

Guest-Editorial Notes (after Progress?)

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Situated at the nexus of the [‘ongoing commercial and technological consolidation of academic publishing – evolving under the rhetoric of internationalisation, excellence and progress’](#) – *Culture Machine* Volume 23 starts from a diagnosis of the contemporary publishing landscape. In this sphere, large corporations such as Elsevier, Springer, and Taylor & Francis provide allegedly cost- and time-efficient integrated solutions for managing, assessing, validating, and widely distributing academic outputs. This offer speaks to neoliberal universities around the globe which – not least incentivised by governments – operate in competitive international markets. [In this context, digital technologies and interconnected platforms are leveraged to enhance the growth and productivity of commercially-driven academic institutions and publishers integrating capitalistic principles](#) – such as efficiency, scalability, profit maximisation, and competitive advantage – into the networks that govern the creation, sharing, and reception of academic knowledges. This system reflects the [‘informational capitalist stage’ in the academic sphere](#), where knowledge is treated as a profitable asset, strategically managed to maximise economic returns.

As platform-based business models become central, the value of scholarly work is increasingly seen as a function of citation and visibility metrics: it is judged by its utility – particularly its ability to generate reputational and economic benefits for both researchers and institutions. This valuation is further enhanced by the frequent, efficient, and broad dissemination of research outputs in top-ranked impact factor publications. As a result of this evolvment, academic progress is framed in terms of productivity, growth, data metrics, and international visibility – closely aligning with modern liberal humanist and positivist ideas, which prioritise individual competitiveness and empirical validation. The capitalist [‘technoscientific desire for the global alignment, quantification, and evaluation of scientific knowledge and productivity’](#) is not uniform. It

arises in different intensities in various disciplinary and geographical realms where it is continuing to endanger knowledge equity and diversity.

Hence, the analytical ground from which the special issue ‘Publishing after Progress’ (as well as many of the articles conjoined in it) departs, are the manifold geopolitical, epistemic, social, and cognitive effects of this evolution – and how it continues to uphold the geographical, class, gender, and racial hierarchies that modern science regimes (their institutional frameworks, discursive constructions, and normative processes and practices) have historically reinforced even in spaces widely celebrated for calling them into question (such as [open access publishing](#) (including [community- or scholar-led approaches](#)) or [open science](#) trajectories).

The analyses assembled in this special issue emerge in relation to and in tension with the larger world(s) academia constitutes and is constituted by: world(s) that are marked by humanitarian and planetary emergencies in which modern notions of progress – based on liberal humanist, utilitarian, and positivist ideas exemplified in academic publishing by capitalist individualist and competitive productivity- and visibility-metrics – reveal their inadequacy in addressing these emergencies. This deficiency is not only revealed in the systemic failure of translating urgent climate warnings into decisive consolidate action but also underscored within the broader geopolitical landscape: not least by ongoing conflicts such as the ones in the Ukraine and the Middle East that reflect a dynamic configuration of global power that does not align with traditional Western narratives of unilateral dominance. These shifts are also manifest in the deterioration of classical notions of the modern state and of liberal representative democracy within post-truth and libertarian regimes which not only prioritise market-led growth but also espouse a ‘survival of the fittest ethos’ [in which deregulation and aggressive cuts to cultural funding directly affect literary and publishing worlds, as well as the social and subjective registers of social, cultural, and political activity](#).

The special issue ‘Publishing after Progress’ emphasises that, in this context, a problematisation of the persistent ‘anthropological’ disparities across class, race, gender, historical and geographical contexts, as well as cultural and epistemic backgrounds remains pertinent. However, in a time that is not only marked by exacerbated ‘anthropological differences’ but also by planetary emergencies, thinking publishing [beyond an anthropocentric viewpoint that places human\(ist\) exceptionalism at the centre of scientific progress](#) is not less crucial. Such a perspective is also exemplified by Carlos Ramírez

Kobra who – through his work [Cyber_bardX: Contrato con entre humanx y entidad virtual](#) on which the cover design for ‘Publishing after Progress’ is based – challenges notions of human exceptionalism by advocating for a redefinition of creativity as a collaborative and horizontal endeavour across human and non-human actors.

