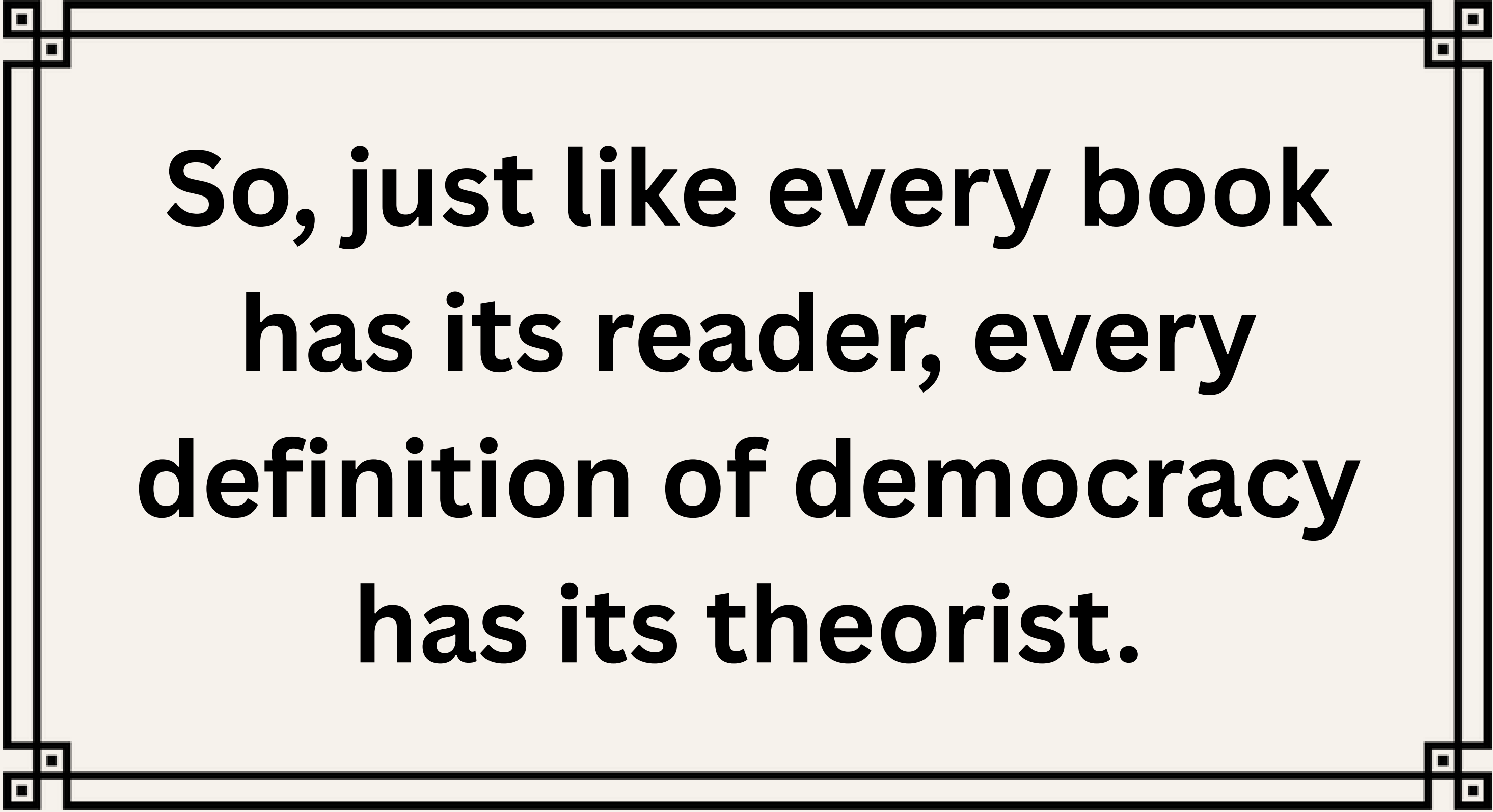# DEMOCRACY, NEOLIBERALISM, AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Academic libraries and democracy are both under threat in the current political climate.

Neoliberalism has harmed libraries, cultures, and societies since its inception.

There are many different ways to explain how neoliberalism has affected academic libraries and democracy.

In large part due to the fact that democracy is an "essentially contested concept" in which "its meaning is constantly and will always be subject to dispute and debate" (Lupien & Rourke, 2021)

So, just like every book has its reader, every definition of democracy has its theorist.

Neoliberalism subverts democracy due to its obsession with unregulated markets as the dominant

What is neoliberalism?

It's an ideology where the definition is mired in confusion, which means it also functions as a floating signifier like democracy.

