CHAPTER 13

Conceptualising and Subverting the Capitalist Academic Publishing Model

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1 Introduction

“The means of effective communication are being expropriated from the intellectual worker.”

MILLS 1951, 152

The situation Mills bemoaned some six decades ago has proceeded apace, reaching a level today that borders on complete expropriation. Similar to most sectors in the communications and media industries, academic journal publishing has experienced a significant wave of consolidation over the last couple of decades. The consequent result is a market dominated by a handful of oligopolistic mega-publishers that wield an inordinate amount of power, as made manifest most prominently in skyrocketing journal subscription costs and a drastic lockdown of content through strict application of copyright and licencing restrictions. While these effects have been widely discussed, particularly among library and information studies and communication and media studies scholars and practitioners, less work has thus far been conducted in trying to account theoretically for these industry developments and their impacts. Even less prevalent in the existing literature is any systematic attempt to interrogate these issues from a critical political economic approach that considers capital’s compulsion to alienate the actual producers from their product, which represents an appropriation of the free labour that underwrites the academic publishing system (notable exceptions include Merrett (2006) and Striphas (2010)).

In an effort to respond to some of these lacunae, this chapter seeks to interrogate and situate theoretically from a Marxist political economic perspective various aspects and tensions that inhere in the contemporary academic journal publishing environment. I propose to examine both the expanding capitalist control of the academic publishing industry and some of the efforts being made by those seeking to counter the negative effects of such capitalist control. In order to engage with these issues, the material presented in this chapter is informed by the following three questions. First, what are the structural
characteristics of the academic publishing industry and how do they impact the scholarly communication system? Second, what efforts have been made by various actors to respond to the crises in the dominant capitalist model of academic publishing? Third, what novel, and potentially more radical, strategies might be offered to actively subvert capital's control of academic publishing?

I suggest that we can conceptualise the responses to these questions by returning to Marx's concepts of 'primitive accumulation' and 'alienation'. Drawing mainly on Volume 1 of *Capital*, my goal will be to demonstrate that primitive accumulation, understood as a continuing historical process necessary for capital accumulation, offers an apropos theoretical lens through which to contemplate contemporary erosions of the knowledge commons that result from various enclosing strategies employed by corporate academic journal publishers. As a theoretical complement, I will further suggest that some of the elements of alienation Marx articulated in respect of capitalist-controlled production processes capture the contemporary estrangement experienced by the actual producers of academic publications. The exegetical account of alienation offered here will draw primarily on Marx's discussion in the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts*. Aside from demonstrating the continued relevance of the concepts of primitive accumulation and alienation, part of my purpose will be to advance the case that, despite a relatively privileged position vis-à-vis other workers (albeit one increasingly under attack), academic cognitive labourers are caught up within and subject to some of the constraining and exploitative practices of capitalist accumulation processes.

In developing my arguments, the chapter will first provide an overview of the commercial academic journal publishing industry, including some of the consolidation trends experienced over the last couple of decades, as well as its major structural characteristics and their effects on the dissemination of scholarly research. Having established this empirical context, the following section will articulate Marx's concepts of primitive accumulation and alienation. The attempt here will be to make conceptual sense of the way that these broader structural characteristics of the academic publishing industry function as mechanisms of enclosure of the knowledge commons and alienation of the actual producers in support of capitalist accumulation imperatives. The focus will then shift to a discussion of the open-access movement as an active, remedial response to the enclosing and alienating effects inherent in the capitalist-controlled academic publishing industry. As the discussion here will demonstrate, open-access publishing is not inherently anti-capitalist. For that reason, we need to distinguish between traditional open access and the more explicitly anti-capitalist attempts to guarantee open access, in what we might