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Communitas and the commons

The open access movement and the dynamics of restructuring in scholarly publishing

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In 1994, the cognitive scientist Stevan Harnad published his ‘Subversive proposal’ at the Network Services Conference in London. In his proposal, Harnad highlighted the ‘Faustian bargain’ that academics had made with publishers ‘to allow a price-tag to be erected as a barrier between their work and its (tiny) intended readership because that was the only way to make their work public in the era when paper publication (and its substantial real expenses) were the only way to do so’. Arguing that the rise of digital networks had given academics the power to subvert traditional publishing structures, Harnad asserted that it was now possible to take our scholarship to ‘the airwaves, where it always belonged’, allowing the unimpeded flow of knowledge to everyone.

Harnad’s proposal was a touchstone piece in what ultimately became known as the open access movement. This vision is articulated clearly in the 2002 Budapest Open Access Initiative and its successors, the 2003 Berlin Declaration and 2003 Bethesda Statement (collectively known as the ‘BBB’ definition of open access). According to the Budapest statement of principles:

An old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good. The old tradition is the willingness of scientists and scholars to publish the fruits of their research in scholarly journals without payment, for the sake of inquiry and knowledge. The new technology is the internet ... Removing access barriers to this literature will accelerate research, enrich education, sharing the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge. (Budapest Open Access Initiative 2002)

Seventeen years later, this vision – or, at least, its subversive potential – seems somewhat difficult to reconcile with the way that the movement has been institutionalized, with open access now mandated by research funders, government agencies and widely embraced by corporate publishers themselves. Indeed, supporters are today just as likely to be conservative politicians as radical egalitarians, and open access advocates often find themselves accused of being an anti-corporate Marxist one day, and a neo-liberal sell-out the next (Eve 2014: 7).

In what follows, I reflect on these transformations in the open access movement and on the question of how we got from there to here – namely, from open access as a ‘bottom-up, community driven model’ to one where the key driving forces are increasingly claimed to be ‘commercial, institutional and political interests’ (Schöpfel 2018: 57). While these transformations are the focus of growing scholarly attention, they are typically conceptualized through the lens of neo-liberalism (e.g., Poynder 2018). Neo-liberalism is clearly an element of the story, but the lens it provides is simultaneously partial and totalizing. As Kapferer and Gold observe:

The current bundle of multiple crises is put down, at least partly, to the ideological effects of neoliberalism... There is much to be said in favour of such opinion. But too much is being forced into the frame of neoliberalism, sustaining left/right distinctions of the recent past that are losing their relevance and much of their analytical bite. Moreover such discourse becomes itself an ideological blind governed increasingly by what may be glossed as economic thinking or economic reductionism, a feature of anti-neoliberal just as much as neoliberal discourse. (2017: 31)

Stepping outside the confines of the neo-liberalism frame, I instead reflect on the open access movement via the lens of Turner’s (1969, 1974, 1992) work on liminality and communitas, which, I argue, is a more productive lens through which to conceptualize current developments in scholarly publishing. Understood as a product of the hybridizing relationship between structure and anti-structure, this perspective moves us beyond a ‘one-becomes-the-other’ typology and suggests that the possibility of interstitial egalitarian spaces in scholarly publishing (and academic life itself) has not been entirely extinguished.

Open access, anti-structure and communitas

Although the open access movement is intimately connected with the birth of the digital era, broader changes in the academy – most notably, the formalization of systems of academic audit and the attendant rise of the ‘managed university’ – were also integral to its conditions of possibility. The serials crisis of the late 1990s, which provided a critical trigger for the open access movement, was largely the result of the convergence between the rise of digital publishing and new systems for auditing academic ‘outputs’ that used journal prestige as a proxy for researcher quality. Acting as a substitute for evaluative labour, the impact factor of academics’ publishing venues became a form of symbolic currency that could be traded into a material economy of jobs, promotions, salaries and benefits (Eve & Priego 2017). Together, these factors served to create what Eve (2013) has described as a ‘zombified’ system of scholarly publishing – one where the ‘no-brainer’ logic of selecting the most prestigious publishing outlet makes that outlet simultaneously *less* accessible and *more* desirable in a perpetual feedback loop that constantly drives up subscription prices.

