

Review of Solving Names: Worldliness and Metaphysics in Librarianship

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ABSTRACT: Review of Popowich, S. (2024). *Solving Names: Worldliness and Metaphysics in Librarianship*. Library Juice Press

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I entered the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) with a mix of curiosity and skepticism, taking my first course on the history and purpose of librarianship while independently reading Domenico Losurdo's *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (2014). Inspired by these concurrent studies, I wrote my term paper on what I was calling, at the time, "the ideology of democracy." I wondered why there are many (valid) critiques of "actually existing socialism," but not nearly as many of "actually existing democracy," with its so-called "successes" rooted in centuries of global slavery and exploitation (Rockhill, 2017, p. 57-58). It was through this inquiry that I first discovered the work of Sam Popowich in his *Confronting the Democratic Discourse of Librarianship* (CDD) (2019). His work offered a necessary intervention, challenging the assumption that librarianship is inherently democratic and ideologically neutral. Popowich's writing has since become foundational to my understanding of libraries and librarianship. So, when I learned of his newest book, *Solving Names: Worldliness and Metaphysics in Librarianship* (2024), I anticipated another vital contribution.

While my own theoretical commitments differ somewhat from Popowich's, our projects are in dialogue. My academic framework has often leaned on thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Todd McGowan, Zahi Zalloua, and Ilan Kapoor to deconstruct the idea that there is anything inherently democratic about the field of library and information sciences. For those familiar with both the work of Žižek and Popowich, bringing them together in comradely discourse may seem nonsensical. On the one hand there is Popowich, who has, following Losurdo, outlined a denunciation of the Enlightenment project (2019, p. 98-102) as well as a sustained criticism of metaphysics (or a particular form therein) throughout *Solving Names*. On the other hand, there is Žižek, who has, on surface level, consistently defended the Enlightenment project throughout his oeuvre, to such an extent that there is no homogeneous ideological consensus on his work. Indeed, he is a polarizing figure with an often-misunderstood canon. This is largely his own fault, with his impenetrable sarcastic writing depending on a fusion of German Idealist metaphysics, post-Freudian Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity, and Marxist political theory. Some have labeled this hybrid philosophy as transcendental materialism (Johnston, 2008), as Žižek has paradoxically (Carew, 2014), contra Popowich, provided a defense of a critical metaphysics despite being a self-described materialist. However, both Žižek and Popowich are concerned with ideological deconstruction and finding ways to move beyond metaphysical impasses.

I've yet to see any in-depth engagement with this transcendental materialist school in LIS literature, despite many wonderful engagements with other critical theorists (Leckie, Given, & Buschman, 2010; Nicholson & Seale, 2018). Here I'd like to not only shine light on Popowich's brilliant new book, but also to demonstrate that there is room for solidarity with these thinkers, despite possible disagreements. In this way, I hope to practice the humanist hermeneutical approach that Popowich describes in *Solving Names* (2024, p. 66-68; 71-72), one working against any sort of metaphysically pure ideology, and thus bringing Popowich and Žižek into dialogue.

The core of Popowich's argument rests on the idea of "solving names," a concept coined by William James. Solving names are essentially "metaphysical concepts" that are utilized in discourse to "ground and defend particular theoretical, political, and practical arguments" (Popowich, 2024, p. 10). These solving names claim to surpass "subjective, personal, or

emotional interests” and can thus be “counted on to provide a neutral, disinterested limit to debate that both parties must agree on” (p. 10). For librarians, intellectual freedom is just such a solving name - charged with political meaning while claiming in tandem to be a neutral concept immune to reasonable critique. Popowich’s elaboration on solving names reminded me of the “master signifier” within Žižekian theory, as master signifiers function in a similar way. Following structuralist thought, signifiers can only refer to other signifiers in a seemingly endless chain of significations. But this endless string of signification must be grounded in *something* that provides (even a contradictory sense of) consistent meaning – an interpretive tool.

