. Epistemology ... can

only be pursued as social theory [60, p. 31] and there is further an "emancipatory interest in knowledge" [61, p. 74]. Epistemology is thus welded to - not remote from - normative critique and historical analysis.

### **Communicative action as epistemology**

Habermas's named his epistemological project universal pragmatics, but for our purposes here his other term - communicative action - is both more descriptive and accessible. While noting that these epistemological efforts were meant to address the "lack of clarity concerning the normative foundation of Marxian social theory..., a philosophical ethics not restricted to metaethical statements is possible today only if we can reconstruct general presuppositions of communication and procedures for justifying norms and values" [62, p. 97]. He is thus well aware of the linguistic critique and deconstruction of language, but Habermas will not make take the full linguistic turn: "culture remains a superstructural phenomenon, even if it does seem to play a more prominent role ... than ... heretofore supposed. This prominence explains the contributions that communication theory can ... make to a renewed historical materialism" [62, p. 98]. Deconstructive "theories which grasp the whole as the untrue, and offer the impossibility of escape as the only affirmation possible" are simply not enough for him [63, p. 82]. Communication is conceptualized by Habermas *as* social action:

If we assume that the human species maintains itself through the socially coordinated activities of its members and that this coordination is established through communication - and in certain spheres of life, through communication aimed at reaching agreement - then the reproduction of the species also requires satisfying the conditions of a rationality inherent in communicative action [78, p. 397].

Sentences are not, in his thinking, isolated from their social context and "taken into the philosopher's 'laboratory' and dissected [as] a string of mere words." Rather, there are rational presuppositions behind sentences within functioning, multilayered social contexts developed over time. "Sentences and the signs that make them up are not isolated elements but take their meaning ... from a publicly available and shared language system" [60, pp. 99-100]. That shared system is the lifeworld, which Habermas characterizes as a "culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns" constructed through communicative action [78, p. xxiv]. Given the welding together of the social and the epistemological, communicative action will therefore be further fleshed out in a subsequent précis of the lifeworld later in this paper. For the sake of clarity at this point, those concepts will be held at bay.

In constructing his epistemology, Habermas worked his way through linguistics, the philosophy of language, cognitive developmental psychology, and even anthropology in combination with those hefty philosophical systems Giddens previously noted.

Briefly, it is first concerned with "the task of seeking out the rationality embedded in everyday communicative practice and reconstructing a comprehensive concept of rationality from the validity basis of speech" [64, p. 176]. In so doing Habermas explores three concepts as a rational truth-basis:

conditions of validity (which are fulfilled when an utterance holds good), validity-claims (which speakers raise with their utterances, for their validity), and redemption of a validity-claim (in the framework of a discourse which is sufficiently close to the conditions of an ideal speech situation for the consensus aimed at by the participants to be brought about solely through the force of the better argument, and in this sense to be "rationally motivated").... When claims to truth or justice become really obstinately problematic, there are no neat deductions ... which could enforce an immediate decision for or against. Rather a play of argumentation is required, in which motivating reasons take the place of the unavailable knock-down arguments. [T]he fulfillment or non-fulfillment of conditions of validity, in problematic cases, can only be ascertained by means of the argumentative redemption of the corresponding validity-claims. [D]iscourse theory ... only claims to reconstruct an intuitive knowledge of the meaning of universal validity-claims which every competent speaker has at his or her disposal [and it]

provides only an explication of meaning, it does not provide a criterion [63, pp. 85-86].

Habermas does not rely exclusively on the "ideal speech situation" of unfettered, rational communication - or its messier social context. He explores language as a symbolic and strategic medium, its dramaturgical use, and the underside of the ideal which (philosophically speaking) impair understanding in the areas of communicative competence vs. incompetence and systematically distorted communication in the form both of deception and psychoses resulting in communicative disorders [60, pp. 106-109, 64, 66, 67]. Finally, Habermas need not argue that words have independent inherent Augustinian connections to things by which we know reality, nor does he feel the need to deeply defend the internal logic of syntax. Rather, he points to cumulative social (public) meanings, the agreements upon those meanings generated over time (history and the lifeworld), *and the process of coming to those agreements* as bases to philosophically ground and connect both rationality and linguistically-constructed knowledge:

[O]ur ability to communicate has a universal core - basic structures and fundamental rules that all subjects master in learning to speak a language [and] in speaking we relate to the world about us, to other subjects, to our own intentions, feelings and desires. In each of these dimensions we are constantly making claims, even if usually only implicitly, concerning the validity of what we are saying. [C]laims of these sorts can be contested

and criticized, defended and revised [and while] there are a number of ways of settling disputed claims - for example by appeal to authority, to tradition or to brute force [-] the giving of reasons-for and reasons-against [is] fundamental to the idea of rationality. [McCarthy in 78, p. x].

