Neoliberalism, Race, and Social Justice in LIS

The library and information science field has long struggled with its overwhelming homogeneity, but it's only within the last few decades that its deficiencies at the structural level - not just a superficial "diversity" issue - have come under scrutiny. Much of the critical scholarship within and about LIS in this time has approached these fundamental flaws and biases from an anti-racist standpoint; there have also, in more recent years, been more critical pieces regarding the role of capitalism and neoliberalism in the structuring of libraries and archives in the US. Transformational change in LIS, including commitments to anti-racist work and epistemic justice, will require critical analysis of the interwoven nature of racism and neoliberalism in America and its effect on the LIS field. This paper seeks to answer - or at least to begin to unpack - the question of how a critique of neoliberalism can help the LIS field more effectively commit to social justice and anti-racist action.

We begin first by evaluating the role neoliberalism has played in shaping LIS and the institutions of archives and libraries. Neoliberalism in practice can be very difficult to define; it is by nature flexible and amorphous enough to exist in many different forms. While the ideology remains essentially the same - the "economization" of all spheres of life (Brown 2016) - the material ways in which this ideology is expressed can vary widely. Cifor and Lee (2017) explain that

> neoliberalism has profoundly restructured areas of economic, political, and social life in ways that focus on individual responsibilities, reduce state interventions and funding for them, draw attention away from systemic oppressions, use 'chronic underfunding, disaster, and state failure' as excuses for privatization, and 'obfuscates or renders invisible forms of labor that are deemed undesirable.' ...Under neoliberalism, people no longer exist; only markets exist. (p. 3-4)

The United States, already primed for individualistic tendencies and Protestant work ethic, has become a neoliberal state *par excellence*.

The rise of a multiracial progressive middle class post-WWII threatened the economic and political elite in the US, and neoliberalism became the weapon with which to dismantle this coalition. By seemingly unconnected, but in reality interdependent, strategies of the "culture wars" in the 1980s and the systematic deregulation and privatization of public goods and infrastructure, the elite worked to resolidify their position at the top of the class hierarchy. Positioning the free market as the ultimate good and citizens as market actors allowed the government to become primarily an enforcer of "freedom" in the sense of market competition. This definition of "freedom" let the state abdicate any responsibility to its citizens, instead shifting the burden to them as "personal responsibility." This hard shift from a multiracial coalition to fragmented and segregated middle and working classes was made possible by the state's framing of "personal responsibility" as an individual moral issue and, very importantly, tying that moralization to race. As neoliberalism expanded and strengthened, the conception of race as a tool for social division became more embedded in the public discourse, and the primacy of the individual and its freedoms grew.

The LIS field being built on liberal and positivist ideals has made it perhaps all that much more vulnerable to neoliberalism. As Cifor and Lee (2017) explain, "Neoliberalism has infused LIS discourse with rhetoric of 'transformational change,' grounded in the unquestioning adoption of both neoliberal theory and practices. ...Neoliberal processes have come to seem natural and inevitable parts of information, government, and academic systems" (p. 8-9). As a field, LIS benefited immensely from the development of the "information age" beginning in the

1970s, an age inextricable from the rise of neoliberalism. Commodification of information helped to professionalize the field and to created a demand for a new type of librarian, one who could help citizens adapt to this changing economy. Libraries, archives, and other institutions embraced their new roles with little hesitation, and soon the neoliberal qualities and values beginning to suffuse both the public and private sectors became just plain "common sense."

The LIS field is suffused with neoliberal assumptions - not just in the structure of public library services, or of university instruction, but even within its scholarship. Pawley's examination of "information literacy" is a good starting point for teasing out some of the field's foundational assumptions: the combination of the "'information' and 'literacy' sets up a tension between conflicting ideals of, on the one hand, a promethean vision of citizen empowerment and democracy, and, on the other, a desire to control 'quality' of information" (2003, p. 425) The professionalization of LIS as a field relied upon the existence of educated experts and a codification of standards and practices. This structure of rule-by-elites is fundamental to the neoliberal project - "governance by majority rule is seen as a potential threat to individual rights" (Harvey, 2005, p. 66) and thus to individuals as free market actors - and often that structure is not even recognized for what it is. Howard Zinn, in remarks to the Society of American Archivists and a subsequent article in 1977, notes,

> Professionalism is a powerful form of social control. By professionalism I mean the almost total immersion in one's craft, being so absorbed in the day-to-day exercise of those skills, as to have little time, energy, or will to consider what part those skills play in the total social scheme. I say *almost-total* immersion, 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. (p. 15-16)

Neoliberalism can also be thought of in this way; it is an ideology almost impossible to define because of its embeddedness, and the few counterexamples serve as plausible deniability for neoliberal proponents.

