Making Sense of Bookster: A Commercial Rental Library and Public Libraries in Romanian Capitalist Realism

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Abstract: This article employs Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism to frame a discussion about the neoliberalisation of Romanian librarianship. Bookster, a Romanian online rental library that mainly services corporate employees and often advertises itself as public library, is taken here as a case study. Capitalist realism is reinforced in this particular case by the fact that a private, profit-driven company successfully assumes the identity of a public library, even mediating book rentals between state libraries and the platform's own end-users. On the other hand, librarianship as academic discipline has distanced itself from the idea of the library (undergoing rebranding as 'information science'), while public libraries in Romania and all over the world have been subjected to the most drastic neoliberal policies of commodification and privatization. This dynamic ultimately paints the very picture of capitalist realism, implying that the private sector alone is capable of successfully running libraries.
Keywords: neoliberalism, commodification, privatization, libraries, librarianship, platform capitalism

Citation suggestion: Vătavu, Bogdan. "Making Sense of Bookster: A Commercial Rental Library and Public Libraries in Romanian Capitalist Realism."*Transilvania*, no. 9 (2023): 46-56.
https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2023.09.05.

Introduction

Mark Fisher defines capitalist realism as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."[1] Having such a broad scope, Fisher's understanding of late capitalism is perfectly suited (if not mandatory) for almost any type of analysis of today's society. Nevertheless, studies employing Fisher's lens to analyze libraries and librarianship in late capitalism are lacking. This paper aims to fill that gap, by relying on a case study from a semi-peripheric country, Romania, therefore double-testing Fisher's theoretical framework in both the field of librarianship and in the non-Western cultural space. The case study involves Bookster, a Romanian for-profit company with an original business model, that runs an online platform, and which often advertises itself as a public library. The fact that this company manages to successfully present itself as a public library, while libraries in the public sector – through a mix of neoliberal policies, commodification, and privatization – are increasingly run (or expected to be run) as businesses, paints a very capitalist realist picture of Romanian librarianship. The paper is structured the following way. It begins by briefly discussing global librarianship under neoliberalism and then turns to the local neoliberal context in Romania. After detailing how Bookster operates on the market and in its relations with the state and the national library system, I attempt to explain how we can make sense of this company in the landscape of late Romanian capitalism. A section is

then dedicated to how this company's activity manages to amplify capitalist realism in Romania, with regard to libraries and librarians. The closing section advances some ideas on how to resist capitalist realist renditions of librarianship.

The Larger Context

In Mark Fisher's account of capitalist realism, the public sector – especially education, a field wherein he constructed his professional career – is plagued by a new form of bureaucracy, which he terms "administrative anti-production". He lists "'aims and objectives', 'outcomes', 'mission statements'" among its features, but this new bureaucracy extends beyond the multiplication of procedures to include demands of 'creativity' from employees, while their "'satisfactory' grading in a performance evaluation is no longer satisfactory" for the employers themselves. This turns into outright "market Stalinism", the "valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement" (similar to the pattern observed in Soviet Stalinism), where "work becomes geared towards the generation and massaging of representations rather than to the official goals of the work itself".[2]

Certainly, public libraries are not unfamiliar with such manifestations of bureaucracy. For instance, library performance indicators seem to fulfill a similar 'Stalinist' role in the overall operation of most libraries. As David McMenemy has observed, the count of circulated library materials is generally being pursued for the numbers alone. Yet, "these cold, hard facts tell us nothing of what the library is achieving" for the people they serve.[3] To this we might add what Miroslaw Kruk calls "library newspeak", most recognizable in the mission statements that literally every library in the world publicly assume. Anticipating Fisher's musings on 'PR', Kruk asserts that "the primary purpose of mission and vision statements is to fulfill the bureaucratic need for written policies, not necessarily reflecting what is being done in practice."[4] But the span of late capitalist transformations that affect libraries goes well beyond "administrative anti-production". The ways in which neoliberal pressure has been exerted on libraries everywhere are not only numerous, but also wide ranging, covering the most important aspects of their activity.

Librarianship itself, as professional field and academic discipline, has not been spared. Most of today's university programs that prepare the future generations of librarians employ the name of 'Library and Information Science'. And while the second part of name of this discipline might seem appropriate (and to a significant degree, it is) for today's technological context, the change in the denomination did spark some controversy among library professionals in the years following World War II and up until the late seventies, when it became generally accepted.[5] By centering their activity on information – as opposed to the more restricted universe of printed materials that was their focus in the past – libraries have also become more easily instrumented by the neoliberal push of the market and the state.[6] Information, as Nathaniel F. Enright has pointed out, has been acknowledged by Friedrich Hayek and the thinkers associated with the Mont Pelerin Society as a central component of the self-regulating economy.[7] With this reading in mind, doubled by the framing adopted along similar lines by prestigious library associations, as shown by Maura Seale[8], the promotion of *information literacy* (the domain of libraries everywhere) becomes an instrument in the production not of 'well-informed citizens', but of well-informed customers and entrepreneurs, as both cited authors have shown in their studies.

