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Everyday activism: challenging neoliberalism for radical library workers in English HE

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to examine the political position of academic librarianship in the context of recent changes in English Higher Education and to explore existing and emergent moments of radical educational possibility. Firstly, we argue for critical attention being paid to the university library – a site often perceived as self-evident, neutral, predictable – and highlight ways in which the work of the library has been affected by processes of neoliberalisation. Secondly, we investigate Radical Librarians Collective (RLC), an open, horizontalist organisation of library workers and supporters, as a potential site through which to counter these developments and foster radical alternatives. RLC's successes are primarily within its aims to provide solidarity, space for discussion, and mutual aid nationally between like-minded library workers, and its support for everyday workplace practices of resistance. We conclude with suggestions for the collective's development which focus on structure and local action.

Introduction

Despite libraries often being termed the "heart" or the "laboratory" of the university campus, and featuring heavily in literature, publicity, and shared memories of academic life, they are frequently overlooked as institutions of political and pedagogical influence. Not only acting as something of a weathervane of broader social processes such as neoliberalisation libraries also engender, reproduce, and extend these processes in the lives of those who use them. Even with the transformation of libraries by the advent of the internet and increasing use of

digital technologies (Goodfellow and Lea, 2013), library work is still a central intermediary in the teaching, research, and everyday practices of the university. Though unassuming, libraries are neither silent nor neutral, and they have both radical and reactionary potential. As agencies within the institution of education (Hansson, 2006), libraries are affected by their context, and as sites where information is acquired, stored, and communicated, the nature of this context has significant influence on the metrics of expertise used, and the nature of knowledge made available.

As will be argued, processes of neoliberalisation are damaging to the pedagogic possibility of libraries. But equally as damaging as denying the permeability of neoliberalisation would be to naïvely harken back to some imagined golden age of education where access and information was freely given to all, and it is for this reason that we focus on the idea of radical possibility. In resisting neoliberalisation in libraries we should remember the innately conservative tendencies within librarianship which have been well-researched over several decades within Library and Information Studies (LIS) (Budd, 1995; Hjørland, 2005; Radford, 1992). As Drabinski argues, libraries have finite, material boundaries, and selection is an unescapably subjective component of what library work is. Despite the rise of automated acquisitions, expertise in libraries is only held in a relatively small number of hands and can only ever represent "one kind of world, one that can never encompass all the possibilities of how we might organize ourselves" (Drabinski, 2018). As such our hope is not for libraries to be restored to how they might have been prior to neoliberalisation, but rather to be critiqued and extended.

The library as a living, evolving, and undirected space is key to our argument. Beyond formal education, they are spaces for everyday life to be performed and difference to be negotiated.

Radical education alludes to an unknown (Ellsworth, 2005, p.6), risk-laden (hooks, 1994, p.4), creative and potentially wonder-full (Ahmed, 2014, p.178) possibility. It can hereby be associated with an active process of becoming, the possibility of learning experiences that enhance both individual self-consciousness and dignity under capitalism (Freire, 2013) but is also contributing to social engagement and shared communities. This supports hooks' view of the possibility of education as "enabling" and as "enhancing our capacity to be free" (1994, p.4) – suggesting its outcome - while also seeing the process of learning itself as an opportunity for "noncompliance and knowledge in the making", as argued by Ellsworth (2005, p.17). In the politically straitened circumstances in which we currently live, the task facing library workers is therefore considerable, but not insurmountable.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. It is to examine the political position of academic librarianship in the context of recent changes in English Higher Education and to explore existing and emergent moments of radical educational possibility through the everyday practices of library workers. In the first section we develop a case for critical attention being paid to the university library within what is presented as an incomplete but largely hegemonic moment of neoliberalisation. In the second section we turn to the emergence of Radical Librarians Collective (RLC), an open, horizontalist organisation of library workers and supporters formed in 2013, as a potential site through which to counter these developments and foster radical alternatives. Empirical data collected through interviews and participant observation with members of RLC are analysed using thematic and critical discourse analysis. We find RLC's successes to be primarily within its radical aims to provide solidarity, space for discussion, and mutual aid nationally between like-minded library workers, and its support for everyday workplace practices of resistance. We also offer

reflections on the challenges of unstructured forms of organisation and considerations for RLC's future success.

