



Conversation with Litwin Books author, Stephen Bales by Emma Quinn

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This interview was conducted as part of the Author Interview Series with Library Students, published on the Litwin Books blog, where prospective information professionals meet with authors to discuss the research process and engage in a deep dive on important topics of the field from concept to publication.

Serapis: The Sacred Library and its Declericalization, by Stephen Bales and Wendi Arant Kaspar, explores the role of the historical and religious symbols and rituals of the academic library (referred to as the "Serapian Library") as a powerful ideological state institution and investigates how these symbols and rituals support hegemonic structures in society. Specifically, the book examines the role of the modern secular "Serapian" academic library in its historical context as a "sacred space," and applies the theories of Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, Ivan Illich, and other thinkers to explain the ramifications of the library as crypto-temple.

This interview was conducted by Emma Quinn, a dual degree graduate student in Irish and Irish American Studies at New York University and Library & Information Science at Long Island University.

The content of this interview has been lightly edited for clarity and style.

Emma Quinn: I loved the intersection between using the ancient symbol of the Serapium to the modern academic librarian response, and I thought that looking at the library through the point of view of it being akin to a place of worship was very interesting. Can you summarize the concept of the Serapian MCAL and explain its importance for this book project?

Stephen Bales: The MCAL, and the library throughout history, is a site for ideological production. The theories that we used draw upon Marxist theories of ideology and structural Marxism, which was really developed in the 1960s and 1970s, primarily by a guy named Louis Althusser. The idea is that institutions are sites of ideological production, so they maintain society through this process of inducting members of the society ideologically into the society through a process called interpolation, in which the person encountering the ideology sees how they fit into the ideological structure. They're more or less told how they fit into the structure, and Althusser says there are all these state apparatuses which work to interpolate people into society, and in the process of making someone fit ideologically, they reproduce that society through indoctrination. The idea of the Serapian library is taken from the Greek idea of

Serapis being an ideological nexus, created more or less intentionally by Ptolemy I, for the purpose of doing the same thing, but it combined religion and politics in one site. We're using this metaphor because the Serapium is a temple for Serapis but also an ideological site for multiple ideologies. What the book does is show how libraries throughout history have served the same purpose as a point where religion and various other ideological institutions meet. The MCAL is the modern iteration of this, and while the ideology is not as apparent as it used to be, it is still there and still has an effect on how we relate ourselves to the institution and then also to our society at large.

Emma: I thought the argument in the book was very compelling, especially when you discussed the architecture of academic libraries and how they so often reflect religious spaces, which I thought was a really good example of the ideological frame of mind when entering the library.

Stephen: It's like you're entering a sacred space, even if you don't even realize it's happening. Even if you never enter a library in your life, you still orientate yourself to the library as a sacred space. And then there's the fact that geographically the library is usually at the center.

Emma: Exactly! So how did you and your co-author, Wendi Arant Kasper, develop the idea for this book project? Did it start as something else?

Stephen: Yes, so I started thinking about it when working on my dissertation back in 2008, which was on Aristotle and his contribution to scholarly communication and his use of dialectical logic. It was specifically on how the academic library was developed out of his dialectical style of thinking. As part of that dissertation process, I did lots of research on the Library of Alexandria. So that's how I started seeing the connection, and then all this dialectical thinking led me to Marx, who's all about dialectical thinking, and so the two together made me think of the academic library's historical processes through history to the present. Wendi came on board a couple of years ago when COVID had hit, and I hit a wall. She's the former editor for both the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* and *College and Research Libraries*, so she helped me reframe what I was doing. It was a mess, so she used her editing skills to reframe it and make it more accessible.

Emma: What was the process of co-writing a book with another author like?

Stephen: I've written two books solo and then I wrote a book with Tina Budzise-Weaver, and that was more interviews with librarians, so we were both doing the same thing, if that makes sense. So this was different from that – I came in with maybe 50,000 words already written, and one of the chapters was 80 pages long. What Wendi did was she helped me shape it into what I was trying to say. Conceptually it's a lot different now from how it was before she came on board.

Emma: In the last chapter, you introduce the concept of the Kynical Academic Library Worker, which I thought was a very compelling idea of how to approach actively dismantling and questioning systems of power within the library. What is it that you intend for the reader to take away from your proposal of the Kynical Academic Library Worker?

Stephen: I guess one of the basic points is that you have to be critically conscious. A lot of librarians are on the right track, but they just have to achieve this reflexivity and critical awareness of ideology, what it does, and what their role is as a representative of this ideology. In order to be a truly radical librarian, you have to understand your role within this institution at large and be willing to speak out the truth against the power with some level of fearlessness. I think that most library workers should become conscious of their history and their place within their institution.

Emma: How did you connect with Litwin as your publisher? What was that process like?

Stephen: I wrote a previous book with them called *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach*. It was an examination of dialectical materialism, especially the work of Marx and Joseph Dietzgen, and how their work applies to academic librarianship and how dialectical thought can be applied as a critical method to library work, and so I went and looked around for publishers and Litwin seemed like the obvious choice because they deal with critical and radical issues and also they are good to their authors – they don't exploit their authors. After that, I did some other stuff before deciding to return to this idea of dialectical materialism. This book is a particular application of the theoretical method I proposed in the first book.

Emma: Was there anything different about the publishing process that was challenging or that surprised you?

Stephen: I think there was a general malaise about research that hit everybody during COVID. I had plans to actually visit some of the sites I mentioned in the book. I was planning on actually going to Alexandria, but that was impossible. Otherwise, I had taken a research sabbatical in 2019 to prepare the proposal, and then right after I did that COVID hit, so I had to spend a while figuring out how to approach the project from a different angle, and that's where Wendi came in at the tail end of COVID.

Emma: What advice would you give to library students, or early career professionals interested in conducting research on critical or radical librarianship?

Stephen: One thing would be to read everything you can and keep up with the latest stuff but don't hesitate to look back at earlier material as well. I would also read books about art and literature more widely. I'm actually working with Tina Budzise-Weaver on another book and we're interviewing critical librarians to see what their most important formative pieces of art, literature, or academic work are, what they thought was most important to their critical consciousness, and we're hoping to get a wide range. There are only a small number of theorists who focus on Marxist thought in library work, so I would encourage students to look into the past to look for ideas. You'll probably have to update them, but we need people to do that.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE FIELD