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REVIEW OF THE BOOK: *BIBLIOGRAPHIC CLASSIFICATION. FROM MIMETIC REPRESENTATION TO ISOMORPHIC DOCUMENTALITY*

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ABSTRACT

This review examines Joacim Hansson's 2025 monograph *"Bibliographic Classification. From Mimetic Representation to Isomorphic Documentality"*. The monograph challenges readers with a dual argument: classifying systems as "documents" under a specific, derived definition, and exploring their documentary agency to "represent social and cultural norms, values and processes." The reviewer notes the book's scholarly achievement in presenting a fresh perspective, supported by substantial historical context, making it valuable for seasoned scholars and junior researchers.

The reviewer discusses the central challenge of accepting the classification **system** (a dynamic, constantly evolving entity) as a "document" rather than limiting the definition to a specific classification **scheme** (a fixed version, like a legal act). Hansson defines a document as "an inscribed reification of social acts with an informative potential of institutional value." The review explores this tension by drawing parallels with the dynamic nature of legal systems and comparative jurisprudence, concluding that while the methodology for framing systems as documents may not be strictly necessary to analyse their social agency, the book's final arguments are accepted in good faith. The review ultimately praises

the monograph's clear writing and ability to sustain suspense regarding its core argument until the "Concluding remarks," where the author's reasoning is convincingly revealed.

[Please note that this abstract was created by the Gemini AI tool and edited by the author. The review itself was written without the use of AI tools.]

KEYWORDS: classification scheme, classification system, comparative research, document, methodology

Introduction

In this review, I discuss the 2025 monograph *Bibliographic Classification. From Mimetic Representation to Isomorphic Documentality* (MIT Press) by Joacim Hansson, Professor of Library and Information Science at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden. The monograph applies a highly disciplined theoretical approach to the concept of "agency" in bibliographic classification systems – specifically "documentary agency", which, after a methodological examination, the author examined from the perspective of what he calls "isomorphic documentality". Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the monograph is its analysis of classification systems as entities having an intrinsic documentary value. The approach taken requires a series of assumptions that I discuss later in this review. This is not all, however: the book presents the reader with a double challenge, on the one hand framing classification systems as "documents" (this term is given a specific definition) and on the other examining the riddle of the documentary agency of these subjects to "(re)present social and cultural norms, values and processes" (the basic question, p. 2). The balancing act required to follow the author's argument makes the monograph a fascinating study. In addition, it contains a great deal of historical background: the reader is invited to follow the long history of classification systems both as ways to organize bibliographies and as independent, abstract models. The scope of that discussion is limited to a general introduction and three case studies, but what is presented, especially in the parts related to the history of Sweden, shows mean-

ingful understanding – the best foundation for sharing knowledge. The book will be valuable not only for scholars working on classification systems but also for more junior researchers seeking to improve their knowledge and application of the relevant methodology and philosophy. The monograph also contains a few notable moments of familiarity for Polish readers, in particular the discussion of the Universal Decimal Classification model created by Paul Otlet for Esperanto, the international auxiliary language invented by L.L. Zamenhof, born in the city of Białystok in today's Poland (pp. 61–86).

The monograph is fairly short, at around 160 pages excluding notes, which should allow most readers to digest its entire contents in a relatively short time. It is to be greatly welcomed that the book is currently available as an open-access PDF. Furthermore, it contains a table of contents which should work on most e-book readers and allows the user to highlight and annotate text – particularly useful in the case of academic literature.

System or scheme

Up to the final pages of the "Concluding remarks", I was unsure whether I would finish the monograph convinced by its main argument or not. It had nothing to do with my personal conviction – I had none to start with – but rather with a sense of cogency or "holding true". The book is very clearly written, so my lack of certainty did not stem from the presentation of arguments but rather from the arguments themselves. The author intentionally leads the reader into a realm where both the viewpoint – (re)presenting social and cultural norms, values and processes – and that which is viewed – classification systems as documents – are portrayed as fresh and new. To me, this fact alone makes the book a scholarly achievement.

That said, up until the final pages, I had the impression that I was being led into that new realm by a somewhat disembodied guide. The chapters explaining the scope and methodology of

the analysis – "Classification Systems as (Social) Documents" and "Questioning Representation: A Brief Note on Methodology" – are written in a way which brings the informative faculty to the fore but pushes into the background the reasons for the many choices the author makes along the way. If it were not for the "Concluding remarks," where the author convincingly outlines his arguments, there would be a risk of leaving the reader with the threads of the argument somewhat unfinished. Of course, some fields of study do not require extended explicit argumentative reasoning to make it apparent that a thesis is valid. However, the stance taken in this monograph was that it would "revisit one of the major influences [...] that pronounced a hermeneutic, socially meaningful alternative to established cognition-oriented research practices within the discipline [of information science – *E.F.*]" (p. 56). Since hermeneutics refer, at their heart, to the art of interpretation, more guidance in the endeavour of interpretation (or reinterpretation) would have been most welcome at every stage.