1. Methods

The empirical aspect of this article is drawn from a small scale ethnographic study carried out from late 2013 to June 2014, involving interviews, reflective diary writing, and participant observation. It primarily concerned Katherine's involvement in Radical Librarians Collective, a horizontalist network of library workers and supporters based in the UK, and culminated in participant observation at their annual day-long gathering, on May 10th 2014 at the London Action Resource Centre (Larc) in Whitechapel.

In addition to reflective diary writing, six semi-structured interviews were undertaken with members of the collective and library workers, academics and managers. In line with ethical considerations of the political positions these library workers were taking, all identifying names were anonymised. We are aware of the limitations of such a small scale study but hold that such critical reflection is appropriate for our aim to "illuminate particular moments of neoliberal reproduction and contestation" through individual and every day experience rather than aim erroneously for objective truth (Quinn and Bates, 2017, p.318).

2. Neoliberalisation, the library and the enclosure of educational potential

The university library is a key site through which the cultural effects of neoliberalisation are made visible in the lives of not only university students but also their wider communities. As Higher Education becomes more financialised around individualised fees and perceived

individualised benefits, the university's insertion within a broader conception of public education as a social right becomes more dubious (Winn & Hall, 2017). Practices of education and learning in this context of an increasingly fragmented HE sector become reified so much as to redefine academic study as asocial, and outside of the wider public. Student fees, though still making up only part of the funding of HE, and mainly being paid through a state organised loan, have come to be imagined as a straightforward transaction between the student and the university. Rather than a feature of public life, the privatisation of University funding has encouraged tertiary education to become a private affair.

University libraries represent a site through which the individualisation of HE's benefits are made plain. They are the building through which many members of the non-university going public would previously have engaged with HE; library architecture is often the most striking on the university campus, and historically there has been significant overlap and co-operation between public, further education, and higher education libraries (McNicol, 2005). Most have, in recent years, become highly securitised and gated spaces with very low access rights to the non-university going public. Turnstiles are now ubiquitous in academic libraries despite evidence that they do little to reduce book theft (Harwell, 2014, p.64) but potentially do much to deter non-university students from accessing knowledge that they have a right to. Adding the movement online of much academic output, the enclosure of previously public knowledge is quite profound: even if a member of the public can get limited access to a university library they are very unlikely to be able to get past the paywalls on previously (physically) open access journal articles, for example.

This shift in the economy of scholarly communication is a further area of library work in which the external pressures associated with neoliberalisation has enclosed educational

potential. Harvie et al (2012) Pirie (2009) and Monbiot (2011), among others, all highlight the extent to which the marketisation of scholarly communication has created publishing monopolies which negatively impact libraries in so far as they take up greater and greater proportions of budgets. Publishers have exploited a "captive audience" by creating the "big deal" scenario which exclusively suits them. The big deal is defined by Davis as "an arrangement where a library can purchase unlimited access to a publisher's entire suite of journals", which frequently includes journals the library had never previously bought or needed, and often includes a non-cancellation clause (Davis, 2003, p.552). While boycotts by academics, librarians, and researchers of Dutch publishing giant Elsevier has had some impact in some European countries (Matthews, 2017) there has been minimal success of such tactics in the UK, and no structural change worldwide.

This scenario, which sees the proportion of library budgets spent on periodicals come second only to staff costs (Banks, 2014) radically reduces discretionary item purchasing. While this may seem innocuous, it represents a shift in the role of the subject specialist librarian and means that collection development is brought within the control of markets, rather than people and ideas. Seeing library collections as discrete objects in themselves which evolve, push boundaries, and represent a diversity of challenging views is essential to their continuation as something more than "storehouses" of knowledge (Williams & Deyoe, 2014). If marketability and short-term popularity is to replace deliberative selection by library workers, the space for serendipity, comprehensiveness, and knowledge for its own sake is also at risk.

