The Commodification of Academic Publishing- Breaking the Silence on Exploitation

Viktor Wang

California State University, San Bernardino,California, USA

Abstract

This article critically explores the structural realities of academic publishing, drawing on Marxist theory and personal academic experiences. While the system purports to promote scholarly excellence and public access to knowledge, it often mirrors broader institutional inequities and profit-oriented logic. Through examples of unpaid academic labor, restrictive publishing contracts, and marginalization of contributors, the article interrogates how for-profit publishing models exploit faculty while relying on the prestige economy reinforced by universities. At the same time, the article highlights ethical alternatives—including open access, scholar-led journals, and equitable royalty models—as paths toward a more just publishing future. This piece aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on reclaiming academic publishing as a collaborative, inclusive, and public-centered scholarly practice.

Keywords: *Academic Publishing, Commodification, Scholarly Exploitation, Intellectual Ownership, Open Access, Ethical Publishing*

Silencing Dissent: The Political Landscape of Leftist Publishing

In light of recent political climates—including rising restrictions on leftist scholarship and global attacks on academic freedom—this article is also timely. The suppression of Marxist, critical race, and anti-capitalist perspectives has intensified under both state-led censorship and market-driven publication models. In some contexts, scholars advocating for critical frameworks have been denied tenure, excluded from editorial boards, or had their work de-platformed by corporate publishers. These threats are not isolated; they are systemic manifestations of an academic-industrial complex that increasingly mirrors the political interests of capital and power. As such, this article not only critiques the economics of publishing, but situates its argument within the larger struggle for ideological freedom and intellectual autonomy in academia today.

Introduction

In the digital age, academic publishing has become emblematic of broader contradictions within higher education: it promises the advancement of knowledge, yet often functions as a system of economic extraction. What was historically intended as a forum for intellectual exchange is now dominated by corporate structures that prioritize revenue generation over equitable access (Smith & Lee, 2020). Commercial publishers have transformed scholarly contributions into commodities, monetizing the intellectual labor of faculty through paywalls, exorbitant article processing charges (APCs), and restrictive contracts—all while offering limited transparency or accountability (Williams, 2021).

This dynamic is well illustrated by Marx's theory of exploitation as outlined in Das Kapital (1867), where surplus value created by labor is captured by capital. Within publishing, authors, editors, and peer reviewers serve as the labor force, generating scholarly output that is ultimately owned and profited upon by a small number of publishing conglomerates (Chen et al., 2020). Marx's related concept of alienation is also evident, as faculty are distanced from their own intellectual creations—often surrendering copyrights, receiving minimal royalties, or finding their ideas repackaged without recognition (Rodriguez, 2021).

Institutions themselves are complicit in this structure. Retention, Tenure, and Promotion (RTP) decisions are increasingly tethered to publications in high-impact, corporately controlled journals. As a result, scholars face an impossible bind: to advance, they must navigate a system that systematically devalues their labor. Book authors fare no better; many sign contracts with inequitable royalty terms, and some discover that proposed projects or editorial roles are reassigned without acknowledgment. These practices not only exploit scholars but also reinforce a broader culture of silence, where legal teams and opaque processes protect exploitative norms.

This article enters this conversation with a critical aim: to interrogate the commodification of academic publishing and imagine alternative models that uphold dignity, justice, and transparency. Through a Marxist theoretical lens and personal scholarly reflection, the article critiques the dominant structures of academic publishing while uplifting ethical practices such as open-access models, scholar-run presses, and equitable author agreements (Banerjee & Khoo, 2020).

Guided by the following research questions, this work positions itself within a broader call for transformation:

- How does the academic publishing industry reflect Marx's theory of exploitation in its treatment of authors, editors, and peer reviewers?
- What structural and institutional mechanisms perpetuate the commodification of academic labor in scholarly publishing? (Ahmed, 2022)
- What ethical and sustainable alternatives exist that resist the neoliberal logic of profit in academic knowledge dissemination?

These questions serve as a foundation for a structural critique that examines ownership, labor, and institutional complicity. As Marx noted in The German Ideology (1845), "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." If today's publishing landscape mirrors those ideas—of commodification, competition, and control—then the scholarly imperative must be to resist, reimagine, and reclaim publishing as a public good (Gomez & Patel, 2023).

