

Historical Scholarship and Publication, or – Why Do Commercial Publishers Exist?

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The project of academic research, in the world in which we now live, involves interaction between three sets of forces: *a*) pursuit of the fundamental intellectual purposes of scholarly and/or scientific communities; *b*) the conduct and processes of publishing organizations, who are still largely responsible for the ultimate (and still overwhelmingly hard copy) transmission of research results and scholarship; and *c*) the partly noble, partly ‘careerist’, aspirations of the multitude of individual researchers who make up scholarly and/or scientific communities or sub-communities. These three are not the only forces in play, in the issues under consideration here – one may also mention academic administrators, whose interests and motives may be different from, and independent of, the interests and motives of all these three (and all are pervaded by politics, ideology, etc.) – but these three are the primary phenomena. If one supposes, at least for the sake of argument, the *possibility* that the purposes of these three sets of persons may conflict, then my argument here may be approached in the following terms: if the purposes of scientific communities conflict with the purposes of publishers or individual academics, how may the purposes of the scientific communities be advanced and supported, thereby obliging the other purposes or interests to yield to this superior purpose?¹ I think we *do* confront a problem, in terms of such conflicts, between the interests of commercial publishers and the other two interests noted – and most of the argument below is applicable to scholarship or research dissemination as such, not just to intellectual history.

I may add that my concerns and interest in these issues do proceed from some personal experience, which has encouraged me to think more deeply about them. Consider the following (actual) scenario. It is mid-1995. A scholar is just about to publish a monograph, *On the Origins of Classical Economics: distribution and value from William Petty to Adam Smith*. He is approached by two publishers, separately and unsolicited, with a view to producing some kind of collected edition of the writings of William Petty. (That is to say, he did not solicit those overtures.) He impartially briefs both of them on the options available, indicating that a mere quick facsimile edition in six to eight volumes would be intellectually pointless and demean the reputation of any academic foolish enough to collaborate in such an insubstantial venture. The only credible alternative is some variation of a serious attempt to place into print, for the first time, a substantial collection of manuscripts from the archive which has only recently been made accessible in the public domain, since the British Library acquired it from private owners, descendants of Petty, in 1993 (along with facsimiles of extant printed works). Of course, this kind of project requires resources – which must be found from the publisher, the editor(s) and research grants. One of the two (prospective) publishers says ‘yes’; the other fades away without further communication (notwithstanding a promise to respond). Shift to 1997. The latter publisher advertises a collected works of Petty – which is, indeed, essentially a long weekend of photocopying (Hutchison, 1997). The former publisher advertises a works of Petty which is seeking to place into

print a large body of previously unpublished documents. It is obvious enough that the former venture can only serve to undermine the latter project. (In fact, the latter project has had to be abandoned.) Given that the retail prices of any such multi-volume editions run to hundreds of pounds sterling, the revenue base which can even potentially validate such publishing exercises is constituted by global library orders. Those decision-makers would have been confronted with two 'new' editions of Petty, more or less simultaneously. It matters little what quality of judgement would have driven the distribution of purchases between the two editions, arising from those library decisions. Who would order both? The market would fragment, and new scholarship suffers – both in this project, and (by way of warning) for others in the future.

Routledge/Thoemmes also then proceeded to publish a paper of mine in their edition (Aspromourgos, 1988). I think in polite circles this is called adding insult to injury. At the end of the table of 'Contents' in the *Sir William Petty: Critical Responses* volume of that edition (the volumes are not numbered) the publishers have stated: 'The publishers would like to thank *all* the above authors and journals who granted permission to reprint their articles in this volume' (emphasis added).² If readers concluded from this, as they reasonably might, that all the authors gave permission for their work to be reproduced, they would be mistaken. My permission was not sought, and would not have been given. One imagines that when one signs the rights to one's work away, to a scholarly society of academic peers (or more precisely, to their agents, Duke University Press), one will be treated with respect; in particular, that permission will not be given for one's work to be reproduced without one's consent. Regrettably, this turns out not to be always so. This is to be treated not merely with disrespect, but with contempt. Without wishing to personalize the matter too much, when I realized my work had been included in the Routledge/Thoemmes edition without my knowledge, I felt physically ill. I think that any reasonable person who had been through the experience I had (with Routledge) would have felt similarly. If all this were merely the tale of a piece of intellectual butchery by a publisher, it would be of little moment.³ But a deeper and more serious issue is at stake here. The plethora of cheap and easy facsimile editions of extant scholarship may actually serve to *undermine* new scholarship.

