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THE MORAL ECONOMY OF OPEN ACCESS

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Abstract

Digital technologies have made access to and profit from scientific publications hotly contested issues. Debates over Open Access (OA), however, rarely extend from questions of distribution into questions of how OA is transforming the politics of academic knowledge production. We argue that the movement towards OA rests on a relatively stable moral episteme that positions different actors involved in the economy of OA (authors, publishers, the general public), and most importantly, knowledge itself. Our analysis disentangles the ontological and moral side of these claims, showing how OA changes the meaning of knowledge from *a good* in the economic, to *good* in the moral sense. This means OA can be theorised as the moral economy of digital knowledge production. Ultimately, using Boltanski and Thévenot's work on justification, we reflect on how this moral economy frames political subjectivity of actors and institutions involved in academic knowledge production.

Keywords

Open Access, digital technology, political ontology, moral economy, justification

Open Access and the digital

Access to and profit from scientific publications have become one of the defining issues in contemporary knowledge production¹. The public uproar around the journal subscription charges of academic publisher Elsevier and the ensuing boycott² are but recent examples of a conflict between more traditional modes of knowledge production and challenges posed by its massification and digitalization (Suber, 2012, Vincent and Wickham, 2013, Fitzpatrick, 2011, Eve, 2014, Willinsky, 2006, Weller, 2014). Digital technologies have unbound communication from the limitations of paper as a medium; as a result, there has been a shift in this economy, from one based on scarcity to one based on abundance (Rosenzweig, 2003).

Reformers like Suber (2012) argue that, just as paper journals are increasingly obsolete, so is the subscription model of funding journals. For many, including the UK and US governments, open publishing has become a progressive goal, if not an economic and social imperative (Finch Report, 2012). However, it would be a mistake to interpret open access (OA) as de-commodification of scientific knowledge. The incumbent publishers of the subscription era, along with a plethora of new firms, are constructing an “economy of openness” where the commodity is not necessarily knowledge *per se*, but data and information *about that knowledge*, the demand for which is driven in part by the creation of abundance (Muellerleile, 2017). In this context, debates over access to research are not just about the distribution of knowledge, but also about its production and content.

Like other public disputes (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000, 1999), these debates feature a moral dimension. The most common moral argument is a critique of for-profit publishers who benefit from the work of academics (e.g. Harnad, 1995). Some have extended this argument to suggest that, regardless of the funding mechanism, it is “immoral” for an author to publish in any journal that encloses research behind a paywall (Taylor, 2013). Conversely, while sparse within the academy, sceptics argue access fees are acceptable, as this allows academic publishing to retain a standard of quality (Slauter & Wulf, 2014, Osborne, 2013). Even here, however, there is little agreement over exactly who should be charged, for what, and what sorts of OA mandates policy makers ought to enact. After all, academic knowledge production and publishing come at a cost. As Eve asks (2014: 67): “who, at the end of the day, pays?”

However, policy implications are not our primary interest. Rather, our concern is the way OA frames and positions *moral agents* within academic knowledge production. Beyond disagreement over questions such as how to maintain the quality of journals without direct market incentives, or who will manage the various repositories of open knowledge, there exists, we will argue, a relatively stable moral “episteme” (Foucault, 1971) in debates over OA. This is *not* to suggest that there is a single definition of OA, or a monolithic pro-OA movement. While this is clearly not the case (Eve, 2014), we aim to demonstrate that there are a number of shared assumptions across this diverse field. These assumptions concern the nature of knowledge, of those who

produce and consume it, as well as the relationship between different actors involved in the expanding economy of OA.

A number of authors have addressed the moral and ethical aspects of OA (Willinsky 2006, Veletsianos and Kimmons 2012, Wickham and Vincent 2013, Brienza 2012, Neary and Winn 2012), primarily in relation to its regulation, uses, and implications for political economy (Pirie 2009, Beverungen et al. 2012, Golumbia 2016). Our argument diverges from theirs in the more thorough exploration of the relationship between the moral assumptions concerning knowledge production, and the nature and agency of those who are involved in it. In this, we aim to explicitly connect the metaphysical foundations of these debates, with the claims for legitimacy put forward by some of its participants (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000: 212-213).

Debates over OA are not just reactions to a pre-existing “digital revolution” or presumed economic imperatives. Rather, these debates frame the actors, institutions, and relationships central to academic knowledge production, in part influencing how academics think about their own labour and, thus, how or whether they contribute to the expansion of digital forms of academic knowledge. In other words, they concern not only the problems, but also the “structured universe of possible solutions” (Bourdieu, 1991: 42). While our argument may appear to be critical of OA to knowledge as such, this is not our intention. However, we believe there is much to gain from “critical self-reflection upon the nature of that with which we are dealing or involved” (Lawson, 2006: 484). Echoing Fourcade’s and Healy’s call for a “reflexive approach, in which theorists in economics, political science, and sociology critically consider their own participation in the definition of the market’s moral categories and in the construction of competing moralizing instruments and techniques” (2007: 305), we want to consider the implications of different possible ontological framings of persons, objects, and relationships involved in the economy of OA.