Other neoliberal mechanisms have been less opaque in their manifestations. John Buschman has recently drawn an almost comprehensive list of these transformations: "the adoption of marketing techniques and principles to the field" of librarianship, to make libraries run less like libraries, and more like bookstores and coffee shops; the involvement of libraries in helping "to create/stabilize/shore up markets—for example, social capital and area real estate"; the adoption of "an entrepreneurial management culture" and the encouragement of "an entrepreneurial grant and/or fundraising culture and internal competition for funds ("intrapreneurialism")"; a ranking culture that promotes competition between libraries, along with the internalization of a "public choice ideology and the consumption model of citizenship in delivering and receiving services and service coproduction".[9]

Commodification, in the form of entertainment and spectacle, has infiltrated public libraries to such an extent that Kruk already began calling them "public-sector leisure centres" in the late nineties.[10] The insinuation of the neoliberal model has been so strong that, alongside the recurring calls for running libraries as retail businesses[11], a shift has also occurred in the language used by some librarians and library professionals, who uncritically resort to such words as 'customers' when speaking about library patrons. The flip side of this wording is the view that the library trades in commodities, as both John M. Budd and William F. Birdsall point out.[12] This should not be easily dismissed as something innocent, because "the language used to describe the stance adopted by libraries is not neutral; it may be culturally, politically, economically, and intellectually charged."[13] This realization should make us more aware of the fact that neoliberalism is not only an economic doctrine, but also a "public pedagogy"[14] or a "political epistemology."[15] And, more worryingly, as Margaret Greene and David McMenemy have demonstrated, this language has already been integrated in national policies, with lasting effects on the public and

the librarian workforce.[16]

The logical step forward from the commodification of library services can only be the outright privatization of public libraries. Calls in this direction are often made. In 2018, a Forbes contributor advanced the idea that public libraries should be replaced by Amazon and Starbucks. The public backlash was so large that the magazine eventually took down the article.[17] Nevertheless, in the United States, the management of public libraries can be outsourced to private companies, and one such firm, Library Systems and Services (LS&S) has managed to sign contracts for a significant part of the public library system in the country.[18]

But the most dangerous neoliberal tactic, with respect to libraries, has not been adjusting them to fit or advance the neoliberal agenda, nor the privatization of their management, but closing them altogether. Austerity politics all around the world have prompted the authorities in many countries to cease or reduce the funding of public libraries. And while closings have not been proportionate to budgetary cuts (at least not in the U.K.), as Ian Anstice has pointed out in his overview on the matter, less money for libraries usually translates to personnel cuts (which is then replaced by volunteers), in reductions in book acquisitions and shorter opening hours, all of which have the effect of discouraging library usage, "which then weakens the case for keeping them open overall."[19]

The Romanian Context

In Romania, Mark Fisher's realist capitalist lens is generally missing from the public and academic discourse[20] and is mainly applied to literary studies.[21] And while this absence is understandable when it comes to discussing libraries (it is also rare in other countries), the fact that no paper discusses the impact of neoliberalism on library services in Romania is startling.

It is doubtful that post-socialist transformations, effected in a very neoliberal manner, as shown by Cornel Ban[22], did not impact libraries. In the book industry, an economic sector that libraries heavily depend on, the repercussions of free market policies and ideologies were severe, to the point that very large state publishing houses did not manage the transition from state to private enterprise, and consequently had to close their operations.[23] Although not empirically documented, the resulting poor editorial output must also have demoralized the library going public. In any case, as Sebastian-Raul Pavel argues, reading and cultural consumption were seriously devalued in the first decade after the fall of communism, not only because of the general decrease in buying power, but also because of the ever changing "standards of coherence" and "literacy competences" of the fledgling Romanian market society. Although regarded as essentials in the new global *knowledge economy*, books and reading were no longer the guarantors of social mobility and high living standards, as Pavel argues they were during communism.[24]

Neoliberalism has had deep and lasting effects on Romanian society, its localized version being actually more radical than the one mandated by international institutions (as Ban claims), as part of the terms and conditions for the financial assistance they provided during the post-socialist era. Romanian intellectuals have enthusiastically adopted and promoted the neoliberal worldview, to the point that any political alternative was regarded (and to a certain degree it still is) as irrational, or even anti-western.[25] Capitalist realism was therefore practically enforced on the general population by the economic and intellectual elites.