Theoretical Framework: A Marxist Critique of Academic Publishing Scams and Pay-to-Publish Models

Within the Marxist theoretical framing, it is important to foreground Marx's concept of universal labour, which highlights how scientific and academic labor draws not only on contemporary cooperation but also on the cumulative efforts of past generations. Marx wrote, "Scientific work, as knowledge creation, can be seen as a kind of universal labour. This labour depends partly on the co-operation of the living, and partly on the utilisation of the labours of those who have gone before. Co-operative labour, on the other hand, is the direct co-operation of individuals"

(Marx, 1998, p.106). Incorporating this lens deepens our understanding of academic labor as inherently historical and collective—thus rendering its commodification not only an economic offense but an erasure of the intellectual commons produced over generations.

This study draws upon Marxist theory to illuminate the structural inequities embedded within the academic publishing industry. Marx's foundational concepts—exploitation, alienation, and commodification—offer a lens for interrogating how scholarly labor is extracted, repackaged, and commercialized by dominant publishing entities. Rather than serving as neutral platforms for knowledge exchange, academic publishers often operate as market-driven institutions that prioritize capital over collective intellectual advancement.

Central to Marx's analysis is the notion of surplus value—where laborers produce more value than they receive in compensation. Applied to publishing, scholars produce research, edit journals, and review submissions, yet receive minimal or no financial return (Turner, 2021). Instead, profits accrue to commercial publishers who charge institutions and individuals for access, despite providing little support for the creation process. The symbolic currency of 'prestige' obscures these material imbalances, reinforcing a reward system that benefits corporate interests while normalizing unpaid academic labor.

Marx's theory of alienation is also pertinent. Scholars routinely cede copyright and control over their work, particularly in high-impact venues or open-access models that require significant article processing charges (APCs). They are estranged from their intellectual labor, unable to share or repurpose their work freely—an alienation deepened by the pressures of neoliberal academia and tenure systems

(Nakamura et al., 2022).

Further, Marx's notion of commodity fetishism explains how academic output is decontextualized and valued not for its substance, but for its citation count, journal rank, or market visibility. This reduces knowledge to a metric-driven commodity, disincentivizing originality or critical inquiry in favor of replicable, fundable research.

Institutional complicity, particularly through university promotion and tenure systems, reinforces these logics. Drawing on Althusser, universities act as Ideological State Apparatuses—legitimizing commercial publishers as arbiters of quality and enforcing a hierarchy of knowledge production shaped by capital, not merit (Silva & Green, 2024).
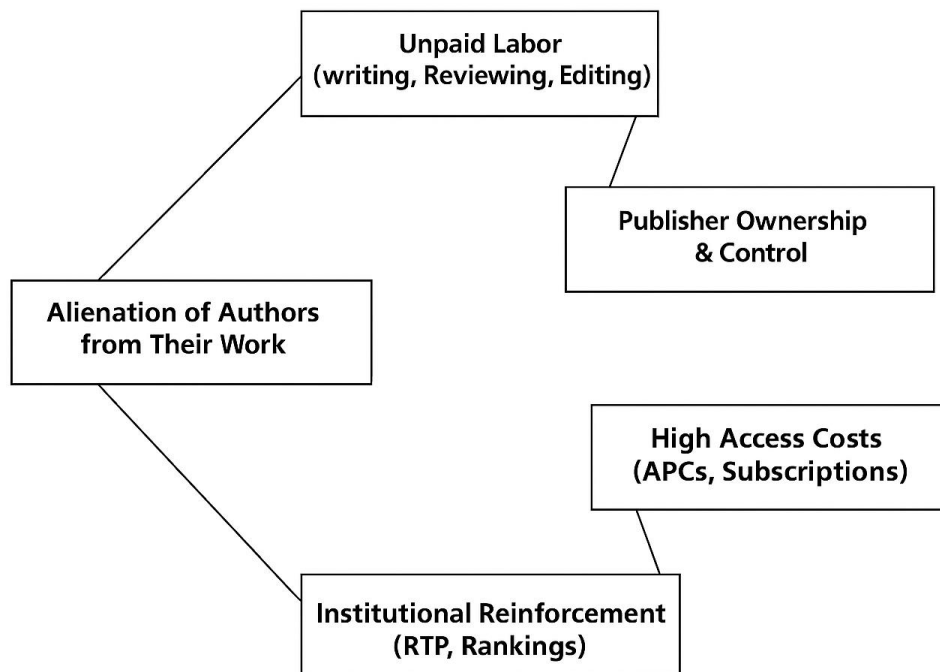
This framework is also informed by critical pedagogy, particularly the work of Freire (1970) and Giroux (1988), who call for the politicization of educational structures and a collective commitment to equity. Applied to publishing, critical pedagogy demands not only awareness of systemic exploitation but action toward transforming publishing practices into a just, inclusive, and community-centered enterprise. The commodification of scholarly publishing has also given rise to exploitative 'pay-to-publish' practices, where authors are promised rapid publication in exchange for hefty fees. As discussed in JCEPS by Frank Truth (2012), these publishing scams disproportionately target under-resourced scholars who are desperate for visibility and institutional credit. Such models erode peer review integrity and further shift academic publishing toward a transactional service model rather than a merit-based scholarly process. The existence of such

pay-for-access structures reinforces the notion that commodified scholarship is not an accident, but a predictable outcome of neoliberal pressures on knowledge dissemination.

