

The Future of Scholarly Publishing in Comparative Politics

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In 1995 I wrote an article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ("The Crisis in Scholarly Communication," March 3) outlining the problems of publishing scholarly books in literary criticism and explaining why the Penn State Press could no longer afford to remain active in this field. Of the 150 books about literature the Press had put out in the previous decade, 65% had sold fewer than 500 copies, 91% fewer than 800 copies, and only 3% more than 1,000. The pattern of sales in this discipline had eroded to the point where a press without much of a subsidy from its parent university could not sustain a publishing program in it anymore. It seemed clear even then that what we scholarly publishers have come to call the problem of "endangered species" would be spreading to other disciplines over time. Five years later I think the writing is beginning to appear on the wall for a field like comparative politics, too.

Let's look at some numbers that illustrate change over time. My previous em-

ployer, Princeton University Press, did detailed studies of sales patterns in different disciplines. For political science as a whole, the average five-year total for books published in hardback only in the period 1960-1967 was 3,387. That average had already dropped to 1,889 for books published between 1971 and 1973. And for books published in 1985-1987 it had slumped even farther to 764 (a projected figure, based on actual first-year sales of 602). Helped by an NSF-sponsored study of changing library budgets (documenting a trend of more acquisitions funds going to journals and less to monographs from 1969 to 1973), university presses began recognizing the seriousness of the erosion in library sales as early as the first half of the 1970s and adopted a new strategy of trying to recoup some of the lost hardback sales by issuing more titles simultaneously in hardback and paperback. Princeton was a pioneer in this effort with its introduction of Limited Paperback Editions early in 1972: LPEs were meant to make available scholarly monographs at prices between \$15 and \$20 to individual buyers who were increasingly unable to afford the higher prices of hardbacks that the steady rise in costs and reduction in

sales to libraries had combined to bring about. It was hoped, of course, that enough of these LPEs would sell to offset the decline in hardback revenues while allowing for a greater number of copies overall to be distributed. Eventually, as prices for regular paperbacks began to creep upward, the distinctiveness of LPEs as a new marketed niche began to disappear and many presses joined the trend of issuing more books in dual format on first publication. How has this new strategy fared? It did seem to work reasonably well for a time. For books published as LPEs and hardbacks simultaneously at Princeton, the average sales for books appearing between 1985 and 1987 in political science were projected to be, for five years, 697 cloth and 2,931 paperback (based on actual first-year sales averaging 446 cloth and 1,380 paperback). With this experience as background, I carried over the same strategy to Penn State when I came here in 1989. In the area of comparative politics, we have done the most publishing in Latin American studies, so the statistics are most meaningful in this area. Between Fall 1992 and Spring 2000 we have so far issued 20 titles on Latin American politics, all simulta-

neously in cloth and paper 1990s, with more teachers from this approach, probably editions. The average sales preferring to cannibalize because we feel it is part of for this group of books as a books for excerpts rather our basic mission as scholarly whole so far has been 213 than assign whole paper-p publishers to distribute as cloth and 862 paper. If we backs to their students (and many copies as we can at as count only the 15 titles pub- often not even paying per- low a price as possible while lished before 1999 (so as not mission fees for such repro- still remaining solvent. An- to bias the numbers because duction), have cut into the other option is to seek more of the lower sales of books, income presses have been subsidies from the universi- especially in paper, in the deriving from that side of the ties whose faculty become first year of publication), the market. Some presses have our authors. Some universi- averages come out to 230 begun to respond to these ties are becoming more cloth and 1,054 paper. What new challenges by retreating aware of the need to provide is most ominous is the aver- to the earlier paradigm of ini- this kind of support, espe- age of 165 for sales of the tial hardback publication fol- cially for junior faculty, as hardback edition of the 11 lowed by a paperback edi- pressures for publishing titles published since 1997, tion a year or two later. monographs continue while indicating yet a further sig- While the sales of the paper- outlets for them dry up. Stan- nificant erosion in library back overall may not reach ford, for example, an- purchases in the most recent the same level (unless a book nounced a couple of years period. happens to become a staple ago that it would grant

