Knowledge, Spirit, Law, Book 1: Radical Scholarship

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As the author-pay model spreads across academic publishing, what are the possible consequences? Will the current rage for open-source scholarship actually accomplish anything other than shifting the furniture around on the Titanic? Will not Open Source in combination with Digital Humanities further destroy the very idea of “slow” and “thoughtful” work in humanistic studies?

Is this model spreading because there is, finally, a revolt by academics serving for free as content providers, editors, and ex-officio peer-review panels for for-profit publishers of books and journals? Or is it spreading because of the tightening grip of neo-liberal capitalist control, with text- and data-mining procedures enforced from on high both from within academia and from without? Perhaps it is caused by symptoms operating in-between exploitation and revolt, as the revolt is, at best, episodic at the moment. If it is scholarly journals that are first to be hit with this model, with books trailing behind, will the book not be a probable “place” to counter the virulent aspects of this emergent symptom?

More to the point, it would seem that the author-pay model (formerly attributed to predatory publishers) is just another way of extracting tribute for the “privilege” of being
published—enforceable only because academia has ratchet-
ed up the stakes by enforcing research metrics and citations,
in the public universities a practice that is primarily enforced
by external “industrial” connections. Almost all public and
private universities are heading toward measuring output
with metrics—many academics now tailoring their CVs to
show why they are “important,” mirroring the social-media
campaigns of celebrities and politicians, and many universi-
ties now citing their own “corporate” rankings when promot-
ing their product (the University, the Institute, the Depart-
ment, the Professor).

Where this is all going is toward increased precarity for
anyone who does not play the game. Individual, solitary
scholars will have few options.

The options for alternative models (such as modified
open-access and a block-chain inspired “walled garden” for
works that resist assimilation) will have to be vigorously net-
worked—another manifestation of the same processes of
converting scholarship to media—foremost on the peer-to-
peer (P2P) and public-relations (PR) side. In adopting the ne-
cessity of the digital network, the product (books, not jour-
als) will have to be kept in sight. The physical book is the
only product that might benefit both the author and the al-
ternative model proposed—against neo-liberal capitalist ex-
ploration. Modified open-access publishing might become,
in this scenario, the last stand for the immaterial rights of au-
thors.

The great conundrum here is that socially generated forms
of cultural production (retrospectively denoted “cultural her-
itage” or “cultural patrimony”) have been hijacked, with at-
omization of scholars the intention of the machinic model
enforced by Capital. Non-democratic, neo-liberal capitalism
wants it two ways at once. It says to scholars and universities:
We take the profit, you socialize the labor and risk. This is the
exact premise or formula for what brought on the 2008 glob-
al economic catastrophe through the massive securitization of
everything tangible and intangible. Must we now endure a
global intellectual catastrophe as well? All signs point to the fact that we are already halfway there.

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