One "concise definition offered by Daniel Saunders (2010)" which "is that neoliberalism is 'united by three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy, and the individual as a rational economic actor'" (as cited in Cope, 2014, p. 68).

Cope, J. (2014). Neoliberalism and Library & Information Science: Using Karl Polanyi's Fictitious Commodity as an Alternative to Neoliberal Conceptions of Information. Progressive Librarian, 43.

Neoliberalism has harmed academic libraries in three distinct ways.

Quinn and Bates (2019) identify three vectors through which neoliberalism has caused harm to the "library as a living, evolving, and undirected space" that correspond to the three tenets of neoliberalism (p.3).

Neoliberalism has harmed academic libraries in three distinct ways.
#1

The first is through the financialization and privatization of higher education. This has fragmented the student body by convincing them the experience isn't a social right of public life, but a private affair, and led to academic libraries becoming more hostile towards community members not attending the university than they were previously (Quinn & Bates, 2019, pp. 4, 5).

Neoliberalism has harmed academic libraries in three distinct ways.
#2

The second is market concentration in the field of scholarly communication, with academic publishers functioning as a cartel and raising the cost of materials year after year. This is not a new problem, but it has gotten significantly worse. Thirty years ago, Hamaker (1995) described spending "85% of our continuing or base materials budget" at LSU on serials, despite not adding any additional subscriptions for nine years prior, due to being "locked in" to purchasing agreements (pp. 37, 38).

Neoliberalism has harmed academic libraries in three distinct ways.
#3

The third harm that neoliberalism inflicts on academic libraries as described by Quinn and Bates (2019) occurs when the "vocabulary of business and management in both the discipline and practice of library work is having a corrosive effect on the capacity of those involved to imagine any future beyond neoliberal common sense" (p. 7). This is echoed by Henninger (2020) describes "processes of commodification and decontextualization" in which things are "devalued and prohibited because they do not support the profit-seeking ends of the employer" as "the employer instead seeks…a specific form of a language that can be incorporated into call center infrastructure as a commodity of context" (para. 18).

One of the biggest reasons neoliberalism was able to cause so much trouble

## was due to the fact that it was a bipartisan endeavor.

Daniel Drezner (2024, remarked that while "[n]eoliberalism was embraced by policy makers from both major parties" because "free market Republicans" viewed it as "scaling back barriers that stunted market efficiency," while "moderate Democrats" saw it "as a set of policies that could lift the poorest of the poor out of poverty" and both parties believed in its ability to promote "economic interdependence, which could, in turn, generate global peace and prosperity" (para. 3).

Drezner, D. W. (2024, January 9). Is the "Washington Consensus" of Neoliberalism and Globalization Over? Reason.com. https://reason.com/2024/01/07/the-post-neoliberalism-moment/