We know already from of adoption for courses), the \$5,000 each to all junior fac- statistics issued by the Asso- chance to sell 400-500 cop- ulty members for use in ciation of Research Libraries ies of a hardback in the first whatever way they best that since the mid-1980s aca- 12-24 months instead of 200 deemed to advance their ca- demic library purchases of or fewer is persuading some reers, including as title subsi- monographs have declined presses that this is the only dies to publishers. But why, nearly 25% as an ever viable option left, short of then, shouldn't universities greater share of their funds abandoning publication in just subsidize their own have gone toward sustaining the field altogether. presses more? We press di-

journal subscriptions (even But there are other op- rector's would welcome that after libraries began cancel- tions, of course. One is to option, but it isn't being of- ing subscriptions in the early adopt the business model ferred by many universities. A 1990s). Anecdotal evidence long followed by European recent report from the Asso- suggests that more libraries publishers: print only a few ciation of American Univer- are opting to buy paperback hundred copies of a new sity Presses (AAUP) shows editions instead of hardbacks book in hardback, price it that of the 62 presses partici- when they are issued at the high enough to recover all pating in its survey for 1996- same time, thus contributing costs from sales to libraries 1999, only 46 received any further to the drop in cloth (say, \$125 for a 200-page subsidies, and the increase in sales that are so vital to the monograph), and then any parent-institution support economics of scholarly pub- sales to individuals become was a mere .2% from 1998 lishing. Meanwhile, the prolif- icking on the cake. U.S. to 1999 and only 6.1% since eration of coursepacks in the presses have shied away 1996, barely even keeping

up with inflation. At any rate, spring, you could easily get printing, binding, and ware- it seems unfair that the uni- that impression. Indeed, housing—which themselves versities that do have presses there are new companies like only amount to about 40% should bear the full burden netLibrary and Questia Me- of the overall expense of of sustaining the system of dia that have started up in publishing a book. Thus, e- scholarly communication on the past couple of years for publishing offers no panacea their own, when it benefits the specific purpose of digitiz- for the dilemmas faced by scholars from all institutions; ing what already is in print scholarly book publishers to- in this light, clearly title subsi- and making it available in a day (though it may hold out dies are a more equitable so- variety of electronic formats, greater benefits for journal lution. and some of these compa- publishers).

But what about saving nies, like Lightning Print and If technology is not going costs by making greater use Sprout, are providing ser- to be the savior, and if the of technology? In fact, vices to store titles in elec- other options outlined above presses have been taking ad- tronic form so that print cop- seem likely not to be pursued vantage of advances in tech- ies can be produced “on de- to the extent necessary, what nology for at least two dec- mand” (even one at a time, is the outcome going to be ades, and the savings—in on site in retail bookstores) for a field like comparative copyediting, design, market- and thus eliminate the need politics in the near future? ing, order fulfillment, etc.— for publishers to keep inven- Another statistic from the have been sufficient to keep tory of slow-selling books. AAUP report begins to loom the rate of increase in prices These offer new avenues for large here: title output of 62 far below what it would oth- distribution of scholarly as university presses increased erwise have been, in the face well as popular books and a only 2% in the period 1996- of steadily eroding sales. new stream of income (the 1999, whereas in the 1980s More recently, there has potential amount of which is, output was still increasing at been much talk not just at this early stage, very diffi- double-digit rates. With in- about deploying technology cult to predict, however). creasing pressures on presses to enhance efficiencies in Still, these are supplementary to pay their own way, many producing books in the tradi- sources of revenue, just as have resorted to changing tional manner but also about permission fees for photo- the “mix” of what they pub- doing actual electronic pub- copying have become, but lish, substituting more sale- lishing. Are e-books the wave they will likely never cover able titles (like regional of the future? If you look at more than a small portion of books, reference works, what is happening in com- the overall costs of publishing “trade” titles, even textbooks) mercial publishing, with both a book. Those publishers for less saleable monographs. Random House and Simon who have experimented with At Penn State we expect to and Schuster recently an- doing full electronic publish- be cutting our list from about nouncing plans to digitize ing have quickly discovered 70 to 60 titles annually soon, their entire backlist of that the added hardware, and those cuts will all come 20,000+ titles and experi- software, and staff costs of in traditional monographic menting with new e-books making the technology work studies, many of which have- like Stephen King’s short equal, if not exceed, the tra- n’t even sold well enough to novel issued earlier this ditional costs of typesetting, recoup their manufacturing

