

# Why write book reviews?

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The pressure to publish or perish or, more recently, to be visible or vanish, marginalises a culture of critical reading and reflection that has historically been the province of book reviews. Today, book reviews are roundly rejected by academic bureaucrats as unimportant, easy to write and hence, easy to get published, mere summaries, uncritical statements of praise, marketing gimmicks and poorly cited so they are shunted to the tail-end of academic tasks. Historical dialectical analysis shows that the disdain for book reviews is implicitly related to their non-pecuniary characteristics. One contradiction in the *status quo* is that academics expect to be served but they are discouraged from serving and hence are led down a line of being selfish. Writing book reviews, therefore, is good not only for its many academic and social uses, but also for political and ethical reasons.

## Introduction

Book reviews have a poor status in the academy. The refrain 'Book reviews do not count' summarises how Australian university research offices and the Australian Research Council see book reviews. They are discouraged because they are not research-based or because they constitute summaries, not anything new. Others see book reviews as mere commercial advertising, claiming that they merely praise and hence serve as a marketing tool for publishing houses. For some, book reviews are easy to write, not subjected to any quality control and hence, they are not serious pieces (Leo, 2009). Together with their poor citation counts (East, 2011), book reviews are pushed to the margins of academic activity. Indeed, the widely known *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008) did not include book reviews in its list of 'weighted research publications' and the Australian Research Council similarly excludes book reviews from both 'traditional (books, book chapters, conference publications and journal articles) and non-traditional (curated or exhibited event, live performance, original creative work, recorded/rendered work)' outputs (Australian Research Council, 2012).

In turn, book reviews are overlooked and editors typically beg or twist their colleagues' arms to get them to write reviews, knowing that even then, actual writing might never happen. When they do, it is only because they

are asked, not because they perceive any benefit (Adams, 2007). Writing book reviews is what you do after doing all the important things: they do not seem to be anyone's first priority (Oinas & Leppälä, 2013). For journals, if there is a pressing need for other scholarly things, the space for book reviews is often the first to be sacrificed.

This essay tries to present the other side of the story. It is important for balance, particularly because relatively few papers have been written on book reviews and encouragement to do more book reviews (see, for example, Miranda, 1996; Tobin, 2003; Leo, 2009; Oinas & Leppälä, 2013). Yet, in my role as book review editor, I realise that PhD students, early career researchers or even more senior scholars with little experience in writing book reviews usually require me to explain why book reviews are important and how they should do it.

This essay developed from a small note that I usually include whenever I send out book review invitations to early career researchers who are writing reviews for the first time. I have refined the note in four ways. First, through my own learning of the various reasons for writing reviews and what I get from doing so. Second, I have drawn on my discussion with PhD students at my institution about why they read reviews. Third, my reflections on advice from my PhD supervisor on doing reviews, a short discussion with him on why he has consistently written book reviews in his career, and fourth a discussion with other book review editors on various issues relating to book reviews.

For this study, I use the historical materialist approach, drawing selectively on the Marxian method of dialectics. It contrasts with the existing non-political economic analysis of the status of book reviews. The strength is that it highlights change and continuity, and the internal contradictions they generate in the process of capitalist development. Precisely, 'dialectics imply that every phenomenon has an origin and an end, that nothing is either eternal or finished once and for all' (Marx, 1990, p. 20). It is different from the Hegelian approach, which sees history as a series of events, and hence calls history change (Marx & Engels, 1888), and substantially different from approaches adopted in the existing limited papers on the topic, the latest being the contribution by geographers Oinas and Leppälä (2013). The historical materialist approach places emphasis on evolution and hence eschews a static view of history. Its historical specificity, that is, interest in context and challenge to unbridled universalism, implies that its use must be grounded in a particular social time and location, while the analyst draws out dynamic rather than static ideas (Sherman, 1993).

The essay argues that the book review serves an important role for the reviewer, the author of the book, the scientific community and the general public. It contests the claim that book reviews are mere praise singing documents, non-research pieces and mere summaries.

## A long history of the book review

Post-publication peer review has a history that predates the establishment of the academy in 1650s Paris and Bologna. The church played a pioneering role in this practice of judging quality and rebuking poorly constructed arguments, thinking, or non-standards conforming publications. The emphasis on publication, then criticism, is a long cherished human practice that predates formal academic institutions (Gould, 2012). The academic culture of reviewing books started in Athens in 140 BC, but the practice was institutionalised much later in Paris in 1665 when the journal *Journal des Scavans* was founded. In the early days, a book review meant drawing the attention of the scholarly community to the state of play in the field. Reviewers tried to be comprehensive in their reviews and the journal did so in its selection of books (Miranda, 1996).