What happened instead is that wealth was funneled from most of the population to the ultra-wealthy. In a study completed by the Economic Policy Institute, "net productivity" which is defined as the "growth of output of goods and services less depreciation per hour worked" increased 2.7 times as much as pay, and the "entire gap in EPI's productivity–pay figure is associated with rising inequality—inequality among wage earners and the rising share of overall income going to owners of capital rather than to workers for their labor" (2024).
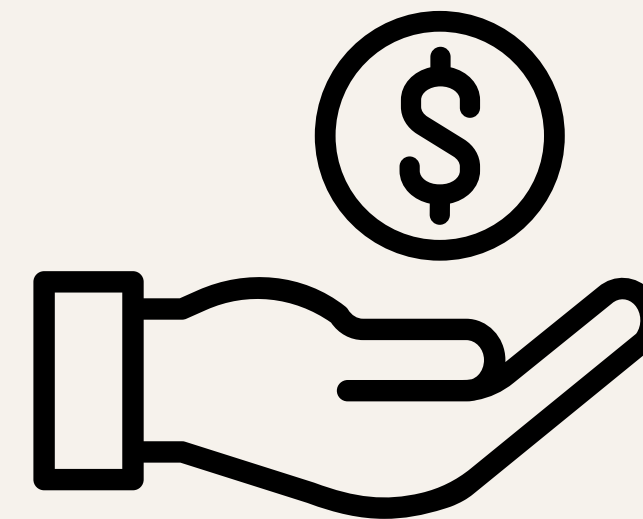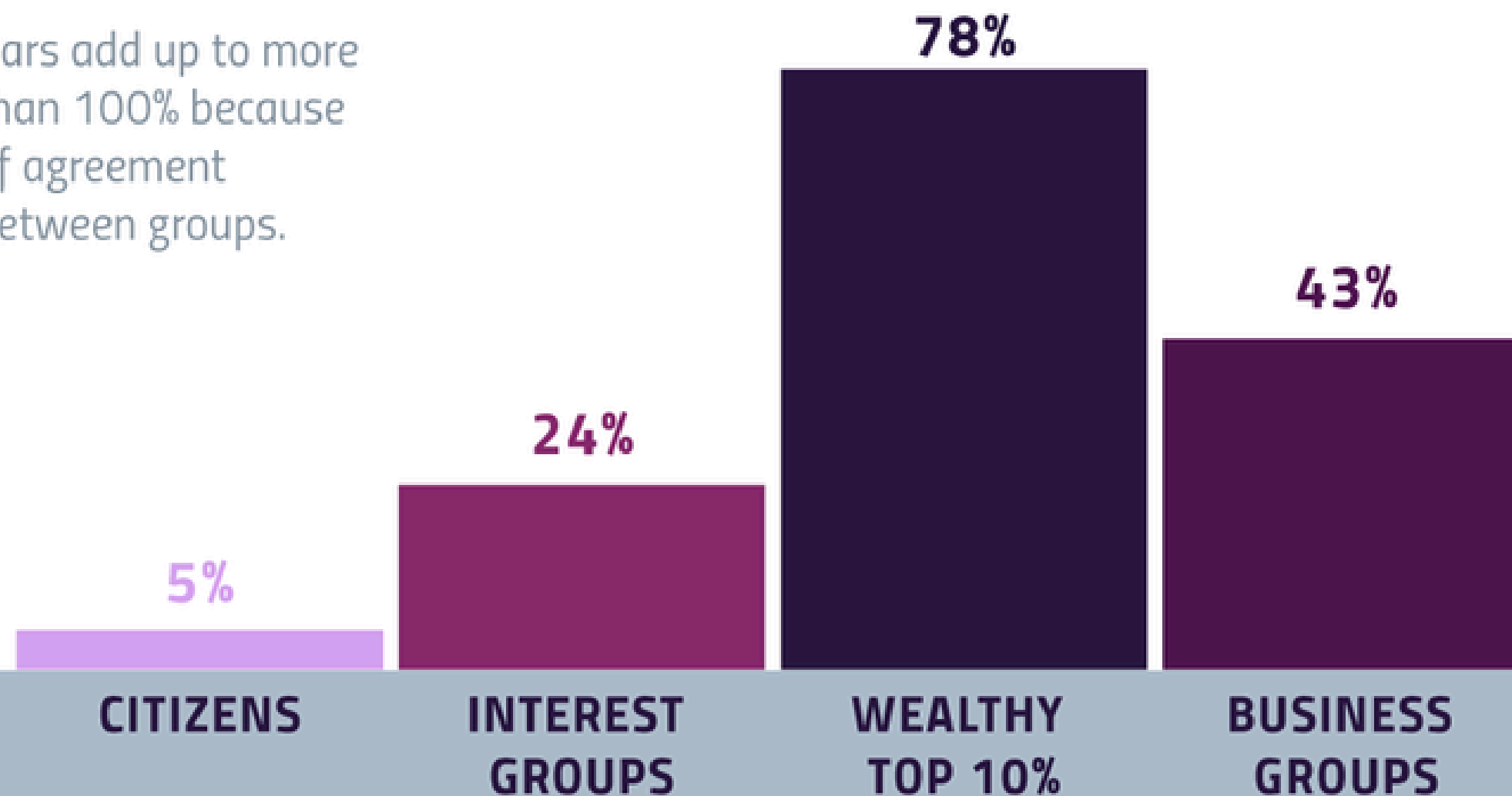
Is America even a democracy?
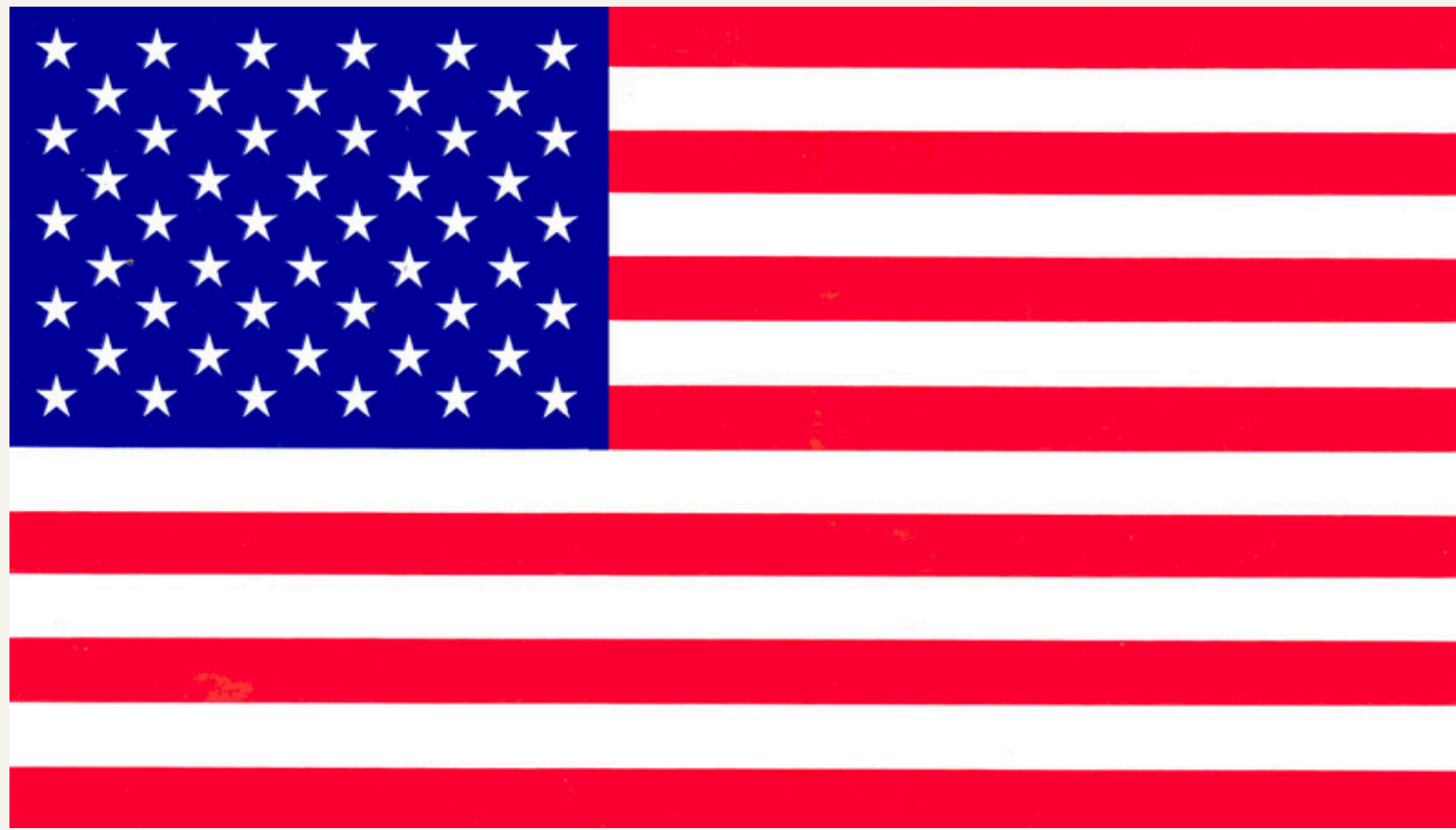
While the policies of neoliberalism have funnelled wealth from the middle class to the ultra-wealthy, many Americans have become disillusioned with democracy.