costs, let alone contribute anything to overhead; the time and money we save will all be devoted to getting "more bang for the buck" out of titles with greater sales potential, especially regional books. Comparative politics, because of its sales profile, will be one of the areas we'll be looking to reduce—thus pushing it closer to becoming another of the academic "endangered species."

As if this were not bad news enough for all scholars in the field, there is even more bad news for junior faculty. More universities (including Penn State) are lining up to join the movement associated with the National Digital Library of Networked Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD), founded at Virginia Tech in the mid-1990s, which has the noble goal of making dissertations in the future more readily accessible worldwide for scholarly use through the Internet. But, unless graduate students are careful about how they participate in this kind of program, they may find that as junior faculty they have undercut opportunities for publishing revised versions of their dissertations as their first books. Libraries, which can readily tap into the NDLTD network, may think about spending scarce resources on books when they know that they can access the original dissertations on which they are based for free. Drawing from their dissertation research, under the direction of Jorge Domínguez as editor. Indeed, one could imagine more such collaborative projects even among just two or three junior faculty, who might develop their dissertations in advance with a view to combining their findings eventually in a truly cross-country or cross-region book. This could be a healthy development for the field and, I believe, would be welcomed by publishers, too—although it would pose obvious problems for tenure and promotion committees.

Another healthy development, which would take maximum advantage of new technology, is experimentation with new kinds of "enhanced" books. This is already being pursued by the American Historical Association, with support from the Mellon Foundation. Robert Darnton, then AHA President, elaborated this vision in his article on "The New Age of the Book" in the *New York Review of Books* (March 18, 1999). With no great constraints on space in the electronic world, e-books in comparative politics could incorporate data sets, interactive materials, documentary appendices, hyperlinks to other works cited and digital archives, digitized maps, color illustrations, even audio

files, to create much more comprehensive, multimedia publications. They could be constructed in "layers," aimed at different audiences, too, as Darnton explains. And there could be opportunities for readers to engage in constructive feedback online, making their responses part of a work growing in complexity over time as a larger collaborative enterprise. The mind boggles at the possibilities! But none of this will be cheap—and it certainly won't solve the immediate problem of the "endangered" traditional monograph anytime soon.

Causes of the Publication Bottleneck in Area Studies

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The increasing difficulty scholars have had lately in finding publishing outlets for country- and region-specific studies in comparative politics, as highlighted in the present issue of *APSA-CP*, has many sources and many consequences. Any attempt to deal with the consequences of the phenomenon must rest on an accurate di-

agnosis of its sources. The parlous financial state of many university presses is without doubt a major cause of the trouble. It can be seen that this distress in the publishing industry, tant and dwindling markets for books, pressures to cut costs, and the rapid growth in conglomerate ownership and cross-media tie-ins, with a concomitant "dumbing down" of the literary product, have dramatically reshaped commercial publishing in the United States and many other places. Independent publishers of quality works of non-fiction are a disappearing species. Had American presses in the 1980s and 1990s been not linked by their charters to university administrations, many and conceivably most of them would long have shut down or been gobbled up by bigger fish in the pond.