Much like solving names, master signifiers help stabilize and unify ideological concepts, despite any contradictions or lack of coherence. Perhaps a prescient example might be the notion of “freedom.” Across the political spectrum, virtually all parties claim to care about “freedom.” But what “freedom” means is rather subjective. Just about anything can be done in the name of freedom, because freedom doesn’t inherently point to other signifiers or contexts. By itself, it is ultimately devoid of meaning and is instead used as an empty container – a truth function -- determining the ideological viability of a range of contradictory political concepts or projects. Everyone wants freedom. When opposing groups, such as pro-life and pro-choice advocates, are both concerned with “freedom” but define it in fundamentally different ways, genuine dialogue stalls. Each position’s reference to the master signifier, in this case freedom, affirms its own worldview and dismisses the other’s, often repressing any self-criticism and resisting interrogation. In this way, both solving names and master signifiers are politically charged concepts that, within their respective worldviews, appear neutral and infallible, providing a false sense of metaphysical consistency which can be used to justify (or ignore) just about anything.

Both Popowich and Žižek suggest that ideology operates most powerfully when it appears absent. Popowich, drawing on the work of Althusser, explores ideology within science, technology, and education, suggesting that we must rigorously critique our own worldviews - even the parts of them we may otherwise hold as sacred and immutable (2024, p. 71-78). Despite this, he does not deny a “strategic usefulness” of metaphysics (p. 76), nor does he seem to suggest that ideology can be entirely eradicated, as it is “the conceptual framework which allows people to navigate their world... to live through and accommodate the contradictions... There is no accurate or objective representation of the ‘real world’ immune from this” (p. 90-91). Similarly, Žižek, who also relies on the work of Althusser, draws similar conclusions throughout his oeuvre, arguing that ideology is an inherent component of subjectivity, without which we could not make sense of experiences - it is, for Žižek, an essential component of beings that use language. Žižek makes a move aligned with Popowich when he critiques the cynical detachment to ideology within liberalism - that liberals adhere to *no* ideology (Žižek, 2009, 24-27). Indeed, those who claim to have surpassed ideology are themselves the most ideologically deluded. As Popowich writes in his conclusion,

“I have said throughout this book that liberal ‘common sense’ views on things like reason, knowledge, truth, etc., opposed to ideology are themselves exposed as ideological once they have to justify themselves in the face of alternatives... there are only commitments, there is only responsibility, the question is what and who we are responsible *to* and responsible *for*” (2024, p. 322-323).

What makes Popowich's work so urgent for LIS professionals is his insistence that these theoretical questions are not abstract. The debate about what constitutes knowledge, he reminds us, is a material concern—one that should be central to library work (2024, p. 82). In other words, theory is praxis. And for library workers navigating increasing precarity, political polarization, and epistemic crises, the philosophical foundations of our profession demand rigorous critique. To think with Popowich is to think beyond liberalism—not necessarily in favor of a specific political program, but to open space for what Žižek calls “demanding the impossible” (2013). Take, for example, a recent economic study by Hickel and Sullivan (2024), which argues that provisioning decent living standards for the global population would require only 30% of current resource and energy use (Hickel & Sullivan, 2024). The idea that a globally planned economy can feasibly provide for the material needs of all global citizens (food, shelter, and water) while also still fostering space for consumeristic pleasures goes against the grain of many dominant political ideologies, such as the logic of austerity, the prioritization of market-first economics, and neoliberal realism. In other words, these are the kinds of imaginaries both Popowich and Žižek ask us to consider: to treat as possible that which the dominant ideologies, solving names, and master signifiers deem impossible.

There are, of course, no easy conclusions. Popowich seems to suggest that the struggle for equity and justice within LIS (and the world more generally) will continue. There is no utopic horizon in view. No historical rupture will eternally save us (from ourselves). As Popowich writes, there is “no accurate or objective representation of the ‘real world’ immune from ideology” (2024, p. 90). Similarly, Kapoor and Zalloua, in their monograph teasing out geopolitical implications of a Žižekian philosophy, remind us that “the struggle for emancipation is a never-ending one”: “...Struggle, struggle again, struggle better” (2021, p. 195).

Librarianship, then, must remain a field of contested meanings—where terms like equity, access, and intellectual freedom are not taken at face value but interrogated as products of ideological formation. We must never, as LIS professionals, believe our own ways of understanding, our solving names and master signifiers, are not without room for analysis, criticism, and debate. To think anything less is pure ideology. Because, as Popowich and Žižek alike remind us, ideology is not something we escape. It is something we struggle with. Every day.

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