Beyond the diagnostic and analytical realm, [as the open call for this special issue stressed \(not without a certain imperative\)](#) – in a time when Western paradigms are losing their binding force and human-centric frameworks are challenged – it is most urgent to, once again, rethink the value, scope, and purpose of scholarship, scholarly work, scholarly subjectivity, and scholarly existence beyond prevalent metrics of productivity and competitiveness and related liberal, utilitarian, and positivist narratives of modern capitalist progress as an unalloyed good. Consequently, ‘Publishing after Progress’ invites such a rethinking while – in the critical tradition of *Culture Machine* journal – remaining committed to intellectual questioning, rigour, debate, and the radical democratisation of knowledge creation processes.

It does so *despite* feelings of resignation and cynicism among individuals which are akin to [‘a species of resigned realism that concedes too much to present conditions’](#) under the systemic dominance of commercial entities in academic publishing. Within some disciplinary communities in academia, these sentiments may easily be perceived as a logical response to a [loss of sense of purpose and significance in academic work](#) or [impulses of professional disengagement and boredom](#). Such feelings of disillusionment and alienation are, indeed, increasingly frequent in a context where the scope and value of scholarly work is seen as a function of citation metrics and progress is mostly recognised as individual and as in competition with others. An insistence on this *despite* seems all the more important in a broader political climate increasingly characterised by hostility towards particular strands of scientific inquiry that reflect on and pursue their scholarship as a way to contribute to social, political, cultural, epistemic, and (in certain instances) ontological change have – for example, under pervasive ‘anti-intellectual’, ‘anti-elitism’, or ‘anti-wokeness’ agendas – been disqualified as ‘ideological’ and ‘unscientific’. For example, this hostility is exemplified by an international rise of political and media attacks – often originating in right-wing populist contexts but increasingly also adopted within more mainstream political discourses – followed by university-led investigations targeting university institutes and scholars engaged in critical arts, humanities, and social sciences. These often are dismissed as irrelevant, overly complex, and unhelpful for solving ‘real-world’ issues or preparing

students for employment, while also facing allegations of political bias or overemphasis on minority rights.

Hence, situated at the intersection of institutional metrics-driven productivity regimes, their liberal, utilitarian, and positivist entanglements, and media and political charges of anti-intellectualism, this special issue emanates from the tension between how contemporary institutions expect tasks to be performed and how individuals and communities want to (or already do) perform their work based on their values, expertise, and understanding of what their work requires in sight of persisting inequalities in scholarship and scholarly publishing as well as to planetary conditions of crisis and emergency. Tentatively mapping [‘emergent discourses on, as well as practices, protocols, and methods for, inaugurating and sustaining new types of research’, publishing, and scholarship](#), this issue opens out to manifold – connected, loosely connected, or not connected – partial and ongoing stories told by activist, artistic, and academic authors (or, better activist-artistic-academic authors) from Argentina, Belgium, Mexico, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the UK, and the US. These, through their publishing endeavours, have started to productively and creatively respond to the conflict between institutional expectations and their own situated vision of what their work requires in sight of pressurised working environments, enduring disparities in academia, and planetary emergencies.

Coagulating around a shared political domain – namely a preoccupation with technocapitalism in publishing and its effects on sociotechnical, naturecultural, and psychosocial environments – the diverse efforts assembled in this issue remain rooted in the manifold disciplinary, theoretical, cultural backgrounds, as well as the situated interests, struggles, and practices they emerge from. While having different names for their doings – be it ‘householding’, ‘designing sideways’, ‘reverse scholarship’, or ‘editing otherwise’ – the contributors to this issue grapple with the possibility of a politics of engagement in and through publishing, rather than conveying a political message or discussing a political topic. They do so, beyond a prevailing capitalist ethos of competition and individual performance evaluation – celebrated by many contemporary institutions as ‘progress’ – while facilitating, in praxis, spaces for experimenting with what such a politics of engagement could be and become in an increasingly troubled and troubling world.