Academic Language and Linguistic Inequities

Additionally, the dominance of English in global academic publishing cannot be viewed as a neutral linguistic standard but must be analyzed as a form of linguistic imperialism. Scholars such as Rob Phillipson and Tove Skuttnabb-Kangas have critiqued the systemic privileging of English as a global academic language, arguing that it reinforces neo-imperial power structures that marginalize non-English-speaking scholars (Phillipson & Skuttnabb-Kangas, 1995). These dynamics are not merely linguistic—they are ideological and economic, as scholars from the Global South or from multilingual contexts are often forced to conform to Anglo-American publishing norms, pay for translation or editing services, and navigate epistemic gatekeeping that devalues local knowledge. Incorporating their insights further underscores the colonial underpinnings of contemporary publishing practices.

Figure 1. The Academic Publishing Exploitation Cycle

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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │      Unpaid Labor       │
                    │ (writing, Reviewing,    │
                    │        Editing)         │
                    └─────────────────────────┘
                                      │
                          ┌───────────────────────┐
                          │  Publisher Ownership  │
                          │      & Control        │
                          └───────────────────────┘
  ┌─────────────────────────┐
  │  Alienation of Authors  │
  │     from Their Work     │
  └─────────────────────────┘
                                ┌───────────────────────┐
                                │   High Access Costs   │
                                │ (APCs, Subscriptions) │
                                └───────────────────────┘
              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │ Institutional Reinforcement │
              │      (RTP, Rankings)    │
              └─────────────────────────┘
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A vital but often underacknowledged issue in the global publishing economy is the dominance of English as the default language of scholarship. This systemic linguistic hierarchy presents significant barriers for scholars across non-English-speaking contexts—not only in the Global South but also in economically advanced countries like Germany, Austria, and Poland. Many researchers face the dual burden of translating ideas and paying for specialized copyediting or translation services just to gain access to indexed journals. These challenges deepen epistemic exclusion, as valuable contributions are often sidelined due to language and editorial expectations driven by Anglo-American norms. As argued by Smith (2019), these inequities highlight a deeper need to decolonize academic communication and expand support mechanisms for multilingual scholars.

Figure 1 conceptualizes the cyclical structure of exploitation in academic publishing, interpreted through a Marxist lens. The cycle originates with the uncompensated intellectual labor of scholars—through research, authorship, editing, and peer review—which forms the foundation of scholarly content. This labor is then appropriated by commercial publishers, who exert exclusive control over the dissemination and monetization of this knowledge through article processing charges (APCs), subscription models, and licensing agreements. Institutions contribute to this dynamic by embedding publishing in high-impact, often inaccessible journals into faculty evaluation systems, including retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) criteria. As faculty internalize these pressures and relinquish control over their intellectual contributions, they experience a form of alienation—disconnected from the ownership, accessibility, and impact of their work. This alienation reinforces the legitimacy of existing power structures and perpetuates a loop of academic labor extraction, sustained under the veneer of scholarly prestige and institutional endorsement.

Summary of Theoretical Anchors

The theoretical framework employed in this study is grounded in several key Marxist and critical pedagogical concepts:

• Exploitation (Marx, 1867): Describes the extraction of surplus value from academic labor, where commercial publishers capitalize on the unpaid or underpaid intellectual efforts of scholars (Freeman, 2021).
• Alienation (Marx, 1844): Captures the disconnect scholars experience when they surrender control over their intellectual products, losing ownership, access, and

agency.

• Commodity Fetishism: Refers to the distortion of academic value, where the social labor behind scholarly outputs is obscured by commodified metrics such as impact factors and citation counts.

• Ideological Reproduction (Althusser): Highlights the role of universities in reinforcing capitalist publishing norms by embedding commercial metrics into evaluation and advancement systems (Lee & Song, 2020).

• Critical Pedagogy (Freire, Giroux): Advocates for resistance to academic exploitation through collective action, critical consciousness, and the pursuit of ethical publishing models.