So we can see that on a fundamental level there is an implicit acceptance of neoliberal ideology within LIS. But how does that manifest itself in material ways? One of the most inescapable is the necessity of concrete valuation. “In a neoliberal framework the language of social justice can be easily co-opted to serve neoliberal aims where everything must lead to a demonstrable outcome,” Cifor and Lee write (2017, p. 12). This co-opting leads to practices like cultural competency trainings, diversity hires, and the conflation of having information needs met with the achievement of social justice. As has been noted in almost all social justice discussions, social justice is a process, one that is always ongoing and never fully achieved. But under neoliberalism, everything and everyone must have economic value, and so institutions (particularly those in the public sphere) and humans must constantly be concerned with demonstrating their value in an economically legible manner.

This fundamental neoliberal need to evaluate everything in market terms means that practices, communities, or knowledge that do not have concrete value on the free market will be neglected or even attacked. This indifference or animosity to things that don’t “make sense” economically or aren’t profit-generating exists throughout the LIS field, from the slashing of library budgets to the lack of attention paid to minoritized communities to the marginalization of non-Western ways of knowing to the racial homogeneity of LIS practitioners themselves. Neoliberalism also requires a similar aversion to naming structures or practices outside of a

prescribed political arena as being inherently political; this fits almost seamlessly with the long-time LIS ideal of "neutrality" within the profession.

From the beginnings of LIS as a field with Paul Otlet's vision of an objective, classifiable truth to even today, many librarians and archivists have viewed themselves as neutral practitioners, outside the messy world of politics and sociocultural biases. In the 20th century, particularly coinciding with the civil rights and feminist movements, the idea of a "neutral" LIS professional came into question. Zinn, saying that "the archivist, in subtle ways, tends to perpetuate the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business. His supposed neutrality is, in other words, a fake," forcefully confronted the false belief so many archivists and librarians had in their objectivity and neutrality. "Scholarship in society is inescapably political. Our choice is not between being political or not. Our choice is to follow the politics of the going order...or else to promote those human values of peace, equality, and justice, which our present society denies" (1977, p. 20). Since then, many other theorists and practitioners in LIS have generated insightful critical scholarship about the existential embeddedness of all humans within societal power relations.

Recognizing our position - both as individuals and as memory institutions - within these power relations is essential to working in a concrete way towards social and epistemic justice for marginalized and minoritized communities. And we cannot effectively or thoroughly evaluate our role in society's power structures without critical analysis of race and neoliberalism within the LIS field and its practices. As librarians and archivists, we are "are active participants in the dynamics of power relations" and although we may work to hold power to account through our roles as professionals and to acknowledge our own power, "the boundary between constructive

and oppressive power is always shifting and porous" (Duff and Harris, 2002, p. 277). A critical piece of social justice work in LIS is constantly questioning what seems unquestionable - our assumptions, our privilege, what we can or are not allowed to ignore by virtue of our race or gender, the way things are done just because they've always been done that way.

Questioning the seemingly unquestionable is difficult for many reasons, one of which is a near taboo on discussing some fundamental ideologies - for instance, the constructed nature of race, particularly of Whiteness. In the US, particularly since the ascendance of neoliberalism, discussing race - even acknowledging its existence, sometimes - and racial power dynamics is seen as divisive. However, to truly pursue social justice we need talk frankly about race and anti-racist work. "A recognition of race's social constructedness...is not an assertion of its immateriality, then, but an opportunity to examine the very workings of its materiality as a site for the exercise of power within regimes of racial subordination," David Hudson writes (2017, p. 20). The LIS field is especially uncomfortable with discussions of race almost certainly due to its largely White makeup; despite this discomfort, a number of LIS practitioners, particularly those of color, have begun and sustained a critical dialogue on anti-racism within the field.

LIS institutional attempts at combatting racism have often been ineffective at best, sometimes even harmful. As is the case with many "diversity" or "multiculturalism" initiatives within a neoliberal society or institution, an unjust and racist social order is implicitly validated by superficial attempts to replicate said social order within the organization. Part of this failure is a flawed or inadequate understanding of race, and in particular Whiteness, as social construct: "liberal anti-racism locates the problem of race squarely within the realm of the (ir)rational individual. With race understood as a morally irrelevant category whose invocation presents a

barrier to social harmony, racism is cast as ignorance and irrationality - as, indeed, a social sickness, an aberration from a broader social order itself thus tacitly valorized" (Hudson, 2017, p. 14). The emphasis on the individual in liberalism and its supremacy in neoliberalism allows for the burden of anti-racist work to be placed on the individual, and more often than not the onus is upon Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) to do the heavy lifting while White people absolve themselves through things like diversity hiring - things that ultimately do nothing to change fundamental racial power imbalances and thus lead to dissatisfaction and burnout among BIPOC practitioners in LIS.

A seemingly contradictory tendency within neoliberalism is to valorize the individual above all else but to universalize experience so as to minimize power imbalance. "Neoliberal concern for the individual trumps any social democratic concern for equality, democracy, and social solidarities," writes Harvey (2005, p. 176). At the same time, by forcing responsibility on the individual to "solve" racism, neoliberalism enables a universalization of "difference in ways that uphold damaging power dynamics and hierarchies" (Cifor and Lee, 2017, p. 4); thus, we end up with possibly well-intentioned but ultimately damaging things like "All Lives Matter" as a response to "Black Lives Matter." Caswell and Cifor note this tendency, saying, "This replacing of bodies, of black with white, naturalizes suffering and pain as the condition of black bodies, threatens to obliterate the suffering of the black body, erases meaningful differences between bodies, and always returns the focus to the white body and its affective experiences" (2016, p. 32). We see this play out time and time again, not just within LIS but in society at large - Black pain only becomes legible to Whiteness when refocused to center Whiteness. Individual empathy, radical or otherwise, is not a bad practice, but is also not inherently anti-racist.