Hence one phenomenon which is symptomatic of publishers using old scholarship for new profits is the ubiquitous facsimile edition. There has been an enormous amount of this, involving both the reproduction of classics in single-volume or multi-volume versions, and collections of reprints of journal articles on specific authors or themes. The editorial standards with regard to the latter have in general been very poor. This phenomenon has also been happening extensively in areas of economics outside the history of thought. Routledge has been aggressively trying to take Elgar's market in this area, as well as that of Pickering & Chatto. The commercial impetus for these low-cost projects seems, in significant measure, to have come from the existence of a substantial Japanese market for these editions, particularly in the history of thought area. If one were able to look at the publishers' accounts for these projects, it would not surprise me if they commonly showed Japanese sales sufficing to cover costs and return a profit, with all other global sales being 'cream', so to speak. In this ongoing exercise, the Japanese academic community has often been sold extremely questionable product.⁴ All this might be almost harmless in itself, so long as new scholarship was not thereby compromised. (Indeed, if old scholarship is to be reproduced verbatim, it may as

well be in facsimile – unless *very* old – since this facilitates the use of earlier literature which quotes or cites the reproduced material.) But a line may now have been crossed, from poor scholarship to destructive behaviour. This would serve to show that such publishers care little for *our* fundamental purpose: the preservation and advancement of knowledge.

I should add, in case there is any misunderstanding, that my concerns expressed here are not much driven by any sense of importance attaching to private and individual property in ideas. I'm enough of an intellectual historian to know that the idea of individual intellectual property is problematic, and a relatively recent innovation. The writers of the seventeenth century, for example, commonly fail to acknowledge sources, not because they wish to steal or plagiarize ideas – they simply do not think of ideas as individual property. Ideas are a 'property' (in both senses of the term) of communities. It is not so much that one's work can be reproduced without one's permission, but *who* is exercising that right to reproduce: profit-making publishers. If I were to find out that some academic somewhere was multiple-copying a piece of my work for distribution to students (at no personal profit), this would not cause me any considerable concern (though I suppose one would still like to asked, a relatively easy thing to do these days).

The particular phenomenon of facsimile reproduction as a substitute for (and inhibitor of) new scholarship, is in fact part of a wider and dangerous set of developments which urgently require the attention and action of the various scholarly communities, across the sciences and humanities. The key issues have been well summarised by my own University Librarian recently – and it is not so surprising that university librarians should be among the first to become alarmed, since they, most directly, pick up the bill for the explosion in pointless publishing (Shipp, 1999 – and his paper in this number of *HER*). To take up the issues further, we may ask, paraphrasing Ronald Coase (1937), 'why do commercial publishers exist; or, what do commercial publishers do?' I would suggest the following:

- a) They *select material for publication*, in the case of books. In the case of journals of course, they do not select articles for publication, since this activity is undertaken by academic editors with the assistance and advice of editorial boards and other academic referees. In fact, in the case of book manuscripts as well, academic refereeing is vital to the process of selection for publication.
- b) They *edit manuscripts*; but again, only in the case of books, not journals. In fact, the amount of editing occurring is now very limited, or one may say 'light', except in the case of the very best book publishers. Still, this is a definite function which occurs, at least in some measure.
- c) They *print* books and journals. In fact, virtually all such printing is now out-sourced to other commercial entities. It is obvious enough that individual academics, or academic societies, are just as capable as publishers of contracting with printers for such work.
- d) They *market and distribute* printed – and now, increasingly, electronic or machine-readable – *texts* globally. It is this last function which involves economies of scale and/or scope, and gives the commercial publishers a certain comparative advantage, *vis-à-vis* individual academics and even academic societies.

- e) In producing a more or less diversified ‘portfolio’ of printed works, they *minimize risk of exposure to loss*, in a manner analogous to the core principle of portfolio diversification in financial economics. (As some wag once observed, James Tobin gained a Nobel prize for telling us what our wise grandmothers told us long ago: don’t put all your eggs in one basket.) Almost by definition, it is impossible for individual academics – and probably even academic societies, given their almost inevitable specialist character – to replicate this function.