Together, these concepts guide a critique of academic publishing that positions it not merely as a technical mechanism of knowledge dissemination, but as a deeply political structure shaped by economic power. By interrogating the foundational ideologies of publishing, this framework provides a foundation for envisioning more equitable and ethical models of scholarly communication (Zhao, 2021).

The Author as Laborer, the Publisher as Profit-Holder

In this context, the appropriation of scholarly labor by corporate publishers can also be understood as a manifestation of class warfare. As economist Richard D. Wolff argues, the exploitation of academic workers by corporate entities constitutes a modern form of class struggle (Wolff, 2022). The disproportionate extraction of surplus value from scholars—paired with increasing institutional pressure and reduced protections—reflects a structural antagonism between knowledge producers and capital-owning disseminators. Wolff's framework

situates these dynamics within a broader narrative of labor versus capital, where the university becomes both a battleground and a mechanism of ideological control.

As seasoned scholars and contributors to the academic publishing ecosystem, the author has experienced both ends of the ethical spectrum. Some publishers engage in equitable, collaborative partnerships. Others, however, reflect the systemic exploitation that has become endemic within the industry. A notable example of ethical practice can be found in publishers like Kendall Hunt, who offer transparent contracts, equitable royalties—as high as 40%—and treat authors as long-term partners rather than disposable content providers (Foster & Grant, 2022). Unfortunately, such ethical standards remain the exception. Much of the academic publishing world is governed by commercial interests that prioritize profit margins over scholarly integrity. Publishers extract intellectual labor while offering minimal compensation and sometimes engage in practices that border on appropriation. The author experienced this firsthand after submitting a proposal for a new journal focused on artificial intelligence in education. The proposal was initially declined, only to be replicated months later under a new title, with no acknowledgment or invitation to participate. This incident underscores a broader pattern of idea extraction and gatekeeping, where senior scholars' work is marginalized while institutions elevate less experienced, often more 'cost-effective' editors (Thomas, 2023).

Such practices are reinforced by exploitative royalty structures, opaque sales reporting, and pricing models that limit access. An encyclopedia the author co-edited, priced above $2,200, generates revenue for the publisher but leaves us

without transparency or sustained royalties. This is not an isolated case—it reflects a deeply entrenched system.

Compounding this is the dependency loop created by institutional pressures. Academic careers hinge on publication in high-impact journals, which are often controlled by these same exploitative publishers. Article Processing Charges (APCs) in open-access journals—sometimes exceeding $5,000—further stratify access, benefiting well-funded institutions and excluding under-resourced faculty, especially from the Global South (Bennett et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, peer reviewers and editors contribute significant labor, often uncompensated, under the guise of professional service. The disparity becomes even more pronounced when comparing nonprofit journals like Adult Education Quarterly—which compensates editors with stipends—to commercial conglomerates that offer nothing despite their massive profits (Almeida, 2021).

This raises fundamental questions about who benefits from the prestige economy and at what cost. The current model glamorizes unpaid labor, commodifies knowledge, and maintains privilege hierarchies. It is sustained by institutional complicity, career pressures, and the normalization of inequitable publishing norms (Osei & Roberts, 2022).

To disrupt this cycle, faculty and institutions must prioritize transparency, ethical labor practices, and the support of alternative publishing models that restore integrity to academic scholarship. Without reform, the publishing landscape will

remain a mirror of broader systemic inequality—where visibility, recognition, and access are privileges, not rights.

Legal Shields and Systemic Erasure: The Invisible Architecture of Academic Publishing

The systemic legal shielding employed by commercial publishers reveals an entrenched structure that not only limits academic freedom but actively profits from its suppression. Numerous empirical cases illustrate how these legal mechanisms reinforce unequal power dynamics. For instance, in 2019, a consortium of early-career researchers in Latin America attempted to renegotiate terms of a publishing agreement with a major global academic publisher after discovering that their region-specific research was being resold through bundled subscription services with no revenue sharing. Despite mounting collective pressure, their efforts were thwarted by the publisher's legal team, who cited non-disclosure clauses embedded deep within the original contracts—clauses that none of the contributors recalled having reviewed in full. The scholars were ultimately forced to continue under existing terms or risk having their work pulled from the publisher's archive.

In another case, a faculty author at a European university who co-edited a multi-volume research handbook was shocked to learn that his name had been removed from future editions. The publisher had revised the handbook's branding and editorial structure without consultation, citing contractual rights to make structural changes. While legally permitted, the exclusion reflected a broader trend of minimizing intellectual labor and sidelining contributors once their names are no

longer deemed commercially valuable. The university's legal counsel refused to intervene, emphasizing that scholarly publishing was 'external to employment jurisdiction.' This sent a chilling message: that even prestigious, long-standing editorial relationships could be terminated unilaterally in pursuit of marketing objectives.