Habermas's technical handling of philosophical ideas to reach this end and his situating of them within his larger program and his critique is vast [78, 79], and it has been summarized by him and others [see for example 47, pp. 1-68, 60, pp. 99-106, 64, 65, 66, pp. 353-56, 67, 68, pp. 2-22]. The point is that, while Habermas works with full knowledge of the deconstruction of language, he will not succumb to its circularity (epistemological or critical) and end up with the impossibility of knowledge/knowing, rationality, critique, or change. His epistemology

permit[s] a progressive radicalization of the argument; there must be the freedom to move from a given level of discourse to increasingly reflected levels.... At the most radical level there must be the freedom to reflect on ... conceptual systems in an attempt to reconstruct the progress of knowledge (critique of knowledge) and to reflect on ... cognitive-political will-formation [65, pp. 482-83].

"Truth" is inherently connected to how we think of "freedom," and the "truth of statements is linked in the last analysis to the intention of the good and true life." True to

his analysis of Marx, he restates the conclusions he drew in correcting him as the definition of his task: normative values and historical analysis and critique cannot be decoupled from epistemology in the task of extending human freedom [65, pp. 478, 485, 490]. This operates, in Habermas's analysis and system of thought, not only via philosophical/epistemological theory, but through an analysis of historical processes, the basis of/reasons for historical change, and the resulting social structures which still bear the imprint of those processes, as will be seen in the next section. For now, the important point is Habermas's epistemology of communicative action contains a defense of rationality and knowing as a social product while accounting for the linguistic construction of knowledge, and it is normatively grounded.

### **The public sphere and history**

Habermas's historical analyses could arguably be called communicative action in action. There is, in his conception of philosophy and critique, no point to an epistemology which can not be put to use to critically understand history as a basis of extending human freedom. He sought to correct analyses that preceded and to answer a series of questions concerning larger historical processes than historians' limitations usually allow them to tackle: we know when and where notions of democratic self-government initially developed, and we know it largely coincided with the growth of mercantile capitalism, but we don't know *how* or *why*. He begins his answer by exploring what we now take for granted: the difference between public and private. Previous

epochs did not conceptualize such a division: "there is no indication European society of the high middle ages possessed a public sphere as a unique realm distinct from the private sphere." The public and private realms were fused - the best example being kingly splendor "as the embodiment of an ever present 'higher' power." As such there was no essential division between the private "person" of the monarch, the associated public symbols of power (the crown and ceremony), and state authority [57, p.50]. The monarch and the nobility "'were' the country and not just its representatives.... [T]heir lordship [was] not for but 'before' the people" [56, pp. 7-8]. Power was absolute, fused to the divine, and this was further combined with the concept of state secrecy in the Renaissance [50, pp. 547-48]. The king could legitimately say, in the word of Louis XIV, "I am the state/the state is me."

How did a separate, public realm develop, and how did a closed system of divinely based power come to be transformed into a system of rights and democratic, accountable processes? It is not enough to merely observe the change because

when and under what conditions the arguments of mixed companies could become authoritative bases for political action ... is a crucial [question] for democratic theory [and] is an inquiry at once into normative ideals and actual history. [Habermas] aims to reach beyond the flawed realities of this history to recover ... an institutional location for practical reason in



public affairs and for the accompanying valid, if often deceptive, claims of formal democracy [69, p.1]

His answer begins with the observation that "it is no coincidence that these concepts of the public sphere and public opinion arose for the first time in the eighteenth century. [P]ublic discussions about the exercise of political power which are both critical in intent and institutionally guaranteed have not always existed - they grew out of a specific phase of bourgeois society..." [57, p. 50]. Greatly simplified, his thesis is that the transformation began initially within the old regime. The nobility's self interest led to a gradual independence from the king's court and combined with a nascent humanism developed during the Renaissance. The resulting sociability and "society" apart from the court represented an early form of separate public and private realms. In the further interests of its own independence, the nobility formed alliances with towns and merchants, in turn leading gradually to *their* further independence and the growth in the importance of their markets. While these new social relationships were highly influenced by traditional forms of power and authority, "a far-reaching network of horizontal economic dependencies emerged that ... could no longer be accommodated by the vertical relationships of dependence [and] domination in an estate system based upon a self-contained household economy." Gradually the interests of the mercantile class came in conflict with unregulated feudal power of government and "the genuine domain of private autonomy stood opposed to the state" [56, p. 12-19].

