


[Fisher on Popowich, 'Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship: A Marxist Approach'](#)

Review published on Sunday, June 12, 2022

Sam Popowich. *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship: A Marxist Approach*. Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books and Library Juice Press, 2019. 322 pages. \$28.00 (paper), [ISBN](#)

[978-1-63400-087-1](#). 

Reviewed by Daniel Clarkson Fisher (Western University) **Published on** H-Socialisms (June, 2022)
Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55737>

Librarians and Democracy

As if the points made in Sam Popowich's brilliant book *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship: A Marxist Approach* were not compelling enough when the book was first published in the fall of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic and other critical situations have certainly underscored the need for library workers to pay close attention to them. Writing for the American Library Association's *State of America's Libraries 2021—Special Report: COVID-19*, the organization's then-president, Julius C. Jefferson Jr., states proudly: "In 2020, libraries of all types stepped up to meet the needs of their communities as they responded to the impacts of COVID-19, a national financial crisis, and social unrest." [1] But, in an opinion piece for *Library Journal*, Callan Bignoli, one of the organizers behind #ProtectLibraryWorkers, puts this into stark perspective: "The flipside of all of these feel-good [narratives about] digital story time, backyard summer reading, and boosted Wi-Fi signals in the parking lot is library workers forced to do jobs they never signed up for, scolded for their attempts to fight for their well-being, and [faced with] the reality of slashed budgets they're staring down from now until ... well, no one really knows." [2] *Publisher's Weekly* further notes that behind the scenes of library responses to the pandemic were "too many librarians and staff working without the proper protective equipment and safety precautions, terrified of becoming sick, facing uncertainty and economic ruin as layoffs and furloughs mounted, with some library workers even being ordered to redeploy from their closed libraries to shelters, makeshift testing facilities, or other frontline, high-risk jobs in their communities." [3] As Bignoli suggests, this has happened in part because of library workers' "instincts for martyrdom and hesitance to make a fuss about [their] own needs." [4] But another culprit here might be what Popowich refers to as the "ideas widespread in librarianship [that libraries are] 'cornerstones of liberty,' 'arsenals of a democratic culture,' 'essential to the functioning of a democratic society'" (p. 1).

Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship makes the case that such "democratic discourse" helps a society "based on economic exploitation, benefiting some and oppressing others" to "maintain its hegemony" (p. 3). In addition, the uncritical devotion to and exaltation of ideas about democracy within librarianship have major implications in terms of how a host of other societal problems are addressed. As Popowich explains, when we start with the assumption that our

democracy is “an unimpeachable good,” things like “racism, sexism, intolerance, alienation, hatred, violence, and political manipulation” are seen as “aberrations, faults, [and] mistakes” occurring within an otherwise perfect system. Obviously, taking any and all critiques of the system off the table and adopting such a view severely limits our ability to respond effectively to these problems. Or, as the author puts it: “By claiming that our societies are indeed democratic we allow ourselves to believe that such problems are easily fixed without fundamentally changing the nature of our society.” Worse still, there is the matter of how libraries have historically functioned in democratic societies like ours: as Popowich demonstrates, “the democratic tradition is part of a larger liberal tradition ... which sees librarianship as neutral, pragmatic, and independent of social, economic, or political concerns” (dust jacket). By helping to maintain the status quo, then, libraries can tell themselves that they are “fundamentally doing the right things, and any problems within the profession—lack of diversity, racism, sexism—can also be ignored in light of the ‘greater good’ of the library’s democratic mission” (p. 3).

While proposing “potential strategies for resistance” and offering alternative approaches are among Popowich’s goals with *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship*, he begins his book by expanding on the above points (p. 13). In chapter 1, “The Democratic Discourse of Librarianship,” he develops his thesis by looking closely at how these ideas have appeared and taken shape in the profession over time. Then, in chapter 2, “Vectors of Oppression,” the author “exposes ... the truth of the library as a capitalist institution, and the necessity of a revolution in our lives and social power as workers” by pointing out “the structures of oppression, domination, and exploitation inherited by librarianship from broader capitalist society” (pp. 60, 12). Popowich goes on in chapter 3, “Liberalism and the Enlightenment,” to consider “the political unconscious of library work” and where exactly it came from historically (p. 169). And because the task of understanding how liberal ideology perpetuates itself through actual practice requires “[taking] up a position outside of it” (p. 120), chapter 4, “Ideology and Hegemony in the Marxist Tradition,” argues for applying a Marxist lens.

