

**PROGRESSIVE
COMMUNITY ACTION:
CRITICAL THEORY AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE IN LIBRARY
AND INFORMATION
SCIENCE**

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Editors**

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PREFACE

Clara M. Chu

“Books for librarians with a critical edge,” this book publisher’s tagline, is an intellectual space this edited volume aptly engages and fills. *Progressive Community Action: Critical Theory and Social Justice in Library and Information Science* (PCA) aims to examine the intersections of critical theory and social justice in library and information science (LIS) and how these are negotiated toward tangible actions that result in positive change in communities. PCA follows the 2009 article “Social Justice in Library and Information Science,” written by co-editors Bharat Mehra and Kevin Rioux, and co-author Kendra Albright in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*¹. A foundational treatise on social justice in the library and information field, the authors defined social justice by describing the ways that it has been conceptualized, and reviewed how social justice had been engaged in the library and information professions, especially in public libraries, and in LIS research. In order to provide the necessary context to understand how social justice has been and can be engaged in LIS, the authors needed

1. Bharat Mehra, Kevin Rioux, and Kendra S. Albright, “Social Justice in Library and Information Science,” in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, edited by Marcia J. Bates and Mary N. Maack, 4820-4836. New York: Taylor and Francis, 2009.

to draw on the literature outside of LIS, including philosophy, ethics, sociology, education, critical studies, ethnic studies, women's studies, computer science, law, political science, and management.

Taking 2009 as a temporal reference, it is heartening to observe the growing number of publications and conference presentations on critical perspectives in LIS and the promotion of social justice. The LIS field has long had a commitment to social responsibility, which has been a core value of the American Library Association, and is expressed in the profession's service orientation, and from the civil rights era, in professional advocacy for equitable information access. However, we are now turning the corner and finding a voice that questions inequity and normativity, names the inequities, represents the oppressed, and speaks clearly and loudly of action that can be modeled or structural barriers that need to be eradicated. In one breath, when we utter diversity, we also now state or understand that it engages the work of inclusion, equity, and social justice. We are seeing in practice, policy, and research that this range of diversity/social justice activities comes from a generation of library professionals, educators, and researchers who examine and undertake their practice from a critical perspective. Although the twenty-first century has brought much progress, the world continues to be rife with inequity, injustice, and conflict, with which the LIS field has to contend. The advocacy that is needed for these times is now conducted in the LIS field with a growing fluency in the language of critical studies and theory, and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for collective action. It is also heartening to see the growth in publication of critical theory and practice in LIS, which has lagged behind archival studies, a field which has a solid critical theoretical foundation that informs its practice and research.

PCA is surfacing at a time when I can confidently state that critical studies and social justice in our field have blossomed, as evidenced by publication productivity and professional discourse. For example, we have the volumes published by Library Juice Press; the recent book *Libraries, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Enabling Access and Promoting*

Inclusion, by Paul T. Jaeger; Natalie Greene Taylor, and Ursula Gorham;² and the last 2015 issue of *Library Trends*, edited by Bharat Mehra,³ and the first 2016 issue of *Library Quarterly*, both focused on social justice. While we continue to have the journals *Progressive Librarian* and *Information for Social Change*, the publication of an open access journal, the *Journal of Inclusion and Diversity in Library & Information Science Education* (JIDLIS), has been announced by the University of Maryland's iSchool. In terms of professional discourse, to complement LIS conferences and personal professional blogs on diversity, we have the 2015 to 2017 annual conferences of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) focusing on social justice themes, and Critlib (<http://critlib.org/>), short for "critical librarianship," which is "a movement of library workers dedicated to bringing social justice principles into our work in libraries." An international collective, Critlib promotes discussion about critical perspectives on library practice and recognizes that "we all work under regimes of white supremacy, capitalism, and a range of structural inequalities, [and asks] how can our work as librarians intervene in and disrupt those systems?" Twitter chats and conferences facilitate discussions, projects promote collective action, and recommended readings support intellectual growth.

Readers within and outside of LIS can benefit from reading PCA. As a work that presents critical theories in LIS, and cases of progressive community action which engage critical theory and social justice, LIS students, instructors, and researchers will learn about critical theory and practices in LIS that they can model or on which they can build. PCA covers social critical theory and social justice work in the context of libraries, classrooms, a library professional association, and a museum. The museum and archival field can use it to learn about comparable work

2. Paul T. Jaeger, Natalie Greene Taylor, and Ursula Gorham, *Libraries, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Enabling Access and Promoting Inclusion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

3. Bharat Mehra, "Introduction," *Library Trends: Social Justice in Library and Information Science & Services* 64, no. 2 (2015): 179-197.

in the library and information sector, and those in cognate fields such as education, ethnic studies, and sociology will understand critical theory and social justice work in the context of libraries and information work.