Some particular features of comparative politics and country/regional studies aggravate the generic problem. The ongoing and unresolved debate within our discipline about the shape of comparative politics, and of priorities within it, is one such factor. Acquisition editors in university presses, being conversant with that discussion, tend to be less certain today than

their predecessors were a decade or two ago that a first-rate book on, say, Russian, Indian, or Central American politics deserves to prevail in what is an ever fiercer competition for spots in the press's catalogue. Among other things, this uncertainty can induce editors to solicit reviews of manuscripts from two or three referees who have markedly different and perhaps irreconcilable views about the merit of single-country studies and, for that matter, about the form such studies should take. Conflicting readers' reports are then the predictable result. At best, they drag out the review, revision, and submission process by months or even years; at worst, they block the road to publication or force the author, after years of fieldwork, library research, and writing, to undertake what is in effect a new research project in order to get the work published and move forward. These burdens, of course, weigh most heavily not on established scholars with a track record and with the time to shop manuscripts around but on their younger and especially on their untenured colleagues, to whom quizzical editors and boards of directors are least likely to defer and for whom the consequences of failing to publish

are the most severe.

A further complication has to do with the reality of the oft-maligned enterprise of "area studies." It is often overlooked that, unlike "women's studies" or "environmental studies," area studies as a whole does not constitute a field of inquiry, a quasi-discipline, an undergraduate concentration, or a community of the concerned and engaged. Area studies for all practical purposes resolves into particularized study of specific world areas, the boundaries of which, needless to say, are constantly being contested. At the operating level, too, there is far less cohesion and common purpose than meets the eye, for the simple reason that the bulk of teaching, research, and publication of results occurs to a lesser or greater degree within disciplinary frameworks. If Middle Eastern, post-Soviet, or Latin American area studies as such had a clear focus and *esprit de corps*, and if its practitioners constituted a seamless market for information—if, for example, the historian specializing on Peter the Great or the literary scholar who writes on Pushkin was likely to buy and read the latest tome on Russian federalism or the politics of economic reform under

Yeltsin or Putin—the problem we are talking about in this issue would be many times less vexing than it is. Conversations with editor personnel of leading university presses, however, leave no doubt that for almost every world area, and for almost every country, large and small, the pooled market for monographic works is steadily shrinking in the aggregate, is increasingly fragmented, and is thus approaching the limit of viability from the point of view of the economics of publishing a great many otherwise deserving manuscripts. This generalization seems to apply to works executed in *all* disciplines and fields.

University presses, in contrast to commercial houses, are constrained by the marketplace, not driven by it. As financial decision makers, most of them are at root risk minimizers, not profit maximizers, responding more to the fear of losing money on a given title than to the hope of making money on it. For an American university press, I have been told that the more or less secure market for a specialized hardcover on a foreign or comparative subject in the social sciences or humanities—mainly libraries and a sprinkling of others through direct marketing—is to

day about 500 to 600 copies. Twenty years ago, it was approximately 2,000 copies. The break-even figure on a title in this category is roughly 1,200 copies sold. The numbers, sadly, do not add up. Pricing books at ever higher levels to recoup publication and distribution costs helps little if at all, since it inevitably deflates demand for the product.

Setting aside other fields within political science, the implications for comparative politics are, in my view, especially disturbing. Comparative politics has long been distinguished by its diverse and therefore lively mix of research traditions, orienting topics and questions, and methods. The loss of one of its central strands—hands-on studies based on field research and use of native languages—would be an irreparable loss to the whole and would push it inexorably in the direction of an intellectual monoculture.

So what can be done? To the extent that the problem springs from global trends in publishing and in the finances of the university presses, no local solution can fix every aspect of it. Some of the possible remedies the editors of this issue of *APSA-CP* asked us in their instructions to address would have such large overall or distribu-

tive consequences for the discipline of political science—and, more to the point, for departments of political science in American universities—that they cannot be assessed in isolation from the needs and expectations of the other branches of the discipline, from political theory to international relations. For instance, greater acceptance of internet publishing would need to be arrived at across the board. Likewise, it is hard on the face of it to see how departments can extend the time from hire to tenure decision for country or regional specialists without adjusting it for other political scientists, or at a minimum without some consideration of possible inequities and frictions. And any departments that do reach internal consensus will subsequently be obliged either to operate within existing university regimes or convince higher-ups to make changes in them.