We accomplish this by theorising OA as a form of *moral economy* (Elder-Vass, 2016, Sayer, 2007, 2004, Scott, 1976, Thompson, 1971). Our argument proceeds in three steps. We begin with a discussion of the concept of moral economy and its relationship to academic knowledge production. We point to some of the key tensions between, on the one hand, its descriptive or analytical and, on the other, normative or

(e)valuative aspects. These tensions have gone largely unexamined in the scholarship on moral economy, but we believe they are key to understanding the extents and limitations of the concept and its applications to knowledge production. We proceed to examine the moral economy of OA through a focus on what we claim to be its key ontological assumptions, in the contexts of both consumption and production. We demonstrate how these assumptions position specific groups of actors, and ascribe specific moral properties to them. Furthermore, we show how they frame knowledge as the *ultimate good*, equalizing the moral and economic meaning of the term. In the final section, with the aid of Boltanski and Thévenot's work on orders of worth and mechanisms of justification (2006, 2000, 1999), we offer an interpretation of this form of positioning in relation to changes in the conditions of knowledge production.

Moral economy and knowledge production

The idea that there is a moral or ethical underpinning to economic activity is not new (e.g. Zelizer, 2012, 2007, Fourcade and Healy, 2007, Sayer, 2004, 2007, Polanyi, 1944). Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* explicitly links ethical and moral norms with a mode of production. Neither is it novel to note that the moral aspect is historically and culturally contingent. For instance, Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* showed how economic ideas relate to customs and forms of behaviour that might seem completely foreign to Western economic rationality, such as the Trobriand Islanders' *kula*. Furthermore, Mauss (1954) showed that systems of gift exchange, whilst formally different from capitalist economies, are nevertheless structured by power relationships between different political and economic actors in what was at the time referred to as "archaic" societies.

These and other early- to mid-20th century social or cultural studies of economic activity can thus attempted to recover the concept of "rationality" from its framing by neo-classical economists as utility maximization-oriented behaviour. E.P. Thompson's (1971) use of the concept of moral economy is a case in point. Against interpretations of grain riots in 18th century England that attributed crowd behaviour to expression of "instinct" such as hunger, Thompson argued riots were motivated by a relatively sophisticated folk concept of rights and duties related to access to subsistence foods, and expectations from the government in terms of their provision.

In this sense, Thompson replaced the interpretation of political agency of the people as an unreflexive reaction to biological needs with a system of values and duties that positioned the main actors – the people, the intermediaries, and the government – in the politico-economic landscape of the day: in other words, with a political ontology.

In *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, Scott operates on a similar register, showing that the major peasant rebellions in 20th-century Southeast Asia were driven by the peasants' "notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation – their view of which claims on their product were intolerable and which tolerable" (1976: 3-4). Scott aimed to show a correspondence between the logic of the subsistence ethic and the concrete choices and values of the peasantry. These grow out of the material and precarious human condition of subsistence farmers, but they also *take on a moral dimension as a claim on society*. Scott, for instance, finds an "inclination to favor those institutions and relationships which minimize the risks to subsistence, though they may claim much of surplus" (ibid: 55).

The concept of moral economy thus initially appears in two forms. *Descriptively*, it is used to classify forms of economic activity that include a moral, or (e)valuative dimension. *Analytically*, it serves as a way to establish a link between "the ways in which economic activities – in the broad sense – are influenced by moral-political norms and sentiments, and how, conversely, those norms are compromised by economic forces" (Sayer, 2000: 80). In this sense, it fits within the broader frame of theorising the relationship between ideas and their material or economic base, or in Marxist terms, base and superstructure.

However, Sayer introduces another moral register, the *normative* dimension, which involves "an evaluation of economic systems, actions and motives in terms of their effect on peoples' lives" (Sayer, 2004). Every economy is, therefore, inherently "moralizing" because there is a link between people's beliefs and the economic order, which reflects the assumptions on which this order rests (cf. Fourcade and Healy, 2007). In this sense, moral economy functions as critique: close attention to how economic arrangements affect well-being can hardly avoid normative implications (Sayer, 2007: 262). While it is, in principle, possible to observe an oppressive or exploitative economic order and refrain from moral and ethical judgments, Sayer

argues one of the main objectives of a critical (or progressive) social science is to think of possibilities for fairer, that is, more just, economic arrangements.

This, however, calls for a specific epistemological position. To be able to judge an economic order “exploitative”, one presumably needs to have recourse to an idea of a different possible set of economic arrangements. In other words, the normative or evaluative aspect of moral economy needs a specific description of reality – that is, a specific social ontology. Boltanski (2011) recognized this as one of the key issues in critical theories of domination, which

(...) Necessarily rely on descriptive social science to paint a picture of the reality subject to critique. But compared with sociological descriptions that seek to conform to the vulgate of neutrality, the specificity of critical theories is that they contain critical judgements on the social order which the analyst assumes responsibility for in her own name, thus abandoning any pretention to neutrality (Boltanski, 2011:4).

This also means that “moral economy”, in its normative register, introduces a caesura between the consciousness of actors involved in particular form of practice, and the consciousness of those analysing this practice: in other words, there is a “miscognition by the actors themselves of the exploitation to which they are subject and, above all, of the social conditions that make this exploitation possible and also, as a result, of the means by which they could stop it.” (Boltanski, 2011: 9).