Habermas then locates the crucial transformation in the historical circumstances of the 18th century Enlightenment furthering nascent intellectual and economic trends:

Public discussion emerged as a response to growing opportunities and responsibilities for commerce [and] three conditions favored the emergence of the public sphere: work outside the home, reading publics facilitated by the development of printing and newspapers, and the rise of the bourgeoisie whose interests were best served by heeding "the force of the better argument" [70, p. 245].

The public sphere was self-constituted via the split between the public and the private and through rational argumentation: "discursing private persons who critically negate political norms of the state and its monopoly on interpretation.... Public opinion institutionalizes itself with the goal of replacing ... secret politics with a form ... that is legitimated by means of rational consensus" [71 pp. 92-93]. This radically altered the concept of governmental authority, subjecting it to the principle of "supervision ... which demands that proceedings be made public" in order to be legitimate. The corresponding development of a catalog of democratic rights and constitutional limitations on power "were a perfect image of the ... public sphere" based as they were on both a reconceptualization of authority and the "presuppositions of free commodity exchange" [57, pp. 52-53]. Habermas's historical work stays true to Marx's notion that we must always think of capitalism as half-progressive and was a specific attempt to

retain democracy's progressive potential and to counter Critical Theory's pessimism. Further, the development of the public sphere and civil society represents more than mere economic interest. "It included institutions of sociability and discourse only loosely related to the economy," and while "the public sphere remains an ideal, ...it becomes a contingent product of the evolution of communicative action, rather than its basis [by] remov[ing] the immanence from specific historical conditions to universal characteristics of human communication." Thus Habermas continues to fuse historical, philosophical, and epistemological analysis [69, pp. 8, 5, 32, 40].

From the very beginning (and contra his critics), Habermas has noted the existence of other (non-bourgeois) public spheres [56, p. xviii] and that it contains the seeds of its own extension: "unrestricted inclusion and equality ... are an integral part of the liberal public sphere's self-interpretation." He points to the successful use of these underlying assumptions in the arguments on behalf of extending formal rights and social inclusion of women, labor, and minorities [72, pp. 425-430]. Not content with locating these ideas merely historically, he takes them up to the present in his analysis of law and the legal system, making an express link between the historical self-constitution of the public sphere, communicative action, and the legal system as "an institutionalization of practical discourse on social norms" [73, p. 6]. As such, laws perform a function of social integration "in abstract but binding forms" and as a "safety net for failures to achieve social integration." That is, he is referring specifically to the institutionalized means by which the force of the better argument has been utilized by women, racial and

sexual minorities, etc. against unfair treatment. The law, to be legitimate, must be grounded in citizens who have a claim on equal rights and self-determination, and there is an "internal relation, and not simply an historically contingent association, between the rule of law and democracy" [74, pp. 136-37]. In theoretical terms, "modern law ... remains in need of justification, and can be criticized, precisely in order to unveil its systematic nature, under the abstract conditions of universalistic validity claims on normative rightness" [73, p. 7, see also 75]. The fusion of epistemology, normative claims, historical analysis, the identification of those processes and liberatory potential in current social forms is summarized by Habermas:

The ideals of bourgeois humanism that have left their characteristic mark on the self-interpretation of the intimate sphere and the public and that are articulated in the key concepts of subjectivity and self-actualization, rational formation of opinion and will, and personal and political self-determination have infused the institutions of the constitutional state to such an extent that, functioning as a utopian potential, they point beyond a constitutional reality that negates them. The dynamic of historical development too was to be fueled by this tension between idea and reality [72, p. 442]

### **The critique of capitalism**

Habermas is by no means a glassy-eyed optimist. His work culminates in a sustained critique of capitalism fused with a tour de force explication of the basis of communicative action. He does so in order to avoid sloppy philosophy, and it follows that Habermas's critique of capitalism is complex, integrating so many of his ideas. In the interest of brevity only a sketch of this critique - along with the concept of the lifeworld - can be offered. Perhaps the best place to begin is his analysis of the disintegration of the public sphere, not as "an appendix to his theory [but as] the problematic of political domination in advanced capitalism [in the form of] depoliticization of the public, its manipulation by state administration and industrial public relations" [71, p. 94].