All that transformed in 1802 when *The Edinburgh* was published. It chose only a few books for its reviews. In turn, getting one's book reviewed was not just a matter of course but it also became a mark of distinction or prestige, although debates also ensued on what criteria had to be fulfilled to get one's book reviewed. Another change

in book reviewing that commenced with the publication of *The Edinburgh* was in the purpose of the review. No longer were reviews just summaries, but they became another avenue for scholarly work to be appraised for quality: a post-publication review. Many reasons can be adduced for these two main transformations, namely the increasing interest of the public in what was happening in the ivory tower and hence an increase in interest in reviewing for newspapers. The second reason was the increase in the number of books and hence the need to know which ones were of good quality (Miranda, 1996). Historically, the motive behind post-publication review has been protecting the public from unmeritorious work or ideas (Gould, 2012), so, encouraging critical assessment of books seems to be for the public good.

Yet, book reviews are currently poorly appreciated. The reasons given for such a poor image are varied. They range from being easy to write, and easy to get published, to being mere summaries, uncritical statements of praise and a mere marketing gimmick. Carefully viewed, these would seem to be part of a bigger shift towards using economic criteria to evaluate scholarly efforts (Stilwell, 2003). Book reviews do not generate research money for universities and do not make universities competitive enough to get external research grants. It can be inferred that academic managers are unlikely to be interested in supporting such unrewarding efforts. It is this money determines everything orientation that Stilwell (2003, p. 58) calls 'academic capitalism'. This obsession with economic criteria has led many academics to adopt coping strategies such as steering off scholarly activities that do not count (Cooper & Poletti, 2011), or exit strategies, such as leaving the academy because they do not obtain sufficient time to read and reflect. A long-term consequence of this trend is that some academics have expressed interest in becoming librarians (Peterson, 2011). The culture of careful reading and reflection that the book review embodies is at the heart of scholarly efforts and as such requires more careful attention.

## Writing a review

Book reviews are not mere summaries or mere praise statements (Oinas & Leppälä, 2013). Rather, they are evaluative commentaries in which reviewers demonstrate their knowledge of the books, where they stand in the scholarly literature and what contribution they make. Reviews may also evaluate books against their stated objectives. They typically make informed analysis rather than merely heap praises on books. Praise for books is normally seen on their back covers and is sometimes referred to as 'endorsements'

or 'in praise of the book'. Book notes summarise and do not usually evaluate. While book reviews may praise, their function is mostly evaluative.

A couple of examples. *International Sociology Reviews* (IS, 2013) (formerly *International Sociology Review of Books - ISRB*), notes that 'ISRB is a vehicle for considering, examining, analysing, appraising, assessing, and evaluating books by sociologists all over the world'. The *Journal of Australian Political Economy* (JAPE, 2013) combines two genres, book notes and book reviews, but each is clearly marked as such. While book notes summarise, book reviews evaluate (see, for example, the current issue of *JAPE*).

These examples challenge the view that reviews are not serious pieces. Indeed, to do a good review, one would have written a book on a similar topic, be involved in research leading to or that has already led to the publication of a number of articles on the topic, or be writing a doctoral (or other) dissertation on the topic (Leo, 2009). There is a judgement to be made not only about the quality of the book but also how the review will be received and read. Some scholars, especially of French training, would typically offer a summary of the book, then show that the book has failed, and then try to demonstrate a superior thinking while still thanking the author. Others, particularly English-trained scholars, tend to move straight to attack, reflecting a competitive and combative model of reviewing in which the reviewer tries to win the duel (Tobin, 2003). In fields such as philosophy, apparently the tendency is to find contrary evidence to write a brutal review. Indeed, it has been suggested that for some philosophy departments, the more ruthless the review, the better it is for the career of the reviewer (Leo, 2009). One reviewer is said to have written that a book under review was beyond 'the boundaries of permissible ignorance' (Tobin, 2003, p. 48). Here is a review that uses rather harsh language to draw attention to apparent problems in a book, but other reviewers might achieve the same end by rigorously demonstrating the import of the book's limitations (Nord, 2006). Either way, thoughtful evaluation is the vision.

