Book Reviews

Edited by Michèle Hudon

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MIKSA, Francis L. **The DDC, the Universe of Knowledge, and the Post-Modern Library.** Albany, NY: Forest Press, 1998. 99 p. ISBN 0-910608-64-4 (PB).

The topic of this slim volume is no less than the historical context and the development of the *Dewey Decimal Classification* (*DDC*), including the present and the future. Only Francis Miksa's considerable background makes it possible to approach this goal in ninety pages of text. *The DDC, the Universe of Knowledge, and the Post-Modern Library* is a whirlwind history which stands adequately alone, but would have carried its arguments more effectively as a first essay in an anthology of Miksa's works which form its underpinnings.

Miksa's overall question is the question of a historian: why are we where we are today? That is, why do librarians continue to support classifications, notably the *DDC*, that attempt to systematically and hierarchically order a universe of knowledge? With such a question, Miksa could have offered a pedestrian review of the salient events with which he is familiar and which would have been safe. Instead, he offers sound summaries as the basis for probing and often provocative interpretation. This review will note the solid grounding, but will focus on what is provocative because Miksa's work merits attention in the form of challenge and argument in some instances and support and amplification in others.

Miksa divides his book into four parts: a history of the *DDC*, the milieu from which it grew, its relationship to recent classificatory developments, and its role in the present and future of knowledge organization. Miksa's history of the *DDC* is a concise narrative, surveying general trends and illustrating them with specific instances. It is a useful reminder of the classification's development in preparation for the arguments to follow and might also serve as an introduction to the *DDC*'s history for the novice. He uses it to introduce major figures and their views, but Melvil Dewey himself seems a rather flat character in this description. Having questioned in the introduction "why someone like Melvil Dewey ... would indulge in this kind of exercise at all," Miksa does not pursue Dewey's motives. The only characteristic of Dewey that he discusses is practicality. In fact, in asking the question in the introduction, Miksa has suggested that "it could have been anyone, but here we must contend with Dewey himself" (p.2). We know from work by Miksa himself and from other sources, notably Wayne Wiegand's biography *Irrepressible Reformer* (1996), that Dewey was anything but ordinary in his ambitions and accomplishments. It is difficult to imagine just "anyone" having created the *DDC*. While others established classifications it is the *DDC* that is still with us, not Cutter's *Expansive Classification* nor Brown's *Subject Classification*. The "why" seems likely to relate to the individual as well as to the historical milieu. Wiegand's work, for example, establishes Dewey's reforming zeal which links to Miksa's assertion that the *DDC* was created to make the best books available to better the general population. This motif is a sort of paternalistic populism that can be revisited in an updated guise in the postmodern age (see below).

In his historical survey Miksa notes that previous discussions of the *DDC* focus only on the philosophical origins of the order of main classes and that the hierarchical structure within those classes has gone largely unconsidered. Thus he introduces one of the most important issues of his discussion: that library classifications as we know them are tied to a hierarchical arrangement that has been taken as a given. Later, when Miksa discusses questioning fundamentals as a characteristic of our postmodern age, we can see that Miksa himself has adopted this insightful technique in this instance.

In the second part of the book, Miksa discusses the relationship between the *DDC* and the classification of knowledge movement of the encyclopedists and their predecessors. It is seldom that a scholar will frankly reverse a previously held opinion. However, Miksa has had the courage to do so in his assessment of this relationship. He states that he no longer accepts a strong link between the classification movement and the early classificationists such as Dewey.