The position of “complex exteriority” (ibid: 7) necessary to defend the distinction between the consciousness of actors and the consciousness of those writing about them, however, is easier to establish from the temporal or spatial distance afforded when observing 18th-century England or contemporary Southeast Asia than when the community of the researchers and the researched is, in principle, the same. This is almost inevitably the case with OA: both the critics and the advocates of OA are deeply implicated in the debates on OA and academic knowledge production. This is not to resort to naïve social determinism that argues knowledge claims are nothing but an expression of (however framed) interest of their authors. Rather, it is to emphasise that, as noted, forms of critique rest on specific assumptions concerning the nature of

social reality (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 213).

Rather than aspiring to a “vulgate of neutrality”, or abandoning the project of critique altogether, there is a need for clarification of the link between the descriptive and the normative aspects of these arguments. Without this, debates over knowledge production risk an unreflexive blurring of boundary between “lay” and “analytical” concepts. In considering OA as a moral economy of knowledge-based digital capitalism we are, therefore, seeking to disentangle its ontology (that is, claims about reality) from its moral dimension. Sayer also recognizes the importance of this when he says “as with any critical political economy (including a critique of political economy), *it is important to examine the standpoints from which these critiques are made*. Such standpoints involve *normative judgements* and if these are not clarified the precise target of any critique is likely to remain unclear” (2000: 80, emphasis ours).

Just like (neo)classical economics (e.g. Lawson, 2006), the economy of openness rests on a specific ontology. This concerns not only concepts of subjectivity and agency of those who participate in it (in neoclassical economics, relatively isolated, rational, utility-maximising individuals), but the way in which ideas of “good” or “evil” in relation to what is conceived as “property” and “exploitation” are embedded in this form of exchange. In this way, this ontology is fundamentally political (cf. Žižek, 2009, Bourdieu, 2000, 1991). Similarly to E.P. Thompson’s 18th-century England, the present landscape of knowledge production is structured by the network of interlocking relations between agents differently positioned *in relation to each other*. This order, however, is not static: it is prone to renegotiation or justification (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999), during which agents draw on (often implicit) assumptions concerning each other. In the following sections, we will proceed to examine some of the key assumptions that constitute the economy of OA.

OA as a moral economy

The literature on OA has significantly grown over the last several years, including disciplinary differences between STEM and the humanities (cf. Eve 2014, Golumbia 2016), as well as various funding and peer review models³. Our analysis foregoes

some of the finer detail of these differences in favour of emphasising general ontological properties of elements that make up OA. This is not to say that we believe there is a monolithic, single argument for OA. However, despite the differences, we believe these arguments share a number of assumptions. They concern the nature of knowledge and its consumption, as well as the role and dynamics of its production.

The context of consumption: knowledge as *a good*

The most common argument for OA comes in the form of a criticism of for-profit publishers, accused of “double appropriation” of academic labour and public resources (Beverungen et al., 2012, Kelty, 2014). In this view, publishers first commoditize academic knowledge without paying for the labour necessary to produce it, then claim these commodities as intellectual property and sell them to individuals or institutions (universities and libraries), often at exorbitant prices. This framing suggests publishers are parasitical on the work of academics – not just their thinking and writing, but reviewing of other scholars’ work, all of which is necessary for the production of journals. For Harnad (1995), this “Faustian bargain”—where the devil is none other than subscription publishers—is no longer necessary in the digital age.

The practice of expropriation, however, is not the only reason why publishers are framed as morally corrupt. By charging for subscriptions, they effectively prevent those who do not pay from using academic knowledge. Thus, for-profit publishing amounts to a practice of enclosure. Here, we can observe similarities with Thompson’s (1971) grain traders in 18th-century England who were considered morally suspect because they extracted profit by restricting access to food. In the case of academic knowledge, there are two injured parties: academics, and to a lesser degree, the institutions they work for; and second, the general public. For both, this moral positioning depends on the idea that knowledge is a public good⁴. There are however, differing underlying assumptions of who constitutes the public, as well as what counts as (a) good.

If the public in question are primarily other academics, the argument is relatively circumscribed: that is, it focuses on the access to knowledge produced by academics for other academics. In this view, for-profit publishing is immoral because it prevents

academics from accessing knowledge produced by people who, in principle, belong to the same group of producers. For instance, Osborne (2013) has argued academic research is not innately produced for ‘public’ consumption, but for the benefit of the researcher, her academic colleagues, her students, and possibly the funding body. As Fuller (2017) argues, knowledge in this case is a “club” rather than a public good; regardless of the possibility of access to the text, only those with the skills necessary to understand it are truly able to use and make sense of it (see also Slauter and Wulf, 2014: 35). In this sense, OA primarily concerns those in the academic ‘club’. In other words, OA restricts its arguments to questions of equality and redistribution within a relatively closed system of academic knowledge production.

More often, however, OA is predicated on the assumption that knowledge should be a public good *as a whole*; and that barriers to access are morally wrong not because they enclose knowledge from other academics, but from the general public. There are two forms of justification for this argument. The first, liberal-democratic, posits that knowledge should be accessible to the public because it is funded through taxes. One possible implication of this is a distinction between different publics: only members of a defined polity (that is, those who pay taxes) have a moral right to access knowledge (see Golumbia, 2016, also Suber, 2003). In contexts in which public funding, especially for social sciences and humanities, is rapidly declining, this leaves a lot of knowledge outside of the remit. More interestingly, from an ontological perspective, the taxpayer argument leaves the assumption of knowledge as a commodity (that is, an *economic* good) relatively intact. The emphasis, in this case, is on the distribution of cost, borne by all (taxpaying) members of a community.