The desire to disrupt these publishing structures was critical to the emergence of the open access movement, which was dominated by scientists at the outset, although influential advocates also appeared in the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Eve 2014; Fitzpatrick 2011; Guédon 2007; Hall 2008; Suber 2012; Willinsky 2009). While the preponderance of scientists gave the movement a decidedly scientific bent, it was nevertheless a classically liminoid phenomenon: it originated outside the boundaries of prevailing social, economic and political structures, and called for a revolutionary transformation of the official order (Deflem 1991; Turner 1969, 1974). From the outset, open access advocates defined themselves against ‘the traditional hierarchical and elitist culture that has prevailed in the research community since time immemorial’ (Poynder 2018: 1). A form of ideological *communitas* was therefore foundational to the movement, with participants working towards a ‘*communitas utopia*’ (Turner 1974: 80). Indeed, the open access movement has clear millenarian undertones: advocates anticipate a future in which knowledge will be universally accessible, regardless of wealth or geography, which, according to the aforementioned Budapest Declaration, will ‘lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation’.

However, beyond a collective interest in the removal of barriers to the dissemination of scholarly research, those voicing support for open access do so from a variety of different – and often wildly disparate – political and ideological standpoints (Eve 2014; Hall 2008; Jackson & Anderson 2014; Moore 2018a). This eclecticism makes the concept of an ‘open access movement’ more a matter of symbolic unity than analytic coherence (Šimukovič 2018). As Samuel Moore, among others, has observed: ‘The development of open access reveals a number of different lineages ... These separate lineages do not make for a consistent set of values associated with open access, especially against the backdrop of the range of disciplinary publishing cultures and working practices’ (2018a: 42). But this lack of a coherent ideological framework is part of what makes the movement liminoid: it enables a degree of ‘play’ and experimentation, with familiar elements combined in novel ways (cf. Turner 1974; see also Adema 2015, esp. Chapter 5; Adema & Hall 2013).

Eclecticism, co-optation and exteriority

To date, a diverse array of initiatives have been created under the banner of open access. Beyond the profit-driven versions that treat it primarily as a new revenue stream, these include mega open access publishers like the Public Library of Science, scholar-driven publishing collectives, and independent journals and magazines committed to experimenting with the form and function of academic writing. Although many of these experiments are Western in origin, a variety of open access initiatives have also emerged in the academic ‘periphery’. These include SciHub, a roving pirate website created by the Kazakhstani scholar Alexandra Elbakyan that provides free, illegal access to paywalled scientific literature, and SciELO, a combined bibliographic database, digital library and cooperative electronic publisher of Latin American open access journals. Open access publishers have also flourished in regions such as South Asia, the Middle East and Africa, although they are frequently, albeit problematically, dismissed as ‘predatory’ (see Bell 2017). While the effects of some of these initiatives have been conservative, all were novel in the ways they reassembled elements to create new forms and in the critique they entailed of mainstream scholarly publishing. In effect, the anti-structural origins of the open access movement created a space for new voices, with many initiatives, including those spearheaded by emerging and Southern scholars, quickly gaining momentum in ways that would have been impossible under the traditional publishing regime.

A key anthropological example is the extraordinary initial success of *Hau* and the concomitant rise of Giovanni da Col – then a doctoral student and the journal’s founder. At first, the sense of excitement *Hau* generated was palpable (Green 2018); ‘Some argue that we have started a movement’, the inaugural editorial somewhat immodestly declared (da Col & Graeber 2011: xiv). Da Col’s position as editor-in-chief symbolized *Hau*’s egalitarian ethos, seeming to embody the spirit of a journal founded on its democratizing promise and the possibility of ‘overcoming the restrictions inherent in the hierarchies of the discipline’ (Kapferer 2018). That the journal’s success ultimately hinged on the ways that it wedded open access to fortifying ‘the prestige economies of the old Ivy League-Oxbridge axis’ (Kalb 2018), speaks to the ideological eclecticism of anti-structural phenomena and their capacity to combine familiar elements in new ways. The paradoxical result was the renewed capture of the field by an old, elitist anthropology in a way that felt new and hip – revolutionary even (Kalb 2018).

For many observers, *Hau*’s stratospheric rise and equally spectacular fall seems to epitomize the broken promise of the open access movement, which a number of observers suggest has merely served to entrench the capitalization of knowledge. To quote Kalb (2018), ‘OA has lent itself perfectly to brute academic capitalism and hierarchy, just as internet platforms in other sectors have not brought the horizontalist information society promised by early internet utopias. On the contrary. OA is one of the academic forms in which the disruption generated by the current techno-financialized rounds of creative destruction and monumental forms of rent taking by capital in the wider society appear’. Likewise, Herb and Schöpfel (2018: 9) question whether open access is the beginning of a more egalitarian era of scientific communication or ‘just another Trojan horse, allowing private companies to extend their control of the Big Data now generated by science’ and Mirowski (2018) highlights the ways in which open access and open science are effectively re-engineering research along the lines of platform capitalism.