The impact of neoliberalism on the national library system is most evident in the closure of numerous libraries. The numbers provided by the National Statistics Institute are telling: a total of 16.665 libraries were functioning in Romania in 1990; by 2021, almost half of these were closed, only 8.458 being listed as open. As expected, readership has also declined: from 5.871.325 active library users in 1990 to 2.127.183 in 2021.[26] The decrease in public spending and the government's neglect towards public infrastructure – both typical of the neoliberal stratagem to invite the markets in – may account for a large part of this development. Some private initiatives geared towards public libraries, such as Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Global Libraries Initiative, that equipped Romania's libraries with public access computers in the mid-2000s, did breathe some life into the system. But it also came with its own neoliberal agenda, aiming to train "public librarians to provide customer-oriented services", promote "the value of libraries on a national scale" and foster "government support to public libraries."[27]

Other than this – and in the absence of dedicated studies on the matter[28] – it is hard to assess the impact of neoliberalism on Romanian libraries. However, things could not be more different than they are in education (where libraries function alongside their parent institutions). As Valentin Quintus Nicolescu and Diana Elena Neaga have documented, higher education institutions have been pushed in the direction of accessing funds not to improve teaching or research, but rather to make them economically viable. Managerialism, the increase in the number of tax-paying students in public universities, the national rankings imposed on these universities, and the general market-oriented philosophy predicated by and practiced in such institutions are indicative of their general neoliberal outlook.[29] How much of this has contaminated the libraries subordinated to these educational facilities remains to be studied. Regardless, the competition inside Romanian librarianship is readily visible in the existence of several professional associations instead of

only one, as Anghelescu and Chiaburu have observed, decrying the lack of cooperation between librarians.[30]

More generally, the neoliberal agenda is explicitly stated in an official document issued by the Romanian Ministry of Culture (although not formally adopted by the government to this day). "Strategia pentru cultură și patrimoniu național 2016-2022" [*The Strategy for Culture and National Heritage 2016-2022*] was envisioned as a medium-term policy for the cultural sector in Romania. Libraries and librarians are featured 117 times in the 183-page-long document. In it, the "creative economy" is first and foremost an economy that "creates jobs, attracts investment, generates added value", and only then is seen as "stimulating social and cultural development."[31] The strategy abounds in market jargon, employing such terms as "competitive advantage", "entrepreneurial ecosystems", "intellectual capital", "business incubators", while the individuals that seek to improve their cultural level are constantly called "consumers". Of course, such normative discourses do not account for the felt realities in Romanian libraries, but they are indicative of the outlook promoted by the state (who finances libraries out of the public purse) and the higher officials and policy specialists that draft such documents.

What is Bookster?

This being the general outline of the Romanian library system, we should now turn to Bookster and ask ourselves where it fits in the broader picture. At the surface level, Bookster is a commercial enterprise with a unique business model. The company establishes deals with other Romanian businesses to provide book rental services, online articles and videos to their employees, as part of their employment benefits. This model seems to pay off, the company boasting impressive numbers in active users and lent books on their homepage, while the number of firms that reached a deal with Bookster is currently 1257.[32] The employees have access to the online platform that Bookster runs, where they can browse the collections and rent titles, which are then delivered to their workplace. There is nothing entirely new in this model. Rental libraries have been around since early modern times (possibly earlier), as documented by Kathleen M. Rassuli and Stanley C. Hollander[33], while similar businesses are in operation all over the world (for instance BookLender in the United States or JustBooks in India). What is different in Bookster's business model is that it offers subscriptions to companies rather than individuals, the implications of which we will return to later on.

From the standpoint of the law that regulates library services in Romania, Bookster is a "public library of private law".[34] This law states that such libraries can function in the country if they are certified by the National Commission of Libraries and authorized by the Ministry of Culture, and in 2013 the company was indeed given an operation permit by the said ministry.[35] This permit has been contested in a legal battle that started in 2019, when ten of the most important publishing houses in Romania have sued the company on grounds of unfair competition, but also the Ministry of Culture, the issuing authority of the permit.[36] Furthermore, as of 2018, Bookster is one of the institutional members of the largest professional library association in Romania, *The National Association of Librarians and Public Libraries of Romania* (Asociația Națională a Bibliotecarilor și Bibliotecilor Publice din România – ANBPR)[37], which brings another argument for the inclusion of the company among the public libraries in Romania. If Bookster is indeed an agent of capitalist realism, as I argue here, then capitalist realism is both government and professionally sanctioned in Romania.

Possibly because of the aforementioned lawsuit, the company no longer advertises herself as a library.[38] However, in 2013, in its first year, Bookster styled itself as "Library 2.0" on its website, promising to "reinvent the library", and as recently as May 2021, the same website greeted its users with the banner "the first modern public library in Romania".[39] And while throughout its media appearances and on its own website, Bookster is careful not to present itself as a library, the company regularly uses the hashtag "#RecomandarileBibliotecarilor" [trans. #TheLibrariansRecommendations] on its official Facebook page when recommending titles for its readers.

