

Book Review: Publishing Beyond the Market: Open Access, Care, and the Commons by Samuel Moore. University of Michigan Press.

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Abstract: This article reviews the book *Publishing Beyond the Market: Open Access, Care, and the Commons* by Samuel Moore.

Keywords: academic publishing, commons, publishing oligopoly, open access

1. Introduction: Publishing in a Commodified World

Much has already been written about the famous first sentence of Marx's *Capital*: "The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities', its unit being a single commodity" (Marx 1965, 35). Commentators notice that, already in this first sentence, Marx captured the deceiving power of the capitalist system: he does not write that commodities are a natural form of wealth of society – rather, they are ways by which wealth is mystified in capitalism (Holloway 2015, Szadkowski 2023). What commodities hide is a lively reality of labour, exploitation, class struggle, and dynamic social changes. Nevertheless, each kind of commodity can mystify itself in its own way. Samuel Moore's *Publishing Beyond the Market* does an excellent job in demystifying the complex and mundane landscape of open access academic publishing.

Contemporary academic publishing is in poor condition. More than half of academic papers are published by an "oligopoly" of a few huge academic publishers (Larivière et al. 2015). They increase profits by steadily raising subscription prices or article processing charges. They exploit the labour of authors and reviewers. They are also engaged in the increased metricisation, compete in citations of their journals, and develop new tools for measurements (Kulczycki 2023, Szadkowski 2023). On the other hand, we hear about open access to publications, greater openness in science, and a stronger drive to openly share data and findings from our research.

Moore's book is a crucial first step in understanding how open access and commodifying forces of marketisation relate to each other in academic publishing. It should be read in the context of broader attempts to analyse academic publishing as a part of the critique of political economy (Knoche 2020, Szadkowski 2023). Although Moore does

not give us guidance on how to fully escape the pressures of marketisation, he makes us aware of how those forces operate and that they are not omnipresent. It is helpful and important work for anyone interested in changing the contemporary landscape of academic publishing and moving away from the model based on producing profit for the big private corporations (Fuchs & Sandoval 2013).

2. Book Overview

In the rich introduction to the book, Moore already explains key concepts for his work and the basis of his main argument. The crucial thing for Moore is that he takes a position of engaged political critique of the movement of open access and, instead of arguing what open access really is, he treats it as an “empty signifier”. His book is a strong critique of the approach focusing just on open access as the end-product of publishing and not the whole production process: “I am therefore making an appeal to those of us who broadly share a progressive or left politics that open access to research is not enough to fulfil these radical aims: we must attend, not just to free access to digital resources, but to how these resources are produced, too” (11). This wider perspective on open access helps him introduce the concept of the commons – a logic distinct from the private logic of the market and the public logic of the state – a logic of sharing through autonomy and self-organisation.

However, he admits that, at the same time, the commons we can observe are never fully outside the capitalist system. In understanding that the title “Publishing Beyond the Market” can be a little misleading – it does not mean forms of publishing that are now completely independent from capitalist markets. To transcend the market seems rather a far-reaching goal, set on the horizon of our actions.

The first chapter presents the most important theoretical contribution of the book. It elaborates on the difference between the idea of the commons and the idea of openness as freely accessible resources. Moore builds his approach on the works of Hardt, Negri, De Angelis, and Stavrides. He states that commons are about self-governed democratic community building and sharing among commoners. Commons are not detached goods or products, but they are cultivated in concrete communities. What is interesting is that it forces them to have some local character – commons have to be based in a concrete community that has to have boundaries and cannot be accessible to everyone.

In this sense, Moore favours local commons over “global commons”, although this locality can also have an international character. For Moore, commons cannot be preserved if they become a product of big international exploitative publishing corporations. This chapter also explores the example of how the platform “Digital Commons” was bought by Elsevier. This led not only to the appropriation of the company's profits but also to “commons washing” – improving the company's PR by engaging in work that appears open and community-led.

Chapter 2 shows how this approach to open access can reshape our understanding of Plan S, developed during the last decade. Moore shows that from the beginning, the

plan created by a coalition of European grant agencies was not created to promote a logic of alternatives to publishing through the capitalist market. It was rather focused on making the results of research more accessible and limiting unjustified profits of publishers that were achieving a position close to the monopolists. However, even the more reformist initial ideas of intervention in the market were stopped during the formulation of the plan, and after protests from publishers, the ideas of setting a maximum article processing charge were abandoned by the funders. The deeper consequence of focusing on the market logic for Moore was the promotion of cost-efficient publishing without care. For Moore, the argument that open access should be cheap can easily legitimise the commodification of publishing and reinforce the capitalist logic of cutting costs. An alternative is publishing with care for the academic community, practised throughout the entire publishing process. Moore argues that Plan S was careless from the beginning.

Chapter 3 presents real examples of how publishing with care can look like. Using materials from interviews with scholarly-led publishers, Moore shows how they try to follow the logic of the commons. However, those concrete examples quickly show that attempts at communion are fragile and, on many occasions, have to compromise with exploitative structures around them.

