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Speculating on theory: towards a political economy of academic publishing

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Summary *In the context of the rapid turnover of theory in geography, this paper treats theory as a commodity in relation to academic publishing and argues that translation is a constructive process by which new products circulate in international academic arenas. Results from a preliminary analysis of the translation of French writing are presented and some links between changing practice in the academic publishing industry and changes in intellectual agendas are hypothesised.*

The rhetoric of ‘commodification’

Mohan (1994) suggests that human geography’s engagement with theory over the last two decades can be fruitfully understood by analogy with product cycles, whereby different theories come onto the market, in no time at all turn out to be obsolete, and are duly replaced by new and improved models. The comparison neatly captures the sense that these days the amount of theory on offer is endlessly expanding and circulating at ever increasing speed, beyond any hope of any of us ever being able to keep up. However, this account remains only a suggestive analogy in which there is no consideration of just what sort of commodity ‘Theory’ actually is.

By representing the relation between knowledge and commodification as a more or less recent fall from a magically untainted state of autonomy into the grubby world of money-power, Mohan’s analysis only diverts attention from the contemporary *restructuring* of the social relations of knowledge-commodity production and circulation. In this paper, by focusing upon the ways in which academic work is implicated in processes of commodification via publishing, we want to avoid the easy gestures which often accompany any reference to the ‘commodification of knowledge’. Such rhetoric most often serves as a means of acknowledging the economic grounds of academic work while also disavowing one’s own contamination by those same conditions, presuming that this acknowledgment in itself serves as a cleansing operation. Examining the commodified nature of academic publishing should serve as a way of recognising difficult determinations and ambiguous complicities. It might also help in identifying those aspects of the extended social division of labour into which our work is woven, thus contributing to more productive ways of critically assessing our own institutional situations and the political potentials which reside in them. (Rowe 1993). In this paper we make a start in this direction by situating theory in a space-economy of production, marketing and translation, and present some preliminary analysis of the emergence of French theoretical writing which has been such a salient feature of the cycles Mohan describes.

Publishing geography

Human geography’s encounter with theory from other disciplines came to a peak with discussions of postmodernism, in which geographers actively participated in

debates stretching across the social sciences and the humanities. Perhaps the most visible mark of this heightened interdisciplinary significance for geography and geographers is the success of Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989). This book has sold more than 40,000 copies, and has been translated into three other languages, with two other translations pending. *The Condition of Postmodernity* was the first of Harvey's books to be published by the same publisher in both Britain and the United States. It thus bears the traces of a corporate restructuring of academic publishing which has seen a concentration of ownership and expansion of markets since the 1980s. British publishing has experienced extensive merger and takeover activity, resulting in the opening up of new markets to established academic imprints, as well as changes in the commissioning, marketing, and retailing of academic books. Companies like Blackwell, Verso, and Routledge, the latter subject to two takeovers in the 1980s, have secured a foothold in the crucial US market which had previously eluded them. The extension of distribution networks across the Atlantic is just one outcome of wider structural changes. There has also been a thoroughgoing conglomeratisation of publishing, involving the increasing capitalisation and flexibility of production and distribution arrangements in what was already a highly disintegrated industry (Feather 1993). These changes serve as the conditions of possibility of the commercial success of a book like *The Condition of Postmodernity*. This is not the place to examine in detail the impact of these processes upon the micro- and macro-scale functioning of academic writing and publishing (cf Low and Barnett, forthcoming). This brief discussion is meant only to establish our working hypothesis: that the reformulation of disciplinary agendas and the emergence of new interdisciplinary research fields has been facilitated, if not in part determined, by changes in the structure of the academic publishing industry at an international scale.

Lingua franca

Reference to postmodernism brings us to another geographical aspect of the problem. Cycles of theoretical interest cannot be understood as the expression of Anglo-American publishing mechanisms alone. The proliferation of 'Theory' in the social sciences and humanities has involved the importation of a range of continental European work. Bhabha (1994 1–39) suggests that theory is constituted in a space of transfers, exchanges, negotiations, fissures, and invasions. In short, theory is produced and exists in *translation*. In the remainder of this paper we want to examine the most visible case of theory in translation, namely post-war French theory. French theoretical writing is arguably the most influential, and certainly the most easily identifiable, body of concepts and ideas to have shaped academic discourses in Anglo-American universities in the post-war period. Existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction have become common reference points in much work in the contemporary humanities and social sciences. They entered debates in Britain and North America primarily through the translation of French work and through an ever-growing range of secondary commentary. This work has been crucial to the reshaping of disciplines in recent years, challenging conceptions of how disciplines function, provoking debate about the responsibilities of 'intellectuals', and transforming the understanding of the politics of knowledge in modern societies. French theory has been instrumental in the emergence of new interdisciplinary fields, and especially in the convergence of social science and humanities agendas. Its terms have also provided a ready vocabulary through which

the political projects of previously marginalised constituencies have been articulated within the academy, as in the cases of certain forms of feminism, queer theory, and post-colonial theory.