But to approach the issue more positively, we may say: that *if* all the above functions could be replicated by academic communities (and at a lower net cost than the current regime of relying on commercial publishers), *then we could render commercial publishers obsolete, at least in the academic segment of the market*, and be rid of them in future. To return to my reference to Coase on firms, and in analogous jargon, we could say that ‘disintermediation’ is now more possible, and may be desirable. That is to say, the mediation of these commercial entities between us as researchers (for which we pay a complex price – the costs of books and journals, the loss of property rights, and so on) may be escapable, in some measure.

What then do commercial publishers give to us – other than marketing/distribution systems and a kind of ‘risk-pooling’ mechanism – which we cannot do for ourselves as scientific or intellectual communities? All the above functions seem to break down into activities which are performed by us (academics), or others than the publishers themselves, except those two. Or to put the same point differently, why would we feel any discomfort in walking away from the use of commercial publishers, if we *could* find a means of establishing our own marketing and distribution networks, and of exploiting the risk-minimizing properties of a large, diversified range of outputs – and the costs of doing so were less than the *total* costs of our current arrangements?⁵ The only answer I can think of is that we think that in some manner the quality of our research output is validated by recognition provided by commercial publication. But is this not an illusion? The quality control which establishes the reputations of both academic journals controlled by commercial publishers, and of books produced by commercial publishers (often, of course, the same entities), is entirely a product of the (mostly unpaid) work of academic communities. It is the reputations of editors and the members of editorial boards, in their academic communities – together with their expertise in assessing submissions – which produces whatever measure of quality control, and thereby reputation, attaches to academic journals. It is similarly, if not so rigorously in the main, the academic refereeing for book publishers which enables those publishers to make decisions about what is worth publishing. In effect, it is by academics giving to publishers this largely unpaid expertise, that those publishers are able to establish and maintain the quality of their journal lists and monograph and other book output. To put the point bluntly, even publishers as distinguished as Cambridge University Press or the University of Chicago Press would be crippled in their commercial activities if academics collectively determined no longer to provide them with any advice. Why do we value, personally, publication by established book publishers, or in journals of reputation? Because this allows us to put something beautiful on the shelf? I don’t think so. It is rather because such publication outlets show that our research has been

validated, in some sense. But that validation *is really by us ourselves as academics and scholars, collectively – not by the publishers as such.*

With regard to the problem of risk pooling or portfolio diversification (and perhaps marketing and distribution), it is here that the academic societies might have to look to collaboration with the universities, or with collections of universities, to find a solution. And in truth – as indicated by John Shipp's views – the universities as institutions have become concerned about the role of commercial publishers in research communication and dissemination, precisely because of the alarming rise in the costs of trying to provision university libraries with all the academic material being produced, and sold at commercial prices. In fact, in the cases of many journals, monopoly prices are being charged which could not bear any relationship to cost of production plus a normal rate of profit. In effect, libraries have in part been used as 'milk cows' to subsidise other things. This is a cost of the current regime of research communication and dissemination as well – and one we should not ignore, and treat as someone else's concern, as if it were 'off (our) budget' – though some of these excess profits are probably supporting academic activities such as annual conferences. To the extent that commercial publishers could be bypassed in research communication and dissemination, moneys could be freed from library provision for other purposes – or libraries could be better provisioned. In relation to what the current publishing regime is doing to our libraries – a vital issue for all researchers, but particularly those engaged in historical scholarship – we need also to ask whether electronic communication among scientific communities could not replace a part of the current output which is being 'intermediated' via commercial publishers.

Consider these scenarios. A book or article is to be 'published' commercially. In the former case the author delivers what is virtually a desktop published text to the 'publisher'; in the latter case, the author, together with the academic editor, delivers something very similar to that. In these scenarios the 'publisher' is otiose, except for marketing, distribution and risk-pooling functions. Could some of this material – especially that which is highly specialist, or has a short 'shelf life' (e.g., reporting of laboratory and other empirical results) – not be better disseminated by downloading of electronic text, from quality controlled sites? For example, an academic society could have a site which makes available refereed papers for downloading. There is no reason why such a site could not acquire a reputation similar to that quickly acquired by a new and young hard copy journal, such as *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* – via the high quality efforts of its editors and referees. Hence, also, there is no reason why having such a 'publication' on one's curriculum vitae should not become a badge of academic merit, in the same manner as hard copy publication in peer-reviewed journals does currently. This is just an example which makes the point, that the credibility or standing of one's research output does not really depend upon the imprimatur of an OUP or a Macmillan – it depends upon the acknowledgment of one's peers, or the leaders of a discipline or sub-discipline. Of course a downloadable book, or part of a book, or journal article, is not a perfect substitute for a beautiful printed work – just as a photocopy of a book or article (legal or otherwise!) is not such a substitute. I am not suggesting that *all* conventional hard copy publication will or should wither away, but rather, that a significant part of current hard copy publication probably would not survive a serious cost-benefit analysis.