That said, I had no issue with (re)presenting social and cultural norms, values and processes. Hansson explains in the book very clearly that its main purpose is to push away from the mimetic representation approach towards what he refers to as "isomorphic documentality", as stated in the title. In Chapter 3, "Questioning Representation: A Brief Note on Methodology", the author explains the complexities of isomorphism, which may refer to the object as well as to a process – of development, tension or "contextual relations and change impetuses in institutional settings" (p. 53). This "idea of transposition [...] is open to objection as it is always hazardous to bring a concept from one discursive context to another". Therefore, the author decides to revisit, as stated earlier, the "hermeneutic, socially meaningful alternative to established cognition-oriented research practices" (p. 56).

The explanation for that shift broadly reminds me of the tension between static and dynamic interpretation found in legal studies of continental Europe, including Poland. Static interpretation is expected to accurately represent the original intent, while

dynamic interpretation enters into a justified, albeit mainly hypothetical discourse as to what is needed and expected from that system "now" for it to work as intended. Dynamic interpretation offers flexibility and openness: such discourse is not only allowed in the interpretation and immediate application of laws, if sufficiently justified, but should and indeed sometimes does also lead to a rephrasing of laws or lasting amendments to their application. Laws are often enacted to adapt to social challenges, as defined in a given period, providing not only more or less effective solutions but also producing somewhat obscure summaries of the policies formulated by the lawmaker. In this sense, they may have documentative, evidentiary uses: they represent their times. The interaction which I understand here as "dynamic" is framed by Hansson with respect to classification systems as a dialectic process of "prefiguration, configuration and refiguration" (pp. 57–59).

By thinking about classification systems as similar to laws, I found myself capable of imagining this dynamic, socially, culturally or even economically relevant process with classification schemes at its centre. The question, put simply as "what does society need?" with respect to classification schemes is, for me, comparable to the same question with regard to laws. Thus, in the rest of this review, I will follow the "avenue to create an understanding of the complex way in which documents find social and cultural significance that goes beyond their immediate use" (p. 59) by mentally comparing them to legal systems and their accompanying documents – systems with which I have a certain familiarity. My use of the term "classification schemes" here, as distinct from "classification systems", generally follows the works and ideas of Dr Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan, primarily as expressed in his "Prolegomena to Library Classification."

What is a system, one may ask, and why are classification systems described as systems? When a librarian thinks of a classification system, what springs to mind is one or several classification schemes that the library applies, be it Universal Decimal Classification, Dewey Decimal Classification, Library of Congress Classifi-

cation or some other scheme. The library may use the scheme in an adapted, localized version; there may be people at the institution responsible for introducing changes into the local classification scheme, and these may occur frequently – even a few times a day; there will be a body of examples from previous uses of the scheme which facilitate certain cataloguing choices in the future; there may be customary uses of certain symbols, as documented over many years of bibliographic choices; there may be written general instructions, rule books and commentaries pertaining to certain classes or genres, and some of them may be published and readily available in print or online; there may be schemes published every few years in print, gathering together the results of years of meticulous preparation and shared reflections by teams of people, both those working at the institution maintaining the scheme and others loosely affiliated or even entirely unaffiliated with it; the results of external questions, guidance requests, seminars and training sessions may be involved; academic publications, symbols suggested by publishers or even perhaps resolutions of classification-related disputes may come into play; there may be a new trend in publishing, a new important topic, and the scheme has to accommodate it – there is really no way around that fact. There is a lot to a system and it remains in a constant state of flux, of motion. Not only that; the system is, to an extent, resilient. If a faulty symbol is introduced against the inherent logic of the system, it may raise voices of opposition – and the offending symbol may be removed or corrected as a result. This is made possible by the fact that a system is more than the sum of its parts. A classification system is not only a concatenation or juxtaposition of classification symbols. All of this went through my mind while reading the monograph and I include it here *in extenso* to explain the main challenge I faced in accepting its core argument.

This leads me to another part of the monograph which I found challenging, namely the framing of classification systems as "documents". We read on pages 10–11:

> "In addressing bibliographic classification, I will not so much focus on the classificatory process as such. Nor is it the librarians or scholars making use of a specific classification scheme for the benefit of information retrieval that is at the center of interest. Instead, what interest me are the systems themselves, seen and defined as documents both in the sense of individual documents (*The* classification system) and as parts of a larger documentary collectives (i.e., classification systems based on decimal divisions) wherein the individual documents share certain syntactical and semantical elements, principles of synthesis, and other properties that relate them to each other and shape them into a certain category." [italics original]

In the introductory remarks to Chapter 2, "Classification Systems as (Social) Documents", Hansson presents a twofold methodological purpose: "(1) to establish a working definition of a document designed to work as a basis for a developed understanding of classification systems as documents; and (2) to develop this understanding of classification systems as *social* documents, where the concept *documentality* is at the center of interest" [italics original] (p. 21). This view is explained by reference to a "cultural warrant" which "highlights the system as an autonomous entity, with syntactic solutions and semantic layers understood as wider than its (intended) use" (p. 17). For Hansson, this means that the classification system "emerges as a document with inherent social significance and value" (p. 17).

