

Book Review

Paul Catherall

The Reviewers

Paul Catherall, Web Developer, Information and Student Services, North East Wales Institute of Higher Education

Review Subject

Globalisation, Information and Libraries: The Implications of the World Trade Organisation's GATS and TRIPS Agreements

Ruth Rikowski

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This book provides an in-depth and yet accessible treatise on the implications of globalisation as represented by the impact of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on public services. Whilst the book does focus on the implications of the WTO agenda for libraries, there is much material of interest to other public sectors or to anyone interested in the World Trade Organisation or the privatisation debate in general.

Rather than consider various globalisation issues in isolation, the book reflects a critical perspective on underlying ethics and concepts. Rikowski's appraisal exposes the profit motive of the WTO to enable corporations to operate public services. Traditional state-run services are generally run at cost, rather than for a profit margin, thus ensuring public funds benefit the public themselves. This process reflects a social ethic where resources are distributed for the benefit of society as a whole. However, the agreements described by Rikowski could see these services increasingly owned or managed by private corporations whose aims are primarily for profit, rather than social justice. The generation of profit from schools, hospitals or libraries clearly represents a shift in the ethics of public services, the possible implications for corporate provision could include lower quality services, reduced range of services for the public and poorly resourced staffing due to retention of funds as profit. The ongoing process of privatisation in public services is clearly evident in the UK under the Private Finance

Initiative (PFI), e.g. City Academies replacing secondary schools, privately run hospitals and business involvement in library service provision (a matter discussed at various points in Rikowski's book).

In the introduction, Rikowski describes the basis of the free market economy and how this system is perceived as an inevitable process without any alternative (i.e. "TINA – there is no alternative"). Rikowski also introduces some of the mechanisms that enable this market-based economy to function, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The author questions whether our global economy is really the "Utopia" it is sometimes portrayed, suggesting that this market-based agenda merely perpetuates the status quo of World affairs, apparently indifferent to global problems such as war and poverty:

Furthermore, we witness death, destruction, suffering and injustice everyday, and globalisation is not reducing these horrors (p. 2).

Rikowski introduces the ideas of globalisation and capitalism, stressing that these economic systems were never designed as social models but evolved from older social structures such as feudalism:

Capitalism emerged from previous economic, social and political systems – it is not a system that the human race has chosen by using its intellect and deciding that is the best possible ... there is an assumption we must just accept it (p. 3).

It is within this wider economic context that Rikowski introduces two WTO agreements, the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) and TRIPS (Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights). Whilst the text aims to discuss these agreements in context to libraries and information services, Rikowski describes these as being of general importance for all public services, threatening the values that underpin the public sector through the liberalisation or opening-up of public services to corporate control and ownership.

Rikowski indicates how the text will be informed by an "Open Marxist theoretical analysis of value", particularly illustrating how in the modern world, intellectual labour is central to our economic system, in contrast to previous ages when manual labour was more important. Rikowski links the "knowledge revolution" of intellectual production and modern information industries to the success of the global economy, illustrating how the WTO is attempting to transform intellectual property and public services into international tradable commodities:

[...] in the knowledge revolution, value is increasingly being extracted from intellectual labour, which is embedded in intangible goods/commodities (p. 4).

Part 1 "Globalisation and the World Trade Organisation" examines this international body regulating global trade. Rikowski begins by presenting historical interpretations of globalisation in context to the global movement of culture, language and trade, however, the author emphasises that the most recent form of globalisation is characterised by the dominance of trans-border economic systems:

[...] eroding of the power and significance of nation states in the face of global capital. Instead trans-national organisations are setting the scene, such as the WTO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (p. 12).

A detailed overview is also given of the WTO as a powerful lobbyist force of predominately Western corporations. Rikowski illustrates how the WTO acts as a regulator of trading rules, maintaining the balance of power between rich developed countries and poorer developing regions:

However, in reality, rich countries and large corporations wield considerably more power and influence at the WTO than those from the developing countries (p. 23).

Leading on from this description of the WTO, Part 2 explores The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Rikowski describes how this WTO agreement is likely to have serious implications for public services within WTO member states, including health, education and libraries, illustrating

how the agreement will liberalise (i.e. open up) government funded services to private sector competition:

One hundred and sixty different services are covered in the GATS agreement, and this includes services that are within and outside of the public services sector... such as health, education, libraries and housing (p. 38).

Rikowski illustrates how WTO members had to participate in a "Requests and Offers" negotiation process, where member states had to offer up some of their services for liberalisation and then request other countries to offer up certain of their services. It is important to note the trans-border aspect of the GATS, where companies can compete to run services outside their own country of origin.