Is there really "equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process"?

WHO HOLDS THE REINS OF DEMOCRACY?

Bars show how much each group's preferences on public policy are actually represented in Congress's decisions.

Bars add up to more than 100% because of agreement between groups.

- CITIZENS — 5%
- INTEREST GROUPS — 24%
- WEALTHY TOP 10% — 78%
- BUSINESS GROUPS — 43%

Source: "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens" by Gilens and Page, 2014

Neoliberalism is coming to an end.

The Trump regime might make some decisions that appear to be neoliberal, but his governing style is best described as competitve authoritarianism, illiberal democracy, or gangsterism.

Democrats like Bernie Sanders, AOC, Elizabeth Warren, Jasmine Crockett, and even Jamie Raskin are moving towards post-neoliberalism as well.

Not to say that there aren't members of both parties who still believe in the ideology.

Despite politicians turning away from neoliberalism

higher education is under attack

In addition to the attempted funding cuts at IMLS and universities, attacks on the funding mechanism of grants, deporting international students, preventing researchers from entering the country based on political speech, and decimation of the federal budget, the entire neoreactionary movement views higher education as the enemy.

Academic libraries give us tools to fight back:

Metaliteracy
Critical Information Literacy,
Hermeneutics,
Collective Action,
Labor Unions

Every crisis is an opportunity.

Despite disliking neoliberalism, here's a quote by Milton Friedman.

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable (Friedman 1982: xiii–xiv).

Neoliberalism, Democracy, and the Academic Library

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Neoliberalism, democracy, and the academic library

Introduction.