Bookster's preferred self-description nowadays is "the first modern platform bringing books nearer to the people" [orig. "prima platformă modernă care aduce cartile aproape de oameni"], as stated on its landing page and in the current *terms and conditions* posted on the company's website.[40] This has always been the case with Bookster, as its business model, since its very inception, was to offer its services through the online platform built by the company.[41] But what sort of platform is Bookster? According to Nick Srnicek, who draws a typology of platforms in what he calls *platform capitalism*[42], Bookster could either be a *product platform* or a *lean platform*. If it does indeed own the books it rents to its clients, then the former might be the case.[43] If it only acts as an intermediary between "readers and the various libraries registered on the platform", as stated in the company's *terms and conditions*, then classifying it as a *lean platform* might be better suited. Lean platforms might seem to be asset-less companies, but as Srnicek has highlighted, "the key is that they do own the most important asset: the platform of software and data analytics."[44] Whatever the case may be at the moment, Bookster seems to be slowly moving towards the second model, of an intermediary between libraries and readers. And in this regard, what is particularly interesting (and possibly worrying), is the fact that the company has managed to establish deals with several public sector libraries to lend books from their collections to its user base. Put another way,

a private commercial company is renting public goods to its clients by way of an online platfoBookster is not only a shrewd business, but also somewhat of a cultural phenomenon. Therefore, a cultural interpretation of the matter might also be warranted. The company has successfully managed to build a community around its platform, calling its users 'booksters' (possibly a play on the word 'hipsters'). The rented books are given extra protection by plastic covers, with the company's stickers applied on them. Besides being a good marketing scheme, the sticker also acts like a badge for the 'booksters' themselves who, as several online commentaries suggest, seem to acknowledge each other in public transport on its basis.[45] The company's PR strategy also pushes the idea that Bookster is more than a business. In interviews for the press, the company's leaders and employees paint the image of an organization that promotes reading, learning, intellectual improvement, even "dreaming". But despite the declared "mainly social motivation" (in the words of one of the Bookster's CEOs at the time of the interview) pushing the company forward, one can easily detect – throughout the public appearances of the firm's management or in the media discourse about its activity – that one of the functions of the company is to turn the individuals that use its platform into better employees.[46]

In this capacity, Bookster acts both as the entity to whom the companies it has contracts with outsource the skilling of their workforce, and as a political tool reinforcing capitalist realism. This is mainly achieved through the book acquisition policy of the company, which favors reading lists from Harvard University or other prestigious MBAs (Master of Business Administration) and book recommendations from individuals such as Bill Gates or Warren Buffet (as stated by company officials in the aforementioned interviews). The book recommendations that the company makes on its official blog or through its spokepersons are also conformity-inducing, most of the recommended reads being books penned by successful CEOs (of equally successful corporations), or books on self-help, personal development, entrepreneurship, or leadership.[47]

Just like anywhere in the world, self-help and personal development in Romania has encouraged the same workplace compliance, radical individualism, the entrepreneurialization of the self, and the shift of social responsibility from the state to individuals, as a collective volume edited by Sorin Gog and Anca Simionca has documented. As shown by the editors in the introduction to the volume, the blurring of the work-life balance and lifelong education is at the core of the neoliberal transformations of work that Romania has undergone in the past two decades (and also something that is openly advocated by the heads of the multinational companies in the country).[48] Access to self-help and leadership programmes is therefore essential in generating the productive workforce and the workplace culture envisaged by capital. As Elena Trifan concludes in her study in the volume, self-help can be rightfully considered "an instrument of ideological education".[49] From what we can discern so far, Bookster is part of this 'educational programme' rather than the disinterested supporter of intellectual improvement and learning that it purports to be.

This being the case, how can we make sense of Bookster? One possible interpretation, in line with Mark Fisher's capitalist realism, is to think of Bookster as a *postmodern pastiche* of the public library. Fredric Jameson, who is an influence on Fisher's thought, defines pastiche as "a neutral practice of [...] mimicry" or a "blank parody", a "simulacrum", in Plato's terms, namely "an identical copy for which no original has ever existed". Bookster treads the fine (and increasingly finer) path between library and platform, public institution and business operation, and manages to present itself as something entirely new, without completely discarding its identity as either library or business. But, as Jameson warns, the postmodern pastiche is not something "innocent of all passion: it is at the least compatible with addiction— with a whole historically original consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and "spectacles" (the term of the situationists)."[50] Through this lens, Bookster is but an imitation of the public library, devoid of the values and the sense of mission that characterizes such an institution. But it is a celebrated imitation, for which the representation of the library is central to its functioning and self-justification, and also one that manages to elicit enthusiasm and honest involvement from its users.[51] The 'booksters' not only genuinely feel that they are patrons of a public library, but also fail to realize that they are integrated in a commodity exchange mechanism.

By selling its services directly to employers, Bookster successfully manages to place itself outside any commercial relationship with its end users. This makes the company rather different than Netflix and Uber (to which it is frequently compared), where transactions are not only visible, but also required of the users themselves to ensure the continuation of service.[52] By limiting its commercial operations to employers, and its services to employees, Bookster can more easily depict itself as a social enterprise (aiming to improve the literacy rates in a country still plagued by illiteracy and rising functional illiteracy), rather than a capitalist firm interested in maximizing profits. And this, I argue, amplifies capitalist realism in Romania.

Reinforcing Capitalist Realism

In the final chapter of his book, Fisher asks himself "When even businesses can't be run as businesses, why should public services?"[53] In a curious reversal of his logic, a very

successful Romanian firm manages drive growth and profits, by portraying itself as a public service. And what is more curious is that this does not invalidate Fisher's argument, but it actually strengthens it. Indeed, what is more capitalist realist than a privately-owned company that acts like a stand-in for public libraries?

