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Review: Information & Liberation: Writings on the Politics of Information & Librarianship by Shiraz Durrani

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Acknowledgements:

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Information and Liberation: Writings on the Politics of Information and Librarianship by Shiraz Durrani. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2008. 385 pp. ISBN 978-0-9802004-0-9.

Whose side are you on? What is to be done? Shiraz Durrani forces these questions to the library community in a fashion akin to “conscious” hip hop’s Chuck D of Public Enemy; like a rap album, most of the pieces are fairly short, with hard-hitting messages that give you glimpses of the social struggles the artist cares about. The stencil graffiti cover makes it seem at first glance that the book would be a new addition to the activist and countercultural publications *Revolting Librarians* (Katz, 1972), and the *Redux* (Roberto & West, 2003) version. However, in this compilation of essays from Library Juice Press we find a different kind of rhetoric than U.S. progressivism/populism (with socialist leanings), but discussions on the struggle against neo-colonialism, class justice in capitalist society, and even revolution.

The introduction tells us that Durrani saw how powerful and ultimately dangerous information could be for those in power and, perhaps, more so for dissidents, when Durrani’s research on Kenya’s Mau Mau liberation movement ended with his taking political asylum in Britain. Inside his new country, his own life was no longer on the line. However, he saw how apolitical collection development policies and lack of community outreach by libraries, as well as stances on issues by the press, had very real consequences for the livelihood of the working classes, refugees, asylum seekers, people of color, and other marginalized communities. And despite his move to a new climate, Durrani was not able to dismiss the problems on the African continent he once called home.

Kenya is where the book begins, and Durrani jumps into discussions of how library services in Kenya fail to serve peasant populations through a lack of materials on agriculture, animal husbandry, and Kenya’s position in the world market (which would help them to understand how, and even perhaps why, they are being exploited in that market). These first essays are most eye-opening for their basic premise: local concerns matter, local information matters, and creating libraries that do not take this into account is harmful to the population that should be using the service.

Furthermore, Durrani states that this type of collection development policy is based on a colonial model of libraries that served the colonists and the upper classes of indigenous people who benefited from colonialism. We then see Durrani’s view that libraries are to hold materials that can inspire people to take action and alleviate social ills.

This is accomplished in a rather exciting fashion with his writing on the anti-colonial struggle in Kenya. Durrani looks to underground newspapers from the Mau Mau as not just a voice for disrupting polite discussion in a society with

democratic options, but a lifeline for those who fought an armed oppressor. (In brief, the Mau Mau—or “Land and Freedom Army”—revolt was a peasant insurgency, lasting from 1952 to 1960, that spread to urban sectors of black laborers. The movement inspired other anti-colonial movements in Africa to fight for independence. Europe did not give up those colonies without bloodshed.)

Durrani writes that librarians should be collecting exactly these types of materials that are by and for the oppressed *who are fighting their oppression*. Rarely do our discussions of collection diversity in U.S. libraries seem anywhere so dire. When discussing the need to have a diversity of voices in our collections, it is one thing to talk about “unpopular” (read: liberal progressive) ideas with mainly liberal-minded professionals, but another to talk about materials from revolutionaries who would risk incarceration or lay their lives on the line, and yet another to identify with those revolutionaries.

Durrani throws out the concept of “neutrality” in collection development, showing us that to choose neutrality is to choose the side of the murderer. Durrani’s call to take sides is foreign to a profession that professes the ability to stay above polarizing debates on issues outside of “information”—preemptive war, mass incarceration in communities of color, or global trade rules being examples of issues on which the majority of library professionals are expected to not share their opinions.