The avoidance of the current, wholesale signing away of our rights to our intellectual property would also be a real benefit. (For a typical example of this kind of current arrangement, see the Appendix below.) The practice of academic authors assigning copyright to their intellectual property (for all, including electronic, publishing formats), to commercially controlled journals, has meant that we are giving away the product without which ‘academic’ publishers are incapable of making profits. Similar considerations apply to monograph publishing. In large measure, this places dissemination of research results under the control of non-intellectual forces, driven by profit and other forms of corporate power. Academic societies (e.g., the History of Economics Society) have gone along with this process – I think unwittingly and unthinkingly, rather than malevolently. And the truth is that without the (largely unpaid) *additional* academic labour, of refereeing and other advising, both for journals and monographs, *all those commercial entities’ academic publishing would grind to a halt*. As academics, we are being picked off, one by one. What is required is a collective approach – and the academic societies, in collaboration with the universities in some collective form, are the only feasible vehicle for any such efforts. We have of course contributed to our own ‘entrapment’: the ‘publish-or-perish’ emphasis on quantity (‘our’ fault), combined with commercial control of those organs which ‘we’ recognize as ‘true publication’, has delivered us (individually) into the hands of profit-making entities indifferent to our true purposes.

In all this, we must keep in mind the fundamental purpose of our endeavours as academics: the preservation and advancement of knowledge.⁶ If we keep that real and legitimate purpose in mind, I think we will approach the issue of publishing as a whole with clearer eyes. It then should be obvious that the only authentic reason why we ‘publish’, in some sense or other, is to preserve and communicate our contributions to knowledge and its preservation. The double use of ‘preservation’ here is appropriate: with regard to intellectual history in particular, the preservation of David Ricardo, for example, is not just about preserving his actual writings. It is also about preserving the *understanding* of them. The (main) writings of David Ricardo were never lost, from 1823 to 1951 – they sat on the shelves of many, many libraries – but at some point the *understanding* of them *was* lost.

We, as members of academic communities and sub-communities, are in danger of becoming mere bit players in a battle between publishers, for profits and market share. The objectives of these players do not seem to include ‘the preservation and advancement of knowledge’. We should try, collectively, to recapture control of our individual and collective intellectual activity. Our relationships with publishers need to be read through our fundamental purposes: how do those relationships and contracts assist or hinder the preservation and advancement of knowledge, and the communication and preservation of our contributions to that purpose?

I may conclude by raising a series of precise and particular questions which seem deserving of systematic and collective consideration:

- a) What are the costs to the academic community of the current regime of preservation and dissemination of research via commercial publishers, versus the costs of the same preservation and dissemination via academically controlled co-operatives (like academic societies) and/or consortia?

- b) Under the latter possible regime, should the mix between hard copy printed output and dissemination, and other forms (e.g., electronic dissemination), be significantly altered?
- c) Does the latter possible regime offer the prospect of significantly reducing the costs of institutional and personal acquisition of research product?
- d) Is commercial control of book publication delivering outcomes – both in terms of *what* is so published, and our collective *access* to those materials – most consistent with our fundamental purposes? Or is commercially intermediated research output turning ‘dissemination’ into a form of highway robbery (or reliance upon Deposit Libraries, for those of us close enough to make use of those of them pertinent to our research)?
- e) Should only *segments* of the currently commercially published product be removed from commercial control (e.g., journals)?
- f) To the extent that we do continue to preserve and communicate our intellectual work via contracting with commercial publishers, should we and can we act collectively in order to retain control of the copyright to our work?
- g) Is any useful purpose served by our doing that?
- h) If everything of a serial nature other than, say, the ‘top’ 150 journals (plus any others *not* controlled by commercial publishers), were only available by electronic communication and preservation, would anything of intellectual importance really be lost?
- i) If it *is* sensible and plausible to move away from the current regime of research dissemination, to any significant degree, how should we proceed?