Clearly, as various open access ideals have become mainstream, the scholarly commons is being treated as an untrammelled good, regardless of the infrastructure and power structures it supports (Moore 2018b) – there is something of this feel to the American Anthropological Association’s recent decision to develop an open access repository ‘for the common good’, utilizing the services of its corporate vendor (see Kelty & Corsín Jiménez 2018). Processes of restructuring are therefore happening in a way that seems to be maintaining rather than challenging existing flows of capital and the inequalities they have cemented (Guédon 2007). Haider (2018: 28) describes the result as a type of *deus ex machina*, ‘in which a specific kind of ideologically confined, technical openness becomes part of an imagined transformative system change that is almost entirely impregnated in the language ... of economic necessity, commercial interests and technological determinism’. However, to suggest that this is the end of the story is to assume that structure and anti-structure are essentially static – a view counter to Turner’s arguments about their dialectical relationship. In his words, ‘social structure ... is constantly being influenced and modified by antistructure, just as antistructure is continually being curbed and penetrated by structure’ (Turner 1992: 133).

While various elements of open access may have been successfully co-opted, this hasn’t exhausted the possibilities of the movement as a whole – a point that is missed in some of the recent dissections, which seem to have prematurely sounded its death knell. In this space, there is little sign of implicit rules that ‘limit the possible combination of factors to certain conventional patterns, designs, or figurations’ (Turner 1974: 61). A flourishing array of open access experiments instead point to cultural processes still very much in the ‘subjunctive mood’ (Turner 1992: 133). Thus, for the present at least, the milieu of open access – or key variants of it – remains that of exteriority, whereby ‘the movement is not from

one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 353). Indeed, this exteriority is being self-consciously cultivated by a number of open access advocates – like the Radical Open Access Collective, who see open access not so much as a model to be implemented, but more as a 'process of continuous struggle and critical resistance' (Adema & Hall 2013: 154). For such advocates, what is at stake is not just the future of scholarly publishing, but the future of the academy itself (see Adema 2015; Fitzpatrick 2011; Hall 2008).

Closing thoughts

Towards the end of her book *Planned obsolescence: Publishing, technology, and the future of the academy*, Fitzpatrick (2011) recounts an incident in which she was queried about her optimism regarding the future of scholarly publishing and asked from whence it came. In her words:

I came to realize that if I am at all optimistic about the course of scholarly publishing over the next decades, it's in a sense similar to that which Karl Marx was optimistic about the fate of capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century. The contradictions of our current systems are simply too great to be sustained; if I am optimistic, it's because I am certain that a revolution in scholarly publishing is unavoidable. (2011: 194)

As Fitzpatrick observes, at first glance this comparison is not especially heartening. After all, Marx's predictions about the demise of capitalism haven't come to pass. In veering from diagnostics to predictions, he failed to account for the power of an established system to incorporate and defuse resistance and incorrectly judged the ability and desire of those oppressed to take the risks required to create a new society. For many observers, this is similarly the fate of the open access movement: advocates have overestimated the willingness of academics to challenge a broken system and underestimated the ability of that system to incorporate and defuse resistance.

While high-profile 'failures' in publishing experiments (of which *Hau* is arguably one example) tempt us to dismiss the prospects for change (Fitzpatrick 2011), scholarly publishing is still very much a field in transition, wherein 'the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet taken definitive shape' (Turner 1992: 132). While Turner suggests that it is ultimately the fate of anti-structural phenomena to be absorbed back into structure, it is their mutual interpenetration and oscillation upon which cultural processes are built.

Likewise, due to the potentiality introduced by the open access movement (Hall 2008: 208), scholarly publishing is currently kaleidoscopic in its possible permutations, despite efforts to fix the lens. Whether it will remain so in the long term is unclear, but one thing is certain: 'Change is coming to scholarly publishing, one way or another' (Fitzpatrick 2011: 195). And if academics evacuate open access prematurely, there is no surer way of transforming it into what many fear it has already become. ●

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Fig. 1. From the session 'Scientific Impact and Open Access' at ESOF 2014, Copenhagen.

Fig. 2. A poster advertising an open access week.

Fig. 3. An enthusiast for Open Access.