The other version of the argument, closer to libertarian or anarcho-liberal political philosophy, assumes in principle that all knowledge (publicly funded or not) should be accessible to all publics. In this case, any undue enclosure of knowledge, whether by companies or nation states, becomes immoral. Those who ‘steal’ knowledge are celebrated as modern-day Robin Hoods, as in the 2013 case of Aaron Swartz. Author of the *Guerilla OA Manifesto*⁵, Swartz was a programmer and hacktivist indicted for downloading a portion of JSTOR’s online repository of academic articles, and subsequently committed suicide (Day 2013, see also Golumbia 2016: 96-100). For many, Swartz is a martyr for OA, which is framed as a battle for knowledge and

transparency against nefarious publishers and their secretive agents, the U.S. Department of Justice. More recently, the focus has been on SciHub⁶, a repository of “pirated” academic papers, currently evading prosecution by Elsevier. In both cases, downloading is seen as heroic because it involves stealing knowledge from the capitalists and giving it back to “the people”, not least those in the Global South. Thus, removing barriers to access becomes a moral act: it both prevents enclosure, and redistributes benefits.

The inherent properties of knowledge as a good also change with the change in the perceived boundaries of its publics: the wider the access, the wider the benefits. Willinsky (2006), for instance, makes a strong case that OA contributes to public health, but extends this to the cultivation of participatory democracy and, drawing on Derrida’s notion of a “right to philosophy”, even argues that access to academic research is a basic human right. Suber (2012: 14) argues in part that OA flows from universities’ (both public and private) broad “public purpose”. In surveying the advocacy field, Eve agrees that a common argument is that OA “enhance(s) the ability of the university to change society for the better” (2014: 53). Finally, the first sentence of the (2002) Budapest Open Initiative argues that OA has the potential to produce an “unprecedented public good” that will “lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge”.

We can observe here that the definition of a public good moves from the *technical* or *economic* (good as a potential commodity) towards a *moral* one: that is, good as a positive, beneficial thing – and, as such, something that should be accessible to all publics, in the greatest possible quantity. This almost imperceptibly equates knowledge with goods such as air or grain: the underlying assumption is that the public *needs* such goods to survive – thus, barriers to access, profit-generating or not, are wrong by default. In this sense, we move from assumptions related to the dynamics of knowledge *consumption* to the dynamics of its *production*.

The context of production: knowledge as good

If OA is framed as a critique of enclosure, there is no necessary change in the quantity or quality of knowledge produced, but rather in its distribution. In this sense, the goal

is to provide *more users* access to the *same content*. However, if knowledge is taken as a good in the *moral* sense, it follows that more (of it) is a good thing—an assumption rooted in the Enlightenment belief in the power of reason to dispel prejudice and contribute to societal and individual development. In other words, if more knowledge is good, then the way to generate more good is through generating more knowledge. Here, we will focus on two elements of the moral economy of knowledge production: the politics of peer review, and the nature of academic labour.

Peer reviewing: delay and enclosure

While peer review does not *necessarily* need to change in an open publishing model, most discussions include considerations of how OA might change peer review. In addition to this, many existing models of OA publishing include different peer review practices. Most frequently, this entails a shift from pre- to post-publication review or “curation” (Bhaskar, 2016). This means publishing first, and employing digital tools and platforms to sort through the resulting (larger) body of knowledge *ex post facto*. In combination with removing barriers to access such as paywalls, the assumption is that publications will be (re)viewed not just by peers – that is, other academics – but also, potentially by the broader public. This is also one of the assumptions behind new models of valuation of academic knowledge production: the ‘Altmetrics manifesto’ for instance, aspires to “crowdsource peer review”⁷.

Critiques of pre-publication peer review appear in two related, though not inseparable, forms. One is that pre-publication review slows down the process of knowledge production. The other is that it obscures the dynamics of evaluation, and can be used to reproduce the status and power hierarchies of the academy. In this context, while usually conceding that pre-publication review and editing serves some important filtering functions, its critics assume that it constitutes both a form of enclosure, and a form of monopoly.

The first part is related to the duration of the review process. Arguing for the expansion of pre-print or “Green OA” repositories, Suber, for instance, says they “bypass delay”, “creating new and earlier opportunities for citation, discussion, verification, and collaboration” (2012: 106). Eve (2014: 148), while clearly noting

that it does not necessarily apply to all academic work, implies a moral imperative to publish quickly since knowledge has the potential to “change policy, thereby saving lives”⁸. Speed of publication is also part of the strategy of mega-journals. Both *ELife* and *PLOSOne*, two of the most popular STEM OA journals, cite “speed” as a key reason to publish with them. Speed of publication is clearly associated with the political ontology of knowledge as a (moral) good. If knowledge is good, then, it makes sense to assume that any social actor who slows down or otherwise impedes the process of its production is morally suspect, regardless of whether they profit from it.

The second part, as we noted, refers to the assumption that peer review can obscure or interfere with the process of knowledge production. Fitzpatrick (2011:15-49) captures this referring to pre-publication review as “the gatekeeper model”, which she connects to a history of state censorship of the academy, the sometimes arbitrary disciplining of knowledge, the reproduction of the authority of editors, and economies of academic reputation. Similarly, Eve (2014) argues that pre-publication review is overtly opaque, leaving a “final artifact in which no traces of the construction remain visible” (145), and where “the quality of the review process must be inferred from the perceived post-publication quality of the research” (141). He furthermore suggests that pre-publication review is bound by presentism (139), which translates into a “permanent pre-silencing” of ideas by reviewers and editors who predefine their audiences (145).