Historically the bourgeois public sphere was based around two concepts: capitalism and democracy, and the first obviated a great deal of the second. With the constitutional establishment of rights, the "intellectual press was relieved of the pressure of its convictions [and] able to ... take advantage of the earning possibilities of a commercial undertaking" [57, p. 53]. The logic of *being* a business transformed the press as it abandoned its polemical position which was succeeded by economic concentration, then technological development, then shifting to a forum for advertising, and finally becoming a form of advertising and public relations [56, pp. 181-195]. Secondly, democracy was broadened in the 19th century and this took place alongside the development of industrial capitalism with its marked economic swings. Consequently, "mass democracy [which] presupposes ... an economic system relatively free of disturbances" came to rely upon the intervention of the state to ameliorate the "dysfunctional side-effects of the economic process [such as] the business cycle [and] a structurally conditioned unequal distribution

of wealth and income" [62, p. 194]. Politics became, under these circumstances, not a process of rational discourse, but rather "a field for the competition of interests" and laws did not then "aris[e] from the consensus of private individuals engaged in discussion [but rather] the compromise of conflicting private interests" [57, p. 54]. The public sphere was, quite literally, dis-integrated.

Mass communications in combination with the need to manage democracy and the economy has "refeudalized" the public sphere - substituting spectacle, diversion, and pseudo-debate for pomp and display of kingly splendor [50]. "The aura of personally represented authority returns.... Public relations do not genuinely concern public opinion but in the sense of reputation. The public sphere becomes the court before whose public prestige can be displayed." Further, public relations "assumes a 'political' character [and] subjects even the state itself to its code. Because private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to 'address' its citizens like consumers" [56, pp. 200-201, 195].

Maintaining the legitimacy of the state in the face of structural contradictions between democracy and capitalism in the unequal competition for resources becomes a process of stimulating mass loyalty - both for the state and the economy in consumption decisions [62, pp. 194-196, 76, pp. 102-104, 28, p. 9-11]: "the constant interpretation and re-interpretation of needs becomes a matter of ... massive manipulation" [77, p. 383].

It is here that the briefest introduction to the lifeworld must be approached. The lifeworld is a concept meant capture social and "structural complexity [and] how it is symbolically produced and reproduced through the medium of communicative action" [McCarthy in 78, p. xxiii]:

[T]o the different structural components of the lifeworld (culture, society, personality) there correspond reproduction processes (cultural reproduction, social integration, socialization), which are rooted in the structural components of speech acts. These ... permit communicative action to perform its different functions and to serve as a suitable medium for the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. When these functions are interfered with [there are] corresponding crises...: loss of meaning, withdrawal of legitimation, confusion of orientations, anomie, destabilization of collective identities, alienation, psychopathologies, breakdown in traditions, withdrawal of motivation [McCarthy in 78, p. xxv]

It is within this framework that Habermas's more recent critiques of capitalism explore the colonization, rationalization, and de-coupling of the lifeworld in both new and familiar terms:

[Social] interaction steered through the medium of money is developed from the concept of strategic action under the conditions of free competition. It fits in with a ... concept of society which ... does not have to be enriched with basic normative concepts [64, p. 157]

We are witnessing an increasing substitution of images for words, and also that inter-mingling of categories such as advertising, politics, entertainment [and] information.... The banal coalesces with the unreal [and] de-differentiated customs blend with high-tech style, and the ruins of popular cultures with the highly personalized, consumeristically polished bizarre [63, p. 97].

