

A ‘Common Sense’ in Librarianship?

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In Descartes, as in the ‘new science,’ once it has separated itself from the spurious elements of philosophical development, the trust in method attained an almost mythical status and takes on a Promethean force, defining itself - along with its commitment to scientific verification - as a sort of heroic, originary ingenuity.

Negri, Political Descartes

One of the most insidious aspects of the triumph of instrumental reason under neoliberalization is its quantification, not only of natural phenomena, but of the self. Methodological individualism - the idea that there is something called “the individual” which forms the origin and basis of social forms - not only continues the isolating alienation of earlier forms of capitalism (required for the mystification and ‘rationalization’ of capitalist labour processes) but grounds the idea of the “data body” as the collection of data-traces left within virtual systems as well as the site of “surveillance capitalism”, platform-health-trackers and, in the academic world, metrics and analytics. Libraries are being drawn into the datafication of the student body out of a concern for “student outcomes”, but the real world outcome remains the same: quantification, dismemberment, exploitation.

Many librarians are critical of the push towards quantification. Ron Day has argued that libraries in the 20th century chose an instrumental “documentation” model of texts drawn from Otlet over a “hermeneutic” model drawn from Heidegger, which helped libraries to integrate within the military-industrial-scientific complex and its model of knowledge production and circulation, giving us access to the government funding that supported that complex. On the other hand, some tendencies within librarianship, such as Evidence-Based LIS, embrace the scientific model of knowledge and understanding. The narrow focus in library school research methods classes on positivist social science reinforces the documentalist, scientific mode of understanding within the profession.

But this dichotomy is not of recent origin and it is not restricted to librarianship. Hans-Georg Gadamer opens his monumental *Truth and Method* with a discussion of the challenges to the “new science” inaugurated by Descartes. Descartes philosophical justification for the scientific method quickly became hegemonic within “rational”, quantitative, experimental explosion of 17th century science.

The human sciences, hopeful of achieving the kinds of rapid advance demonstrated by scientists like Newton, looked to the method of the natural sciences as the way to accomplish this. In the course of the 19th century, the “human sciences” attempted to reconstruct themselves along the lines of natural science, importing the standards of truth, logic, and evidence into the humanities and social sciences. But Cartesian science and its applicability to the human sciences was challenged from the very beginning. One of the victories of neoliberalism seems to be the victory of the scientific method over other forms of understanding within the humanities and social sciences.

For the early critics of the “new science”, “the specific problem that the human sciences present to thought has not rightly grasped their nature if one measures them by the yardstick of a progressive knowledge of regularity. The experience of the sociohistorical world cannot be raised to a science by the inductive procedure of the natural sciences” (Gadamer, 4). For Gadamer, the distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences is that, because the object of the human sciences is humanity and society, we - as researchers - cannot remove ourselves from them, cut ourselves off from our objects of study, as is required by the objectivity of science and the scientific method. We bring our entire lived experience - as individuals living in societies - to the study of humanity and social forms. Gadamer writes that

The human sciences are connected to modes of experience that lie outside science: with the experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science. . . . One must have a sense for the aesthetic and the historical or acquire it, if one is to be able to rely on one’s tact in work in the human sciences. . . . A logically consistent application of [the scientific] method as the only norm for the truth of the human sciences would amount to their self-annihilation. . . .

The kind of knowledge and understanding required in the study of society is *a very different kind* of knowledge from that gained in the study of natural phenomena. When librarianship chose documentation over hermeneutics, it committed to a particular kind of knowledge that is inextricable from the instrumental rationality of capitalism in general and, now, the exploitative and oppressive quantification of neoliberal capitalism.

Why are the scientific form of knowledge and capitalist exploitation inextricable? In an early work, Antonio Negri argues that Cartesian dualism - not only the distinction between mind and matter, but between an individual subject and an external, objective world - arose out of the failed bid by the bourgeoisie to capture political power in the Thirty Years War. In Negri’s view, the humanist singular conception of the individual and the world is present in the early work of Descartes, but in the later work this has been replaced by the strict separation between mind and body, subject and object, inquirer and external world. Descartes’ philosophy provided a “reasonable ideology” for the bourgeoisie

as it continued its economic and political project over the next two hundred years. With the political victory of the bourgeoisie in Europe between 1789 and 1848 (the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 was an outlying precursor in the most advanced capitalist country), the long line of bourgeois conceptions of truth, knowledge, and science from Descartes through Kant to Hegel achieved an unchallengeable hegemony. This gives us not only the dominant view of the neutrality of professions (teachers, librarians, journalists) somehow able to stand outside their objects of study and their work, but also the idea that artificial intelligence can take the place of humanity in the world (because the “intelligence” of AI is equated with the scientific model of knowledge; but it cannot take the place of a non-dualist, humanistic form of knowledge). To take a library example, the problem with LCSH subject headings is not that definitions and mores shift over time, but that we think that we can “scientifically” apply descriptors from a position outside of human social and political relationships. The Brian Deer Classification System and Dorothy Porter’s work at Howard University are important not only because they provide decolonized alternatives to LC or DDC, but because they are based not on a separation between cataloguer and community/society, but on the cataloguer being a part of community.

