

Social Justice and Library Work

Bales, Stephen. *Social Justice and Library Work: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Cambridge, MA: Chandos, 2018. ix, 189 pp. \$78.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9780081017555

In this timely volume, Stephen Bales provides a concise, but informative guide to pursuing social justice-oriented library work. Conceived originally during the writing of the author's previous work, *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach* (Litwin Books, 2015), the present volume serves as a reference work, expanding to include "library work in a wider sense, e.g., academic libraries, public libraries, school libraries, special libraries, archives, and other related institutions such as museums" (ix). Intended as a "navigational tool" (16), the book is designed to introduce the intersection of social justice and library work, both historically and at present, and to provide a selection of resources and case studies on the theory, practice, and praxis of social justice in libraries. I would recommend this guide to anyone working in, around, or adjacent to any of the above-mentioned cultural heritage institutions, particularly those with an interest in either beginning or expanding their pursuit of social justice and human rights in their work. Additionally, I would recommend this guide to those in management or administrative positions at libraries and cultural heritage institutions as a resource for understanding and advocating for the allocation of time and money to enable social justice work within their institutions.

Social Justice and Library Work is organized into four distinct sections. First, the preface and introduction orient the reader to the philosophical and social underpinnings of social justice and human rights in relation to library work and situate the author and his voice within the context of these topics. The introduction also gives recommendations for how the reader might interact with the content of the guide, providing brief overviews of each major section.

The second section includes chapters two and three, annotated bibliographies of resources on theory and practice respectively. Within each of these chapters, Bales further subdivides the resources by topic or format. In chapter two, resources on theory are categorized by the topic covered, including foundational principles of social justice praxis, political economy and labor, critical information literacy, and diversity (gender, race, sexuality, ability, etc.) in LIS. Chapter three makes up the bulk of this guide and provides resources subdivided by format or type, including a breadth of options from news sites and legal resources to advocacy groups and training programs. Additionally, each resource is notated with its advocacy focus, LIS audience, and geographic focus.

The third section consists of chapter four, a collection of case studies in the application of theory in practice, or praxis. This chapter profiles seven projects, programs, initiatives, or organizations through interviews with individuals involved in the creation, running, or maintenance of each. Groups profiled include the following: ARL Diversity and Leadership Programs, the 2016 Los Angeles Anarchist Bookfair, Free Government Information, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Librarians and Archivists with Palestine, the Seattle Public Library Books on Bikes program, and the Occupy Wall Street People's Library. In each profile, Bales provides the social and theoretical context surrounding the history of each group interspersed with insights from his interviews with stakeholders and concludes with a set of three to four takeaways from the case study.

The fourth and final section is the conclusion, which stands as a call to action and profile of what makes library work transformative. In this section, Bales suggests three lenses through which to

consider transformative library work: political clarity and commitment, theoretical inquisitiveness tempered by critical consciousness, and an attitude of postprofessionalism (171). Through these lenses, Bales profiles various forms a transformative library worker might take, calling for feedback on and engagement with these concepts within the broader community of practice.

Guided by and grounded in the foundational work of Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), this book emphasizes that practice without theory becomes “at best, a naïve activism, and at worst, a rote and robotic operation” (2). Thus, the structure and content of this guide aim, successfully, to provide the reader with the means to avoid taking on social justice work without the necessary critical thinking tools to give that work a tangible purpose and impact. Core to this is the concept of “[applying] theory *to* and (importantly) *by* the community for the intent of positive change” (2). Bales demonstrates this through the breadth and variety of resources provided and thoughtfully annotated, focusing on resources, projects, initiatives, groups, etc. created by and for the communities which they seek to improve and change. For example, the links and contact information for groups such as the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) (97), INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans People of Color against Violence (99), REFORMA (101), and National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) (105), to name a few, are all provided to cover a variety of community focuses, including intersectional interests and concerns. This diversity of resources emphasizes that community needs are as varied as the communities themselves, and that one library worker, let alone a single institution, cannot and should not have to address them all. As noted in the takeaways from the Occupy Wall Street People’s Library case study, it is important to “tailor the goals of your activities to reflect the needs of the community that you are a part of and[or] serve” (168). To this end, it is worth noting that this guide was written and completed pre-pandemic, and while many (if not all) of the resources mentioned within are still relevant, there are many more groups, papers, books, websites, etc. covering pandemic- and non-pandemic-specific social justice and human rights concerns that have come about between the publishing of this guide and the writing of this review.

True to its title, this book provides a guide to social justice work in libraries with a low barrier to entry, clearly and concisely laying the foundation for self-guided education and exploration of theory, practice, and praxis. Bales offers a consistent voice throughout, presenting his suggestions and recommendations with an awareness of his own subjectivity, effectively demonstrating the level of self-awareness which he recommends transformative library workers practice as they begin and/or continue their work. This aspect of the guide lends an air of comradery, centering the reader as a peer on the journey towards more critical library praxis. Additionally, there is an important balance struck between the conceptual/theoretical/philosophical and the practical, something that is often lacking in similar works. Altogether, this book provides the breadth and diversity to be relevant not only to a wide variety of libraries and cultural heritage institutions, but also to the diversity of communities served and represented by those institutions.

Brinna Michael
Emory University