The Politics After Postmodernism Begins with the Political Economy of Our Own Work

John Willinsky

About the time of postmodernism’s eclipse or exhaustion at the turn of the century, many of us deeply influenced by that great raft of critical theory, writ large, found ourselves at a turning point. The intervening years between then and now have not been a time of post-theory so much as a time trying to find a way lit by theory. Which is to say that the work is being driven by what postmodernism and poststructuralism exposed as the pretense of an overweening center, a totalizing grand narrative of Western progress amid lapse and shortfall. Certainly, some sustain the critique of the West’s particular, but by no means exclusive, legacy of racism, classism, misogyny, homophobia, colonialism, and capitalism, while others have turned to new educational forms in hip hop pedagogy, culturally responsive curricula, the maker movement, and more. And still others have tried to pursue what Fredric Jameson imagined as a postmodern politics: “The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale” (1991, 54). With this last group, among whom I count myself, the vocation in question is academic work, as we seek to invent a means of fully projecting the global cognitive mapping of our colleague, working in every corner of the world, onto the new public space of this digital era.

Given “our positioning as individual and collective subjects,” to continue with Jameson, we aspire to “regain a capacity to act and struggle” against the treatment of academic work as a corporate asset (ibid.). For the world of scholarly publishing is increasingly subject to what Jameson identifies as the “world space of multinational capital,” as the industry undergoes a process of corporate concentration led handful of scholarly publishers, with Elsevier, Springer Nature, Wiley Blackwell, and Taylor and Francis at the forefront, but often with the scholarly societies in tow (ibid.; see Larivière, Haustein, and Mongeon, 2015). This struggle to regain the capacity to act has involved such measures as creating open source scholarly publishing platforms and forming new sorts of cooperative arrangements with research libraries for publishing scholarly journals and monographs for which access is open to all (MacGregor, Stranack, and Willinsky, 2014). These new means of scholarly production are being freely
distributed and locally installed, with colleagues around the globe using them to make their scholarly work into a common public good that can now be part of the responsible efforts, from journalist and others, to oppose the disinformation horrors that otherwise prevail across the infosphere.

Not to be left behind in scholarship’s great digital opening, corporate interests have moved in to monetize open access and buy up the scholarly infrastructure of this new openness, from preprint servers to bibliographic systems, further reducing the academy’s capacity to act outside the worldspace of multinational capital (Peters, 2017). So it would seem that the political economy of our own work continues after the heyday of postmodernism in the long-standing intellectual struggle to find a place to stand from which to move the world with what can be learned of it.

References


MacGregor, James, Kevin Stranack, and John Willinsky. (2014). The Public Knowledge Project: Open source tools for open access to scholarly communication. In Sönke Bartling & Sascha Friesike (Eds.), Opening Science (pp. 165-175). Gewerbestrasse: Springer International Publishing.