Reflecting on the difficulties of writing an "editorial about the political climate of libraries," Buschmann (2021) notes that while it is no "simple task in ordinary times (whatever those were or will ever be again)," it has become "much more difficult to tackle since the 2016 US election" due to the increased complexity faced by both libraries and the country as a whole. He then concludes that upon completion of the 2020 election "it does not look any simpler" (p. 129). To say that the complexity faced by the United States, and the libraries existing within its borders, has increased once again in the three months since the most recent US election took place in 2024 would be like calling the Large Hadron Collider an elementary-school science project, or the trip to the moon a simple camping trip.

The research that follows is not necessarily written in the style of an editorial, though it will no doubt contain assumptions and opinions, it is, however, undoubtedly shaped by the strong opinions I hold concerning the ethics and values espoused be neoliberal ideology. While, I have no doubt that there have been at least some who wholeheartedly believe in the righteousness of neoliberalism. They stand pure of heart and mind, confidently optimistic in their belief that the policies being enacted in the name of this ideology are just and won't cause untold suffering. I am nevertheless extremely doubtful that such a person exists among the powerful people who enacted neoliberal policies. You could possibly argue that Jimmy Carter, the

first neoliberal president, didn't know the harm these policies would cause when he chose to loosen regulations on airlines, banking, and trucking industries at the urging of his close friend Ralph Nader. However, the fact that a few years before he practically incapacitated the anti-monopoly movement that had been going strong since the New Deal means that whether he acted honestly or thought the benefits outweighed the risks, the actions he took would hurt millions (Mitchell, 2019, 34:50). I'm not naïve enough to believe that Carter or any other politician or businessman who pushed for neoliberalism is inherently a bad person. Ralph Nader saved 3.5 million lives with his push for consumer protection in automobiles (Green, 2015). People are complex, and disagreeing with somebody's politics is not a sufficient reason to judge somebody's ethics or morality.

I will leave that to history researchers, ethicists and the religious to make those judgements if they so desire, instead the following paper will serve as an attempt at understanding and explaining the background and nuances of the complex situation surrounding an unprecedented political climate in the United States, how it relates to neoliberalism, and what it means for academic libraries. To best understand the seemingly insurmountable challenges currently facing academic libraries and the potential opportunities that might arise from them, it's important to lean into the transdisciplinary nature of LIS to draw on a diverse range of sources on a diverse range of sources including journalism, both informal and academic blogs, and grey literature where possible, in addition to library and information scholarship.

Before we dive into an exploration of the current crisis, though, we must first understand how we arrived here. As one of the foremost scholars of democracy in the field of library and information science, Buschman (2021) has identified neoliberalism as one of the main causes that led us to our current predicament. This is echoed by other experts on the topic throughout the field of LIS including: Mills and Drabinski (2024) who discuss the necessity of collective action in neoliberal society; Jaeger, Taylor, Gorham, and Kettnich (2021) who describe how libraries helped fill the vacuum in civic society caused by neoliberalism during the crisis of the pandemic and the powerful energy of the protest movement; Quinn and Bates (2019) who advocate for using critical literacy and forming collectives of like-minded information professionals as means of advocating for a better system ; Seale (2016) who explores the link between liberalism, neoliberalism, and enlightenment values; Budd (2015) who explores the effect of neoliberalism on higher education; and even to a certain extent Kranich (2020) in the two decades of research she has done on libraries and democracy, despite not explicitly identifying neoliberalism as such.

As will become apparent when diving into the research of this impressive list of scholars in the next section, they are almost certainly correct in recognizing the role of neoliberalism in harming academic libraries, American democracy, and what is known as the Liberal International Information Order. Political scientists, Farrell and Newman (2021) define the current "information order as the norms and governance structures that shape communication and data in the

global economy during a given period," clarifying that the "current information order is 'liberal' because it supports free flows of information across borders, facilitated both by international civil rights and a variety of private sector governance arrangements that regulate data" (p. 335). Issues like transborder data flow, data sovereignty, and the propagation of international civil rights, which usually necessitates the existence of pluralist democracies, are all important areas of research for academic librarians, with the third actually existing as a core tenet of the field's ethics and values. However, the role that "private sector governance" plays, when unregulated, in the "arrangements that regulate data" is one of the clearest symptoms of the malevolent strain of neoliberalism that is currently threatening libraries, harming universities, and undermining the necessary trust for democracy to exist. That and certain other symptoms of neoliberalism are part of a much larger problem that has hollowed out large parts of the global information ecosystem from the inside, bringing us to an emergent crisis point where the global system of governance as it currently exists is undergoing rapid changes that will have deleterious effects on societies, academic libraries and the values they hold dear.