For scholars in the Global South, these dynamics are often amplified by the absence of institutional backing. A Nigerian anthropologist reported being offered a contract that required full copyright transfer for a book based on decades of fieldwork, along with a clause that restricted republication in local languages. When the author raised concerns, the publisher claimed it was a 'standard clause' necessary for global distribution. After refusing to sign, the author struggled to find an alternative venue due to the manuscript's perceived 'regional focus'—a label often applied to non-Western scholarship that implicitly devalues its broader academic worth.

These examples collectively expose the underlying mechanics of systemic erasure. Through ambiguous contracts, strategic gatekeeping, and selective editorial engagement, publishers not only manage the flow of content but actively construct hierarchies of whose work is visible, valued, and shared. Institutions—by failing to provide legal review, support mechanisms, or contract training—become complicit in this marginalization. And as scholars internalize the risk of speaking out, the structure perpetuates itself with disturbing efficiency.

Legal opacity also undermines scholarly transparency. A recent report from the Coalition for Fair Academic Publishing revealed that over 70% of authors who

sign contracts with the top five commercial academic publishers are unaware of the duration of copyright transfer or the resale mechanisms for their intellectual property. Many assume that royalties will be paid consistently, only to discover that after the initial period, reporting stops altogether, or royalties drop to negligible levels. One co-author of a widely distributed digital textbook reported receiving less than $20 in royalties for a volume that generated over $30,000 in institutional licensing revenue—again, due to buried contractual terms that limited royalty payout to two years post-publication.

The power imbalance created by these legal infrastructures is not simply contractual; it is ideological. When authors are denied full knowledge of the terms that govern their work, or when they are discouraged from questioning authority, a culture of passive submission takes root. This is particularly harmful for first-generation scholars, adjuncts, or scholars working across borders, who may lack access to legal literacy or advocacy networks. The system teaches them early on that silence is rewarded and resistance is penalized—a dynamic that mirrors broader patterns of academic inequity.

It is therefore imperative for institutions to take a stand. Beyond merely offering workshops on publishing, universities must build infrastructure for contract review, create ombudsperson roles dedicated to publishing ethics, and embed protections within faculty handbooks. Funding agencies can also help by requiring ethical publishing disclosures as part of grant reporting. Furthermore, professional associations must be proactive in creating collective guidelines that support equitable contract practices and discourage exploitative publisher behavior.

Scholars, too, have agency in this process. By sharing stories, refusing predatory contracts, and supporting alternative platforms, we create a countercurrent to the dominant model. The growing movement of scholar-led journals, Creative Commons licensing, and consortia-backed open-access initiatives demonstrates that another way is not only possible but already emerging. But transformation requires courage—especially from those who hold prestige and institutional security. Without their voices, reform risks being relegated to the margins, disconnected from the levers of power that perpetuate academic publishing as it currently exists.

Beneath the surface of academic publishing lies a system structured not only to disseminate knowledge, but to regulate and capitalize on its production. At the heart of this system is a complex legal and institutional apparatus designed to consolidate power among commercial publishers while marginalizing authors. Many publishing contracts include restrictive clauses—buried in dense legal language—that require scholars to relinquish copyright, limit future reuse, and accept vague royalty terms, all under the assumption that publication alone is reward enough (Yang & Tran, 2023).

For many authors—particularly early-career researchers or those without institutional legal support—this legal landscape creates an atmosphere of submission. Challenging unfair terms or seeking transparency is often met with silence or exclusion. Over time, this fosters a culture of compliance, where authors avoid asking difficult questions about royalties, pricing, or access. The implicit message is clear: challenge the system, and you risk professional marginalization (Murphy & Delgado, 2020).

The author experienced this firsthand when the author submitted a proposal for a journal on artificial intelligence in education. After initial engagement, the proposal was rejected—only for a similar journal to emerge months later, with no acknowledgment of our original idea. The author was not consulted, invited, or credited. Instead, a less experienced editor was installed—likely for cost-effectiveness rather than field expertise. What transpired was not just a breach of trust, but an instance of intellectual appropriation—legally defensible but ethically indefensible (Kingston, 2021).

Such incidents are symptomatic of a larger system, where publishers, shielded by legal departments, wield unchecked authority. Contracts ensure control; institutional prestige policies reinforce dependency; and pricing models prioritize profit over access. The impact is especially severe for scholars without institutional privilege—independent researchers, adjuncts, or faculty in the Global South—who lack the leverage to contest these terms (Lopez & Ahmed, 2024).