Not all of the effects of this work have been salutary. The corollary of the widespread hegemony of French theory has been the displacement of political economy from its once privileged position at the core of critical social science. Thus, a paradox lies at the heart of French theory's impact upon Anglo-American academic debates. While it has expanded the sense of what constitutes the material conditions of intellectual work, it has been largely unable or unwilling to analyse writing in detail as a commodified activity implicated in processes of accumulation, production, and exchange.

Rather than the ready-formed product of a particular national milieu which then travels elsewhere, French theory is the product of a set of institutional transfers and commodity flows which require an understanding of its *Frenchness* as constituted only in and through translation. This notion that French theory is produced through translation may at first appear counter-intuitive, not least because we are not used to considering theory as a commodity, produced and disseminated through a set of economic practices. Yet a good deal of modern theory, including many of the works of Marx and Weber, most of Gramsci, Saussure and Wittgenstein, have been shaped into discrete authorised texts only through the publishing process. Such examples throw into question the practice of treating theoretical texts as merely the singular products of originary great thinkers. Not the least of the effects of this habit is the effacement of the constitutive role of publishing in shaping the terms of intellectual inquiry.

French theory has come to represent the French academy and even a stereotypically French intellectual style and culture. Jokes abound regarding French intellectuals writing about food, clothing, sex, and about their obsession with style, while their preoccupation with allusive theoretical elaboration is contrasted with a supposedly more direct Anglophone empirical tradition. Yet a striking *empirical* feature of 'French' theory is that it is not straightforwardly French at all. Structuralism, for example, is often considered to be an archetypal genre of French theory. However, the structural linguistics from which structuralism emerged was rather cosmopolitan and is better thought of as an amalgam of European schools reaching from Copenhagen to Prague, Geneva to Moscow. Moreover, the development of European structural linguistics significantly depended upon the reading of particular American philosophers and linguists (Jakobson 1985), while structuralism's emergence in the social sciences was conditioned by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss' discussions in New York during the 1940s, which were a crucial influence on the latter's *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, written with the aid of a Rockefeller Foundation grant (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, xxvi). Structuralism was always an Atlanticised theoretical movement. We want to suggest that all such intellectual movements are similarly fabricated through a series of exchanges and appropriations. Rather than attending to the 'origins' of different theories, it might therefore be more fruitful to examine the processes by which new, syncretic theories are fashioned across dispersed spaces. Theory might be best thought of as intermediate: as a means of mediation which is produced in the in-between.

French Theory: the facts

If the authorship and location of theory are so problematic, then it is because processes of translation have often shaped the terms of intellectual practice in

relevant academic contexts. Translation, until quite recently peripheral to discussions of theory and language (Steiner 1975), has now become a central issue in discussions of 'travelling theory' (for example Miller 1995). Nonetheless, translation has still to be examined as a process constituted in relation to book publishing and marketing in a space-economy. As Darnton (1990, 107–35) has shown, books are part of a complex 'circuit of communications' involving different agencies (publishers, printers, writers, editors, audiences, etc) and institutions (markets, firms, states universities, etc), integrated asymmetrically and distributed unevenly across space. A serious analysis of the way in which this space-economy shapes contemporary theoretical practice has yet to be undertaken and would involve a variety of research strategies. As a preliminary contribution to such a project, we present here some results from an ongoing investigation of these relationships. We want to show how even the simplest empirical exercise can open important lines of inquiry relating to the mechanisms through which different bodies of theoretical work are constituted and circulate in an international intellectual arena.