In the greater picture of late capitalism, Bookster does not seem to be such a curios entrepreneurial undertaking. In the last decades, neoliberalism has shown that it can commodify anything and any experience, and has frequently thrived on the back of the public infrastructure. Public libraries have largely been spared of complete commodification and privatization, but not necessarily because they benefited from state protection, but because a viable business model was not envisaged. Just like the internet – a publicly developed and publicly owned infrastructure until the mid-eighties, when it was practically handed over to private companies – the services that public libraries provide are difficult in lending themselves to commodification. As Ben Tarnoff has argued, the dot-com bubble from the mid-nineties was just that, an incapacity of most of the tech companies of the day to turn profits from the public assets that were transferred to them by the state.[54] The lessons learned in that crash nevertheless stood at the basis of what we call today *platform capitalism*. Similarly, book rental businesses were in operation all over the world since early modern times, but as Rassuli and Hollander have pointed out, these businesses were rather *competed by*, than *in competition with* public libraries, which also finally brought their collapse after World War II.[55] But with the advent of the internet and online platforms, the rental library has seen a resurgence (e.g., BookLender, JustBooks), with Bookster in Romania at the forefront of a peculiar and profitable business model.

As platform, Bookster automatically shares the characteristics of all online platforms. Besides data collection, platforms also rely on 'network effects', as Srnicek points out. A network effect means that the more numerous the individuals that use a platform, the more valuable the platform becomes for everyone else, acting both as an incentive for non-users to become users (to be where everyone else is), and as a disincentive for users to disengage (to miss out on what everyone else is doing online). The logical conclusion of network effects is, of course, monopoly.[56] In Bookster's case – especially in its more recent variant as intermediary between state libraries and its users – this monopolistic tendency is doubled by the reinforcement of capitalist realism. As public libraries are caught in the aforementioned practices of "administrative anti-production" – that mandate an ever-greater circulation of books and the increase in the numbers of active patrons – Bookster steps in to lend them a hand in spiking their numbers. As the terms and conditions of the company state (6.2), any user who happens to rent a title that is part of the collections of one of the partner libraries automatically becomes a registered patron of that library. One can see how attractive this is for Romanian public libraries, which have been witnessing dwindling patron numbers during the past decades. But one can also imagine how this also intensifies the network effects, as more and more libraries might outsource their services to a private company in order to keep the demanded numbers afloat.

Another way in which capitalist realism is being strengthened in Romania, with regard to libraries, is through the portrayal of the library profession. While librarians and library professionals everywhere have rebranded themselves as information specialists (as previously shown), a private company has fully embraced the name and profession of librarian, disregarding the entrenched stereotypes in the field. More surprisingly, as Abigail Luthmann observed, although these stereotypes have recently become less clichéd in the media, they do feature prominently in the professional literature produced by library specialists (which is indicative of their self-image).[57] Romanian librarians are not exempted, as Maria Micle has shown, but in this case, the stereotypes are strengthened by the neglect and underfinancing of the national library system.[58] The crumbling infrastructure, the lack of digital services, the old furniture, and equally old books that one finds in Romanian libraries work against any attempt to draw a positive image of the librarian. As Micle stressed, at least at the time of her writing, patrons more likely associated the space of the library with the former communist regime. And if, as Simionca has observed, the figure of the state employee is generally never one to look up to, and almost invariably labeled as "communist" (especially by younger corporate employees)[59], one can see how the public image and the self-image of the librarian have become non-redeemable in Romanian society. Still, Bookster manages this feat by banking on the aforementioned double-identity: as business, its employees are the young upwardly-mobile and entrepreneurial individuals of the capitalist present; as library, the company profits from the great social capital that libraries (as organizations that center on knowledge and reading) have built in the past, and still hold to this day in the public mind. But one can also see how this reinforces capitalist realism. As librarians in the public sector are deterred from imagining a different public version of themselves, the one adopted and promoted by Bookster becomes the sole successful, functioning alternative.

Resisting Capitalist Realism

In Mark Fisher's formulation, capitalist realism leaves little room for contestation. Moreover, in Romania, if Simionca is right, capitalist realism is actually more

pervasive than in other parts of the world, as it blends with anticommunist ideology[60], therefore rendering even the flawed (but real and, to some, still relatable) alternative of state socialism impracticable. As for the libraries themselves, as Anstice has already stressed out, any protest against their neoliberalization has proven useless.[61] On the flip side, to try and meet the logic of capital, libraries have made efforts to prove that they are economically sound and improve the quality of life for the communities they serve. All these efforts have fallen on deaf ears, and not because the data and arguments employed are unreasonable, "but, rather, that ears have been re-engineered not to hear (or value) such data and arguments", as Buschman has eloquently put it. "It is not that it is overly difficult to address the value of public libraries with data – he goes on to say – but, rather, that the terms and definitions of 'value' have simply been redefined so that the 'public' values of public libraries are no longer legitimate ones under neoliberal discourse."[62]

Despite the general pessimism of his outlook, Mark Fisher does, nonetheless, point a way out of capitalist realism. Borrowing Lacan's concept of 'the Real', Fisher argues that "one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us."[63] Capitalism has thus managed to superimpose its own reality, by suppressing the 'Real'. Fisher exemplifies with such 'Reals' as environmental catastrophe, mental health, and bureaucracy, that have been naturalized and individualized under late capitalism. The pushback against capitalist realism, Fisher argues, can only come in the form of the repoliticization of these 'Reals'.

