

## Commercial Publishers, Again

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In his 'Defence of commercial publishers' John C. Wood responds to my earlier critical appraisal of the role of publishers in research (Aspromourgos 2000). He takes up the five reasons that I there suggested might justify commercial publishers' current intermediation in the production, preservation and communication of the results of academic scholarship – and considers two, in particular, of nine questions I raised for consideration in concluding my analysis. In fact, he does not engage with any of these issues, other than very briefly to cast doubt on the capacity for academic consortia to replace commercial publishers. Instead, he offers 'a somewhat indirect and incomplete response': an account of his own projects in the reproduction of extant scholarship since 1980, with publishers Croom Helm and Routledge. Wood cites seven collections, a total of twenty-eight volumes, between 1982 and 1987 for Croom Helm, and a further fifteen collections in sixty-eight volumes between 1988 and the present ('forthcoming') for Routledge. The latter are in the main jointly edited. This account is laced with asides evidently intended to show the benefits that can arise from the involvement of commercial publishers in these exercises.

The effect of this procedure is to put aside most of the pertinent issues I raised in my article, and to narrow the debate to a very specific matter: the contribution or benefits of such multi-volume collections of reprints of *previously* published articles, and the role of commercial publishers in those projects. The question of the role of publishers in the production and control of *current* new issues of journals, or new journals – and their role in the production and control of non-serial publications (monographs, collections of new papers, as well as such works in certain forms of 'non-journal' serial issue) – is ignored. In fact, Wood also takes it for granted that these multi-volume works could not have come into existence *without* publishers' involvement. That may be true; but it is something that needs to be demonstrated, not assumed. Furthermore, his comments do not at all go to the new question of the significance of publishers' now routinely acquiring *electronic* rights – the matter which so concerns John Shipp (2000, pp. 41–45), from his librarian's vantage point.<sup>1</sup> But within this limited domain, I may comment on Wood's specific points concerning the benefits which are supposed to attach to these exercises, *assuming* publishers' involvement to be essential.

First, we are told that payments are received – mainly by journals, though in some instances also by authors – for reproduction of articles. Given Wood's own extensive involvement in such projects it would be possible for him to provide us with concrete insight into the scale and character of such payments. No such detail is offered. I myself have been reprinted some half a dozen times (twice without my consent being sought) and have never received a cent. In addition, to the extent that journal revenues are themselves controlled by commercial publishers, such payments are transfers from one commercial publisher to another (and no doubt in some cases, from a publisher to itself).

Second, Wood suggests adding to my list of what commercial publishers do, the provision of enormous capital for the production of books. Now, my list of what publishers do was about what useful *services* they possibly provide. In fact, all five of those services of course involve the use of capital (and other resources); so this is not an additional service over and above those five. For the academic community, the question is whether, or to what extent, or on what terms, we should

accept such services from publishers; those publishing companies must decide for themselves whether they apply capital and other resources to the supply of such services.

The account which then follows, of Wood's involvement with Christopher Helm and subsequently Routledge in the *Critical Assessments* series, and the spread of such projects (for example, to Elgar), provides an indication – not clearly explained – that 'the Japanese market niche' (Wood's phrase) was pivotal to the publishing 'success' of this formula. No scholarly benefits are suggested, other than the one already noted concerning payments.

There are also some brief and rather vague comments on copyright issues. Wood suggests that he was scrupulous in seeking permissions, from authors or journals, and indicates that in most cases rights are owned by journals.<sup>2</sup> A critical question arises here: where rights rest with journal owners rather than authors – as is mostly the case – would an editor like Wood acquiesce in a *moral right* of the author to disallow republication, even if that author has no legal right? To put the point sharply, as a matter of respect for scholars, should not an editor/'colleague' like Wood *seek* the permission of authors, even when they do not retain legal rights to their work – and should not he (Wood) *deny himself* republication, if the author says no while the rights owner says yes?

Wood adds that in some cases payments to individual authors directly funded further research. But how does he know how the monies were spent? This is not explained. And even if real, this benefit would have to be set off against all the monies which went into funding purchases of these collections, by Japanese and other institutions – funds which also could have 'directly funded further research'.

I may conclude by commenting on each of two points Wood makes in his conclusion, which recapitulates some of these matters. 1) *Commercial publishers exist to make profit and otherwise would not be in business – but earn lower returns on capital than are earned in other activities.* This doesn't make sense, except as a temporary phenomenon. 2) *Others, like Croom Helm, have been in the business for 'love'.* But whether publishers are in the business for love or money, the question remains: what are they doing for and to scholarship?

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## Notes

1 The papers by John Shipp and myself were presented at a symposium on this issue, at the 13th History of Economic Thought Society of Australia Conference, University of Sydney, July 2000.

2 He could have added, 'and thereby owned by commercial publishers, when they own the journals'.

## References

- Aspromourgos, T. (2000) 'Historical scholarship and publication, or – why do commercial publishers exist?', *History of Economics Review* No. 32 (Summer), pp. 1–9.
- Shipp, J. (2000) 'Commercial scholarly publishing: the devil incarnate or divine saviour?', *History of Economics Review* No. 32 (Summer) pp. 37–45.