To commit to anti-racist action in LIS is to commit to breaking from the neoliberal framework imposed upon us and our profession, and to interrogate even the structures that seem "natural" or unmarked. The unmarkedness of Whiteness in the US is reflected in the unmarkedness of neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal project has been so successful at hiding itself in plain sight, at seeming to be not just the default but the only option, that we can see strong parallels between it and the constructedness of Whiteness as default, as "raceless." And indeed, these parallels help maintain and expand both neoliberalism and white supremacy:

> As a state-sanctioned account of difference, multiculturalism has served as a vehicle for incorporating institutionally validated nonwhite populations within the structural bounds of the nation, as well as a framework for reproducing such populations' differentiation and subordination in ostensibly deracialized terms like culture, nation, and religion. (Hudson, 2017, p. 24)

By continuing practices that inscribe and reinscribe these structural bounds, LIS does ultimately very little to challenge status quo power dynamics.

Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance is useful in analyzing how certain practices or biases can become standardized. Cifor and Wood note that Butler's work can "demonstrate that archiving is constructed through the repetition of a particular set of sanctioned acts that become naturalized into 'codes of behavior and belief.' Such scripts are thereby performed without even acknowledging that such a performance is being undertaken…" (2017, p. 9). This unconscious repetitive construction builds structures and practices that seem entirely natural or non-ideological. Neoliberalism relies upon a similar inscription and outcome to expand and maintain dominance; Gramsci's idea of "common sense" as constructed by a hegemony to manufacture a society's consent to be ruled through its conformance to said

common sense (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 67) works both to empower neoliberal projects and to enforce power dynamics along racial and class lines.

When we undertake critical analyses of race and of neoliberalism's effects in LIS, we must be conscious of of the framework in which we are situated. In a neoliberal framework, information has become a commodity, and our library patrons or archival researchers are now consumers. Within this framework, "information literacy is a matter of making enlightened and informed consumer 'choice'" (Pawley, 2003, p. 435). The neoliberal library, university, or other institution would have us constrain our work merely to assisting users in making the informed decision, or to performing other actions - such as providing computer literacy classes - that serve the purpose of producing more valuable workers and increasing human capital. If we are to fundamentally transform LIS institutions, however, we need to interrogate these prescribed goals with questions such as, "How does the institutionalization of information literacy, and the development of information literacy as a 'natural' category reproduce, mediate or transform power relationships?" (Pawley, 2003, p. 445)

The information age and its technological advancement has altered the LIS field in meaningful ways, but to examine those changes without also understanding the neoliberal framework behind them is to only get a partial picture. While the internet and other technologies have allowed for a broader distribution of information, the LIS field "must investigate how cultural heritage institutions can create avenues of meaningful access without further promoting the uneven power dynamic that inspired the creation or collection of records of certain communities or groups" (Punzalan and Caswell, 2016, p. 34). Diversity initiatives and other attempts at social justice transformation that still operate within a neoliberal and hierarchical

framework cannot fundamentally transform or rebuild the foundations of the LIS field. To undertake this radical transformation, we must rethink assumptions and ideas of freedom, individualism, and neutrality.

To paraphrase a line from Zinn's address to SAA, anything but a full-time commitment to political activity - that is, social justice - assumes that we are operating in a basically just society. This is a critical reminder that to do nothing is to enforce the status quo; to take it even further, to do anything but critical anti-racist and collective work is to support the status quo. "What is required then is to wrench ourselves out of our passivity, to try to integrate our professional lives with our humanity," Zinn exhorts (1977, p. 25). Part of shaking ourselves free from passivity and the illusion of neutrality is to expose and question the power dynamics in our society falling not just along class lines but along racial lines as well. We can integrate this critical inquiry into our work by conceiving of alternate ways of working, existing, relating, and thriving. For example, Duff and Harris (2002) describe the idea of a "liberatory descriptive standard" that exposes, rather than obscuring, its construction and creators. This transparency "would not obscure the dimensions of power which it reflects and expresses" (p. 284).

This work is not easy, and requires not just an ongoing commitment to social justice but also imagination. Harvey (2005) reminds us that "To propose different rights to those held sacrosanct by neoliberalism carries with it, however, the obligation to specify an alternative social process within which such alternative rights can inhere" (p. 204). The unmarkedness of neoliberalism and of race in the United States can often make it difficult to conceive of a different way of being in the world and relating to those around us, but difficulty is not the same as impossibility. Continuing to investigate and interrogate LIS with critical understanding of

race, gender, economics, and neoliberalism can help us build an ethic not based on individualism inscribed by the free market but based on mutual support and anti-racist action.

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