The new electronic technologies do offer scope for scholarly communities to regain control over their intellectual work. As indicated above, the thing which the commercial publishers have always had, which we as scholars have not really had, is distribution networks, and a scale of production which allows diversification. In fact, many publishers are now *little more than distribution networks* – to the extent that authors are being contracted to provide ‘camera-ready’, or near camera-ready, texts, and printing is also out-sourced. The new technology, with some creative thinking and the co-operation of academic societies (and perhaps university consortia), has dramatically reduced the costs of establishing such systems. It may be that we *cannot* do without the commercial publishers, without incurring unmanageable costs and difficulties – or that we cannot do without them in significant segments of our research preservation and communication – but this should be a *conclusion* at which we arrive, by corporate deliberation, not merely an axiomatic and untested *assumption*. And if we must continue to contract with them, in some measure, we might do so with a clearer corporate understanding of how to conduct such business (e.g., with respect to copyright). I hope these thoughts may stimulate others to deliberate upon these issues, and in organized collective ways, particularly via academic societies. Any such symposia could begin with reflection on this question: *do publishers exist for scholarship, or does scholarship exist for publishers?*

APPENDIX:**A Typical Assignment of Copyright**

The following is a not untypical example of the kind of document via which copyright is assigned, for a journal article. Indeed, the following quotations are from a document I myself signed on 3 September 1999. The document is a double-sided single A4 sheet. On one side is the 'Agreement to Publish'; on the other, some 'Explanatory Notes'. First, the Agreement:

In order for us to ensure the widest possible dissemination and protection of material published in the Journal, we request authors to assign worldwide copyright in both print and other media in their papers, including abstracts, to The ... Society. This enables us to ensure maximum international copyright protection [for whom?] against infringement, and to disseminate your article, and the Journal, to the widest possible worldwide readership. ... In consideration of the undertaking ['to prepare for publication and publish the article'] ...the Author ... assigns ... copyright in the article ... for the full legal term of copyright. So that there should be no doubt, ... this assignment includes the right to publish or adapt (subject to paragraphs 3 and 4)⁷ the material ... for use in conjunction with computer systems, including networks; the article may be published in printed, CD-ROM, microfiche, on-line, or in other machine-readable form.

And the 'Explanatory' Notes:

The Journal's policy is to acquire copyright ... [because it] helps to ensure maximum international protection against infringement,⁸ ... requests for permission to reproduce articles ... can be handled efficiently and with sensitivity At the same time, this relieves editors and societies of a time-consuming and costly administrative burden. ... [T]he growing demand for research literature to be delivered in machine-readable form ... can be met efficiently, with proper safeguards As a consequence ... your Article ... may ... be stored electronically ... for delivery as an individual article copy or as part of a larger collection of articles from a range of journals to meet the specific requirements of a particular market. Assignment of copyright signifies agreement to the Journal making such arrangements. ... **Authors may, as of right, use their article elsewhere after publication without prior permission from [publisher's name], provided that acknowledgement is given to the Journal as the original source of publication, and that [publisher's name] is notified so that our records show that its use is properly authorised** [bold in original]. ...

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Notes

¹ It is of course more than possible that, in a conflict between an individual academic and a scientific community, the former is in the right. And in fact, not a little scientific and otherwise intellectual progress has been a result of some individuals' willingness to oppose established scientific positions. We leave aside these issues here.

² This is the statement in its entirety.

³ I have thoroughly assessed the Routledge/Thoemmes edition in a review article forthcoming in *Contributions to Political Economy*, vol. 19 (2000).

⁴ During the Symposium at the 13th HETSA Conference (Sydney, July 2000), at which this paper was presented, one Japanese participant pointed out that 'the Japanese market' had been driven by a large expansion of the university system – combined with government regulation obliging the creation of libraries, in order to gain accreditation. To that extent, that Japanese market is a temporary phenomenon.

⁵ I put aside the editorial expertise mentioned under function *b* above. I see no reason why that is not capable of being out-sourced in a similar manner to printing – and indeed, to some extent it already has been in the publishing industry.

⁶ In fact, this goes to our teaching, as well as our research, purposes.

⁷ These paragraphs state: 'The Editor ... and the Publisher are empowered to make such editorial changes as may be necessary Every effort will be made to consult the Author if substantive changes are required. ... The Author ... asserts his/her moral rights under the terms of the [UK] Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the Author of the Article.'

⁸ Since most of us are making no money whatsoever (or very little) from our publishing, it is not at all clear what we have to lose from any such 'infringement'.

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