To redress this imbalance, universities must take a more active role. This includes providing legal support for contract negotiation, embedding ethical publishing into RTP evaluations, and supporting scholar-led publishing alternatives. Equally, scholars must find the courage to share their experiences, critique exploitative norms, and collaborate across institutional boundaries. Until these reforms are made, systemic erasure will persist—not as isolated incidents, but as a silent, pervasive feature of academic publishing (Pereira, 2023).

The political climate in the United States following the Trump administration has left an enduring impact on academic freedom, particularly for scholars who engage in leftist, Marxist, and critical race scholarship. During and after Trump's

presidency, institutions of higher education have witnessed intensified scrutiny, legislative pressure, and public backlash for perceived ideological bias, often targeting programs, faculty, and publications that embrace social justice or critical pedagogy frameworks. This climate has exacerbated existing pressures on scholars who publish in politically engaged journals or pursue research that challenges neoliberal, nationalist, or corporate ideologies.

Legislation introduced in various states has sought to limit the teaching of systemic racism, gender theory, and critiques of capitalism, positioning such content as indoctrination rather than scholarship. This has directly influenced hiring decisions, promotion cases, and even grant funding, creating a chilling effect for leftist scholars, especially those without tenure or institutional protection. Publishers, wary of controversy, may sideline politically charged content, leaving critical research without viable platforms or watering down manuscripts to avoid reputational risk.

The marginalization of Marxist and anti-capitalist scholarship is not new, but the post-Trump landscape has emboldened efforts to redefine academic priorities around 'neutrality' and 'objectivity'—terms often used to delegitimize progressive scholarship. Journals that have historically published political economy critiques have faced funding threats or have been pressured to diversify editorial boards in ways that dilute ideological coherence. In some cases, editorial decisions are influenced by corporate board members or advisory councils concerned with aligning content to broader market or donor expectations.

This shift is compounded by increased surveillance of academic speech. Scholars

have been targeted through social media, public campaigns, or institutional reviews for comments made in publications or classrooms. A study conducted in 2023 by the Academic Freedom Alliance reported a 35% rise in self-censorship among faculty who identify as left-leaning, particularly in conservative-leaning states and public institutions. Even when publication opportunities exist, the fear of retaliation deters full intellectual expression—particularly in politically sensitive fields like critical race theory, decolonial education, labor history, and environmental justice.

For publishing houses, this environment introduces complex tensions. On one hand, there is a demand for politically relevant scholarship that speaks to the challenges of the contemporary moment. On the other, there is a growing risk aversion that affects editorial choices, marketing strategies, and distribution networks. In this context, leftist scholars often find themselves negotiating editorial requests that neutralize their critique or shift language to avoid political specificity. Publishers may delay review processes, impose additional oversight, or quietly reject proposals deemed too provocative.

The implications are particularly severe for emerging scholars. Doctoral candidates and early-career faculty may avoid politically engaged topics, fearing limited publishing venues or job market disadvantage. Graduate programs, responding to shifting political winds, may de-emphasize or eliminate coursework in critical theory, creating a curricular gap that erodes future intellectual leadership in the field. Faculty who do persist in leftist scholarship must often rely on independent publishers, scholar-led journals, or international outlets to disseminate their work—often without institutional support or recognition.

In this environment, collective organizing becomes even more vital. Scholars must support platforms that defend academic freedom and prioritize ideological diversity. Journals such as the Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies (JCEPS), *Rethinking Marxism*, and *Critical Education* continue to provide spaces for politically engaged scholarship, but require sustained faculty involvement, editorial labor, and funding to survive. Professional associations must also take firmer stances in defending critical scholarship and lobbying for protections against ideological censorship.

Finally, the post-Trump political climate underscores the importance of ethical publishing not just as an economic reform, but as a political act. Choosing where and how to publish is increasingly a statement of values—about what kind of academic culture we are building, whose voices we amplify, and what role scholarship plays in shaping democratic discourse. Leftist scholars are not simply knowledge producers—they are cultural workers resisting the commodification, suppression, and sanitization of ideas. Their work is not just vulnerable to political backlash—it is essential for envisioning a more just and liberated academic future.