A specific focus of PCA and explicit in its title, which serves to distinguish it from other publications, is the term progressive. For Mehra and Rioux, progressive thinking addresses justice and fairness, and in turn the community action included in the book is necessarily progressive through its engagement of critical theory and furthering of social justice. This key word rings familiar to anyone paying attention to the current electoral discourse as the Democratic Party presidential candidates fight over the meaning of “progressive.” I agree that to conduct social justice work, the action taken benefits individuals or a community positively and should be understood in critical terms. However, beyond such actions for the common good, progressive action needs to move beyond the immediate and situational toward sustainable community development. This means that, for long-term benefit, progressive action necessitates the eradication of systemic barriers that create structural inequities and unrecognized privileges. PCA accentuates libraries as a social good, and the library and information field as an intellectual and professional space addressing critical theory and social justice.

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INTRODUCTION

Kevin Rioux and Bharat Mehra

Along with like-minded colleagues interested in socially-relevant information work and research, we began discussing connections between social justice and information service over a barbeque lunch at the 2005 American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) meeting in Austin, Texas. In many ways, we haven't stopped talking about this topic since.

Of course, over the past decade, our discussions have gone in several different directions, and together as well as with others we have written and spoken about social justice and library and information science (LIS) research and practice at various local, regional, national, and international venues.¹ Bharat's social justice path has led him to work with and study specific user groups and communities (e.g., "The

1. Kevin Rioux, Bharat Mehra, and Kendra Albright, "Conceptualizing Social Justice in the Information Sciences," *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 44, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 1–4, doi:10.1002/meet.1450440130; Bharat Mehra, Kendra S. Albright, and Kevin Rioux, "A Practical Framework for Social Justice Research in the Information Professions," *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 1–10, doi:10.1002/meet.14504301275; Bharat Mehra, Kevin S. Rioux, and Kendra S. Albright, "Social Justice in Library and Information Science," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, 3rd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 4820–36, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1081/E-ELIS3-120044526>.

Library-Community Convergence Framework:²⁾ and Kevin's work has tended toward the conceptual (e.g., "Metatheory in Library and Information Science"³⁾). Together we have kept a keen eye on LIS discourse and practice that both explicitly and implicitly connect information to social justice concepts. In addition to our scholarly activity and action research, we both teach LIS graduate courses that integrate social justice in the information professions at our respective universities.

We are gratified to see an increased interest in social justice among LIS researchers, students, and practitioners that is reflected both in the LIS literature and at professional conferences.⁴ The social justice movement in LIS is indeed gaining momentum, and is identifying lacunae for new and expanded analysis and practice. Yet there are challenges due to the fact that social justice in LIS is still an emergent and amorphous construct. In many ways, social justice remains a loose, feel-good concept instead of a rigorous framework that can guide LIS efforts to bring about societal change for the better. This suggests that additional venues, such as this edited volume, are currently necessary for exploration, description, and sharing of examples of LIS-related social justice activities, and for developing social justice practice frameworks and research methods. It also seems that the time is right for LIS researchers, practitioners, and students to look for ways to demonstrate relevance by reporting on the outcomes of LIS activity associated with social justice ideas, and to create solid and precise articulations of social justice theory for the field.

2. Bharat Mehra and Ramesh Srinivasan, "The Library-Community Convergence Framework for Community Action: Libraries as Catalysts of Social Change," *Libri: International Journal of Libraries & Information Services* 57, no. 3 (September 2007): 123–39.

3. Kevin Rioux, "Metatheory in Library and Information Science: A Nascent Social Justice Approach," *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science* 51, no. 1 (2010): 9–17.

4. Paul T. Jaeger et al., "Library Research and What Libraries Actually Do Now: Education, Inclusion, Social Services, Public Spaces, Digital Literacy, Social Justice, Human Rights, and Other Community Needs," *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 84, no. 4 (October 1, 2014): 491–93, doi:10.1086/677785; "ALISE 2015 Conference," accessed August 17, 2015, <http://www.alise.org/2015-conference-2>.