Finally, the vocabulary of business and management in both the discipline and practice of library work is having a corrosive effect on the capacity of those involved to imagine any future beyond neoliberal common sense. In most professional qualifications for LIS a course

in Management is compulsory, which heavily reinforces a business-orientated approach to an institution which is not predicated on profit making. New Public Management, in which management is considered the primary activity through which an organisation succeeds has permeated LIS literature (Quinn and Bates, 2017) and has dwarfed alternative models of running libraries through horizontal management or co-operation. In practice, the rebranding of students to customers, librarians to "Information Officers", and success to measurable outputs undermines the radical potential of libraries. As Lossin (2017) has pointed out such neoliberal language is "both symptomatic and generative" (p.100) and removing references to the foundational principles of libraries – books and access to them – promotes a reimaging of the library as "a brick and mortar portal into the private sector" (p.112).

After having demonstrated the enclosure of education potential via neoliberal developments, the next section explores the ways in which Radical Librarians Collective (RLC) and radical librarians contribute to a politics of possibility and resistance.

3. The challenge for radical librarians: Radical Librarians Collective

RLC was conceived in 2013 on the social media site Twitter via serendipitous exchanges between like-minded library workers. These initial conversations were sparked by expressions of frustration "about increasing commodification and marketisation in libraries, about creeping neoliberalism and managerialist attitudes within the profession, about the decimation of the public library system, and much more" (Brynolf, n.d). Since then RLC has developed online as a place for conversation, collaboration and research. It has a Twitter feed, website, an online open access journal (Journal of Radical Librarianship), and

collaborative documents aimed at information sharing and solidarity. While the readership is not prescribed, and no formal membership exists, the resources include reading lists, guides, and strategies primarily useful to fellow library workers. Offline, there have been five annual gatherings for physical meet-ups across the UK in Bradford, London, Huddersfield, Brighton and Glasgow. Sporadic regional groups have also met in between those larger annual meet-ups in London, Oxford, Yorkshire, and Dublin.

Someone who was involved in the foundation of the collective suggested the initial stage of RLC's foundation was a cathartic moment of "do you think what I think? I think I think what you think…we should do something about this!" Another RLC supporter described realising they "were not alone" (Quinn & Bates, 2017) through such encounters. These exclamations express both a feeling of release shared among people who otherwise did not know each other, and happiness at being relieved of what felt like isolation in their respective workplaces. They also speak in part to the isolation associated with work in capitalism. Since RLC began and develops on Twitter, the paradox of social media is also relevant, something both Iber (2016) and Back (2016) have recently alluded to. This paradox speaks to the fact that although the job precarity and demand for self-marketing engendered by neoliberalism have arguably created at least some of the perceived need for professions including librarianship to use Twitter for a type of self-publicity (Iber, 2016), it also allows users to "inhabit the attentiveness of another" (Back, 2016, p.110) in a very positive way. Interestingly therefore, connections and moments of empathy and solidarity are facilitated by the very tool that has also been criticised for being symptomatic of the anxiety, isolation, and precarity felt to characterise academia.

Political positions from the collective appeared fluid and not clearly defined, but that fact was acknowledged and justified by members of RLC in interviews and online. Keeping "radical" as undefined beyond its etymological definition of "grasping at the root" of librarianship was a tactic designed to promote inclusivity. Using the definition of "grasping at the root" is perhaps telling of a belief that librarianship and libraries have a "root" that has been lost or at least damaged in recent years. While such claims to universality could be problematic, this "root" appeared a lot to do with democratic values of free information, and a belief that such information could enable politically engaged non-compliant education. One interviewee described her personal political position and occupational identity as a librarian in the same breath, saying "I always came from a relatively active political position anyway …and became a librarian because I found libraries really scary when I was a student and I realised that there had to be a way where it wasn't scary, because information should be empowering and you should be able to help people find information". As such, an important aspect of RLC as being in facilitating conversations and meetings between people who identified themselves in their work, who saw there being a "radical root" to librarianship, but who saw their paid-work detracting from it.

As a collective, this inclusive politics RLC aims to organise in a manner one supporter described as "prefiguratively." They defined this as: "doing things as you want them to be", aligning with a common anarchist notion of prefiguration, which is the ''embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal'' (Boggs, 1977, p.100). For RLC, as for many other radical social change initiatives, this value is carried into its organisation and practice. For example, gatherings are held at co-operatively managed social centres or libraries, such as the London Action Resource Centre, The Cowley Club social

centre in Brighton, and the Women's Library in Glasgow. These organisations are themselves working as alternatives to profit-seeking corporations and have radical social change aims which align with the politics of RLC. Several of our interviewees pointed to the importance of getting away from the physical and bureaucratic infrastructure of their workplaces in HE. One said that not having the "institutional baggage" that came with university conference set-ups, which are "there to generate income" for the university, made different conversations possible.