The Political Climate Post-Trump and Its Impact on Leftist Scholarship Reflections on the Trump Administration's Ongoing Impact

The issues outlined above lead naturally to questions about what can be done. The following section shifts focus from critique to solutions, exploring how ethical publishing practices are emerging and what steps scholars and institutions can take to enact meaningful change. While the article addresses early developments under the Trump administration, it is essential to reflect on the ongoing impact of

Trump's second-term political influence. The continued clampdowns on academic freedom, particularly targeting pro-Palestinian scholars and leftist faculty, reflect an intensifying climate of repression. Legislation in multiple states has restricted academic discussions around race, gender, and colonialism—often citing 'objectivity' as a justification for silencing critical discourse. This environment has emboldened university administrations to distance themselves from political controversy, leading to the withdrawal of support for faculty whose research is perceived as ideologically charged. The resulting self-censorship, institutional gatekeeping, and the chilling effect on politically engaged scholarship warrant urgent attention as systemic features of the post-Trump academic landscape (Dawson, 2024).

Marxist critiques of academic publishing are not confined to the U.S. context. Across the globe, scholars face similar patterns of labor extraction, prestige-driven gatekeeping, and institutional complicity. What varies is the intensity of these dynamics and the structural vulnerabilities that scholars must navigate in different geopolitical contexts. The prestige economy of publishing, as shaped by neoliberal capitalism, has become increasingly homogenized—centering Western norms, citation indices, and market-driven metrics as global benchmarks of scholarly worth.

In the United Kingdom, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has transformed higher education into a performance management system. Faculty are evaluated based on their publication outputs in high-impact journals, many of which are operated by commercial publishers. The REF has created a perverse incentive structure where the value of research is often measured by venue rather than substance. Faculty in UK institutions report increasing pressure to produce

work that conforms to editorial expectations of elite journals, even when that work diverges from their own disciplinary commitments or community-engaged research goals. This not only distorts academic priorities but perpetuates inequalities between research-intensive institutions and under-resourced universities, which struggle to meet REF metrics without equivalent funding or staff capacity.

In Australia, the shift toward 'Excellence in Research for Australia' (ERA) has mirrored the UK's REF model. Academic publishing is heavily incentivized based on journal rankings and citation metrics, leading to an overreliance on international journals owned by large publishing conglomerates. Australian scholars have raised concerns that ERA perpetuates a prestige economy that is largely unattainable for those working in Indigenous studies, decolonial theory, or local applied research—areas that may not align with the expectations of top-ranked international journals. Moreover, early-career researchers and adjuncts often find themselves excluded from competitive grants unless they demonstrate a track record of publishing in high-impact journals, thus reinforcing class and racial stratifications within the academic labor market.

In the Global South, the inequalities embedded in academic publishing become even more pronounced. Scholars in countries such as Nigeria, India, and Brazil often face systemic barriers to accessing high-impact journals—not due to the quality of their research, but due to language, institutional affiliation, and inability to pay article processing charges (APCs). Many are forced to submit to predatory journals, which exploit their desire for visibility while offering little peer review or legitimacy. The result is a double marginalization: these scholars are excluded

from elite publishing circuits while also devalued for publishing in venues labeled as inferior.

Furthermore, academic publishing in the Global South often suffers from infrastructure gaps, such as limited access to databases, inadequate research funding, and inconsistent internet connectivity. These material conditions translate into reduced publishing capacity, which in turn limits academic advancement and global collaboration. Marxist theory helps us see how this is not accidental—it is the result of global systems of knowledge extraction, where intellectual labor is extracted from the Global South but rarely rewarded or cited proportionately.

The notion of surplus labor, a core Marxist concept, is particularly salient in these contexts. Scholars in the Global South often undertake the same editorial, peer review, and research duties as their Western counterparts but without equivalent recognition, support, or remuneration. Their intellectual contributions are frequently appropriated by co-authors or editorial partners from more elite institutions, who receive disproportionate credit. This labor hierarchy is not just academic—it mirrors broader global inequities rooted in colonial histories and capitalist exploitation.

The fetishization of impact factor and Scopus indexing also distorts scholarly ecosystems. Universities in developing countries often tie promotion and tenure decisions to publishing in indexed journals, even though those journals may have little relevance to local audiences or research priorities. This drives scholars away from local languages and community issues, pressuring them to adopt Western frameworks and academic English. As Marx observed, ideology is material. In

academic publishing, the ideology of global prestige reshapes the very content of scholarship, dictating what is researched, how it is framed, and who gets to speak.

To challenge this system, many scholars in the Global South have begun launching independent publishing platforms. In Latin America, the SciELO network offers open-access publication opportunities for regional scholars without APCs. In South Africa, the Academy of Science's SciELO SA platform aims to increase visibility for African research. Despite their success, these platforms often face funding shortages and lack the international indexing that confers legitimacy in global academic circles. Without recognition from Scopus or Web of Science, their impact remains underestimated—even as they offer some of the most equitable models in existence.

