

**Ruth Rikowski. Globalisation, information and libraries: the implications of the World Trade Organisation's GATS and TRIPS Agreements, Chandos Publishing, 2005, ISBN: 1-84334-084-4 (paperback), 1-84334-092-5 (hardback)**

Reviewed by John Vincent

As Ruth Rikowski herself says, very little attention is being paid to the implications of GATS and TRIPS, and this important book starts this process.

“... the continued success of capitalism is dependent upon the continued creation and extraction of value from labour, and that only labour can ever create value. Capitalism goes through various phases ... now we are moving into the knowledge revolution ... in the knowledge revolution, value is increasingly being extracted from intellectual labour, which is then embedded in intangible goods/commodities ...

Thus it becomes necessary to examine areas such as intellectual property rights, services, knowledge, information, brand names, white-collar and intellectual work, skills, human capital, intellectual capital, ideas and brainpower.” [pp4-5]

The book is in four parts:

- Globalisation and the World Trade Organisation
- The General Agreement on Trade in Services [GATS]
- Agreement on Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights [TRIPS]
- An Open Marxist theoretical perspective on global capitalism and the World Trade Organisation.

Part 1 looks briefly at globalisation and some of its effects (using Glenn Rikowski's “Four dimensions of globalisation”, pp12-14), and then goes on to examine the role of the World Trade Organisation [WTO], assessing the range of contradictory views on its usefulness and whether it should be retained. The book makes it very clear just how unfair the decision-making and weightings of the WTO are.

Part 2 then gives an overview of GATS (with clear definitions) and shows the links between the GATS and “the commercialisation, privatisation and capitalisation agenda of state-funded services” [p43ff]. This part continues by looking at the reactions of different organisations to the GATS and the likely implications for libraries and cultural services, starting with an international perspective, and looking in some depth at definitions of ‘public goods’, ‘private goods’ and ‘commodities’ – this is because, whilst libraries are often defined as ‘public goods’, there is a clear shift away from ‘public goods’ towards ‘private goods’, which, Ruth Rikowski argues, is being “aided and abetted by the GATS and TRIPS” [p56].

Moreover, it is clear that library (or library-related) services can fall within sections of the GATS – and, indeed, a number of countries has already signed up and committed themselves to the GATS (18 by 2004). However, at the same time, there is clear concern being expressed by some nations’ library associations (eg the Canadian Library Association).

Ruth Rikowski also outlines the issues in the UK – as she says, “[t]here is still a lack of awareness about the GATS in general, let alone the implications for libraries and information both in the UK and indeed internationally” [p94].

Part 3 looks at what the WTO has agreed in relation to TRIPS, and then relates this to copyright, information and libraries, both internationally and also in relation to the UK. As Ruth says, “in this book I am arguing that the TRIPS is about transforming information, knowledge and ideas into intellectual property rights which can then be traded on the global market in the form of internationally tradable commodities. Furthermore, TRIPS is concerned with the trading of these intellectual property rights, and is not concerned with moral, humane and public service ethos issues” (p187).

Finally, in Part 4, Ruth looks at the implications of GATS and TRIPS from an Open Marxist approach.

It is clear that Ruth is developing a new way of looking at information, libraries and society, and, in Part 4, she applies the Open Marxist approach to these issues – pioneering work. There is so much to read and think about here, that a review cannot really do this book full justice. I thought, therefore, that it might be most useful to focus particularly on the chapters on the GATS and libraries, especially as this is the area I know best!

Ruth places public libraries firmly in the area of ‘public good’ (and uses Frank Webster’s 1999 article to do this). She then looks at some of the key critiques of public libraries: I think she too readily accepts the positive spin about high levels of visits and public library use (there’s a big difference between visits and library use), and is perhaps overly critical of competition: whilst libraries need to be aware of the pitfalls of operating in a competitive way, nevertheless they do also need to keep a sharp eye on what other providers are doing – otherwise, as has happened in the past, they may find themselves done out of a role!

She then investigates the impact of the GATS (and other commercialisation) on libraries, and this analysis is one of the book’s real strengths. She starts by looking at commercialisation, and, quite rightly, is critical of the emphasis placed on income generation and the need to see library users and potential users as ‘markets’. The book could in addition, I think, have looked at the changes that have taken place in local government budget processes, which have led to the need for income and expenditure to be ‘balanced’ (and therefore have made it increasingly difficult to break out of the income generation trap), and the dilemma that libraries face if they are, on the one hand, to generate income and, on the other, to tackle social exclusion.

She then goes on to look at the privatisation of libraries – and sounds a warning note which may already be becoming too late. Two areas that have developed since Ruth wrote this have added to serious concerns about privatisation: firstly, the development of ‘call centres’ in public library services, which are increasingly being run by commercial organisations (such as Capita), and which are intended to replace much of the face-to-face and/or personal contact with individual libraries with a centralised approach; and the new joint venture between Walsall Council and Fujitsu. Ruth goes on to look critically at the role of Best Value and Library Standards. I understand – and, to some extent, share her concerns – but also think that there is an

urgent need for public libraries to be accountable and monitored in order to ensure that they really are fulfilling Government and other requirements and are really making the right efforts to reach the whole population. Without mechanisms such as Best Value (now Comprehensive Performance Assessment) and the Standards, this would be extremely difficult.

I think Ruth is absolutely right in her recognition of the dangers posed by the GATS and TRIPS, and has argued persuasively about the problems posed by increasing commercialisation and privatisation of libraries, of a 'public good'. Her Open Marxist analysis of the issues – and her analysis of the work of the WTO and the threats of global capitalism – are ground-breaking and extremely important.

However, I think that, at the same time, there is a danger in assuming that any sort of managerial approach to issues is, of its very nature, wrong. This applies to the discussion of the Standards (mentioned above) and even more to her view of Newham Library Service's restructuring (pp132-133) – I am not convinced that a library review is necessarily going to "provide a wealth of opportunities for further marketisation, commodification and privatisation of libraries" (p133): it may be urgently required if the best service is to be provided.

These minor quibbles aside, however, this is a book of immense importance – and, at the same time, manages to be highly readable! We should all read it – and think twice before looking at money-making schemes!