in a non-English tongue will be a challenge. This not to say that departments will not be able to surmount it with good will. It is no exaggeration to say that some of the rest of us manage to come to responsible judgments about how work executed in abstruse professional idioms can be very nearly as challenging for the non-expert as another language. Consciousness-raising about the publication bottleneck in comparative politics obviously makes sense across the board. One practical objective, which could appropriately be pursued through APISA and its comparative politics section, would be to educate all comparativists, junior and senior, to build publication expenses into their financial plans and especially into their grant applications. Some lobbying with the NSF and other public funding agencies may be necessary in this connection. For financial estimates to be realistic and applicable to the publishing industries that need, we all need a radical improvement in our shared knowledge base. How much money is actually needed to facilitate timely publication of a monograph? To whom should it be transferred, by whom, and how? What are the guarantees that it will off-set actual costs of production and distribution and not be diverted to general subsidy of the publisher's operations? Perhaps most crucial, how can we be sure that subsidies will not subvert scholarly quality control over the acceptance of manuscripts, and how can we ensure that it is known by all concerned that peer review has not been compromised by financial subventions. All these are questions that need to be answered before any concrete action is taken.

It is in this regard that country and regional centers in the universities can play a valuable entrepreneurial role, if awakened to the task. These centers are often in a position to raise modest project funds from foundations and, when included in campus capital campaigns, endowment money from alumni and friends of the university. As an example of what may be accomplished, the Russian and post-Soviet studies center I currently direct at Harvard recently solicited a \$1 million gift from a generous alumnus to endow a range of library- and publications-related activities. The money in hand, we concluded an agreement with Harvard University Press to underwrite one or two publications per year in our fifty-year-old book series at the press, which had been dormant for some time because

of financial problems. Some of the sum invested will eventually return to the center as income from sales, once the break-even point has been reached. Our priority will be to support the publication of first books by younger scholars. I stress that this is not a mere distribution agreement—which can be a problematic arrangement, especially for junior scholars, since books in a distributed series are not accepted by the press in question through its usual arrangements. Rather, Harvard University Press will continue to review and accept (or reject) manuscripts using the same procedures and quality standards as for any manuscript it considers, only this time in the knowledge that it will be relieved of financial exposure for titles it chooses to accept under the program. This is a model which other area centers, in collaboration with departments and individual scholars, may want to consider, as part of a concerted response to the problem.

Averting the Impending Literary Drought

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Each year, my undergraduates see *Je te plumerai*, a prize-winning Cameroonian film that laments the loss of heritage and community that results from the difficulty African authors experience in finding publishing outlets. Dependence and underdevelopment can arise from many sources, but the inability to communicate through the written word is especially disempowering. In this instance, the gap is not filled by writers from industrial countries, with their own viewpoints. Today's marginalization of Africa comes not only from the difficulty the continent's own citizens encounter in finding ways to express their views but also from the parallel challenges their American counterparts confront.

Editors, authors, and academic departments need to work together to avert an impending literary drought in the African politics sub-field. Current publishing trends potentially threaten our capacity as a society to respond to some of the major humani-

tarian challenges of our era. Why? As publishing of Africa-related material dwindles or shifts to reflect Western fads, both younger and older generations of scholars go on to other pursuits or turn to public sector employment. As a result, we risk losing independent, university-based expertise. Constructive debate is likely to decline as university faculty, news sources, and government consultants become one and the same. We also surrender the lessons systematic study of the region has to offer us. And in these turbulent times, U.S.-based scholars, African and American, have an important role to play in sharing ideas across national boundaries, getting stories out, and maintaining the chronicle of great events and lives. This obligation comes with greater means and greater security.

The Trends

The publishing problem is partly evident from the roster of important university publishers which will not entertain social science manuscripts on African topics and from the preferences displayed by those that do. Harvard University Press categorically tells authors that it cannot make money on a book with Africa content and declines submissions. Princeton University Press has long