Ultimately, the global landscape of academic publishing reveals a deep alignment between capitalism, colonial legacies, and institutional power. While the commodification of knowledge may wear different faces across regions, its logics remain consistent: valorize Western norms, extract labor, and reproduce hierarchies of access and prestige. A Marxist critique is not only useful—it is essential for revealing how scholarly labor is devalued, segmented, and globally stratified in the service of academic capitalism.

Reclaiming Ethics in Academic Publishing: A Call to Action

The ethical publishing movement is not merely procedural—it is a deliberate resistance to systemic inequities, rooted in justice, authorial dignity, and equitable access to knowledge.

Table 1. Comparative Models of Academic Publishing: Exploitation vs. Ethics

Publisher Type	Royalty Terms	Peer Reviewer Compensation	Copyright Policy	APC Charges	Access Model
Commercial (Exploitative)	10% (2 years max)	Unpaid	Full transfer of rights	$2000–$5000	Subscription / paywall
Ethical (Collaborative)	Up to 40% (ongoing)	Recognized or compensated	Creative Commons or author-retained	None or funded by institutions	Open Access / Scholar-owned

They embrace open-access frameworks, ensure authors retain rights, and in some cases, provide recognition or honoraria for peer reviewers and editorial contributors—highlighting publishing as both a scholarly and ethical endeavor. Ethical publishing alternatives include models such as SciELO (Latin America), SciPost (Europe), and Punctum Books, all of which embrace transparent governance, open-access dissemination, and scholar-led editorial structures. These platforms serve as practical counterpoints to commercial publishing monopolies. Institutional reform is equally necessary. Universities must revise RTP guidelines to value diverse forms of publication and encourage faculty to prioritize ethical and community-centered publishing venues. Collective faculty action and support from professional organizations are critical in resisting exploitative systems and sustaining scholar-led initiatives.

For example, Feldt et al. (2024) call for scholar-led governance models that replace opaque editorial boards with transparent, participatory structures.
Recent research has emphasized that equitable publishing must integrate anti-racist, anti-colonial frameworks (Ledgerwood et al., 2024; Slattery (2024). These

frameworks are not peripheral—they are essential to building sustainable, justice-oriented alternatives.

Conclusion: Beyond Commodification

The commodification of academic publishing presents a direct contradiction to the values that higher education institutions espouse—intellectual freedom, equity, public service, and the democratization of knowledge. When scholarship is reduced to a transactional commodity, its purpose is compromised, and access is determined not by merit or need, but by capital.

This article has argued for a radical reimagining of the publishing landscape—not as a hierarchical structure tied to prestige and profit, but as an ethical, collaborative ecosystem where knowledge is treated as a shared societal resource. In such a system, authors retain agency over their intellectual labor, editorial contributions are valued, and access is not limited by financial barriers.

As educators and scholars, the author holds both the responsibility and the power to model this transformation. Remaining silent in the face of systemic inequity only reinforces it. Instead, the author must teach, publish, and advocate in ways that interrogate who benefits, who is marginalized, and how justice might be more fully realized in academic knowledge dissemination.

The author owes it to ourselves, to our students, and to the integrity of scholarship to dismantle systems that reward exclusion and exploitation. In doing so, the

author affirms the belief that knowledge should be liberated, accessible, inclusive, and anchored in principles that reflect the true mission of education.

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Dr. Viktor Wang is a globally recognized professor and leader in the field of Education, with a distinguished career marked by innovation, scholarship, and mentorship. With over 240 peer-reviewed publications, Dr. Wang has made significant contributions to academic research and thought leadership. His work has inspired over 200 articles and more than 1,500 chapters contributed to his journals and books by scholars worldwide, further advancing the field of education. These publications are widely respected and housed in top-tier institutions, including Stanford University Libraries and other renowned university libraries globally.

He has been honored with numerous prestigious awards, including the **2016 Presidential Award for Exceptional and Innovative Leadership** from the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), as well as institutional honors such as the **Distinguished Faculty and Scholarly Achievement Award**. A devoted mentor, Dr. Wang has successfully guided more than 80 doctoral students through dissertation completion. His leadership has also driven substantial institutional outcomes, including enrollment growth, the launch

of innovative academic programs, and the formation of international educational partnerships. This **cover story** highlights ten books authored and edited by Dr. Viktor Wang, featured in the 2025 CSUSB Biennial Book Launch. Collectively, these volumes represent his enduring contributions to educational leadership, career and technical education, lifelong learning, and the transformative integration of artificial intelligence and technology in global education. The official university **video** further showcases his recent publications and scholarly impact, reflecting a continued commitment to global scholarship, transformative research, and leadership in the field.