In this case, pre-publication review is framed as enclosure not by virtue of preventing access to the finished product, but by keeping the process of production behind ‘closed doors’. As Eve (2014: 43-85) points out, subscription or scarcity-based journals entangle the economics of publication with the symbolic or reputational economics of prestige. Editors involved with pre-publication review journals are framed as gatekeepers, who are exceedingly interested in rejection rates and impact factors, or worse, as lackeys of for-profit publishers who benefit by cultivating the artificial prestige of journals (see Kelty, 2014).

OA advocates who favour post- as opposed to pre-publication review suggest it would make not only access to, but also knowledge itself, more democratic. For instance, Suber (2012) argues that

We want access to everything that could help us decide what to call knowledge, not just to the results that we agree to call knowledge. If access depended on the outcome of debate and inquiry, then access could not contribute to debate and inquiry (112).

From there, he goes on to explain some of the reasons why restricting or preventing access to the dynamics of production is wrong:

Among other things, research includes knowledge and knowledge claims or proposals, hypotheses and conjectures, arguments and analysis, evidence and data, algorithms and methods, evaluation and interpretation, debate and discussion, criticism and dissent, summary and review. OA to research should be OA to the whole shebang. Inquiry and research suffer when we have access to anything less.

Access to “the whole shebang” makes knowledge more democratic not only by opening up the “black box” of peer review (Squazzoni and Gandelli, 2013), but also eliminating or at least correcting the status hierarchies and inequalities inherent in the relationship between reviewers and the (text being) reviewed. Fitzpatrick argues for a collaborative peer-to-peer or network-based system of post-publication review where the focus shifts from “the review of the texts being published... [to a] review of the reviewers” (2011:38), making it more transparent than the present model. In this view, rather than censors, reviewers would become equal participants in the process.

The moral foundations of these arguments are not difficult to establish. If knowledge is (a) good, then more knowledge can only mean more good. Any agent or structure that obstructs the creation of knowledge – either by slowing down the rate of production, or by making it potentially susceptible to the whims and fancies of editors and reviewers – *cannot be but morally wrong*. It seems that irrespective of whether publishers profit, embracing abundance suggests not just that paywalls are morally

bad, but pre-publication filtering *itself*. While most OA advocates do not propose eliminating pre-publication curation altogether, a common theme is that it should not extend to a *selection* of what gets published. Selection, in other words, ought to be left to readers or consumers. In this sense, opening the black box of peer review is seen to constitute the emancipation of knowledge from the various monopolies and hierarchies of the academy, and in the process democratises access to, *but also the production of knowledge itself*. This brings us to the other important aspect of this process: academic labour, and those who perform it.

Free labour: academic altruism

As established earlier, one of the main arguments for OA is that for-profit publishers unduly benefit from the work of academics. This is most obvious in the subscription model, but it is also evident in the *gold* or article processing charge (APCs) model, where authors, institutions, or their funders are expected to pay for their product to become OA post-publication. In other words, academics are first ‘robbed’ of the products of their labour and *then* have to pay for access – either individually (through APCs), or through institutional subscription.

In capitalism, there should be no surprise that for-profit publishers aim to profit, including by appropriating academic labour. It is much more interesting to consider the assumption that academics should not be directly remunerated for their research and writing. This assumption – that publishing is part of (already) paid academic labour – is, however, predicated on a specific idea of *who* is an academic, as well as what kind of work they perform. Namely, most contracts stipulate that academics do varying amounts of teaching, research, administration, and possibly applying for external research grants. Typically, however, academics cannot expect additional income from publishing in peer-reviewed journals. Whilst publishing books usually comes with royalties, and speaking engagements, consultancies, and sometimes even appearances in the media can involve payment – academics are usually not paid for publishing the results of their research in journals, nor for presenting it at conferences.

This “peculiar custom” (Suber, 2012: 10) reveals important assumptions about the valorisation of academic labour. Historically, journals and proceedings, just like

conferences, were framed as outlets for the exchange of findings and arguments between the small number of those who belonged to learned societies. Thus, sharing one's research with peers was not just a way of contributing to the expanding boundaries of the discipline; it was also a sign of belonging and participation in a specific social environment that validated the labour. This is why publishing was framed as an inextricable part of knowledge production; the context of justification – that is, the communication of findings – was intrinsic to research itself.

As many authors have noted, the shift towards quantification and ranking of the products of academic labour came as a consequence of the expansion of universities and, in particular, the introduction of neoliberal forms of governance, associated in the UK with New Public Management (e.g. Gill, 2009, Vostal, 2016, O'Neill, 2014, Sparkes, 2007). Linking public funding of higher education institutions to research performance assessment created conditions in which academics are incentivised to publish not only 'better', but *more*. In other words, both wages and career progression in academia are connected with the quantity of output, even if corrected for quality through techniques like the UK Research Excellence Framework⁹.