The articles conjoined in this special issue affirmatively draw on [the productive overlaps between post-hegemonic, cultural hegemony critical, social and epistemic justice, intersectional feminist, and decolonial discourses and theories](#). While most of the contributors

are situated in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, many of the authors assembled in this special issue underline that their efforts are part of a wider array of ‘insurrectional publishing practices’ – for example, by anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist collectives, organisations, movements and networks – that extend beyond what is acknowledged by the university in general and the open access and open science discourses, specifically (as privileged sites in which academic publishing – including the creation, validation, and sharing of knowledge – is debated and shaped).

Consequently, the knowledges assembled in this special issue range from – and often combine – [affirmative critiques of current publishing models](#) participating in [institutional](#), [policy](#), and [governance](#) debates; over contributions advocating for [activist and interventionist modes of being in academia](#) involving in a meta-discussion about the [nature and scope of scholarly work](#); to nuanced micro-political and socio-cultural interventions into current capitalist publishing regimes closely tied to practical know-how on developing archiving, writing, [editing](#), [design](#), [licensing](#), and [publishing](#) processes, practices, and methods ‘after progress’ and, with this, participating in political theory production.

Despite their differences, a shared insinuation emerges among the contributions for ‘Publishing after Progress’ and the politics they bring forward: They all, in manifold ways, are preoccupied with enabling and bringing to the fore the muddled, non-instrumental, contextual, social, and subjective dimensions of thorough and inventive intellecto-political work that have been rendered invisible and inconsequential within current capitalist publishing regimes with their penchant for quantifiable outcomes, productivity- and visibility-driven metrics of success, and their focus on individual achievement. A similar preoccupation is shared by the [peer reviewers](#) that, in the framework of the open review process experimented with for ‘Publishing after Progress’, have taken the risk of critically and tentatively engaging with the potential meaning(s) and scope(s) of their work, as well as with [the standards and parameters of peer review beyond utilitarian and positivist assumptions about scientificity or the economic value of knowledge](#).

However, is pertinent to outline here that, in bringing these efforts together as part of an incomplete and open-ended mapping exercise, ‘Publishing after Progress’ does not want to simply argue for a re-appreciation of the collaborative, context-related, or personal dimensions in publishing within prevalent frameworks of individual assessment and evaluation of academic work. Rather, this issue wants

to pluralise the discourse on existing presents and possible futures of scholarly publishing: it does so through acknowledging what already exists as an [“undercurrent” within contemporary universities](#), or as [‘a decisive but hidden factor’ in the networked environments in which knowledges are created, validated, and shared](#). By doing so, ‘Publishing after Progress’ aims to make the manifold publishing undertakings assembled in this issue legible on their own terms but also as part of a broader set of ‘insurrectional publishing practices’ – in an outside academia.

Making these practices legible can be understood in the sense of a prompt to [‘talk bigger’ and, with this, ‘nudge \(...\) along \(...\) \[and\] enact the world we hope to inhabit’](#). It might take the shape of [‘collective and consciously “inefficient” process of mutual entanglements’](#) towards a [‘dis-identification from the modern, Western subject of progress’](#) that allows for agency-sustaining mutual encouragement and collaboration among engaged knowledge producers: through crafting, sharing, and – through this special issue – temporarily weaving together relationships and stories that contest, collectively, pervasive notions of resigned realism, the loss of sense of purpose and significance in academic work, or impulses of professional disengagement.

In this sense, ‘Publishing after Progress’ might, primarily, not be so much about an argument against, or for, progress thinking as such: Rather, it is about a vehement insistence of the possibility of something that transcends the limitations of what one is advised is achievable, valid, and acceptable within current regimes in academic publishing, in academia more broadly, and in face of anti-intellectual allegations. It is about nurturing the conditions under which this possibility can emerge through inviting scholars to engage with their own writing, editing, review, and publishing activities not [‘merely as competitive producers of research outputs but as active agents in collaboratively shaping the conditions of academic work’](#).