The brevity of the discussion makes it difficult to grasp precisely why Miksa has had such a drastic change of view. He discusses Dewey's focus on utility, but utility is not antithetical to theory. Miksa notes Dewey's sacrifice of theoretical harmony to practicality when the two are at odds. However, in the acknowledgements to the 13th edition, Dewey mentioned his "varid reading, correspondence and conversation on the subject," his "filling the 9 clases of the skeme [with] the inverted Baconian arranjement of the St Louis Library," and the "valuabl aid ... renderd by specialists, who hav assisted greatly in developing tables. Among these ar many wel-known skolars, ... many minds wer necesary to supply teknical and special lerning absolutely essential in filling minute heds." (1932, p.46) Whether or not Dewey's "varid reading" included the encyclopaedists or philosophers of classification, theory may well have infiltrated the classification through Dewey's acknowledged borrowing from Baconian origins and the "skolars" who assisted development of the internal structure of the *DDC*. As Miksa suggests, this connection is weaker than a direct link to Dewey. However, even if Dewey did not follow the theory of the classification of knowledge movement, but developed a classification on the same model based on mutual antecedents, a link is present. The attributes that Miksa defines as central to the earlier classification movement are also central to library classification. The difference in purpose does not necessitate a difference in principles.

The third part of *The DDC, the Universe of Knowledge, and the Post-Modern Library* begins with an account of the changes that encouraged the development of twentieth century library classification theory. These changes stem from a growth of information for specialists that resulted in more publication and a more precise and complex concept of subject. Miksa sees this change in emphasis as a shift from classifying the best books for the betterment of the public at large. To explore these changes he examines four classification theorists: Ernest Cushing Richardson, Henry Evelyn Bliss, W.C. Berwick Sayers and S.R. Ranganathan. Miksa's extremely useful summary of their contributions also includes their influence on the *DDC* and their relationships with each other and the earlier classification of knowledge movement.

In the final section of the book, Miksa puts the *DDC* into our postmodern context. His conception of postmodernism is presented in two sections – one on the postmodern library and the other on the postmodern age – that could also be seen as a distinction between postmodernism and poststructuralism. The rejection of universals or absolutes is central to postmodernism and poststructuralism. This rejection is accompanied by the suggestion that realities are constructed by discourses operating within societies. Miksa implies such discourses when he attributes the relativity of truth in a postmodern context to "human propensities" (p.86). While readers might infer some kind of essential human qualities in this phrase, Miksa does make the connection between social construction of realities and truths and rejection of universals. Moving on from this point, one might make a distinction between postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism is a critical stance that questions underlying presumptions as Miksa describes in his section on the postmodern age. It is not so much an interpretation of our current era as a questioning of epistemological and ontological foundations. As Miksa notes, it requires substituting individual knowledges reflecting individual realities for a positivist view with its singular universe of knowledge. Hence, the questioning moves deeper than epistemology to questions of ontology. Miksa implies this consideration of ontology in his discussion of realities and truths (p.86). Richardson's "things of existence" raise the issue of ontological foundations for classification. The questioning stance of poststructuralism thus requires classifications to accommodate ontological diversity – a radical departure from previous philosophical underpinnings. Perhaps Dewey's emphasis on practicality over theory will offer us an easier model for transition than the more dogmatic theoretical stances of Richardson, Bliss, Sayers and Ranganathan.

Unlike the *critical stance* of poststructuralism, postmodernism is a *manifestation* or *application* of the rejection of universals. The postmodern world is frequently viewed as a bleak landscape of shifting ground without moorings (by theorists such as Fredric Jameson and writers such as cyberpunk fictionists). A vision of the individual adrift in a relativistic wilderness is rampant in these views. However, this focus on the individual is antithetical to the social constructionist views also characteristic of poststructuralism and postmodernism. The rejection of universals suggests a relativism that some critics find threatening, but does not require this frightening fragmentation of realities. Automatic acceptance of absolute individuality as concomitant to rejection of universality is a tacit acceptance of binary opposition, the intellectual division of concepts into dualities. Such binarism is a presumption that one conceptual framework is universally applicable. Individualism is the complementary discourse to universality that we have inherited from the European Enlightenment. Fortunately, Miksa does not fall into the trap of accepting the "bleak landscape" perceptions of postmodernism. He takes the more positive approach that there are roles for classification in this new environment. However, I suspect that the role he proposes for the individual in his section on the postmodern library is one more typical of the modern notion of individuality that fostered selec-

tive dissemination of information (SDI) than of a postmodern age.