OA does not interfere with this assumption. If anything, removing pre-publication review will contribute to abundance, that is, make it easier for academics to publish their work, including work still in progress. Once paywalls are removed, different types of audiences will get the chance to read, comment, and engage with the work of academics; in this context, it is assumed that high-quality knowledge will 'float to the top'. An important underlying assumption here concerns the time and effort needed for this sort of filtering. In the context of the demands for increased output, combined with additional administrative and teaching burdens and a tightening time frame – what scholars have referred to as the acceleration of academic life (e.g. Vostal, 2016, 2014, O'Neill, 2014) – reviewing can often be seen a temporal luxury. Across the board, academics are reporting feeling overwhelmed and incapable of coping with their workloads; while agreement over exact figures is hard to establish, it seems a lot of academic research ends up not read at all, or at least not cited¹⁰.

Opening access aims to change this by changing the number of people who can access the products of academic labour, but it does not change the *status* of the product vis-à-

vis commodification of academic labour. What it does is shift the assumption of non-financial remuneration of academic labour from an “old tradition” (Budapest 2002) to a moral expectation (Harnad, 1995, Suber, 2012). This is nicely captured by the 2014 Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resource Coalition’s (SPARC) OA Week motto: “Generation Open”. Focusing on students and early career researchers¹¹, this pushes OA into the realm of identity politics, implying that to not choose OA is to be old-fashioned and out of date, and most damningly, *closed*.

The idea that academics should not be interested in profiting – financially or symbolically – from their labour, rests on the idea that they are already paid for publishing by their employers. This, as we noted, is predicated on a specific idea of who is an academic: a person (ideally permanently) employed by a university, whose contract includes a sufficient amount of time allocated to research and publication, and who is relatively unbound by other obligations. It does not apply as easily to staff on short-term, contingent and casual contracts, whose numbers are growing both in the UK (UCU, 2016) and the US (Gill, 2014). These positions pay significantly lower wages, often only for teaching, and by definition offer no guarantee of future employment. Switching to publishing in OA journals only, and thus sacrificing the potential benefits of participation in established networks and orders of prestige, is a much higher risk for these precarious labourers. This risk, of course, could be mitigated by a wholesale switch to OA. However, even if this happens sometime in the distant future, the short run will likely be characterized by the duplication of labour, where early career researchers try to contribute both to OA and traditional journals, thus increasing their already inflated workload. This has led some critics to suggest that the focus on consumption (that is, enabling access) in an OA economy diverts attention from the process of production, and “turns academic labor against itself” (Golumbia, 2016). Neary and Winn (2012) similarly argue that the politics of open knowledge focus on the freedom of *things*, but further exploit and enclose the value of academic labour.

Our argument is that these implications stem from the conflation of the economic and moral meaning of “good”. If knowledge is treated as a good in the *economic* sense, the labour involved in its production can be measured, valued, and exchanged. However, if knowledge is treated as (a) good in the *moral* sense, then measurement as

well as remuneration are seen to constitute the reduction of the moral to the economic – that is, an attempt to measure something that cannot be measured. In this sense, academic labour in an OA economy figures not unlike domestic labour in the classical capitalist economy; in other words, a “labour of love”, supposedly outside of the sphere of economic exchange (Federici, 2012, Fraser, 1990). This falls in line with a longer tradition of framing academic work as a ‘vocation’ or ‘passion’ – a framing that is fully compatible with neoliberal work ethic, especially in the context of knowledge production (e.g. Cannizzo, 2017).

The ontological status of knowledge also contributes to the emphasis on “the freedom of things” that Neary and Winn (2012) argue characterises arguments for OA. If knowledge as *a good* (in the economic sense) and knowledge as *good* (in the moral sense) are equated, it follows that in order to *do good*, one just needs to ensure the free circulation of objects that carry or contain it – i.e. journal articles. Similarly, those who generate (moral) good cannot be expected to be specifically paid for it, no more than doctors or nurses should expect to be paid for the compassion they (presumably) feel for their patients. The purpose of exchange, thus, is not to generate profit, but rather to generate (more) good. This moral economy, in other words, is moral more than economic.

The moral (of) economy: the political ontology of knowledge

Like other forms of economy, OA as a moral economy of digital knowledge production rests on a set of specific ontological assumptions. These assumptions concern the nature and agency of actors involved in academic knowledge production, the nature of knowledge as (a) good, as well as their mutual relationships. Our analysis has focused on the assumptions underpinning both the context of the production and the context of the consumption of knowledge. In these, we have shown that OA positions agents in relation to knowledge as a good.

On one side are for-profit publishers, in most cases seen as evil or at least morally suspect, because they enclose academic knowledge. They intervene both in consumption and production: on the consumption side, they construct paywalls that prevent both academics and the broader public from accessing the results of research;

on the production side, they contribute to the reproduction of disciplinary and institutional monopolies through pre-publication peer review, which encloses the process of selection and curation in the sense of rendering it invisible to other academics and the general public. In this, they are seen to collude with (or at least reinforce) traditional structures of academic hierarchy, who have a vested interest in perpetuating differences in status between journals, institutions and disciplines. Juxtaposed to this world of profit-motivated enclosures are academics, seen as relatively uninterested in material or symbolic profit from publications. These academics selflessly engage in open and collaborative (post-publication) peer review, which they have both the time and the patience to do. In this, they are aided by members of the public, who, no longer impeded by barriers to access, contribute to the work of sorting and ordering the results of academic knowledge in this age of abundance.