Consumerist and possessive individualism, motives of performance and competition gain the force to shape conduct. The communicative practice of everyday life is one-sidedly rationalized into a specialist-utilitarian lifestyle; and this media-induced shift ... calls forth the reaction of hedonism freed from the pressures of rationality. As the private sphere is undermined and eroded by the economic system, so is the public sphere by the administrative system [78, p. xxxii]

[S]ocietal rationalization ... had to reach a certain maturity before the media of money and power could be legally institutionalized in it. The



two functional systems of the market economy and the administrative state ... destroyed the traditional life forms. [P]rocesses of monetarization and bureaucratization penetrate[d] the core domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization [68, p. 355]

His critique of capitalism, in other words, has come to focus on the crippling of an integrated lifeworld and public sphere via communicative corruption: mass manipulation in the service of consumerist values, the colonization and rationalization of everyday life and consciousness (social and personal relationships steered through the medium of money) toward consumerist ends, a state on the horns of democratic dilemma and the evacuation of meaning in politics and public communication via advertising and public relations in politics as well as in the service of commerce. Put succinctly, "advanced capitalist society [is not] a social totality. [I]t is split into separate realms integrated on different bases...: personal relationships and (at its best) communicative action ... is counterposed [with] nonlinguistic steering media (money and power) integrating society impersonally through functional or cybernetic feedback" [69, p. 30].

Habermas, it must be remembered, is striving mightily to avoid a combination of theoretical deadly sins: the bankruptcy of historical materialism, the isolation of philosophy and epistemology from critique and history and social reality, the deconstruction of all forms of meaning and possibility, and preeminently, the dead end of pessimism. Again and again Habermas recognizes that social realities have been

transformed in the past, and further, that those transformations contain normative good along with normative deficit. Contra Frank Webster's [48, p. 167] characterization of him as "unrelentingly glum," Habermas's overall project retains the unmistakable stamp of hope in his efforts to formulate "a critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize" the public sphere [56, p. 232] and to reconstruct "the entire spectrum of cultural and societal rationalization processes, and [trace] them back beyond the threshold of modern societies" [72, p. 442]. While deeply suspicious of the media, he continues to examine it in order to recognize moments of critical rationality and as a space for opposition [50, 70]. He sees real, actual progress in the successful arguments against the historical injustice of exclusion and discrimination and for the rights and inclusion of women and minorities and the still-progressive potential inherent in the law and in education [72]. New social movements, arguments over history and its relationship to current politics and policies, and the movement toward a unified Europe are arenas that demonstrate potential to inject critique, rational dialog, and positive change [70, 80, 81, 82]. As he put it,

I would not speak of 'communicative rationalization' if, in the last two hundred years ... and in spite of all the catastrophes, a piece of 'existing reason' ... were not nevertheless also recognizable - [in national liberation movements,] in the bourgeois emancipation movements, no less than in the workers' movement, today in feminism, in cultural revolts, in ecological and pacifist forms of resistance, etc. [63, p. 102].

His task is no less than rescuing the humanistic and neglected "*intentions* of the Enlightenment" and the project of modernity and learning from its mistakes, rather than the nihilism of negating and rejecting them entirely [83].

### **Habermas and theory/practice in librarianship**

Habermas has constructed a system of thought which addresses the circularity of problems in which librarianship's theoretical writing finds itself. His critique of instrumental rationality (positivism) in service to capitalism's ends never reached the dead-end of determinism and pessimism. He managed this by recognizing and analyzing the process of *actual* historical gains in human understanding and freedom (the public sphere and democratic rights). Second, he formulated a critical epistemology (communicative action) firmly welded to normative concerns - tackling both the critique of naïveté on linguistic accounts and an unreal distance from the cultural and social/economic effects of market capitalism. Third, this epistemology forms the basis both to analyze the process of historical gain and to critique current diminutions of democratic means and human freedom (refeudalization of the public sphere and the dislocations of the lifeworld). Finally, Habermas maintains in communicative rationality the means to critically capture and push forward democratic actions and human understanding. In high theory terms, he addresses librarianship's critical intellectual and public issues and problems. We ignore his system of thinking at our own peril. He has his critics [3, pp.

44-45], but even this brief review clearly indicates that his is a powerful system of thought which bears further investigation in librarianship. Some of this will be explored via two broad categories of theoretical debate within the profession on historical revisionism and classification.

### **Harris v. Dain**

The pessimistic endpoint of Harris's revisionist historiography of American librarianship has been described. Phyllis Dain [84] and others [see 85] responded with two basic positions. The first is that *far* too little is known or can be said definitively to come to Harris's conclusions: "History must stand as nearly as possible as it happened [and] it is unwise to attempt to change it [or] impugn the motives of the past..." [85, p. 962]. The second tended to preclude alternative answers: "who else but an elite group could have organized public libraries? ...Librarianship was a bookish profession.... Could [librarians] be expected to have been anything but middle class?" [84, pp. 262-263] Dain later characterized the founding of public libraries as a benevolent attempt at social control, and "whatever the particular reasons for their creation, public libraries ... enabled readers to make whatever use they wanted of collections, which became increasingly broad-minded and more accessible" [44, p. 62]. Thus the field intellectually arrived at a point concerning American library history that Wayne Wiegand characterized as "simplistically categorized ... into two camps: pro- or anti-Harris" [46, p. 20].