A problem with Miksa's focus on individualism is its tendency towards elitism. This tendency is not new in the context of library classification, as is evident from Miksa's discussion. The shift from a concern with the best books for the public to a concern with precise scientific information is also a social (and political economic) shift from serving the general population to catering to an elite of researchers and policy makers. It is a shift away from the practical application for people's ultimate betterment that Dewey the reformer initiated. Making "one's own computer" the prerequisite to an allegedly postmodern version of individualism and privileging electronic information for "one's own library" is a major service to a powerful elite. This elite is characterized by combinations of economic and educational resources concentrated in predictable countries and populations. Since the *DDC* is the most widely used classification in the world and commonly used in school and public libraries and in national bibliographies it is a potential vehicle for inclusion. In this role, the *DDC* can open up social discourses and their construction of realities. A consciousness of this potential will assist the *DDC* editors in using techniques such as Miksa suggests to avert the hegemony of either a "universal" scheme or a scheme that caters only to elites.

A more helpful interpretation of postmodernism might come from postmodern architecture. Its eclecticism crossing (or transgressing) styles and periods illustrates that structures need not be built on only one theme to be able to stand up. Miksa suggests various strategies for change that might foster such an eclectic structure. Such mechanisms are already under development in the *DDC*. For example, Miksa's suggestion that various specification levels be available in the *DDC* is well-established in the long-standing principle of broad and close classification. His idea that a highly specific standard edition be the basis for this flexibility sees the *DDC* as a potential tool for large general collections and focussed in-depth collections in addition to its current uses. To offer an electronic means of determining appropriate segmentation as Miksa proposes would certainly expedite the process.

Miksa's second suggestion of alternative arrangements is another way in which individuals and libraries serving diverse populations can be addressed by the *DDC*. Part of the research agenda Forest Press has defined for the *DDC* is decomposing *DDC* numbers into their facets. This innovation offers a flexibility for classification as seen in classified catalogues (rejected in North America since Cutter converted us to the dictionary model). Even within one library or virtual collection there can be a diversity of results. Of course, this flexibility will rely on electronic capabilities that, again, suggest an elite, but one dependent on institutional rather than individual resources – libraries rather than "one's own computer."

The most intriguing, valuable and difficult suggestion Miksa makes is to develop the capacity in the *DDC* to discover hidden patterns amongst facets of knowledge. The decomposition of *DDC* facets will be a step in enabling this task. However, the current structures by definition inhibit finding new patterns. The choice of what facets are included (as Ranganathan pointed out, there are infinite facets and not all can be included) and the elements in their arrays limit a system's parameters. The very idea of a facet implies at least two levels of hierarchy – the overarching concept defining the facet and the elements in the array that are included under that concept. However, these obstacles should not deter our search for different patterns. As Miksa notes throughout, hierarchy is only one way of organizing knowledge and can profitably be questioned. Breaking free of hierarchical thinking – the mode of thought in which we have been nurtured and trained – is extremely difficult. Searching for different patterns has great potential for opening our minds to different modes of thought. Joan Mitchell, the current editor, encourages facilitating access to the *DDC*'s universe of knowledge from different points-of-view. My own current project to make the *DDC* accessible through a feminist lense is part of this effort. Such projects offer the opportunity to find new patterns as Miksa suggests.

Miksa obviously believes that the *DDC* offers the flexibility to continue to be meaningful in a postmodern age. Miksa's *The DDC, the Universe of Knowledge, and the Post-Modern Library* offers provocative insights from the past to point the way toward a productive future for classification and the *DDC* in particular.

Hope A. Olson

Dr. Hope A. Olson, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, T6E 1B6 Canada. e-mail:hope.olson@ualberta.ca

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"Knowledge Management" is becoming very much a watchword in business and management circles these days. Knowledge is now said to be a crucial factor of production as well as a product in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. Like it or not, we have been thrust into the age of the knowledge society. In-