We have constructed a database containing information about books written by 119 authors who have been translated from French into English and presented as 'theoretical' writers in different but overlapping disciplines in Anglo-American academic contexts. The data contain information on 3,094 books in total: 2,009 books published in French by these authors and 1,085 in English translation¹. The database includes information on French publication dates and publishers, and translation dates and publishers in the United States and United Kingdom. This information was derived from several sources, including bibliographies and on-line catalogues. We have been catholic in our inclusion of authors, and are confident that additions or subtractions would produce only marginal alterations to the results presented, which should be treated as indicative of general patterns rather than as a final reconstruction of the processes under investigation. The authors include historians of science (for example Bachelard, Jacob), literary theorists (Riffaterre, Genette), feminists (de Beauvoir, Irigaray), philosophers (Sartre, Derrida), anthropologists (Lévi-Strauss, Godelier), historians (Braudel, Furet), music theorists (Xenakis, Nattiez), linguists and semioticians (Benveniste, Barthes), surrealists (Breton, Leiris), sociologists (Bourdieu, Touraine), and psychoanalysts (Lacan, Kristeva)².

Figure 1 shows the number of books translated per year and indicates, for reference, the appearance of their originals in France. The escalation of translation in the 1960s and especially from the late 1980s is clear. From the 1960s, the increase in translations is related to the emergence of structuralism, and the boom in the late 1980s reflects the institutionalisation of post-structuralism, deconstruction, 'New French Feminism', and postmodernism in sections of the Anglo-American academy. This graph is aggregate, concealing important shifts in the form of theory translated at different times. It nevertheless confirms the aforementioned sense of French theory flooding the Anglo-American academic market³.

Turning our attention to details, we find that the increase in numbers of translations published in the 1980s coincides with an increase in the average age of works being translated (Figure 2). The average time-lag between French publication date and date of translation is fairly constant from the 1950s onwards, until an increase is registered from the early 1980s⁴. This indicates that the increasing availability of translations in the 1980s is not simply an echo of an increasing volume of theory published in French in the late 1960s and 1970s (cf Figure 1). The rate at which work from this period has been translated varies significantly. For example,

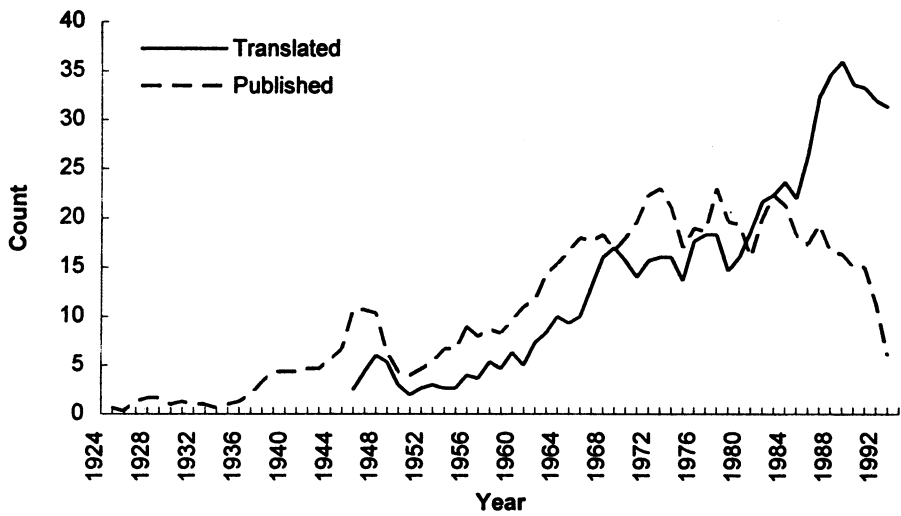


Figure 1 The translation of French theory (three-year moving averages)