I would like to acknowledge and thank those, who have contributed to shaping these conditions in the context of *Culture Machine* Vol. 23 ‘Publishing after Progress’: the publisher Open Humanities Press for establishing their academic prestige largely outside an economic logic of measurement and efficiency; the co-editors Gabriela Méndez Cota and Rafico Ruiz for – together with various guest-editors, authors, and in every issue of *Culture Machine* anew – facilitating a collaborative space for experimentation, intellectual risk, critical responsibility, and the radical democratisation of knowledge creation processes; and to Alyssa Arbuckle, Miranda Barnes, Simon Bowie, Lucía Céspedes, Joana Chicau, Lucie Kolb, Nikki Fairchild,

Domenico Fiormonte, Mara Karagianni, Alberto López Cuenca, Julien McHardy, Matías Milia, Samuel Moore, Fernanda Mugica, Élika Ortega Guzmán, Priya Rajasekar, Lozana Rossenova, Dubravka Sekulić, Toby Steiner, Jennifer Wolgemuth, and Zenia Yébenes for care-fully, enthusiastically, and generously taking part in the open peer review process experimented with in this volume.

The aim of this experiment has been to critically enact some of the analyses and [questions developed by academic communities](#) regarding the standards and parameters of conventional (double blind) peer review as an [‘expert guarantee of scholarly quality, relevance, or value’](#): these include the lack of intellectual, institutional, and financial recognition for peer review labour as vital component of the scholarly publishing ecosystem; potential biases such as linguistic or epistemic discrimination; the danger of destructive and derogatory feedback supported by anonymity; or the imposition of top-down value judgments through untransparent or/and falsely universalising quality criteria during peer reviewing processes.

As part of the experiment with open peer review conducted for ‘Publishing after Progress’, as I discuss in my own contribution to this special issue, I have attempted to create and facilitate a conversational process that was intellectually meaningful and stimulating for both reviewers and authors; made interactions between authors and reviewers more transparent, horizontal, collaborative, and responsive to the diverse perspectives, realities, and needs of all participants and contributors to this special issue in order to increase their agency; and reframed the notion of value in politico-intellectual contributions as intrinsic to the specific contexts (topics, problems, constellations, for example) in which they come to matter.

As every experiment, the open review process explored in ‘Publishing after Progress’ is not (and does not intend to be) conclusive, not without flaws (nor morally, nor practically), and far from being a standardisable and formulaic replacement for established double blind peer review processes. For example, challenges remain regarding the balance between the distribution of agency, editorial involvement and control; consistently applying evaluation criteria across the journal; the collaborative establishment and agreement on evaluation criteria, while striving to align critical fairness and intellectual thoroughness with inclusivity and the recognition of diverse perspectives in a situated way; and navigating the complexities of human interaction, personal biases, and behaviours in open peer review setups, where emotional reactions to feedback, resistance to criticism, power dynamics, and conflicts of interest can

potentially affect the constructiveness of the review process. To mitigate some of the challenges in open peer review, a consensual and honest good-faith engagement in scholarly debate is required from all the participants in a review process – because, as Domenico Fiormonte, Sheila Godínez-Larios, Eduardo Aguado-López, and members of the Scientific Information System Redalyc demonstrate, it is not at all [‘so “dangerous” to turn a review into a negotiation’](#). One just has to risk it.

[Culture Machine’s Interzone](#) offers excerpts from some of the conversations between authors and reviewers contributing to ‘Publishing after Progress’. These conversations – layered and multi-dimensional as they were – unfolded across several media (including IRL and online conversations, in-text feedback, and extensive email exchanges). The decision which excerpts to openly publish to offer a glimpse into the process is the result of an editorial discussion and decision-making process unfolding between the authors, reviewers, the *Culture Machine* co-editor Gabriela Méndez Cota, and myself. Some reviewers and authors took their exploratory engagement during the open peer review process for ‘Publishing after Progress’ as an opportunity for meta-reflections on peer review itself: as a cherished and unassailable institution, a warrant of quality, and as an opportunity for intellectual development in academic contexts. These reflections form part of the main content of this special issue and can be found under the header ‘Peer Reviewers’ Reflections on Open Peer Review’ in the [table of contents](#).