In addition to the turmoil in global politics, humanity faces an entire polycrisis of existential proportions, when it comes to the crises of biodiversity and climate collapse; resource depletion; attacks on personal freedoms and the functions of democratic societies; rising inequality and increases in the number of pandemics and the chances of war; information disorders and the effects of new

forms of information communication technology potentially eroding the shared epistemic reality that society requires to function (Rockström et al., 2023; Garner & Fife, 2025; Hartman-Caverly, 2022).

While neoliberalism has certainly played a role in contributing to these problems, many of the academics mentioned so far in this introduction would probably agree that the situation is far more nuanced than that. The role that academic libraries can play in both providing academic communities incredible assets to help address the polycrisis and in helping students develop the skills necessary to survive the potentially calamitous changes that are coming and, hopefully, to rebuild something new and better, full of thriving people, whatever comes after.

Having spent much of this introduction trashing neoliberalism, it may seem odd to quote one of its high priests, but the effectiveness of neoliberal thought demonstrates that academic libraries can learn something from it.

> Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable (Friedman 1982: xiii-xiv).

Academic libraries need to be prepared to both fight for the present and imagine a better future and draw on the deep knowledge of

information and policy that exists in the field of library and information science to help bring it into existence.

This paper exists in conversation with the many brilliant scholars in the field of library and information science researching democracy, political information, neutrality, and information policy as well as the many amazing academics whose disciplines we work with closely. It will draw on the transdisciplinary nature of our field to examine the factors that led to this current moment and how they relate to the role academic libraries play in society, before seeking to define some of the current challenges faced by both academic libraries and American democracy, as well as the epistemic environment exacerbating these challenges. Next, it will explore the deep relationship between academic libraries and democracy, and how the interplay between this relationship can affect how the concept is understood. Finally, this paper will explore some potential policy proposals, both possible and less so, but focused on imagining better futures and the role academic libraries and LIS professionals can play in building them. It will conclude with some brief, actionable advice and a final reflection.

Its methodology draws on hermeneutic analysis, critical information literacy, standpoint theory, and critical discourse analysis. Using these techniques to examine the historical, sociopolitical, economic, and philosophical concepts this paper attempts to analyze and understand the following—how academic libraries, serving as a microcosm for civil society as a whole, have

arrived at this current inflection point; what this inflection point actually entails for the future given its role in the much larger polycrisis; why the relationship between democracy, academic libraries, and their role in the civic process is so important; and, finally, where do things go from here. Academic libraries promote vital functions such as offering services that strengthen their communities, aiding in the production and dissemination of incredibly important research, ensuring access to important information in addition to its continued existence, proposing information policy, and most importantly teaching students and those we serve skills that have the potential to make the world a better place.

How did we get here and why does it matter?

It may seem counterintuitive to attempt to explain how we arrived at the present crisis before even fully describing the nature of the crisis beyond a brief mention of a disruption in international affairs. The entry-level philosophical question regarding the teleology of academic libraries at the end of the subheading for this section likely seems even more absurd. Nevertheless, it is possible to use an understanding of academic librarians, and their development throughout the 20th century into the present, as a prism that separates and refracts the potential problems currently threatening academic libraries, the entire system of higher education in the United States, the country's democracy, and potentially the entire global order into distinct beams for better analysis. None of these institutions are perfect, but attempts have been made to fix some of their flaws, which would be impossible if the attempted changes to the current system

either become permanent or result in something worse. Both outcomes will cause significant harm to untold numbers of the global population in addition to academic libraries. While the suffering of the latter may pale in comparison to that of the former, it's quite possible that the work done at academic libraries will help alleviate some of the population's suffering.

While it's beyond the scope of this paper to trace the entire history of academic libraries, as the experts mentioned in the introduction correctly note, many of the problems currently faced by academic libraries, higher education, and pluralistic governance in the United States can be traced back to neoliberalism. One reason for this, as Cope (2014) points out, is because the term itself is mired in confusion. He then provides a "concise definition offered by Daniel Saunders (2010)" which "is that neoliberalism is 'united by three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy, and the individual as a rational economic actor'" (as cited in Cope, 2014, p. 68). On the surface these beliefs might not seem incredibly harmful. Librarians believe in the free flow of information and limited government interference when it comes to censorship. These are exactly the kinds of things harmed by neoliberal ideals, and it is possible to demonstrate their harmful effects.

Given the distaste for neoliberalism demonstrated thus far, you may assume that I'm inherently biased against markets and the field of economics and markets as well. I fully admit that I am to a certain

degree, but regardless of my political beliefs about capitalism, it is important to recognize the role that economic markets play in modern life. The economy, like politics or society, is a complex cybernetic system that is adaptive, responsive, and self-organized allowing it to solve complicated problems and guide decision-making using information aggregated from the actions and decisions of its participants (Farrell, 2024). The problem with neoliberalism is the presumption that both politics and society should be completely driven by economic decisions and the infallibility of the three core beliefs mentioned above that make up its ideology. It also disregards its beliefs in the name of pure extractivism, when necessary, which promotes extractivism throughout the rest of society, including in academic libraries (Seale et al., 2024).