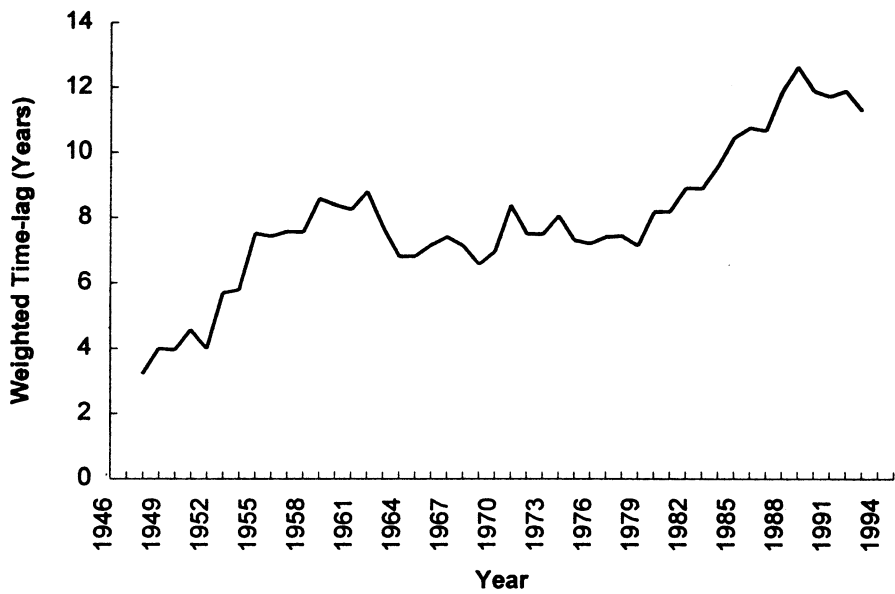


Figure 2 Mean time-lags between publication and translation, 1946–1994 (weighted five-year moving average)

whereas Althusser and Foucault were translated relatively quickly (cf Althusser 1965, 1969; Foucault 1969, 1972), significant texts by Gilles Deleuze from the late 1960s appeared in English only in the 1990s (cf Deleuze 1968, 1969, 1990, 1994). In addition, the works of writers from an earlier generation, such as Bataille and Blanchot, are now being translated in greater numbers as the influence of a wider network of French intellectual traditions on structuralism and post-structuralism is

recognised. The increase in the average translation lag-time suggests that there is a process underway by which Anglo-American publishers are raiding the 'back-catalogues' of French publishers. This, rather than the translation of work by a new generation of French intellectuals, is responsible for the increased number of works being translated.

One important effect of this translation history is that the temporality of French theory is understood in specific ways in the Anglo-American academy. Works written in a particular historical conjuncture are transformed into a succession of theoretical horizons as they become widely available in English at different times. The question worth pursuing here is the extent to which this differential translation is an effect of the changing operating imperatives of academic publishers, which have facilitated the increasing availability of a much wider range of French theory from particular periods and of certain types. Table 1 shows the numbers and percentages of books translated by the leading Anglo-American publishers of French theory, and equivalent figures for the French publishers of the original editions of these translated texts.

The importance of US University Presses in the translation process is clear. More light is thrown upon this when the numbers of translations by University Presses and non-University publishers is considered (Figure 3). Until the 1980s, non-University publishers were responsible for the bulk of translations. This situation then began to change, as the number of translations published by US University Presses steadily increased. Both types of publishers are now producing roughly equivalent numbers of translations. The increase in theory translations in the 1980s thus coincides with an increase in the overall proportion for which US University Presses are responsible.

The operations of US University Presses have been thoroughly restructured in the last decade or so. Traditionally committed to the publication of high status but commercially unrewarding research monographs, and heavily subsidised by their host institutions, they suffered financial crisis in the 1970s. Such were the scale of the financial difficulties at Northwestern University Press, publisher of a prestigious series on 'Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy', that it published only three books in total in 1979 (Tebbel 1981, 659). As a result of restructuring in the 1980s, US University Presses have been forced to operate on a more explicitly commercial basis. One effect of this is the emergence of more commercially oriented imprints such as those of Minnesota and Stanford, which have become highly assertive in the contemporary circulation of French theory. The increase in the translation of French theory, and the heightened significance of US University Presses in this process, follows this period of restructuring. The boom in theory translation would thus appear to be related to the commercialisation of the norms of US University Press-based publishing.

It might be expected that the restructured University Presses are behind the ransacking of the back catalogue of French writing noted above. However, this does not seem to be the case. There was a pronounced shift upwards in the average translation lag-times of US University Presses as early as the 1970s, while the more recent general increase in lag-times is due to the dramatic increase in the age of material being translated by non-University publishers (Figure 4). It would appear that this sector has also been subject to changing imperatives which have encouraged and made profitable the translation of older French intellectual work. It seems, then, that the characteristics of 'Theory' meet the requirements of an academic publishing sector which is in general operating in an ever more

Table 1 The top English and French language publishers of French theory, 1924–1994.