In response to these needs, we as editors sought for this book original, methodologically-varied scholarship that addressed the intersections of *progressive community action*, *critical theory*, and *social justice* in library and information science. The conceptual space provided by these intersections allows for broad exploration of a variety of topics, and provides an overall structure and scope for this edited collection. Using this frame of inquiry also allowed us to include examples from different types of libraries, museums, and other information settings that tell the stories of a wide range of social justice interests and concerns that exist in today's information landscape.

The reader will notice that the reflections and observations described in these chapters clearly demonstrate a *progressive* mindset on the part of LIS professionals that supports democracy, freedom, and individual liberty. Progressive thinking promotes elements of justice and fairness, and embraces the concepts of equality and equity. Overall, the positions described herein are those that work against discrimination based on race, ethnicity, national origin, geography, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, education, income, disability, veteran status, and other variables of difference.

In recent years, the progressive mindset in LIS has been linked to *action*, and the organic relationship between social justice and library and information science has been characterized as action-oriented, socially-relevant outcomes via information works-in-progress.⁵ Action elements are fundamental to a meaningful application of the social justice construct to LIS because they translate philosophical, legal, and intellectual discourse into substantive outcomes that change existing power imbalances, social inequities, and marginalized realities at all levels.⁶

5. Bharat Mehra, "What Is the Value of Social Justice in Pakistan's Library and Information Science Professions," *Pakistan Journal of Information Management & Libraries*, (December 31, 2014).

6. Bharat Mehra and Lisette Hernandez, "Libraries as Agents of Human Rights Protection and Social Change on Behalf of Sexual Minorities in India: An Action-Based Manifesto for Progressive Change.," in *Perspectives on Libraries as Institutions of Human Rights and Social Justice*, ed. Ursula Gorham, Natalie Greene Taylor, and Paul T. Jaeger, Advances in Librarianship Series (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, forthcoming).

This application can be achieved through a wide range of LIS-related experiences, which include social justice planning, conceptualization, and implementation integrated with all types of information work, including information creation, organization, management, and dissemination processes. Social justice actions provide tangible results that challenge the status quo⁷ and change norms and existing modes of practice from what is to what should be.⁸

The *progressive community action* elements that distinguish these collected chapters are urgently important to LIS efforts in shaping public perception about the value of information work in everyday life and culture. The authors document their activities as information creators, organizers, educators, students, leaders, and facilitators in terms of the community-wide changes their projects achieved or have the potential to achieve. They suggest that social justice actions and positive changes attributable to information professionals will demonstrate relevance to the public, and empower them to play a more important and visible community leadership role. This includes interacting with political, economic, and policy leaders, and resisting power imbalances that negatively affect democracy, civil society, and individual freedom.⁹

The works in this collection also acknowledge (either implicitly or explicitly) that critical thinking and critical theory go hand-in-hand with a reflexive process that questions traditional understandings and scrutinizes existing values, practices, ideological frameworks, and processes.¹⁰

7. Mehra, Albright, and Rioux, "A Practical Framework for Social Justice Research in the Information Professions"; Rioux, Mehra, and Albright, "Conceptualizing Social Justice in the Information Sciences."

8. Bharat Mehra and Lisette Hernandez, "Rural and Urban Queering Alliances Out of the Library towards Legal Protection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning People in India," in *Queer Library Alliance: Global Reflections and Imaginings*, ed. Rae-Anne Montague and Lucas McKeever (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, forthcoming).

9. Bharat Mehra, "Introduction: Social Justice in Library and Information Science & Services," *Library Trends* 64, no. 2 (2015): 179-197.

10. A. Michael Froomkin, "Habermas@discourse.net: Toward a Critical Theory of Cyberspace," *Harvard Law Review* 116, no. 3 (January 2003): 749; Jurgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*,

With roots in service-based ethics, critical approaches to examining LIS theory and practice are appropriate, especially in relation to community contexts and progressive actions to make a societal difference.

The term *critical theory* originated in the Frankfurt School, a collaboration of social philosophers who studied societal development problems in Germany between the two twentieth century world wars. Included in this group were Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and others. Since the 1960s, the second-generation scholars of the Frankfurt School (e.g., György Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, and especially Jürgen Habermas) took critical theory from its roots in German idealism and introduced elements of American pragmatism. Critical theory is today concerned with social foundations such as the forces and relations of production, employer-employee work conditions, division of labor, property relations, cultural institutions, political power structures, roles and rituals, and the nature of state control. The chapters in this collection explore the application of critical approaches in the context of the professional activities of LIS researchers, practitioners, and educators. The characteristics of critical theory are relevant here because they focus on the perspectives of all stakeholders in a given information context, and include the points of view of those on society's margins in order to do justice to a diversity of perspectives while providing a grounding for the evaluation of potentially divisive problems.¹¹ The integration of critical theory with the social justice and progressive community action foundations of this book is intentional, as these constructs are deeply intertwined, and their connections may serve as a guide for future theory-building in LIS.