But how can we translate all this to the field of librarianship? Buschman says that the neoliberal assault on the public library follows because neoliberalism feels threatened by the notion of the "public" advocated by libraries everywhere, providing "an alternative to a neoliberal discourse reality."[64] Indeed, not only do public libraries provide an alternative to neoliberalism, but also to capitalism altogether. In its basic functions, a public library, as collective buying agent, acquires goods on the market (books and other materials), stores and inventories them, and then redistributes these goods to the members of public, according to their needs (e.g., a patron can place a hold for a book borrowed by another patron). This model has been supplemented more recently to cover not only books and other print and digital media, but practically everything, as so-called 'libraries of things' have recently popped up in public libraries everywhere. And with the advent of the 'maker culture', makerspaces have been inaugurated in libraries all over the world, literally putting actual means of production – like 3D printers and laser cutters - in the hands of the public.[65]

This, I argue, is the 'Real' that can "be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality."[66] To escape capitalist realism and avoid complete privatization and commodification, the public library needs to be repoliticized along the lines of its core functions. As others have advocated[67], a political economy of librarianship is needed, in order to render visible the power relations of information production and dissemination, but also to sketch out possible alternatives to the functions of the library in the current capitalist society. A "commoning library", as Soudias has suggested, facilitating access to spaces of "*commoning knowledge*", where "*alter-neoliberal pedagogies*" can be developed, is one such project.[68] A more ambitious one, exceeding the space of the library, is to model our entire society on the basis of the typical relationships developed by centuries of library practice. Dubbed "Library Socialism" by its creators, the producers of the SRSLY WRONG podcast[69], this utopian political system extends the logic of the library to the entire economy, where the profit motive is replaced by the principles of *usufruct, the irreducible minimum,* and *complementarity*. Irrespective of how possible these alternatives actually are, one thing seems certain: companies like Bookster are incapable of providing anything remotely resembling them. What they are capable of, though, is to provide mirror images of such alternatives, where public services are provided as commodified, neoliberal twisted versions of themselves.

Acknowledgements: I want to thank Ovio Olaru and Ioan Achim Balaban for reading my draft and providing excellent suggestions that have contributed to significant improvements of this article.

Note

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10. Kruk, "Death of the Public Library."
11. Ed D'Angelo, *Barbarians at the Gates of the Public Library: How Postmodern Consumer Capitalism Threatens Democracy, Civil Education and the Public Good* (Duluth, Minn: Library Juice Press, 2006), 1–4.
12. William F. Birdsall, "A Political Economy of Librarianship?" *Progressive Librarian*, no. 18 (2001): 3.
13. John M. Budd, "A Critique of Customer and Commodity," *College & Research Libraries* 58, no. 4 (July 1997): 310, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.58.4.309.
14. Dimitris Soudias, "Imagining the Commoning Library: Alter-Neoliberal Pedagogy in Informational Capitalism," *Journal of Digital Social Research* 3, no. 1 (2021): 46, https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/g248q, who borrows the concept from Henry Giroux.
15. Buschman, "Public Libraries Are Doing Just Fine, Thank You," 165. Buschman borrows the concept from Philip Mirowski.
16. Margaret Greene and David McMenemy, "The Emergence and Impact of Neoliberal Ideology on UK Public Library Policy, 1997," in *Library and Information Science Trends and Research: Europe*, ed. Amanda Spink and Jannica Heinström, vol. 6, Library and Information Science (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012), 13–41, https://doi.org/10.1108/S1876-0562(2012)0000006005.
17. The article was archived nonetheless on the American Library Association's website, and can be read here: https://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/AmazonShouldReplaceLocalLibrariestoSaveTaxpayersMoney.pdf.
18. The American Library Association has positioned herself against privatization, also issuing a detailed report on the matter; see Jane Jerrard, Nancy M. Bolt, and Karen Strege, *Privatizing Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2012).
19. Ian Anstice, "Public Libraries in the Age of Austerity: The Gloves Are Off," in *The Death of Public Knowledge?*, 2017, 133–40.
20. One exception is Anca Simionca, who employs it to better situate employees in the anticommunist discourse prevalent in post-socialist Romania, Anca Simionca, "Neoliberal Managerialism, Anti-communist Dogma and the Critical Employee in Contemporary Romania," *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai – Sociologia* 57, no. 1 (2012): 123–49.
21. See for instance Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria Literaturii Române Contemporane: 1990-2020* (Iași: Polirom, 2021), chap. 12.
22. Cornel Ban, *Dependență și dezvoltare: economia politică a capitalismului românesc*, trans. Ciprian Șiulea, Colecția de stradă (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2014).
23. Adriana Stan and Cosmin Borza, "Deetatization of Culture, Privatization of Politics: The Case of the Publishing Houses in Postcommunist Romania," *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 20, no. 3 (2020): 382–97.
24. Sebastian-Raul Pavel, "Revoluție și Competențe literate: România postcomunistă," *Revista Transilvania* 12 (April 20, 2021): 12-20, https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2021.03.02.
25. Cornel Ban, *Dependență și dezvoltare: economia politică a capitalismului românesc*. For an account of the same worldview, adopted by the Romanian publishing business sector, see Stan and Borza, "Deetatization of Culture, Privatization of Politics".
26. These can be consulted at: http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/. The sorry state of Romanian libraries in post-socialism is summarized by Hermina G. B. Anghelescu and Elena Chiaburu, "Regime Change in Romania: A Quarter-Century Impact on Libraries," *Library Trends* 63, no. 4 (2015): 809–43, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0020.
27. Anghelescu and Chiaburu, 817. Promoting the values of libraries and government support do not qualify as neoliberal. On the contrary, they elicit state intervention. However, these ideas were (and still are today) formulated in very neoliberal terms. In an attempt to produce quantitative data in favor of libraries, most studies and policy briefs on the matter try argue that libraries produce a good *return on investment* (ROI) for the states that finance them.
28. In their study, Düren et al. have investigated how familiar is New Public Management (NPM) theory to the managers of several public libraries, including four from Romania, in the context of European-wide budgetary cuts. Although it claims to study the effects of NPM on several European libraries, this study does not go beyond asking "library leaders" whether they have the managerial skills to run their libraries efficiently under budgetary constraints. Moreover, the study rather leans towards advocating for NPM as a mitigation tool for the effects of austerity; see Petra Düren et al., "Effects of the New Public Management (NPM) and Austerity in European Public and Academic Libraries," *Journal of Library Administration* 59, no. 3