Translation Publisher	Number of Translations	Percentage of Translations	French Publisher	Number of Books	Percentage of Books
University of Chicago Press	67	6.18	Gallimard	166	19.10
Columbia University Press	43	3.96	Seuil	105	12.08
New Left Books/Verso	41	3.78	Minuit	63	7.25
University of Minnesota Press	41	3.78	Presses Universitaires de France	42	4.88
Routledge	32	2.95	Galilée	33	3.80
Blackwell	31	2.86	Grasset	28	3.22
Knopf	27	2.49	F Maspero	26	2.99
Hamish Hamilton	26	2.40	Plon	26	2.99
Jonathan Cape	26	2.40	Fayard	15	1.73
Cambridge University Press	26	2.40	Flammarion	13	1.50
Polity	25	2.30	Découverte	10	0.15
Allen Lane/Penguin	24	2.21	Hachette	10	1.15
Stanford University Press	21	1.94	A Colin	9	1.04
Northwestern University Press	19	1.75	Skira	9	1.04
Hill and Wang	18	1.66	Calmann-Lévy	8	0.92
Johns Hopkins University Press	18	1.66	C Bourgois	7	0.81
Harper and Row	18	1.66	F Alcan	6	0.69
Cornell University Press	17	1.57	Fata Morgana	6	0.69
Harvester	17	1.57	A Michel	6	0.69
Random House/Pantheon	16	1.47	J J Pauvert	6	0.69
University of California Press	15	1.39	Union Générale D'Éditions	5	0.58
Semiotext(e)	14	1.29	Nagel	5	0.58

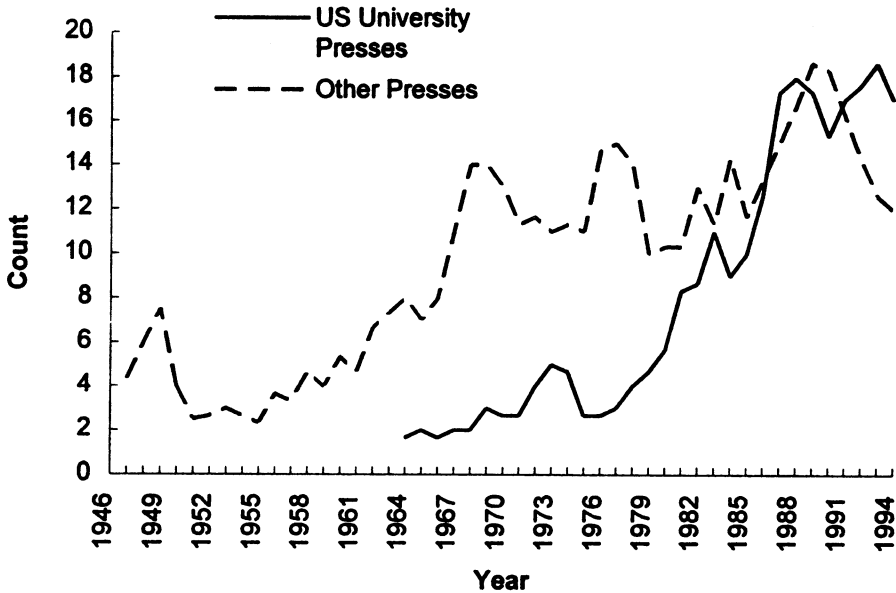


Figure 3 Translations by US university presses and other presses, 1946–1994

commercialised manner following restructuring, conglomeratisation, and internationalisation. What remains to be established is the precise relation between changes in the operations of academic publishers and other processes of legitimisation by which French theory has become institutionalised in the Anglo–American academy (cf Lamont, 1987).

Our investigation raises interesting issues relating to the different publishing contexts in which the ‘same’ works emerge in France and in Britain and North America. Most of the books being published in translation by British and North American publishers come from a very small number of French publishers (Table 1). The dominant position of Gallimard is quite clear, and is all the more notable given that Hachette, the other leading French publishing conglomerate, is not particularly significant in the production of this sort of work. Furthermore, much of what circulates in the Anglo–American academy as French theory was originally published by a very particular sort of French publisher. Gallimard, Seuil, Minuit, and Grasset are all primarily *literary* publishers. The status of internationally renowned French theorists as *public* intellectuals is in no small part due to the fact that their work circulated amongst wider non-academic audiences due to the particular sector of the French publishing industry which these writers frequented and were sponsored by (Debray 1981). The literary publishing provenance of French theoretical writing provided certain writers with access to wider distribution networks, encouraged and facilitated more experimental styles of writing, and worked to efface the academic situations out of which much of this work continued to be shaped. This congruence between certain emergent publishing interests and particular intellectual movements is also related to the status of Paris as the focus of a hierarchical academic system and centre of literary and artistic movements, and as the administrative and economic centre of French cultural production.