The author particularly focuses on the library and information sector, illustrating (through examples) how the GATS is being debated or implemented by WTO member states, including the USA, Canada, European and Asian countries. Rikowski urges readers against complacency warning that commitment to the GATS for library services has already been implemented amongst some European countries and is under consideration in others:

A number of countries have committed their library services to the GATS under section 10C. These are Iceland, Austria, Lithuania, Georgia, Albania and Estonia (p. 85).

Furthermore, Rikowski points out that European Union states are represented at the WTO as a single body, with the prospect that should the European Commission commit any public sector to the GATS this will have implications for all EU states. Rikowski's discussion on the GATS agenda is continued in chapter 5, "Real life examples of how the GATS is impacting on libraries in the UK" and chapter 6 "Positions taken by various library and cultural bodies on the GATS".

In part 3, Rikowski introduces another WTO agreement, the TRIPS (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights). Rikowski defines TRIPS as "about transforming information, knowledge and ideas into intellectual property rights which can then be traded on the global market in the form of international tradable commodities" (p. 187).

The author demonstrates how US corporations, particularly the pharmaceutical industry are lobbying for implementation of the TRIPS. Rikowski demonstrates the link between this WTO agreement and US patents which corporations are trying to impose on the developing world to consolidate and control markets. Rikowski demonstrates how the TRIPS will allow corporations in the developed world to "pursue" organisations in non-compliant states for breach of patents:

Over 90 per cent of patents for new technologies are held by corporations in rich countries and the agreement is likely to stifle innovation in poorer countries (p. 188).

Rikowski also describes how corporations are exploiting traditional knowledge such as traditional medicinal knowledge in developing countries, where citizens and innovators are less able to protect their own intellectual property. Further chapters consider the implications of TRIPS for libraries and copyright, commenting how notions of intellectual property are at odds with issues such as the free flow of information and access to information. For Rikowski the "balance in copyright" defined in TRIPS disproportionately favours the protection of intellectual property and business interests, rather than the concerns of the wider community:

[...] the important point always to bear in mind is that trade considerations will, and indeed must, always override other considerations. This is exemplified and highlighted in TRIPS, from which moral rights, for example have been excluded ... (p. 228).

In part 4, Rikowski describes a "Marxist Theoretical Perspective on global capitalism and the World Trade Organisation, illustrating the link between labour, knowledge and capital from a critical Marxist position. Rikowski illustrates how Marx identified labour and the products of labour as the basis of the capitalist economy and how profit is generated through the use of labour. Furthermore, that profit is

derived from value, and that value can only ever be created and extracted from labour. It is this surplus which is directed away from society and retained as capital by the corporate elite:

Thus, capitalism is sustained by value; its very existence depends on the creation of value, and this value is extracted from labour and can only ever be created from labour... Yet by this process labour is exploited, alienated and objectified ...” (p. 312).

Rikowski applies this theoretical perspective to the GATS and TRIPS, illustrating how these essentially capitalist agreements exploit labour and knowledge and allow the transformation of public services into tradable commodities:

[...] we must not forget that the logic of capitalism is the commodification and marketisation of all that surrounds us (p. 297).

In contrast to the exploitation of labour for profit under capitalism, Rikowski suggests that communism is the more moral system, where the product of labour is intended to benefit society; the moral question of how labour is exploited is explored in Chapter 12.3 “Global capitalism sustained by value, not morals.”

This also explains why moral rights have been left out of the copyright section of the TRIPS agreement... Moral rights can hamper and slow down this process (p. 319).

Rikowski concludes by considering the general lack of awareness and discussion across society regarding the implications of the GATS and TRIPS. Rikowski also makes a case for suggesting that these issues should not be considered in isolation but should be considered in context to the wider political landscape and from a general theoretical perspective (i.e. Marxism), hence academics and practitioners need to consider the GATS and TRIPS from broader perspectives which consider the ethics of capitalism. This is Rikowski's purpose in forming Marxist-based responses to the WTO agenda.

This is a very insightful book on the underlying issues of the privatisation debate. The book is very ambitious and attempts to provide us with “the big picture” on the forces at work on the international scene that are driving the corporate takeover of public services. Rikowski also suggests practical ways that librarians, information professionals and other interested individuals can get involved in the debate, adopt a critical perspective on the issues and lobby for appraisal of the privatisation agenda.

This is an essential book for anyone interested in the privatisation of libraries or the public sector in general.

As a final word, Rikowski comments on the need to harness the products of labour for society rather than allowing this to be harnessed by the profit ethic:

Let humans rejoice then, in the world that they have developed with their own labour – do not let them be dominated by it (p. 336).