Based on an inspiring explication of the ideas and two definitions from a document by Maurizio Ferraris, Hansson constructs a single definition stating that "a document is an inscribed reification of social acts with an informative potential of institutional value" (p. 33). Again, this definition seems acceptable to me. Hansson himself admits that, in this definition, there is an "emphasis on materiality and fixity" – as there certainly should be – and a "document may be subjected to contextual changes, but if so, there will be versions of editions of the document that may be related to its specific historicity and social complexity" (p. 33). This explanation, however, deals neither with the problem of change

nor with the environment surrounding the central document, or it deals with them only superficially. Imagine a legal act, in force and applicable. Now imagine it being amended: it is clearly a document being amended. It was fixed before the amendment and it will become fixed again after the amendment. Now imagine that there are hundreds and thousands of such legal acts, interacting with each other, all subject to occasional amendments at different points in time. Imagine that there are authorities, courts of law, ordinary citizens applying the laws, producing all kinds of documents – judgements, new laws, private contracts, and also interpretations, commentaries and scholarly publications. These documents inform and influence each other, collectively creating a tradition, a history, a society. Only then one can perhaps call them a "legal system".

For me, if a classification system works in a constant flow of application within an institutional environment, what I would call a "document" is the classification scheme, its version on a specific date – not the entire "system". Such a dated scheme would have important evidentiary value; that is not controversial. Keeping the comparison to legal systems in mind, I do not see how extending the definition of a "document" to an entire classification system, even if narrowly understood, is a requirement for further analysis if one can reduce the subject matter to a "classification scheme", thereby completely avoiding the methodological hurdle.

Incidentally, the subject of the three case studies presented in the monograph are, I would argue, classification schemes – naturally so, as classification schemes are much easier to evidence, reference and discuss in writing than, for example, their application, even if this is well documented. This is a known issue in legal studies: the method of choice is often to analyse the text of a legal act on its own merit, limiting the discussion to certain linguistic and logical aspects rather than analysing its application, effectiveness and so on. However, separately, there also exists a large body of serious academic literature on comparative law and, in particular, comparisons between entire legal systems. To quote from one such study:

> "In very short, law as jurisprudence stands for the proposition that law is more than just the sum of its facts – the texts, the institutions, the sanctions, etc. [...] created and implemented by the State. [...] Law is also, and crucially, the ideas that underline, animate, and tie these facts together: the view of due process that roots the court system, the understanding of promise-keeping that informs our law of contracts, the conception of crime that seeps through our criminal law. [...] Law as jurisprudence is neither "law in books," nor "law in action" [...] It is "law in minds" [...] – "a deliberative enterprise ... [taking place] within 'the logical space of reasons'," [...] a "style of thought," [...] "a web of beliefs, ideals, choices, desires, interests, justifications, principles, techniques, reasons, and assumptions" [...] – which accordingly can be apprehended only from within, [...] from the standpoint of legal actors"."
>
> Catherine Valcke, "Comparative Law as Comparative Jurisprudence – The Comparability of Legal Systems", 52 *Am. J. Comp. L.* 713 (Summer 2004), pp. 716–717.

The issue of the comparability of legal systems is by no means new (see, for example, Maximilian Schmitthoff, "The science of comparative law" in *The Cambridge Law Journal* 7.1 (1939), pp. 94–110). Likewise, Catherine Valcke, after the inspiring introduction quoted above, goes on to show that "law as jurisprudence, unlike naturalism and positivism, entails a conception of the legal system as comparable, and that comparative law as comparative jurisprudence – comparative law *per se* – hence appears possible" (*ibid.*, p. 720 and similarly on pp. 739–740). One promising methodology when comparing legal systems, as presented by Valcke, is the hermeneutic approach (*ibid.*, p. 740). The prerequisite for systems to be comparable is their simultaneous unity (they are both legal systems – like different kinds of fruit but not, say, apples and airplanes) and their plurality (they are distinct legal systems – for example, French versus English – like apples versus oranges) (*ibid.* pp. 720, 739).

From Valcke's perspective, it is not only permissible to analyse entire systems: it is permissible to compare them running in parallel with each other. This approach does not limit the researcher to the process of creating new documents in a given social con-

text but can be extended to working systems which would be regarded as comparable with their counterparts (that is to say, other systems of that particular kind) applied elsewhere. For example, a comparison may be drawn between classification systems applied in twentieth-century Sweden and in selected libraries operating in the United States of America at that time. Thus, in research in comparative law, entire systems are deemed comparable. This makes it difficult for me to take the leap from a classification scheme (clearly a document) to a classification system treated as a document, purely because I see no reason for regarding systems as documents as a prerequisite for analysing how they "represent social and cultural norms, values and processes".

I am, of course, aware that the methodology of comparative law may not easily translate into the field of information science; such an interdisciplinary approach would be very interesting but is by no means expected in rigorous research into one specific field. I therefore save my reservations and accept the final arguments of the monograph in good faith, presenting them here to show disparities between various fields that may, perhaps, inspire future research and fruitful discussion.

Minor remarks: page 94 is missing an "is" at the beginning of a paragraph; "becomes" on page 72, "prjets" on page 79 and "Littéraure" would appear to be mistakes.

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