(April 2019): 342–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2019.1583019.

29. Valentin Quintus Nicolescu and Diana Elena Neaga, "Bringing the Market in, Letting the Science Out. Neoliberal Educational Reform in Romania." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, The Fourth International Conference on Adult Education, Romania 2014, 142 (August 2014): 104–10, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.595.
30. Anghelescu and Chiaburu, "Regime Change in Romania," 838.
31. Ministerul Culturii, "Strategia pentru cultură și patrimoniu național 2016-2020," December 2016, 38, http://www.cultura.ro/sites/default/files/inline-files/_SCPN%202016-2022inavizare.pdf
32. There are currently 143.000 readers and 6 million loans listed on the company's homepage: https://landing.bookster.ro.
33. Kathleen M. Rassuli and Stanley C. Hollander, "Revolving, Not Revolutionary Books: The History of Rental Libraries Until 1960," *Journal of Macromarketing* 21, no. 2 (December 2001): 123–34, https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146701212003.
34. Law no. 334/31.05.2005, Article 35.
35. The document was published as part of a journalistic investigation, and can be consulted here: https://media.hotnews.ro/media_server1/document-2021-09-30-25073200-0-aviz-functionare-bookster-2013.pdf.
36. The entire story is documented in a journalistic investigation by Adrian Vasilache, "Miză de milioane de euro în scandalul dintre marile edituri și Bookster, așa numitul "Uber" al bibliotecilor publice. Istoria unui proces învăluit în tăcere" (https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-media_publicitate-25078356-miza-milioane-euro-scandalul-dintre-marile-edituri-bookster-asa-numitul-uber-bibliotecilor-publice-istoria-unui-proces-invaluit-tacere.htm, October 2021). Some details concerning the lawsuit are public, and can be consulted on the online portal of the Ministry of Justice, at: https://portal.just.ro/3/SitePages/Dosar.aspx?id_dosar=3000000000927040&id_inst=3.
37. The admission was heralded in the association's main publication, see Redacția, "Noutăți în Asociație," *BiblioMAGAZIN. Buletinul informativ al ANBPR* 2, no. 24 (June 2018): 24.
38. In one of the more recent media appearances, the company (under new shareholders) is presented as having a new business model and "no longer a library, but a delivery service for borrowed books [orig.: nu mai este o bibliotecă, ci un serviciu de livrare de cărți împrumutate]", https://www.zf.ro/companii/teodora-radulescu-ceo-ul-bookster-in-2022-am-depasit-incasarile-din-21655890. I also initiated an email exchange with Bookster, to inquire about its status as library and its lending policy. The answer I received from the company's Friendship Officer also stressed that Bookster is not a library.
39. The quotes and dates are picked from the archived versions of Bookster's website, which can be accessed at the Internet Archive: https://web.archive.org.
40. See, https://library.bookster.ro/info/termeni-conditii. Also observe the fact that the domain name of this page contains the term "library".
41. When it openly acted as a library, the company also borrowed books to individuals that were denied access on the platform, because their employer did not sign a deal with Bookster. But in this case, the patron had to go to the physical address of the company, in Bucharest, to pick up the books.
42. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, ed. Laurent De Sutter, Theory Redux (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), chap. 2.
43. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that, among the libraries that Bookster lists as partners in the *terms and conditions* on their website, one is also a defendant in the aforementioned lawsuit against the company, as can be seen on the online portal of the Ministry of Justice: https://portal.just.ro/3/SitePages/Dosar.aspx?id_dosar=3000000000927040&id_inst=3
44. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, para. 7.28.
45. See for instance: https://www.zf.ro/opinii/procesul-edituri-versus-bookster-aminteste-de-inceputurile-amazon-si-ridica-o-intrebare-importanta-cum-facem-sa-nu-mai-fim-ultimii-din-europa-la-consumul-de-carte-18828906, https://ralucabrezniceanu.ro/2017/06/o-tura-prin-lectura-alaturi-de-bookster/.
46. The quotes are from a TV coverage of the company, see Sergiu Voicu, "BOOKSTER, Bogdan Georgescu, Alexandra Stroe, Iulia Ghita, ROMANIA FAST FORWARD, Sergiu Voicu," YouTube video, 9:55, March 5, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgIIzydIU6M. Bookster's role in improving the professional skills of its users, in fact employees of the companies that subscribe to Bookster's services, is clearly stated in a TV business programme, the excerpt regarding the company being hosted on Bookster's YouTube channel, see Bookster, "Biziday Digi24 14.01.2016 Fragment," YouTube video, 3:33, January 15, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H67h6bDQT1w.
47. The company's blog can be accessed at: https://companii.bookster.ro/blog/. For the book recommendations of two of the company's co-CEOs in 2019, see: https://theceolibrary.com/alexandra-stroe-and-iulia-ghita-17441.html.
48. Sorin Gog and Anca Simionca, eds. *Noile Subiectivități Ale Capitalismului Global: Spiritualitate, Dezvoltare Personală Și Transformări Neoliberale În România*, Colecția Atopos (Cluj-Napoca: Tact : Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2020).
49. Elena Trifan, "'Când te-ai gândit ultima oară la tine?' - Dezvoltare personală și neoliberalism în România," in *Noile subiectivități ale capitalismului global. Spiritualitate, dezvoltare personală și transformări neoliberale în România*, ed. Sorin Gog and Anca Simonica, Colecția Atopos (Cluj-Napoca: Tact : Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2020), 71–91.
50. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 2. print. in pbk. (London: Verso, 2007), 16–18; for the Romanian edition, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernismul sau logica culturală a capitalismului târziu*, trans. Alex Văsieș and