The pre-Cartesian, humanistic view of knowledge persisted, and Gadamer sees hermeneutics as the culmination of this second, minor trend in philosophy and scholarly method. Negri, too, sees value in rehabilitating a pre-Cartesian humanism in order to challenge the dehumanizing instrumental rationality of capitalism. In Gadamer’s view, two of the most important Renaissance concepts needed to challenge the scientific mode of knowledge, to insist on a different kinds of truth in the human sciences, are *Bildung* (culture) and “*sensa communis*” (common sense).

After Descartes and the rise of dualist, instrumental rationality, human beings became “characterized by the break with the immediate and the natural that the intellectual, rational side” of our lives demands. This break is what has allowed human beings to be operated on with the dispassion and disinterest that we treat the natural world. Horkheimer and Adorno connected instrumental reason to the crimes of the Holocaust, the ability to treat human beings as non-human, as raw material, as objects. But it leads also to quantified tracking, surveillance, the resurgence of eugenics, and “scientific” racism. We are finally seeing the results of Cartesian dualism on the natural world, as capitalism propels us headlong towards climate catastrophe; but we are happy to continue with a scientific dualism that treats “human resources” as raw materials for power and profit. *Bildung* - or culture - is the accumulation of experience with and through society and the natural world that gives us a place within it, and the kind of knowledge that would prevent us from treating human beings and the planet as disposable.

“Common sense” on the other hand, doesn’t mean what we think it means. Common sense is not a particular “sense” that all people share out of some fundamental human nature. Rather, it comes out of the education and experience of living within a particular “commune”, a particular society. Gadamer writes

that

The most important thing in education is... the training in the *sensus communis*, which is not nourished on the true but on the probable, the verisimilar. The main thing for our purposes is that here *sensus communis* obviously does not mean only that general faculty in all [people] but in the sense that founds community.

What the isolation and alienation of capitalism has produced, what arises out of the “methodological individualism” of liberalism and the natural-scientific method applied to the human sciences, is the death of the “*sensus communis*”. All the calls for civility in politics, all the criticisms of postmodernism as causing (rather than being a symptom of) the death of truth and the ability to communicate (or even to have) shared experiences, all of this comes out Descartes sleight-of-hand that founds the philosophical justification for capitalism. Individually, with no shared goals or values, we fight amongst ourselves. Divided, we fall for “fake news”, propaganda, advertising.

Despite the views of early “library scientists” like Dewey and Cutter, the lack of any kind of “*sensus communis*” in librarianship has been felt for a long time. It is widespread in the literature of the profession and its philosophy, from Archibald MacLeish in 1940:

Nothing is more difficult for the beginning librarian than to discover in what profession he is engaged. Certain professions define themselves. Others are defined by those who practice them. The librarian’s profession is of neither sort. A librarian is so called not for what he does, as the farmer who farms or the lawyer who laws, but from the place in which he does it. And the definitions of the librarians, though they are eloquent in describing the librarian’s perfections, are reticent in saying what the librarian’s perfections are for. (MacLeish, “Of the Librarians’ Profession”)

To Buschman in 2018:

Librarians and administrators often fall back on an improvised admixture of utilitarian and capabilities approaches in response to their ideals operating in fluid and challenging circumstances. Are we at a dead end then, with libraries vaguely described as a good, which is most often interpreted by boards and administrators as merely feel-good? (Buschman, “Everyday Life, Everyday Democracy in Libraries: Toward Articulating the Relationship”)

This lack of a common sense, a set of shared values, priorities, and goals, lies at the heart not only of our jumping on board any new initiative that comes up, but of our focus on the technical and technological side of our work at the expense of the humanistic. But it is also at the root of Fobazi Ettarh’s “vocational awe” - a religiosity that tries to compensate for a lack of real humanist commitment, and our problems around racism and lack of diversity. The way

we treat librarians of colour - and I am thinking here specifically of precarious workers and diversity interns, in Canada this often singles out Indigenous women - is impossible to remedy as long as we don't choose for ourselves and our profession some kind of common goal or set of values and then stick with them. The vague "strategic priorities" of our organizations do no good; diversity theatre is dangerous; the instrumental rationality that drives our decision-making goes unchallenged. We decry the abuse of analytics and other kind of data, but we go along with the idea that the scientific method is an appropriate methodology for a social profession like librarianship. I've written elsewhere about the need for a political commitment on the part of libraries - something that might help prevent policies like Winnipeg Public Library's, itself predicated on a parochial separation between the state and its citizens - but in addition to this we need a commitment to our own self-definition of goals and values predicated on our sense of community.

In order to achieve such a sense of community, however, we need to destroy all those insidious processes, like instrumental rationality itself, whose function is to separate, isolate, and alienate us from each other. This may not be possible without a revolution, but in the mean time we have to face some hard social truths, challenge unpleasant realities, and have the kinds of difficult conversations that instrumental reason, methodological individualism, and quantification are all designed precisely to prevent us from having. The alienated, ideological "common sense" of neoliberalism is a hard habit to shake, but I think we need to start there, among our co-workers and administrators, challenging decisions, getting organized, deciding for ourselves what kind of profession we want to be. But this decision cannot be top-down, hierarchical, or based on unchallenged assumptions, as our decisions tend to be. Rather, it needs to be communal, bottom-up, democratic in a radical, Renaissance sense.