Keeping all of the above in mind, we are pleased to present this collection of essays written by a mix of new and experienced doers, scholars, and observers of contemporary social justice in LIS. Readers

Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994); Douglas Kellner, "Boundaries and Borderlines: Reflections on Jean Baudrillard and Critical Theory," *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 9, 1989.

11. Ben Endres, "Habermas and Critical Thinking," *Philosophy of Education Archive* (1996): 176.

of these chapters will learn about roles played by progressive LIS professionals in bringing about positive community changes, and will gain understanding of how social justice is evolving as a critical approach that can guide action in LIS research, education, policy, service design, and programming, among other areas.

Chapters are grouped into two sections, but readers may approach these essays in any order, according to their specific interests. The first section, “Emergent Conceptual Frameworks for Progressive Community Action in Library and Information Science,” includes three chapters:

- While thoughtfully considering activist libraries such as the People’s Library of Occupy Wall Street and urban community information spaces, **Zachary Loeb** argues that libraries are more than sites in which various groups encounter particular information technologies—that in fact, libraries can be conceptualized as a type of technology or tool that can support socially-just community action.
- Using a critical framework, **Gabriel Gomez** discusses emergent trends in behaviorist-oriented Big Data collection. He suggests that these trends are likely to shift the foci of human information behavior research to largely commercial ends, affecting libraries’ core values, social justice goals, and community actions.
- **Jonathan Cope** discusses trends in the marketization of public goods, places, and services (such as those provided by libraries). In response to these trends, he introduces a critical framework based on his idea of “socially generated information.” Cope then explores ways in which this framework can be used to support democracy, progressive community action, and community development.

The second section of the book, “Contextual Examinations of Progressive Community Action in Library and Information Science,” features the following six chapters:

- Using Giroux’s critical theories as a framework, **Wendy Highby** offers an auto-ethnographic case study that describes her efforts as an academic librarian in Colorado to lead colleagues at her

university in a community action against a proposal to lease mineral rights to an energy corporation that plans to use fracking techniques on the campus. Her work suggests that librarians can indeed engage in the public political sphere and nurture environmental justice, progressive values, and community action.

- **Nicole Cooke**, an LIS researcher and educator, and **Joseph Minarik**, a social worker and educator, report on their collaboration in developing techniques and conceptual frameworks for teaching diversity, community action, and social justice topics to LIS graduate students. They present strategies to help a variety of learners understand the complexity of inequality and privilege, and give suggestions for discerning the difference between progressive and pseudo-progressive policies.
- **Laura-Edythe Coleman** argues that museums must develop a socially-inclusive curatorial voice in order to position themselves within a social justice advocacy role. She offers a curatorial voice gatekeeping framework that can generate and encourage progressive social action on the part of museum leaders.
- **Jeanie Austin** uses a queer theoretical lens to explore the concept of youth development. She questions the philosophy underpinning the 40 Development Assets for Adolescence used by the Young Adult Library Association (YALSA), and suggests that socially-just community action for youth service would be best served by working with youth rather than providing services to youth.
- **Kaurri Williams-Cockfield** explores how public library leaders can develop, implement, and advocate for progressive, socially-just library services in rural communities that collectively perceive no need to change. To address this issue, she takes novel approaches in using unstructured research techniques to study a sample of rural libraries.
- **Punit Dadlani** reports on an exploratory study of high school students engaged in a collaborative online project. Using context-specific methods, he provides insight on how young people in an

information space construct notions of social justice, particularly around ideas of control, power, and fairness—useful to school teachers and librarians eager to support collaborative, socially-just pedagogical environments.

Despite a traditional reluctance toward taking activist stances in LIS, we know that many in our field are motivated by social justice thinking, and there are many implicit and explicit social justice elements that drive LIS practice and research. Yet working toward social justice is not trivial. We recognize that information workers face a number of challenges as agents of social justice, including an underdeveloped social justice theory base for LIS, overly-specialized and fragmented voices for social justice in LIS, and workplace and political pressures to maintain the status quo. We hope the chapters in this book help begin to address these issues for readers, and inspire LIS professionals to more fully explore, experiment, and integrate critical social justice theories, strategies, and practices in their work. We look forward to the continued discussion.

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