At the gatherings themselves, prefiguration is shown through their horizontalist approach and lack of "keynote" style presentations. Topics are "pitched" either online in advance or spontaneously on the day. "Pitches" are suggestions for topics to be discussed in groups at the gatherings, and usually the person pitching gives a brief and informal explanation of the subject and why it is relevant to radical librarianship. Topics at previous RLC gatherings have included: feminism and librarianship, radicalising professional status, imposter syndrome, metrics, and the role of libraries to challenge oppression. Beyond these specific issues, among RLC's core interests are the promotion of critical information skills, web privacy, defence of public libraries through supporting local and national campaigns, and union organisation against declining working conditions across sectors. Such values highlight their political, as opposed to purely professional, identity concerns and a desire to connect librarianship with broader societal concerns. Thus, RLC operates as an agitator to the official professional body for librarians – the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) – which one of the interviewees called "utterly pointless", and has been criticised for aiming at unattainable political neutrality.

Outside of the collective meet-ups, everyday practices were a particularly interesting element of interviews in connection with radical librarianship. As Chatterton and Pickerall (2010) argue, these molecular level actions are essential for resistance within imperfect structures, rather than separated from it. They say, "it is through its everyday rhythms that meaning is given to postcapitalism" (p.476). One such tactic was so-called "guerrilla collection development". Acquiring books and materials for HE libraries which were challenging to neoliberalism meant leveraging institutional budgets, however small the opportunity was, for resistance. In one case, a subject librarian with responsibility for business and nutrition spent some money on books covering permaculture, agribusiness, co-operative management and Marxism. The practice, identified by several interviewees, involved using what was available to them – in this case their budget – to "secretly develop a whole alternative collection" of challenging texts for library users to benefit from. The interviewees felt this was entirely within their remit as subject librarians, since the "alternative voices" are valid, but may be overlooked: "it's about combatting where the dominance is really I think…and encouraging people to believe that those are OK sources to be using as well, and critiquing the state of play". Recently Hudson (2017) has argued insightfully against believing 'diversity' is sufficient for anti-racist library development, saying "to be included in a space is not necessarily to have agency within that space" (p.13). However, it seems an important, if small scale, act of resistance.

Further practices of radical librarians were articulated as everyday interactions with students or the public, in the workplace. These included talking to students about their assignments in an honest and emotionally invested way, suggesting challenging topics and material, and even the ethics of their institution's technology usage. For example, the bibliographic management softwares used by many universities, like Endnote, are proprietary, for-profit

and inaccessible to those without subscriptions. This is the same with Windows, Photoshop, and many other softwares relied upon institutionally. Open-source software – like Linux, Etherpad, and Zotero – is, in contrast, transparently built and adaptable by a community of users, so is more in keeping with RLC's politics. One interviewee suggested that librarians in general were too concerned about "balance", and overestimated the "danger" of having divergent opinions. There was a tension here between ethics and legality, especially around questions of copyright. As one interviewee queried: "how much 'ethically' as a librarian are you allowed to scrabble around trying to find a free, probably illegal copy of a document that you find on the internet? And how much shouldn't you do that? And...I think...we're not allowed to have those kinds of conversations within the library service". Having these conversations with students, even if stopping short of providing the "illegal" copy, is important for enriching understanding of the political economy of academic publishing but poses a personal risk to librarians employed by university institutions.