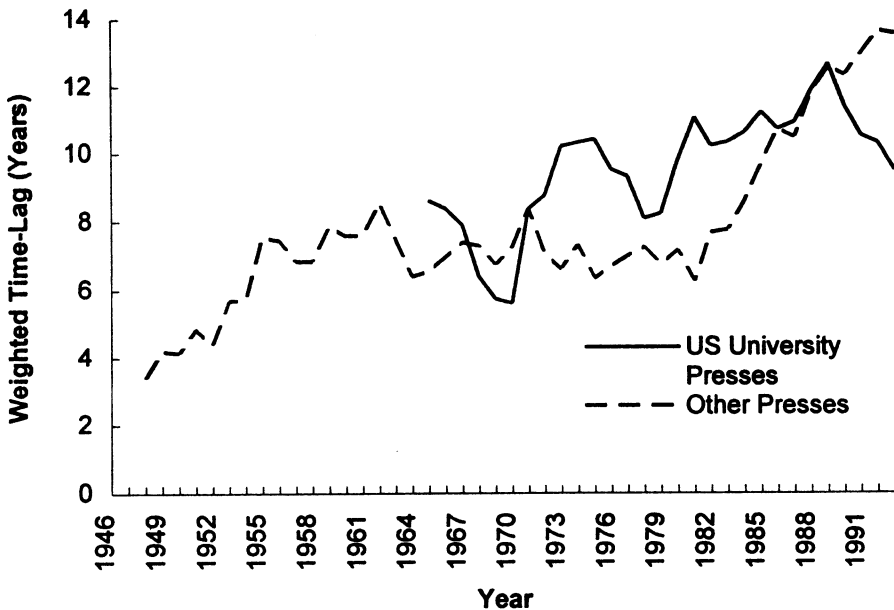


Figure 4 US university presses and other presses: mean translation lag-times, 1946–1994 (weighted five-year moving averages)

By comparison, the leading publishers of French writing in translation are overwhelmingly of two sorts: University Presses; and specialist educational and academic commercial publishers. The process of translation appears to have two significant transformative effects. On the one hand, there is a deconcentration of publishing outlets. The translation of French work is dispersed across a much larger number of publishers, an effect exacerbated by the fact that some texts are effectively published twice, once by a UK publisher and once by a US publisher, itself an effect of limited distribution and marketing networks. There is also a more diffuse geography to Anglo–American translation because, while commercial academic publishing is concentrated in London and New York the respective academic systems, and hence University Presses, are themselves more dispersed. On the other hand, this dispersion can be read a constriction of potential audience. French theory is produced by academic publishers because there exists a reliable market in the form of University disciplines and interdisciplinary fields. But by virtue of this being the market towards which such publishers are oriented, access to wider audiences is constrained both by the marketing of this work *as* academic theory, and because these publishers do not have the well-developed distribution networks with the same reach as non-academic trade publishers. The form in which this work is profitable for academic publishers limits its circulation amongst other potential publics. Thus, the relation between academic work and access to the ‘public sphere’ is effected by the changing rhythms of different publishing interests, and the changing relations between these and academic institutions (Derrida 1995, 428–9).

Bringing publishing off the shelf

We have suggested that the political economy of theory might best be understood in relation to a particular realm of commodity production: academic publishing. Using the template of translation as an empirical and theoretical entry point into the field of academic publishing, we have attempted to raise some preliminary questions about how the activities of this sector determine the constitution of different publics, markets, and audiences for theory. Translation should be understood not simply as the transposition of meaning between distinct natural languages, but in an expanded sense, as a constitutive process by which different social idioms are articulated together. Attention to translation underscores the international dimensions of theory, and in particular its status as the hybrid product of various negotiations of difference and processes of movement. Precisely because translation underscores the irreducible materiality of language, it can serve as the means by which to foreground questions about how the theories which present themselves for our attention are fabricated and produced.