Vlad Pojoga, Lumea prin teorie (Sibiu: Editura Universității "Lucian Blaga", 2021).

51. A spirited debate was set in motion at the news of Bookster being taken to court by the Romanian publishing houses, with advocates on both sides. A glimpse of this debate can be taken from this reddit thread: https://www.reddit.com/r/Romania/comments/f27abv/biblioteca_pentru_corporati%C5%9Fti_bookster_dat%C4%83_%C3%AEn/.
52. Google and Facebook – which are called *advertising platforms* in Srnicek's terminology – used to be thought of as *free* services in the popular imagination. However, lately, this projection has waned, as users have become more aware of the fact that they pay with their data.
53. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 80; in the Romanian edition Fisher, *Realism capitalist*, 123.
54. Ben Tarnoff, *Internet for the People: The Fight for Our Digital Future* (London ; New York: Verso, 2022).
55. Rassuli and Hollander, "Revolving, Not Revolutionary Books."
56. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*.
57. Abigail Luthmann, "Librarians, Professionalism and Image: Stereotype and Reality," *Library Review* 56, no. 9 (January 2007): 773–80, https://doi.org/10.1108/00242530710831211.
58. Maria Micle, "Stereotypes Regarding Libraries and Librarians: An Approach of Romanian School and Academic Libraries," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, International Conference on Communication and Education in Knowledge Society, 163 (December 2014): 92–98, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.12.291.
59. Simionca, "Neoliberal Managerialism, Anti-communist Dogma and the Critical Employee in Contemporary Romania."
60. Simionca, 144.
61. Anstice, "Public Libraries in the Age of Austerity."
62. Buschman, "Public Libraries Are Doing Just Fine, Thank You," 166.
63. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 18.
64. Buschman, "Public Libraries Are Doing Just Fine, Thank You," 166.
65. Of course, the economic and cultural dynamic of late capitalism has devolved the public library, in Frederick Andrew Lerner words, "from an instrument of education, intended to uplift the working classes, into a relatively minor cultural and recreational facility for the middle classes", Frederick Andrew Lerner, *The Story of Libraries: From the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 138. If Lerner is right, this means that access to both the traditional services, and the newer ones that the public libraries have put at the disposal of the public is restricted to the more well-off individuals in society. Nevertheless, the potential for an alternative economy is present, or even prefaced in the workings of the public library.
66. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 18.
67. Birdsall, "A Political Economy of Librarianship?"; Ellenwood, "'Information Has Value'."
68. Soudias, "Imagining the Commoning Library."
69. The system and its ideological foundations is detailed in a series of episodes that can be found at https://srslywrong.com/.

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