Finally, self-reflection and consciously embedding radical aspirations within the working day is crucial for RLC. All interviewees mentioned their use of reflective journals and diary writing as ways to deal with problems at work and think about the way they had handled things. While recognising this can threaten to be one more thing to do and be an additional burden, interviewees stressed reflective journal writing's merits in relieving the stress associated with neoliberalised work patterns, as well as helping to engage them in reasons for why they wanted to be a librarian in the first place: "it's about...reinforcing your mindset, helping you to … reflect on things, and then how you approach things in your day-to-day life, so yeah, praxis is what you do all the time, every day, so it's about reinforcing and working with that". Another stressed the importance of making this critical reflection a part of the

working day, and forcing it onto the agendas of colleagues and bosses: "what's useful is giving yourself the time, and legitimising in your workplace, the space to work and the space to reflect and evaluate your practice". Going even further, another radical library worker set up a discussion group in their workplace under the banner of Continuous Professional Development. He said:

> "There're no outcomes, we don't have to present to any higher group, there isn't any of that. I've managed to sneak it in under the CPD framework, and it was ticking a box. So one of the management group was like "Oooh great, you'll do that, that's fine". And so nothing has to come out of it, no work, or anything, so people kind of like it. We've only had a couple, but people seem to like how they can just come along and read an article and just talk about what we do at work and then we try and reflect on it and we try and ask, what is it we're doing there?".

What is interesting here is not only the immediate association, and associated revulsion of, activities like presenting to "higher group", and having "work" and "outcomes" – illustrative of audit fatigue common under neoliberalism – but also how people who aren't calling themselves "radical" are feeling welcomed and supported in what feels like an unusual activity for some – that of talking about the bigger picture.

Although the collective has many strong points, both in terms of offering mutual aid to self-identifying radical librarians and in terms of intervening into students' everyday lives, we found it to have areas in need of improvement on its own terms. Firstly, although its horizontal and open nature is often alluded to, without deliberate processes or structures it was hard to know what or who RLC really was, and this gave rise to informal hierarchies which were difficult to navigate (Quinn & Bates, 2017). Balancing a desire to focus on issues that were pertinent to those attending the gathering with a stated desire to be radical also

needs constant re-evaluation. If issues are self-selected, there's a tendency for status quo concerns to be tacitly supported, even within 'radical' groups. As Ahmed (2013, n.p.) argues, "open" calls with "invisible" restrictions (who is speaking, who is attending, what is being discussed), work to reproduce rather than resist "what we inherit" in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, and ability. As she says, "it would be timely to re-state the arguments that sexism and racism are not incidental but structural, and thus to understand sexism and racism, requires better, closer readings of what is being gathered. Attending to the restrictions in the apparently open spaces of a social world brings us into closer proximity to an actual world". This is a question for all of LIS, not just RLC, but a focus on such issues seems a very appropriate project for a collective with the aims it has.

As we elaborated in Quinn & Bates (2017), many of these criticisms have been taken on, and there seems to be a positive development in RLC with more explicit processes and named organising committees (RLC website, n.d.). Being critical and reflective practitioners necessitates a willingness to visit and revisit aims, structures, and practices, and also to learn from where others have gone before. To this end, a constructive collaborative document entitled "Barriers to participation" (2016) was created, and resources from other anti-capitalist organising groups were flagged up for possible training. Overall, RLC has potential to become a space through which radical alternatives to neoliberal hegemony within librarianship can be explored and fostered.

Another way that RLC could improve its work is by focusing more on what it wants to build, and in strengthening its local activism in addition to the national gatherings. Following Gibson-Graham's concept of "capitalocentric" (2006, p.125), a framing of reality whereby all "non-capitalist" alternatives are connected and contingent on a dominant and dominating

conception of capitalist society, RLC could work to re-envision their role positively. RLC can sometimes be seen to fit within a framework which positions individual librarians as "activists", or experts with perhaps superior ways of understanding the world, and as though the key to unlocking radical educational possibility rested with them. As such it places less emphasis on the broader context in which education, libraries, and library workers exist, and on the many ways a range of people in education and broader society work to struggle with the dehumanising aspects of capitalist education every day, often without self-consciousness.

We will conclude by opening up to RLC's implications for the broader remaking of our society. Our observations of the practices of RLC have wider implications for resistance to the neoliberalisation of HE beyond librarianship. Their principles rely on critical knowledge production and dissemination and therefore represent fruitful areas for reflection in wider resistance movements in HE and beyond. Learning from, and engaging with, RLC's critical use of technologies would allow the further growth of anti-capitalist and open-source technology platforms and practices to flourish. RLC's radical appropriation of "management friendly" activities such as reflective practice and reading groups are also transferable beyond the library. Finally, engaging in critical and honest conversations with students and colleagues represents a small scale but profound practice through which to work towards remaking our worlds on a daily basis.

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