Utilizing Habermas does not "solve" this controversy, accepting neither determinism nor the simplistic "it somehow came to pass" as historical explanation. The means of self-actualization, critique, and will-formation is best captured in Habermas's exploration of the public sphere. Libraries, it has been argued, enact and embody crucial aspects of the public sphere, and came about in a societally-significant way during the period of democratic cultural institution-building. For instance, the principle of critique and argumentation to rationally arrive at values and conclusions is supported through the commitment to balanced collections, preserving them over time, and making a breadth of resources available. Social inclusion is extended through active attempts to make collections and resources reflect historical and current diversity - and by their very existence libraries potentially refute claims to exclusion in making current and retrospective organized resources available to check the bases of a thesis, law, policy etc.. Thus the potential for rational process of critique and argumentation - which lies at the heart of the public sphere and democratic process - is both continued and preserved. This gives the field more than a casual relationship to the public sphere, democracy, and the process of arriving at both [3, pp. 46-48]. (Frank Webster makes a related argument about British public libraries as well [48, pp, 176-177]). A description of the intellectual and historical environment from which American libraries developed along with civil society reads like a Habermasian blueprint of the public sphere [86].

The questions are thus begged: When did the objects of Harris's social control (library patrons) begin to actively resist and turn the institutions toward their own ends - and by what means? Were there antecedents? Was librarianship's own democratic rhetoric used against it to make the institution more open and responsive? How did economic interests (both larger social as well as personal interests) intersect with this shift? In broad terms, libraries have still not evolved into democratic institutions. Why? Dain was correct in that the historical record is complex, but she exercises the historian's over-caution in coming to *any* conclusions as to the questions of how and why transformation takes place. Harris was correct in that capitalism has exerted enormous cultural influence on the profession and the institution, but a Habermasian analysis would recognize historical self-actualization and future possibility to transform librarianship.

These are not purely historical questions. Are libraries now - as has been claimed - mere symbols of reason or learning, or are they actually used by their communities? Does that use bear relationship to the forming of rational positions or argumentation (on a question, an assignment, or perhaps still, a law or policy)? If so, how? What do libraries do to support or retard these attempts? Does the current rhetoric of librarianship (particularly its theoretical and management literature) bear any relationship to the purposes of its users? Have those purposes largely been shaped by media capitalism (ala refeudalization of the public sphere which has its parallels in the field [3, 48, pp. 177-182]) vs. the historical role of enacting and embodying the public sphere? A

Habermasian framework connects the means of historical changes to current possibilities, making such questions central to librarianship's research, practice, and public language.

### **Classification**

There is a line of LIS analysis which, following the French postmodern theorist Michel Foucault, comes to some damning conclusions about library classification and bibliographic control methods and systems. Greatly simplified, it is constructed thus:

1. "All discourse is controlled [and] the user becomes appropriated by the practice of the library and becomes defined by its limits and structures..." [36, p. 304].
2. "Objectivity and truth are sites of struggle among competing systems of discourse [and] the library, as an institution for arranging texts, becomes a component in the legitimation of a particular order of discourse..." [9, p. 418].
3. "The library objectifies by fixing places for documents on library shelves, and through the operation and maintenance of a subject analysis system that maps decontextualized ... content to arrays of documents in a highly privileged and culturally respected institutional space" [14, p. 255].

This argument - tightly interwoven with the fundamental critique of positivism and the language-deconstruction epistemological position outlined earlier - thus arrives at a view of library classification as control mechanisms in service to a larger dominating discourse.