The core ontological assumption of OA, therefore, is that knowledge is valuable *as such*. While removing barriers to access, OA does not question the form, value, or usability of knowledge, because knowledge is assumed to be a good in itself. As noted in the beginning, OA takes as its starting point the digital transformation of knowledge production, which allows products of academic labour to be ‘liberated’ from the old constraints of physical media. What OA seeks to do *beyond that* is use the digital nature of knowledge in order to transform relations between different agents in the context of knowledge production. This is why OA can be thought of as a moral economy: knowledge is assumed to have the power to subvert existing relations of production, including, for instance, those that enable publishers to profit from the work of academics. Attempts to treat it as a commodity – that is, enclose it, limit its use, or compensate its producers or mediators – are framed as immoral or expropriative. On the other hand, those who produce it are framed as altruistic and by definition uninterested in economic forms of personal gain, while willing to risk symbolic gain. Access to knowledge, then, serves at the same time as a critique of these relations, and as a solution to them: remove barriers to access, and other inequalities related to the use, application, and interaction with knowledge — will diminish or even disappear.

In this sense, OA is in line with the broader critique of the commodification and marketization of knowledge production, which criticises encroachment of the market on other forms of exchange, or colonisation of the “lifeworld” by the “system” (e.g. Habermas, 1985, Polanyi, 1944). At the same time, this particular case shows historical continuity with distrust towards intermediary actors, which E.P. Thompson claimed characterized the moral economy of the English crowd in the 18th century. Here, we can observe the resurfacing of the tension between market and other types of exchange, and their moral corollaries (cf. Fourcade and Healy, 2007). However, in the unrestrained belief in the good (of) knowledge as such, OA resembles the arguments made by free market advocates: just like the latter believe that the market helps purge society of tyrannical and centralised state authority, it appears that OA rests on the belief that knowledge has properties that allow it to liberate the society from various political and economic problems.

Knowledge *ex machina*: beyond justification

In the closing section, we would like to offer a sociological interpretation for the development of this form of moral economy. Simone Weil argued that “Every professional group manufactures a morality for itself in virtue of which the exercise of the profession, so long as it conforms to the rules, is quite outside the reach of evil. This is an almost vital need, for the stress of work...is in itself so great that it would be unbearable if accompanied by anxious concern about good and evil” (1943:172). As we noted earlier, authors writing on higher education and research agree that “the stress of work” has substantially increased over the past years. In the context of mounting pressures to demonstrate relevance or “impact”, it is not surprising that academics look for a higher, ‘metaphysical’ justification for their position, status, and value.

Boltanski and Thévenot write that justified disputes are grounded on a disagreement over the worth (*grandeur*) of different beings present in the situation (1999: 363). The “situation”, in this case, refers to the changing political context of academic knowledge production: under conditions of austerity, governments increasingly require universities to justify the use of public funds for teaching and research. The vocabulary of justification that governments offer increasingly has to do with utility:

that is, academic labour is valued on the basis of its contribution to economic growth, competitiveness, or application in industry. In Boltanski and Thévenot's terms, this corresponds with the worlds of market and industry (1999: 372): worth is judged in accordance with the criteria of competitiveness and efficiency.

Different entities present in the situation have a different relationship to these orders of worth. Many academics, especially in the humanities and social sciences, are hostile to the application of economic logic to evaluate their activities: in fact, this forms a large part of the critique of transformation of knowledge production both in the Anglophone world and beyond. For-profit publishers, on the other hand, can fit into these 'orders of worth' more easily – as their aim is the maximisation of profit on the basis of academic labour. But there is another important element in this political ontology, insofar as it concerns OA: knowledge itself.

As noted at the beginning, the nature of knowledge has changed substantially with the onset of the "digital revolution". Previously bound in books and physical copies of journals, knowledge can now be liberated from the constraints of the physical, just like it can be liberated from the confines of structures and networks that controlled and limited access to it and its use. This, at least, is what OA advocates would want to believe: 'information wants to be free' – and, in this process, it can liberate those who come in contact with it. However, not everyone is happy with this arrangement: different actors involved in knowledge production still want to exercise control over knowledge through one of the orders of worth that dominate their worlds: that is, by judging it – and, by extension, those who produce it – by the criteria of economic relevance: does it contribute to economic growth? Is it efficient? (cf. Brown 2015, McGettigan, 2013).

Forms of critique or resistance to this type of evaluation employ, to varying degrees, other orders of worth identified by Boltanski and Thévenot (1999:368). For instance, the public good argument can be identified with the civic order (is it in collective interest?), while appeals to the transformative/liberating power of knowledge combine elements of the civic and inspired orders (is it creative and nonconformist *and* in collective interest?). What sets OA apart is that it goes *beyond* specific orders of worth: in other words, it positions knowledge *outside* of the need for justification.

Knowledge, in other words, becomes a good not because it can be priced or exchanged, but because it is treated as good in the *moral sense*. OA functions as a moral economy because it equalises the *moral* and the *economic* side of knowledge production; as knowledge becomes the ultimate good, it is positioned beyond the sphere of commodity exchange.