Academic publishing comprises a set of contradictory practices and relations. They include the operations of the market, the changing social relations of production, and the technical division of labour in the publishing industry on the one hand; and the dynamics of higher education and other cultural institutions in different national contexts on the other. These institutional spaces do not share the same imperatives, and it would be mistaken to consider market mechanisms and profitability as the only determinants of what gets published. Academic publishing is subject to certain non-market forces, including standards of educational quality, pressures of institutional legitimization and professional prestige, and issues of free expression. These render this form of commodity production dependent upon the dynamics of relatively autonomous intellectual and scientific formations (Lorimer 1993).

Profitability in academic publishing does not rely on huge sales, but upon the high cultural value of the commodity at issue and the relatively predictable market conditions with which this is associated. US and UK academic publishing depends upon a secure but relatively narrow market-sector: that constituted by and around higher education institutions. Market expansion has taken place *within* the confines of this sector, in the form of interdisciplinary publishing ventures. The most dramatic of these is related to the growth of cultural studies as an arena of interdisciplinary intellectual exchange, to which the translation of French theory has made a formative contribution. Cultural studies exemplifies the intricate and ambiguous connection between the emergence of new research agendas and changing publishing practices (cf Langauer 1992). It is important to recognise this connection not in order to dismiss new trends, but to acknowledge that processes of commodification cannot be understood in moralistic terms as always necessarily bad, since under certain circumstances they can be objectively progressive (Williams 1981, 87–118). In so far as cultural studies articulates new political agendas within and without the academy, the enabling function of certain forms of commodified knowledge dissemination should be acknowledged, without losing sight of the concomitant limits and complications.

Given that profitability is a function of the real costs of production, it is also worth considering that the full costs of the research which academic presses publish is not borne by them. They bear the costs of production of the book-commodity itself. The costs of research, support, salaries, etc, is borne by higher education institutions. Neither are academic writers immediately dependent upon the market success of

their commercially published output as, for example, novelists are, since they are salaried professionals paid by universities. On the other hand successful book publishing is a basic requirement of professional career advancement. The extent to which the interests of publishers and academics in getting books published coincide or diverge is thus crucial to understanding the reshaping of research agendas in the contemporary academy. In particular, the question of how academic writers in the humanities and social sciences internalise the known market conditions of academic publishing as professional and/or intellectual norms is in urgent need of investigation.

The ways in which these tensions and contradictions are managed and negotiated require further research involving empirical investigation and careful theoretical elaboration. How are the different scales of academic publishing, stretching all the way from international conglomerate financing to the weekly research seminar, articulated? What forms of uneven development characterise and accompany these forms of theoretical speculation? How are the different and competing interests involved in this field worked out? We would suggest that the role of particular mediating agents in the publishing process, most notably that of commissioning editors, is crucial to the mediation of different imperatives and interests, and has become more so with the professionalisation of such roles and the growth of planned marketing in the wake of the conglomeratisation of academic publishing. A detailed analysis of the articulation of different scales and institutional sites is necessary if we are to move towards an understanding of the extent to which forms of intellectual production are directed by the interests of publishers, or how far they remain subject to the autonomous non-market imperatives of academic institutions.

Lorimer and Scannell (1993, 163) suggest that 'the neglect of publishing by academics is due to its very transparency', and that 'print seems to be the invisible medium of scholarly effort and thus escapes serious scrutiny'. Precisely because being published in journals and books is a key part of what academics do, publishing's anecdotal familiarity discourages sustained critical attention. The economy of academic publishing needs to be studied in the same manner as any other sector of the economy, in empirical detail and with theoretical sophistication, and above all with an eye to extending our reflexive understanding of the politics of academic work.

Notes

- 1 This is an average of approximately 17 books per author. The database includes extremely prolific writers such as Lefebvre (61 books), Dumezil (60 books), Garaudy (60 books) and Sartre (53 books) as well as a large number of writers whose output is below this average.
- 2 We realise that these categories are somewhat arbitrary, but trust they help illustrate the variety of work covered.
- 3 The upward trends in Figure 1 are no doubt related to a complex series of institutional processes, including the expansion and restructuring of higher education in different national contexts, changes in the career profiles of professional academics and non-academic writers, and the emergence of new disciplines. While we recognise the importance of these factors, in this paper we want to explicitly foreground the role of publishing as a crucial mediator between these institutional changes and intellectual developments.
- 4 The moving averages of translation-publication lag times have been weighted by the number of translations appearing in a given year, so as to offset the effects of very small numbers of translations, particularly in some years in the 1940s and 1950s.

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