Moore starts by discussing inspiring examples of the first Internet-based open-access initiatives in the 1990s – they already sought to make research more publicly available and were still based on strong communities of scholars (103). However, contemporary scholarly-led publishers, although they are engaged in various experimental and democratising publishing practices, are also in a very precarious position and operate on limited resources. Yet Moore believes they can contribute to a more fundamental change – we can see them as counter-hegemonic and as the basis for a new kind of subjectivity.

Chapter 4 goes into more depth about what Open Access Publishing Commons look like. It is strongly based on the author's experience with the Radical Open Access Collective, which gathers various open-access publishers trying to achieve non-market-based open access. It shows that rather than a one-size-fits-all solution, there is a need for multiple open-access infrastructures that will respond to the different needs of different communities and create space for experiments in democratizing publishing. Moore highlights the need to increase bibliodiversity and to undermine the hegemony of English in academia (144). Besides smaller experimental initiatives, he also appreciates larger-scale ones, such as SciELO or Redalyc, emerging in Latin America. It makes Moore strongly criticise approaches that see market-based competition as the main force of productive innovation in publishing. At the end, he argues again that we need to focus on the whole process of publishing and not only the output.

The last part of the book – conclusions – not only summarises the points already made but also makes clearer how Moore sees his propositions for transforming scholarly communication in contrast with others. He distances himself not only from Plan S and the commodified approach to open access (that sees it as a cost-efficient service).

He also sees publisher boycotts, research assessment reforms, or reliance on undemocratic academic societies as mostly fruitless ways for change. The issues with those forms of resistance are that they do not build new non-hierarchical societies but rather seek to change things through individualistic, consumerist boycotts or top-down reforms that do not challenge the crucial power structures. Finally, Moore states that open access should be treated rather as a “bare minimum” than as a final goal. Instead of focusing on how many final products of publishing are openly available to readers, we should focus on flourishing more democratic and commons-based practices around publishing that will create bases for communities of scholars that can create an alternative to academia based on market-like competition.

3. Further Ways for Publishing Beyond Capitalism

The approach presented by Moore, without a doubt, is an important contribution to the discussion around open access and the critique of marketisation of academia. It also reveals numerous contradictions in academic publishing as the commons. The collective and democratic potential of publishing based on commons contradicts the real precarious dependency of such publishing initiatives. The transformative promise of the commons contradicts the reality of big publishing corporations’ huge market domination, which has made even moderate market interventions aimed at reducing their profit impossible.

Academic traditions of rather generous sharing one’s work with other scholars as a base of commons contradict colonial and exploitative legacies of Western universities. Revealing those contradictions (even if they are not always openly highlighted by the author) is an important achievement. They reveal something we could describe as a productive limitation of the book.

Paraphrasing Marx, we can say that Moore’s book reveals that open access “presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities”. Many policy makers and powerful stakeholders portray open access as a commodified service we should buy on a (loosely) regulated market rather than as a community building based on commons and care. Moore’s book shows that the crucial thing is to stop seeing only the end product of a freely available resource and start to see the whole process of production. It encourages us to see how various scholarly-led publishers operate, how different their needs are, and how they are able to find time and motivation to care for the whole publishing process.

However, the production processes described in the book are still small and partial. The absence of reflection on some important phenomena, such as piracy and the global influence of sites like Sci-Hub, is puzzling. Nevertheless, to a large extent, this partiality is a natural limitation reflecting the general state of contemporary discussion on academic publishing. It would require a much larger research project to describe in much more detail the scale of power of the oligopoly of publishers and how it affects other actors in academic publishing. One would also have to significantly extend the book’s historical timeframe to grasp something we could call the world history of the

political economy of publishing. Historical accumulation of capital and prestige by the biggest publishers and corporations, the contemporary power of these publishers' lobbying, or the processes behind the development of so advanced open-access infrastructure in Latin America remain rather on the distant horizon of reflection presented in the book.

Reflecting more deeply on such world history of the political economy of publishing creates doubts about some of Moore's propositions. If the contemporary power of big publishing corporations is too big, maybe the crucial political goal should be limiting it somehow (even before moving outside the market logic) to create more space for a publishing based on commons? Why should we focus so much on new experimental publishing practices rather than on connecting with other political communities such as unions, student organisations, or political parties? What exactly had to be achieved in our society so that publishing "beyond the market" would not only be an attempt to reach a goal on the horizon, but rather a process strongly independent from the influences of the capitalist system? The book does not answer those questions clearly, but it is an important step in their further exploration.

Sometimes, through the book, the reader can also feel that the language of care and commons replaces the language of anticapitalist struggle. Publishing based on commons and care gives us hope, but the language of describing it makes some conflicts appear less sharp than they are in reality. Nonetheless, future attempts to conceptualise positive change in academic publishing should learn from Moore to focus on the whole process of publishing and not only on the end product. Furthermore, to aim for publishing with care, not for the cheap publishing of cost-effective capitalism.

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Franciszek Krawczyk is an assistant professor in the Scholarly Communication Research Group of Adam Mickiewicz University. He published results of his research on theories of centres and peripheries of knowledge production, academic resistance, and predatory publishing. In his future work, he is going to focus more on the forgotten history of academic publishing in the socialist countries.