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Libraries Against Capitalism

By Caitlin Burnett

The “little free library,” a small public model of book distribution, and the larger context of public libraries are examples of anti-capitalist institutions in the United States. For a practice or institution to be anti-capitalist, it must deliberately or unintentionally operate against capitalism. According to social theorists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the main principles of capitalism are profit-driven production, privately owned property, and inherently generated inequality (Marx and Engels 2017/1864, 75-78). Capitalism, as a mode of production, is an economic system. Unlike other modes of production, such as small-scale subsistence farming patterns, capitalism relies on the generation of social classes. In order to produce goods, some people own the means of production, such as the land, labor, and capital. Others sell their labor to the aforementioned class, and yet others are left out of the production system entirely. According to Marx and Engels, the entire system, and the subsequent way we conceptualize our world, is based around the need to produce goods through the division of labor (Marx and Engels 2017/1864, 66-67). In the process, property is privatized, and some people inherently have more than others; this creates inequality. The “little free library” model is an example of an anti-capitalist institution because it does not (strive to) generate profit; it exists as a form of public property to be used by all people. The structure of the “little free library” actively works against the principles of capitalism.

The little free library model would likely not exist without the presence of public libraries. The first public library in the United States was opened in Franklin, Massachusetts, a lending library consisting of books donated by Benjamin Franklin in the late eighteenth century (Abbott et al. 2015). The popularity of this model grew, and public libraries spread across the

United States. The most important feature of these libraries was that they were open to the public, creating accessibility for the common person. In the past, libraries had looked more like private book clubs, requiring a certain amount of wealth and prestige in order to be included in them and have access to literature (Abbott et al. 2015).

However, even these early public libraries were not truly accessible to all people. Much in the way that the Declaration of Independence's opening statement, "...all men are created equal," "all" was largely synonymous with "white" (US 1776). Public libraries, funded by taxes and managed by towns and cities, were not exempt from the segregation practices that existed in many other public facilities during the early and mid-twentieth century in the United States (Abbott et al. 2015). Accessing any public library's resources often requires a library card, an identification document issued by a particular library that allows a person to check out books/films/audio resources and is meant to hold patrons responsible for returning these. Many African Americans were refused access to library cards (Sullivan 2014). Although many libraries, largely in the South, were not integrated during this time period, African American libraries run by African American staff were created, like the Auburn Branch of the Atlanta, Georgia Public Library System (Abbott et al. 2015). One aim of the Civil Rights movement was to desegregate public institutions such as public libraries, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal for any public facilities, including public libraries, to discriminate on the basis of race (Abbott et al. 2015).

Today, American public libraries have become a symbol of equal access, turning away from their discriminatory past and exemplifying anti-capitalist ideals. With a lack of places for people experiencing homelessness to stay during the daytime, libraries have become an area of refuge for these patrons (Gunderman and Stevens 2015). One of Karl Marx's fundamental ideas

of capitalism was that it generated different social classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Marx 2000/1848, 246). He also wrote about the lumpenproletariat, the lowest strata of the proletariat (Marx 2000/1848, 254, 316) This term is often used to refer to groups of people, such as people experiencing homelessness; these individuals do not contribute to the capitalist system through use of their labor (Encyclopedia of Marxism). Here, one can see the impact of public libraries as anti-capitalist institutions, as their doors are open to all people – bourgeoisie, proletariat, and lumpenproletariat alike. For many people experiencing homelessness, public libraries provide warmth, shelter, internet, and entertainment, with one interviewed librarian stating, “The library often serves as a destination for people who have no place to go...Some may resent [their] presence...in the library, but as far as I am concerned, everyone deserves a chance to use it” (Gunderman and Stevens 2015).

The history of the public library system in the United States sets the stage for a smaller scale example of a model that works even more actively against capitalist principles. While the “little free library” model follows many tenets of the public library model, it provides another level of accessibility. In practice, this model consists of several important details. First, the “library” is a small structure that is placed in any public space, preferably with a high level of traffic surrounding it. This could include places like town commons, along busy main streets, or outside local businesses. The structure is filled with a variety of books. The premise is that anyone can take a book and are encouraged to leave a book in its place – “take a book, leave a book” (Little Free Library). One could also utilize the “little free library” in the same way as a public library, by borrowing and returning a book.

The idea and structure of the “little free library” model is fundamentally opposed to capitalist principles. First, this model requires its physical structure to be a form of public

property. No single person can control the structure or determine who is allowed or not allowed to use it. The structure itself is located on public property that can be accessed by all people. The books inside of the structure also become a form of public property: they are no longer the possession of one person or institution. Further, in a capitalist system, creating profit is the goal. This model does not generate profit. If profit is not generated, the system fails. Rather, the “little free library” model is focused entirely on exchange. The very idea that an institution does not strive to make money is opposed to capitalist values. Finally, because the “little free library” is accessible to all people, this model works to eliminate social classes. By being located in public places, like along streets, these books can be utilized by anyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Despite the many qualities that exemplify this model as an anti-capitalist institution, it still functions within a capitalist system. As a result, the model is not entirely free from the restraints or influences of capitalism. For example, the books still have to be produced, likely by people who are alienated from the production process or the final product. Someone must make the initial purchase of these books before they can be donated. This process relies on capitalism – without the production of these books or the market for them to be bought and sold, the model could not exist. The same issue exists with the physical structure of the libraries themselves. There is an entire non-profit organization that centers around this model. One can go to their website, purchase a box to use as a library, and buy discounted books to stock the library with (Little Free Library). It is also encouraged that people leave a book behind, if they decide to take one from the “little free library.” This system also relies on a person having some initial capital or literary resources, which are not accessible to all people. Although this is not a requirement of the model, it does suggest some limits to defining this as anti-capitalist.

The public library system and the “little free library” model have varying degrees of intentionality in their anti-capitalist approach. For example, one could argue that the purpose of the public library was not to oppose capitalism. Instead, this system works within capitalism, and is the product of a capitalist society. The fact that it happens to work against capitalist ideals may not have been intended. In contrast, the “little free library” model appears to be more intentionally designed to be anti-capitalist: such libraries are situated in high-traffic public areas that are accessible to all people and do not require having a library card or visiting a specific building. In theory, a person could take a book from one “little free library,” potentially leave something in return, and then bring the book across the country without any repercussions. Within the public library system, all books are technically owned by the public and are simply borrowed and returned. Yet one gets the impression that the books are the property of that library. The books must be returned, or else there is typically a fine or penalty. Someone from another location can request to borrow a book through a different library, but it still must be returned to the initial library. In this way, it appears that the public library anti-capitalist result is not intentionally worked into its design but is some sort of by-product.

Regardless of the intentionality of the anti-capitalist institution, both these forms of library models reject the fundamentals of capitalism. Indeed, one could argue that libraries have become a symbol of equal access to knowledge, regardless of age, gender, race, or socioeconomic status. If capitalism flourishes through the production of social classes, public libraries subvert that process by removing some of the barriers preventing people from accessing literature and other resources. By not being profit-driven, these libraries work against a fundamental principle of capitalism. Although these models do rely on capitalism to produce the literature they use, the process of distributing that material and knowledge resists this system of

production. As local-level public institutions, public libraries have created sanctuaries for people of all backgrounds and provided resources and accessibility that otherwise may not have reached certain people in a capitalist system, exemplifying resistance to an unjust model.

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