This approach can be shocking or refreshing, and it also opens the door to the main problem of the book: a lack of clarity on whom the audience is for this collection. For those librarians who are interested in social change or are committed leftists, the book does not elaborate on topics that could make for a more exciting study. For those students who are not familiar with social struggles, past or present, the book does not give enough background to be truly engaging. Practically, the book ends up serving those who are already partial to these issues. Indeed, Durrani writes, “Achieving equality in practice needs the kind of resolute approach that can only be borne from a sense of passion” (p. 122). The writer Toni Cade Bambara would disagree; she wrote, “The role of the revolutionary artist is to make revolution irresistible” (Latner, 2005). In the case of those librarians who Durrani most wants to move to a new viewpoint, he has work to do.

Durrani leaves some of the book’s most exciting ideas unexplained. When he writes, “There is no doubt that underground publications have had a major impact on the Kenyan society [in the anti-colonial struggle]” (p. 78), readers are left to wonder what kind of research bears this out. If underground information channels really were a decisive factor in ending colonialism in Kenya, it would be nice to have some elaboration. Another example is when he looks at capitalist Western societies and proclaims, “It is not surprising that the working class, Black and anti-imperialist struggles of the people remain untold. This is true in all fields,

but particularly so in the library and information field” (p. 332). To more fully explain why libraries might serve the interests of the ruling classes rather than working people, Durrani needs to be able to explain ideology with a nuance he does not provide. Such an approach might also help to explain why he says this masking of “peoples’ resistance” is particular to the library field. His view that professionalization makes librarians less class conscious could provide a way to explore this, but in the end it sounds like hyperbole; the field Durrani is in is the one he will criticize most.

Durrani, as an anti-capitalist, has a clear agenda against the World Trade Organization. However, the policies and history of the WTO are not explained in enough detail to make it relevant to most readers and Durrani constantly refers to the organization in a number of essays. It is unfortunate that it has not remained in the common vocabulary of people who are relatively well informed about international events from the mainstream media, but he should be aware of this! In one example, he merely cites an International Federation of Library Associations position paper critical of the WTO’s Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, leaving readers to follow up themselves.

On the other hand, other international political movements he mentions are either relatively obscure (the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico) or are too well known for their negative impacts (the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela) for Durrani to neglect details about how their use of media technologies or library policies, respectively, are more people-centered than the capitalist approach. And then there is the issue of Durrani’s dated Leftism. It is odd to see continual references to Mao’s thinking and a vision of China as a viable alternative. Those familiar with the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s will know the power of the vanguard example of China, and why he would be inspired by them. But to see these references continuing into 2007 casts a strange pallor over certain essays, and may only discredit other more powerful ideas in the book. Additionally, Durrani’s references to class and race overshadow his perspective on the treatment of women, the queer community, and other marginalized communities, making him seem resistant to take on the more modern and common view of the broad Left to see oppressions as beyond race and class.

How and where will this book be used? It will be used most effectively in the few classes in library schools that openly focus on issues of diversity, minority oppression, and social change. With good lectures behind them, and the right kind of scaffolding, these essays could lead to some lively debates. Creative professors or self-directed students will find ideas that, as stated above, need to be expanded.

At its best, this book can inspire librarians to take a serious look at their own institutions, and to think about how to change their collection development policies, who works at the library, and what communities are (not) considered for outreach. For example, Durrani’s essays on the Three Continents Liberation

Collection, a library collection focusing on issues related to Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (and their diasporas), is inspiring. The writing on the Quality Leaders Project, during which minority youth were asked to think of ideas to improve library services for minorities, is a project that might inspire future children's and YA librarians to think more politically about the communities in which they work.

If this book leads to a commitment to learning about and joining social justice movements outside the library, it would be the great victory for which Durrani is looking. As he writes, "It is important to relate the struggles within libraries to two important struggles outside the library: the anti-racist struggle in the society outside, and to the class struggle within a capitalist society" (p. 91). The implication for the academic study of libraries and information policies is that our inquiries into equity need to be intertwined with the lessons learned from ethnic or queer studies—those academic arenas in which the continuing relevance of social struggle is the basis for those studies at all.

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Reviewer

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