Two alternate views challenge this, though not with an explicit epistemological argument. First, Tom Mann explodes current managerial notions that "it makes no important difference to the quality of scholarship enabled by a research library if it lacks any particular book in its classified collections onsite, as long as it can assure [its] timely delivery...." In examining a search for information on lighthouse libraries in the Library of Congress (LC) stacks, he concludes that, "with the classification scheme's arrangement of multiple books on the same topic together, within one library's stacks, the needed information could indeed be found systematically and comparatively easily." Browsing is most definitely *not* serendipity. Finding "*which fifteen* of the 438 volumes [at LC] had the relevant information" was a systematic, planned result of library classification. Interlibrary loan and the process of requesting remote books simply could not be sustained as a method of research to review all 438 volumes: "without local aggregations of ... books shelved next to each other in subject groupings in a physical place, such depth access is essentially precluded" [87]. Second, Sanford Berman has long challenged "archaic, foolish, clumsy, inauthentic and biased subject terms" identified classification terminology that is racist, class-based, gender biased, and downright squeamish in the area of accurate use of sexual terminology in cataloging, and highlighted the avoidance of clear, common language: "TRANSPORTATION, AUTOMOTIVE-FREIGHT" instead of "TRUCKING"; "DEOXYRIBONUCLEIC ACID" instead of "DNA". His critique invokes criteria of intelligibility, findability, and fairness in order to reform cataloging "that demonstrably damage[s] rather than enhance[s] catalog intelligibility and



effectiveness" [88]. In both cases, Mann and Berman highlight what systems of classification (or better versions of them) *enable*.

Habermas does not view language or its constructed systems as domination *per se*, as Foucault seems to. Rather, communicative action posits meaning socially built up over time, and identifies the means by which people rationally construct understanding and as social background. Mann and Berman come closer to that notion: classification and library systems of organization are subject to being invested with social meaning ("a public consciousness about ... why knowledge organization systems ... matter to the public [and] how such systems make a difference" [54, p. 12]) and are potentially subject to the force of the better argument. While we know the positivistic roots of library classification schemes, and we know they are of human construction and not inherently or scientifically possessing meaning, notions of rational access and improving that access are not easily dismissed or replaced. How do electronic formats (the world wide web, search engines, and full-text keyword searching) intersect with these ideas? Do they break down communicative rationality or liberate it, or both? In what ways do classification systems (or the lack thereof) hide or highlight the potential for cultural resistance? Do these notions bear a foundational relationship to print literacy? Harris critiqued the reification of print and literacy in librarianship, but this seems to clash with the critique of the market thrust and destabilized learning inherent in information technologies (it was Harris who consistently reminded us that libraries consume the cultural output of a market economy). Why has there been so much resistance to

reforming controlled vocabularies and formulating more connections among literatures in organizing libraries?

These examples and questions do not by any means exhaust the critical and reflexive possibilities to apply Habermas's work to librarianship and its theoretical literature. There are more quotidian questions like the public's connection to/use of more diverse and democratic representations in library collections. Are there any? Does Habermas allow us to epistemologically ground and defend notions of collection balance and intellectual freedom in a digital age? That question would profit from an analysis of librarianship in light of the public sphere and its relationship to democracy, linking to the idea of epistemology-as-normative-social-theory. If librarianship bears an intimate relationship to the public sphere and its attendant normative and democratic claims, can LIS theoretical work be further informed by democratic theory? Lastly, the publication of reasoned argumentation transformed the solitary act of reading into an act in the process of forming a self-aware "public" and community (the formation of the public sphere). Does this still happen and do library-supported forms of writing and reading still hold that potential?

### **Conclusion: Toward "Integrity and Obstinacy"**

To conclude, Habermas's vision is not so theoretically complex and sophisticated that he ultimately misses the humane point at the core:

I believe we all want to live in a civilized country, which displays a cosmopolitan openness and cooperatively, yet cautiously inserts itself into the circle of nations. We all want to live among people who are accustomed to respecting the peculiarity of what is foreign, the autonomy of what is unique, as well as regional, ethnic, and religious diversities. [We must] remember ... the catastrophes of the 20th century, but also ... the ... moments of emancipation and achievement of which we can be proud. In quite an unoriginal way, I would wish to see a disposition, which is suspicious of lofty and profound rhetoric; one that also rejects attempts to aestheticize the political and yet watches for that which borders on trivializing the integrity and obstinacy of intellectual creations [82, p. 94].

Habermas is said to be skeptical concerning the quote from Marx which led off this paper on philosophers changing the world [89, p. 24]. Perhaps our task should be framed more modestly: the goal of LIS theory - and the librarianship it would shape - must point us toward a society such as he describes, grounded in a hopeful, humane, cosmopolitan, and suspicious disposition which is respectful of the obstinacy of human intellectual creation. His system of thought helps address the problematic circularity in which LIS theory finds itself - a first step.

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