Our analysis shows this positioning proceeds in three phases. First, through the critique of enclosures, knowledge is established as a public good. In this form, it is still susceptible to a market logic: this is why it needs to be defended from appropriation by “greedy” publishers. Second, knowledge as a public good is equated with the capacity to *do* good: in other words, access to knowledge is connected to democracy and equality, and to dismantling hierarchies – including those, such as that between North and South, that still thrive in the domain of knowledge production. Once the economic and moral meanings of ‘good’ are conflated, the evaluation of other entities involved in this social situation follows logically from it. Namely, those who impede, enclose, or otherwise try to extract profit from knowledge are identified as evil; those who produce it (academics) or help others get access to it (hackers like Swartz or Elbakyan, the creator of SciHub) are rendered as good, providing, of course, that they collect no personal profit from this save the gratification of being morally correct. In this process, knowledge is rendered an ultimate good, and thus beyond the need for justification.

Conclusion

This does not necessarily mean the landscape of knowledge production OA seeks to engage with is “flat” or democratic. The political ontology of OA assumes knowledge as such has the power to erase the differences between different people and publics when it comes to the capacity to use, evaluate, and apply knowledge, towards the greatest possible good. In the era of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’ epistemic landscape, not to mention the increasingly personal segmentation of knowledge by algorithmic filters, this is a tall order indeed.

Our paper shows how a specific community (or group of actors) constructs a moral economy in the context of digital capitalism. This context has, on the one hand,

enabled the free circulation of products of academic knowledge, no longer impeded by physical limitations in the same way ‘traditional’ books or papers in academic journals have been. On the other hand, it has also posed substantial challenges to academic labour, in particular through increasing demands for accountability and demonstration of value of research. In this context, OA emerges as a form of justification, which serves to underline the value of those who produce knowledge – and, more importantly, the value of knowledge itself. While, of course, this process is an expected response in the context of challenges posed to the profession – especially, as Weil noted, in relation to the “stress of work” – it makes sense to bear in mind that a truly open way of engaging with knowledge would need to involve more than just access, including, potentially, questioning the moral assumptions underlying the privilege of those who produce it.

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Notes

¹ Some authors are critical towards the term “knowledge production”, claiming that using it justifies the framing of knowledge as an economic good, and thus represents an endorsement of the commodifying drive of neoliberal policies related to higher education and research. While we agree with those who argue that ever more aspects of higher education are being “marketised” and “economised” (Brown 2015, McGettigan 2013), we do not celebrate this commodification, nor do we want to reduce academic research and writing to an economic operation. Nevertheless, we are interested in the various processes through which academic knowledge and its derivatives acquire value in a capitalist economy and society.

² See “The Cost of Knowledge” project/boycott: <http://www.thecostofknowledge.com/> [accessed 15/10/2016]

³ There are many definitions of OA, concerning a wide array of issues (e.g. access itself, funding, copyright, (re)use) and content (see Eve 2014: 8-12, Suber 2012: 1-9). Like most OA advocates, we are interested in arguments in favour of removing financial and permission barriers to peer-reviewed academic knowledge. Crucially, we are also interested in the ways that moral assumptions surrounding OA are entangled with arguments of what content ought to be subject to this economy. So while we are mainly interested in academic journals and journal articles, and less so in books, the definitions of “journal”, “article”, or other related media and content, are

changing rapidly. Furthermore, to some extent we discount disciplinary differences in approaches to and debates over OA. Some may object to this approach, but we believe that these differences are of *relatively* little consequence for the assumptions at work in the moral economy and political ontology of OA.

⁴ The concept of a public good is relatively technical in economics, relating to the extent of the “rivalry” and “excludability” of goods (see Stiglitz 1999). ‘Pure public’ goods are those not diminished by consumption (rivalry) *and* where it is impossible to coerce payment for access (excludability). For Suber (2009), knowledge in general is clearly and technically a public good, but codified knowledge or “texts” are not—although in the age of Internet, they could be. In reality, pure public goods are rare and most public-like goods fall somewhere on a scale between public and private (see Schoenenberger 2005).

⁵ http://archive.org/stream/GuerillaOpenAccessManifesto/Goamjuly2008_djvu.txt
Accessed 15/10/2016

⁶ See “Who’s downloading pirated papers? EVERYONE”, *Science*, published online 28/04/2016, accessed 25/02/2017: <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/04/whos-downloading-pirated-papers-everyone>

⁷ See <http://altmetrics.org/manifesto/>, Accessed 14/04/2017

⁸ See Eve 2016, revisiting his 2014 arguments on speed and OA, and suggesting that speed of publication must be balanced with taking the time to “get it right”. Accessed 18/02/17: <https://www.martineve.com/2016/02/17/on-speed-and-open-access/>

⁹ Probably the most problematic result of this is the “predatory OA” journal where authors are aggressively recruited, peer review and editorial standards are low or non-existent, but unwitting authors are nevertheless pressured to pay APCs (see Sorokowski et al. 2017). More important is the increasingly popular OA “mega-journal”, where disciplinary boundaries are discounted and peer-review and editorial standards subordinated to speed of publication. Unlike predatory journals, most mega-journals are seen as legitimate and respectable outlets. The non-profit *PLOS ONE* may be the best-known example, but all large for-profit publishers now have mega-journals, as do some university presses like the University of California’s *Collabra* platform.

¹⁰ See Lariviere, V and Gingras, Y (undated working paper) “The decline in the concentration of citations, 1900-2007”, <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/0809/0809.5250.pdf>

¹¹ Accessed 20/2/17:
<http://www.openaccessweek.org/profiles/blogs/2014themeannouncement>