

# Information for Whom?

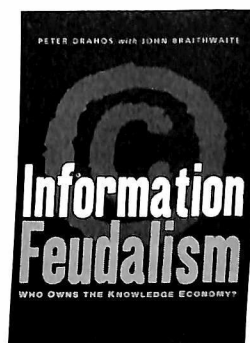
By Sarah Raymundo

A review of Peter Drahos with John Braithwaite, *Information Feudalism: Who Owns the Knowledge Economy?*. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 2002.

How much do we know about what we know? In their book *Information Feudalism*, Drahos and Braithwaite problematise the political economy of knowledge and information in the context of globalisation. Their study of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) provides much-needed data on, and analysis of, how knowledge production is monopolised by big corporations to the disadvantage of the majority of the world's population. By demystifying the deals behind IPR, the authors show how big corporations affect our access to Hollywood movies, software, scientific research, health services, food, books and so on.

In this book, Drahos and Braithwaite explain how information and knowledge are redistributed through the "transfer of knowledge assets from intellectual commons to private hands" (p. 3). They add that "these hands belong to media conglomerates and integrated life sciences corporations rather than individual scientists and authors" (p. 3).

The corporatisation of knowledge is one of the more insidious processes of the uneven distribution of industry and technology within the so-called global village. Compounded by the overwhelming control of wealth and centralisation of political and military power to the big bourgeoisie, the effect of such phenomenon "is to raise the levels of private monopolistic power to dangerous global heights at a time when states, which have been weakened by the forces of globalisation, have less capacity to protect their citizens from the consequences of the exercise of this power."(p. 3).



While the strength of the book lies in its critique of the behaviour of monopolistic corporations, the authors fail to provide a comprehensive assessment of the role of the states in the era of globalisation. Instead, they argue that the state is "weakened by the forces of globalisation." Such analysis of the state apparatus does not take into account how this actually plays an active role in policy-making. After all, the ratification of the GATT-WTO would not have come to be without the representatives of each nation-state, who are also members of the elite class of their respective nations. This perspective of the state apparatus will explain how citizens, especially women and children without access to reproductive technologies and other health services, are not simply 'victims' of big corporations but are caught within the relations of domination involving monopolistic states and their satellite nations.

The book engages the reader on how knowledge is transformed to profit through criminal means. The authors trace the connection between organised crime and intellectual property, describing how owners of intellectual property in Eastern Europe would deal with organised groups like the Georgian and Russian Mafia to ensure maximum profit.

The book also shakes the foundation of the self-righteous anti-piracy discourse by tracing the phenomenon of piracy to the 1500s. By narrating the conflict between South Korea and the U.S. regarding the production of textbooks, the authors show how the latter will go as far as curbing the flow of knowledge in a supposedly free global village. A South Korean

businessman published and/or reproduced thousands of American textbooks, as these textbooks and even software were beyond the reach of South Korean students. In Korean culture, copying was regarded as a sincere form of flattery, something that should gladden the authors rather than anger them (p. 20). But in this case, the publisher stayed in jail for eight days. The example poses a serious question about education and corporate behaviour. In this age of IPR, the popularisation of knowledge for the majority is illegal, and this, the authors stress, is an irony of globalisation.

The book also presents significant debates on the rise of *biogopolies* or patent-based privatisation of discoveries in the field of biology, chemistry and computing science.

Focusing on the formation of cartels and its impact on biotechnology, the authors maintain that "biotechnology reaches into all aspects of four very basic areas: food, health reproduction and environment (p. 167). Given this, they argue, the dangers of biogopolies run deeper than prices and consumer welfare. "The globalisation of intellectual property rights will rob much knowledge of its public good qualities. When knowledge becomes a private good to be traded in markets the demands of many, paradoxically, go unmet. Patent-based R&D is not responsive to demand. The blockbuster mentality of large pharmas takes them to those markets where there is ability to pay. Drugs for mental hypertension, erectile dysfunction and illness are where blockbusters are, not tropical diseases" (p. 167).

All these tendencies are part of what the authors identify as the era of information feudalism. This latest development in inequality and property rights in world history "is an evocative way of describing the contemporary institutional push to redistribute property rights unequally" (199). According to Drahos and Braithwaite, information, like feudalism, "rewards guilds instead of inventive individual citizens. It makes democratic citizens trespassers on knowledge that should be the common heritage of humankind, their educational birthright. Ironically, information feudalism, by dismantling the publicness of knowledge will eventually rob the knowledge economy of much of its productivity" (219).

The parallelism between feudalism and corporatised social relations that configure contemporary state of affairs in the 'information economy' is interesting. Arguably, residues of feudal relations still shape the

inequality brought about by capitalist relations. However, such historicising takes for granted the dominant mode of production that shapes economic and political relationships which, in turn, determine the distribution of knowledge and information. The mechanisms described by the book correspond to the behaviour of big corporations in the era of monopoly capitalism where the prime mover of capitalist function is accumulation. Thus, the locking up of knowledge through patents that the authors describe may be, on the micro-level, comparable to the behaviour of landlords indifferent to modernising agriculture because exploiting the slaves is more than enough. But such analysis fails to analyse how the crisis of capitalist accumulation can actually lock up the production of knowledge and information through the formation of big conglomerates.

To call this process the feudalisation of information in the context of capitalist globalisation is to invoke a static view of history. This line of thinking implies that history ends where capitalism has proven itself to be the most viable mode of production and thus, social, political and economic relations can only be modified by taking on previous characteristics such as the feudal mode. Further, the authors could have been more dialectical in their analysis by focusing their attention not only on the domination of big corporations but on the crisis of monopoly capitalism that pushes big corporations to pursue profits through irrational means, including an embargo on knowledge in the pursuit of profits that are, in fact, increasingly becoming meagre. What is happening is not a feudalisation of information but the intensification of capitalist crisis, which in turn impacts the production of knowledge and information. This situation provides fertile grounds for alternatives.

Notably, this book gives us the opportunity to understand how production within capitalism is pursued for profit and to realise how inequality among nation-states is intensified through globalisation. It exposes the grim reality of how information is created and commercialised for the benefit of big corporations. The human response to the crisis of monopoly capitalism is beyond the book. For only through the praxis of organised movements for social transformation can we concretely combat the conditions described in *Information Feudalism*. ☺

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