LIS INVESTIGATES LIBRARIES — INSTITUTIONS OR ASSEMBLAGES?

Not everyone has considered the library, throughout its long history, as the empowering source of free knowledge that we know it to be. To many disenfranchised people in the past it has been a forbidding institutional symbol of their exclusion. But, as KATHERINE HOWARD points out, libraries are becoming more flexible and leading the way in becoming agents of positive change in many people's lives.

In a conceptual paper titled 'The library assemblage: creative institutions in an information society'[1], Natasha Gerolami introduces us to the assemblage theory of Deleuze and Guattari, which she uses to 'develop a theory of the institution that highlights the library's potential to resist forces of domination'.

While that description may seem a little melodramatic for this day and age, Gerolami points to instances in which libraries have attempted to constrain people – the notion of class at the end of the 19th century, for example. She quotes William Kite, who wrote in 1877 that 'working-class men and women would remain "content with their lowly but honest occupations"', so long as the library was stocked with literature that was appropriate for their class. If working-class individuals started thinking about new possibilities for themselves, they may very well "disrupt the status quo".

Before looking at the application of assemblage theory, Gerolami first looks at the concept of an institution, and how, through a social contract theory lens, it is seen as suppressive or oppressive. Libraries as institutions are not exempt from this, as history has shown us. Social contract theory portrays society in a negative light; the aim of the 'contract' is to suppress the base instincts of society. Libraries perpetuated this view through the provision of 'good literature' – that somehow immoral behaviour and society's ills would be corrected if society were exposed only to the good stuff.

Gerolami turns to Deleuze's theory of institutions as an alternative to social contract theory. Deleuze is all-encompassing in his conceptual understanding of 'institution': social institutions such as marriage, and government institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons are included. In contrast to social contract theory that sees society negatively, Deleuze sees the potential to 'conceive of institutions in a positive and inventive manner …', as Gerolami points out. In theory of institutions terms, the library as an institution 'is best understood as a productive space [and] a creative rather than repressive force [with the potential] to produce new social networks'.

The use of assemblage theory is a way to ground library services as tools for advocacy. In short, assemblage theory states that 'different components of the assemblage [that is, the library] are not determined or defined by the whole assemblage of which they are a part. Parts can … be detached and removed … and connected to another one [that is, another assemblage]. Furthermore, the assemblage is more than merely the sum of its parts'. What this means in practice is that the library (as an institution) 'could be assembled with other institutions, forces or people'.

The article is not the easiest to read, but Gerolami peppers it with analogies, which help to make it more realistic rather than merely conceptual. She questions the continued use of potentially outdated concepts (for example, evaluation methods used in collection development), and uses the theoretical concepts discussed to encourage the use of 'old concepts in new ways'.

DR KATHERINE HOWARD, AALIA
Lecturer
Information Management, School of Business IT
& Logistics
RMIT University, Melbourne
katherine.howard@rmit.edu.au

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