Quinn and Bates (2019) identify three vectors through which neoliberalism has caused harm to the "library as a living, evolving, and undirected space" that correspond to the three tenets of neoliberalism (p.3). The first is through the financialization and privatization of higher education. This has fragmented the student body by convincing them the experience isn't a social right of public life, but a private affair, and led to academic libraries becoming more hostile towards community members not attending the university than they were previously (pp. 4, 5). If the free market were benevolent, it wouldn't commodify something that functions as a public good, limiting access to those who can't afford it, nor would it promote predatory student loans.

The second is market concentration in the field of scholarly communication, with academic publishers functioning as a cartel and raising the cost of materials year after year. This is not a new problem, but it has gotten significantly worse. Thirty years ago, Hamaker (1995) described spending "85% of our continuing or base materials budget" at LSU on serials, despite not adding any additional subscriptions for nine years prior, due to being "locked in" to purchasing agreements (pp. 37, 38). This problem has had some positive effects such as helping to spur the push towards open access, but other attempts at resistance have been less successful. Davis (2014) describes how after recognizing that the "little if any effect" a "vociferous campaign" against Elsevier "may have had" resulted in some librarians coming to the belief "that the current model of scientific publishing is defective and needs to be completely overhauled" (pp. 547, 548). After the last election, it seems many Americans arrived at the same belief about democracy due, at least in part, to the neoliberalism-induced lack of enforcement of existing antitrust law, which has contributed to a crisis of market concentration causing serious harm both domestically and around the globe.

The third harm that neoliberalism inflicts on academic libraries as described by Quinn and Bates (2019) occurs when the "vocabulary of business and management in both the discipline and practice of library work is having a corrosive effect on the capacity of those involved to imagine any future beyond neoliberal common sense" (p. 7). This is echoed by Henninger (2020) describes "processes of commodification and decontextualization" in which things are "devalued and prohibited

because they do not support the profit-seeking ends of the employer" as "the employer instead seeks…a specific form of a language that can be incorporated into call center infrastructure as a commodity of context" (para. 18). While the existence and influence of linguistic relativity has not been conclusively proven, language that frames every situation through the lens of value and use can engender an extractive frame of mind which can result in both attacks on the funding of academic libraries and a shift in a more transactional attitude towards the community they serve (Seale et al., 2024). Studies also indicate that these linguistic changes can exert an emotional effect which increases their ability to shape perspectives (Perlovsky, 2009). This harm arose in part due to the predilection, bordering on delusion, of those who have been influenced by neoliberal thought to consider themselves to be rational individuals acting economically.

In addition to the damage each of the three neoliberalism-induced harms have done to academic libraries, they have also contributed to the erosion of good governance which is one way of understanding the swing towards dystopian illiberalism. As academic librarians, many of us are used to having a certain amount of protection that arises due to the privilege of being professionals. While this is still true for many academic librarians, it is not guaranteed to remain so, and the level of protection has decreased based on a person's perceived relationship to the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In the next section, I will describe the current situation faced by

academic libraries, its relation to neoliberalism and liberalism, and how it can be used to understand democracy.

Post-neoliberalism, and the attacks on higher education and democracy.

In the year before Trump won his second term, a post-neoliberal consensus arose among certain academics in the fields of foreign policy, political economy, and governmental affairs. While it was slightly muted compared to when Fukuyama declared the crumbling of the USSR that ended the Cold War to be the "end of history," it was still generally believed to be a victory for democracy. A political scientist who teaches at Tufts Fletcher School, Daniel Drezner (2024, remarked that while "[n]eoliberalism was embraced by policy makers from both major parties" because "free market Republicans" viewed it as "scaling back barriers that stunted market efficiency," while "moderate Democrats" saw it "as a set of policies that could lift the poorest of the poor out of poverty" and both parties believed in its ability to promote "economic interdependence, which could, in turn, generate global peace and prosperity" (para. 3).

What happened instead is that wealth was funneled from most of the population to the ultra-wealthy. In a study completed by the Economic Policy Institute, "net productivity" which is defined as the "growth of output of goods and services less depreciation per hour worked" increased 2.7 times as much as pay, and the "entire gap in EPI's productivity-pay figure is associated with rising inequality—inequality among wage earners and the rising share of overall income

going to owners of capital rather than to workers for their labor"
(2024).