From there, chapter 5, “Three Hegemonies of Library History,” uses this lens to “map the history of modern librarianship to changes in the socio-economic conjuncture from 1850 to 2008” (p. 12). Popowich stops his mapping in 2008, noting that the financial crisis of that same year “[marks] yet another moment of social, political, and cultural inflection, the nature of which is as yet unclear” (p. 176). The lead-up to this event still gives us a lot to reflect upon, however. Unsurprisingly, the author sees the most recent epoch, the period of 1973-2008, as being heavily influenced by neoliberalism. So, in chapters 6 (“The Library Myth”) and 7 (“Truth Machines”), he examines two of the most pressing issues for those working in the “neoliberal library”: “the question of epistemology and ‘library science’ under postmodernism, and of library labor in the age of intelligent machines,” respectively (p. 205). Chapter 8, “Dual Power and Mathesis,” considers some of those aforementioned strategies and alternatives for those wanting to push back against the neoliberal library and its democratic discourse. And the conclusion, “Lives and Time,” throws into sharp relief what is at stake here: a society based on economic exploitation, of course, has enormous costs in terms of both human lives and the time frame for our ability to fight back (thanks to anthropogenic climate change, among other things). But, as Popowich reminds us, “while we do indeed develop in a particular society and culture, we are not completely determined by it” (p. 299).

To be as clear as possible, *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship* is a masterwork. Throughout the book, Popowich demonstrates complete command of the relevant (and sometimes

difficult) theoretical material. In addition, his analyses are utterly convincing and also incredibly thoroughgoing. Even his small digressions have a robustness to them that other, comparatively more extended treatments often lack. In particular, the parts of the text that consider intellectual freedom in librarianship are among the most sophisticated and compellingly argued that this reviewer has read. Because Popowich deals so fairly and perceptively with the arguments of those who think libraries can and should be politically neutral when it comes to things like collections development and programming, his critiques of them are all the more decisive and devastating; he is easily the profession's most formidable and effective critic in this area. What is more, Popowich makes excellent use of recent news stories from the library realm throughout the book. This ripped-from-the-headlines approach keeps things from feeling too abstract and gives *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship* exactly the kind of immediacy and real-world applicability that one would hope for from a title like this.

That being said, the book's intended audience (academic librarians and others in the scholarly world) seems rather narrow. On the one hand, this is not unexpected: critical librarianship is, for the most part, a movement of academic librarians. And, as Rory Litwin, founder of Library Juice Press (the publisher of this title), has noted, it is particularly "concerned with theory in general it seems, as there is often discussion about post-structuralist critical theory." [5] On the other hand, though, the points Popowich makes are so crucially important that one hopes they will find an audience beyond the ivory tower. This is not to say that *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship* is not deliberately educative (it is), or that Popowich is not a refreshingly accessible academic writer (he is), but many of the theories being considered are necessarily complex. Realistically speaking, then, if a wider and more popular readership is to be reached, some streamlining will be required. Popowich's especially excellent blog (<https://www.spopowich.ca/blog>), which provides comparatively "bite-sized" insights along the lines of the book, seems like a smart step in this direction.

Looking elsewhere, though, we can find instructive examples of how to present similarly essential ideas in even more "user-friendly" ways. For instance, Popowich discusses Fobazi Ettarh's concept of "vocational awe," which refers to "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique." [6] This idea has spread like wildfire both within critical librarianship and without. Among other things, it comes up constantly in journal articles and professional publications, on Twitter, and in other forums. While this ubiquity speaks to the importance of the concept, we can also learn something from how efficaciously it has been communicated: in the article "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," which was published in the journal *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* and is where many first encountered it, Ettarh makes her case with equal parts intellectual heft and essayistic eloquence. And, of course, the term "vocational awe" itself is highly effective in that it is so spot-on and readily graspable. It might be an idea whose time has come, but it was also expertly midwived. Achieving a commensurate reach and influence may seem like a tall order, but this reviewer feels strongly that Popowich has the requisite skills and abilities on top of the big ideas.

In its current state as an academic tome, however, *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship* is certainly a superlative achievement. At a moment when the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a significant tension at the heart of modern librarianship, it definitely qualifies as required reading for students, educators, those involved in relevant labor movements

(#ProtectLibraryWorkers, #LIBREV, #CloseTheLibraries, and #LibraryLayoffs), and rank-and-file library workers with more scholarly reading tastes. Any attempt to resolve this tension will thus require confronting the democratic discourse of librarianship. Library workers and others, then, would be seriously remiss if they did not hear out Sam Popowich.

Notes

[1]. The American Library Association, *State of America's Libraries 2021—Special Report: COVID-19*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.ala.org/news/sites/ala.org.news/files/content/State-of-Americas-Libraries-Report-2021-4-21.pdf>.

[2]. Bignoli, "Don't Leave Workers Out of the Library Narrative | Opinion," *Library Journal*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/Dont-Leave-Workers-Out-of-the-Library-Narrative-Opinion>.

[3]. Andrew Albanese, "The Top 10 Library Stories of 2020," *Publisher's Weekly*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/85122-the-top-10-library-stories-of-2020.html>.

[4]. Bignoli, "Don't Leave Workers Out of the Library Narrative."

[5]. Litwin, "Interview with Elaine Harger, PLG Co-Founder," Litwin Books & Library Juice Press, July 21, 2016, <https://litwinbooks.com/interview-with-elaine-harger-plg-co-founder/>.

[6]. Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.

Citation: Daniel Clarkson Fisher. Review of Popowich, Sam, *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship: A Marxist Approach*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. June, 2022. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55737>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).