The work of Piketty (2013, 2020) has demonstrated that income
inequality is self-sustaining when returns from capital are more
profitable than labor and greatly weakens democracy. While there is a
significant amount of research into income inequalities, research into
power inequalities is less common. The work of Gilens and Page (2014)
demonstrated that the wealthy are 76% more likely to see legislation
that matches their policy goals. The chances of average citizens
seeing their policy preferences become law are statistically
insignificant. It's no surprise that this study occurred four years
after the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Citizens United v.
Federal Elections Commission* that money donated to political
candidates was considered free speech.

The current Supreme Court, where Justices like Clarence Thomas
have been credibly accused of corruption, is also one of the key
parties involved in ensuring that Donald Trump was able to win
reelection due to their decision in *Trump v United States* which held
that the president maintained qualified immunity during his time in
office, which Justice Sotomayor identified as "effectively creates a
law-free zone around the President, upsetting the status quo that has
existed since the Founding"(p.29). The law has frequently been
unjustly enforced and used to reinforce existing hierarchies in
America, but this decision reinforced the fact that the law is applied
unequally and as a result further eroded the rule of law in this

country. It also caused the Supreme Court's approval rating to drop to near an all-time low with only roughly 47% approving after this decision.

The Supreme Court alone is not responsible for Donald Trump's election, however, in fact it's likely impossible to assign blame and fully understand the complex web of actions and reactions that brought about his reelection and contributed to what former New York Times columnist, Paul Krugman, referred to as a "rapid unscheduled disassembly" of the Federal Government on his blog. This is why hermeneutics works well as research philosophy and methodology. Hansson (2005) identifies this in his paper stating that "hermeneutics are well suited for the integration of political elements in problem formulation and scientific work" because it "emphasizes the interpretation of experience as one of its key issues" and that experience, of course, could "be of both individual and collective character, and hermeneutic theory does not make any clear distinction between the two" (p. 105).

In addition to using hermeneutics, our understanding of these issues will benefit greatly if we also draw on the tools of critical information literacy, which "aims to understand how libraries participate in systems of oppression and find ways for librarians and students to intervene upon these systems" by examining "information, libraries, and the work of librarians using critical theories and most often the ideas of critical pedagogy." He then quotes Gregory and Higgins (2013) who describe how critical information literacy "takes

into consideration the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption" (para. 3).

By looking into the individual and collective interpretations of social, political, economic, and corporate systems, and how the power and influence held by these systems allows them to exercise control over the entire information process, it is possible to better understand what is happening. We've already mentioned one collective instance of complex corporate systems flexing their powers as monopolists. This is part of what allowed an extreme amount of wealth to flow into the pockets of the wealthy. Through monopolies in media companies and social media platforms, it's possible to see the power some of these large systems and major players within them can wield.

Over the past several months, since retaking office, the new administration has "targeted diversity, equity and inclusion. His administration slashed more than a billion dollars in federal grants and contracts for universities, and it plans to cut more. It's also attempted to deport pro-Palestinian international scholars, accusing them of sympathizing with terrorism" (Quinn, 2025, para 1). This is in addition to denying a French researcher entry into the country due to messages on his phone daring to speak ill of Trump (Mackey, 2025). It goes without saying that this will have an extreme chilling effect on higher education in the United States. Many international students will choose to pursue their education in different countries.

In a brilliant newsletter entitled, "Academia: What They Are About to Take from You," the history professor, Timothy Burke (2025), provides this description of one small part of what we are about to lose

> Science requires both basic research that has no immediate or direct application and it requires free and open communication about research and research outcomes. American companies that have made use of scientific discoveries…have small research and development wings that draw upon—and sometimes outright steal— science created in universities, science funded in the public interest, science that requires a free society to flourish. (para. 7)

> They are going to take that from you…They think they will have enough juice squeezed from the fruits of two centuries of science to get them where they want to go, but they won't. They have no idea how to go from seizing to making, and that's because you *can't*. Science in authoritarian nations depends largely on feeding off of science being done elsewhere. The authoritarian state can command a narrow project…but not sustain the entire enterprise of research across a hundred specialized fields. (para. 8)

Neoliberalism really is over with these kinds of policy decisions. Instead, what stands in front of us is a stark choice. Academic libraries don't solely revolve around science, though some certainly

do, but it seems like the entire system of higher education, and even society, given the many horrors and controversies I didn't have time to cover, stands at the edge of a cascade failure. It would be a very safe bet that things are going to change drastically, though it would be almost impossible to predict exactly how. This is the type of crisis that Milton Friedman was talking about in that earlier quote, and academic libraries need play to their strengths, use the collective knowledge and research skills of our field and "develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable" (Friedman 1982: xiii-xiv).

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