As a reviews editor, I prefer a more balanced review. Book reviews may be about 1,000–1,200 word long, shorter or slightly longer. I prefer a review that typically adopts a critical but civil stance throughout and as much as possible is thorough without denigrating the book author. Generally, the review will set the stage by highlighting the conversation that the book joins, introduce the book, describe the structure, content and argument, assess the book's strengths and weaknesses, and make an overall statement about whether the book is worth reading by reflecting on the implications of the total appraisal. The

reviewer will start with an overview, demonstrate how it compares with existing work, evaluate the evidence and the arguments, and close with a balanced and as civil a verdict as possible that can engage with the broader field. One way to judge the contribution of a book is to determine whether it introduces new material, synthesises old material in a new way or offers a new interpretation of already known phenomenon. To Tobin (2003), this is a key feature of a good book review. Doing so will inevitably lead the reviewer to engage with scholarship on the topic, it also tends to draw more citations (Oinas & Leppälä, 2013). The format I have described is not formulaic. The reviewer can, for instance, provide an overall judgement at the outset. However arranged, what I have offered are some of the key elements in a book review. So, contrary to the view that reviews are easy to write, to do them well, the reviewer ought to expend significant intellectual effort.

Writing reviews may be less of a task than writing a full research paper, but producing a good review is not as easy as critics suggest. Reviews are usually reviewed internally by the reviews editor or externally by experts on the book's topic. *Capital and Class* and *African Review of Economics and Finance*, for example, review book reviews internally, but *Review of Radical Political Economics* and *Journal of Urban Health* will usually review the reviews externally. Either way, the reviewer is checked and required to demonstrate integrity and knowledge. *African Affairs* requested my CV the first time I asked to review, implying another quality check. For all these reasons, a published review will usually have some informed ideas, even if it is quite ordinary (Oinas & Leppälä, 2013). In the hands of an experienced reviewer, a book review can be properly placed in a long conversation or used to establish or detect gaps in the literature – a substantial service to the scholarly community.

## The many benefits of book reviews

By contesting some of the misleading impressions about book reviews, I have implicitly shown some of their benefits. It is also important to be explicit about other merits, from the perspectives of the writer, the broader scholarly community and the public. As a first submission, the reviewer gets the book for free and, for PhD students and early career researchers with limited funds or senior scholars in developing countries who struggle to obtain books published by the major presses, this material benefit is even more substantial.

When I review, I find that I am forced to critically read the whole book, a practice I might not otherwise be able

to do in today's tight academic schedule, although doing so helps to get more out of the book. Besides, creating a permanent documentation of the salient points raised in the book is useful for future study and reference. Writing reviews helps me to enhance my research as I learn how others present and evaluate evidence. In a world of publish or perish, it is easy to forget that without reading and doing so critically, quality research can suffer. Book reviews can help sharpen our own writing and develop our ideas.

Reviews help to develop the skills of evaluating substantial amounts of research, projects, or programmes, a skill that might not otherwise be developed, especially when such a skill is not always taught in PhD programmes, particularly if the PhD deals with research questions that do not deal with evaluation. It is also a skill that can be transferred to the evaluation of a global position statement and the state of literature for one's thesis or other studies, a theory or conceptual framework. I have encouraged my own PhD students to consider reviews of books from which they are borrowing concepts, frameworks, or theories. I know some PhD students who find reviews of such books very useful, although reading the special issue of *Australian Universities' Review* on doctoral education (54[1]), I got the impression that not many PhD supervisors encourage the practice.

Writing reviews is a great way to become known as a specialist or researcher in the field. A persuasive and comprehensive review evokes a feeling of respect for the reviewer, if the reviewer is not already known. The benefits of being known as an expert are numerous; they give one visibility, impact and attention, among other things.

Writing reviews helps the writer to get some ideas. Book reviews submitted to the *Review of Radical Political Economics* are refereed by at least two experts on the topic and, in my experience, they give great feedback. *Agriculture and Human Values* will have the book review editor referee the submitted book review and give helpful feedback. The editor of *African Review of Economics and Finance* tries to get book reviewers to join the conversation of books reviewed in the journal and broader field as well as give feedback on effective writing and joining a bigger conversation.

Beyond helping the reviewers, reviews also support the scholarly community. The reviewer provides an invaluable service to book authors. Reviews can help book authors when seeking promotion or block the rise of others not as yet sufficiently qualified for promotion. According to Adams (2007, p. 202), reviews play a significant role in the decision to promote academics. Reviewers help book authors to get feedback, useful for future development,

and to know the success or failure of their books (see, for example, Leyshon, 2013). Reviews can also help course teachers to choose one book over another or warn them off certain books. Gillian Hewitson's (2012) review for the *African Review of Economics and Finance* does this well by encouraging lecturers to adopt the book she reviewed, with additional materials, as a teaching text. Also, reviews bring to the attention of the scholarly community what it is that has been added to the body of literature. Librarians can be persuaded to obtain books that have received excellent reviews.

For the general public, reviews can be a way to determine how people should perceive newly published books. To be sure, this service is not only about whether to acquire certain books. But, rather, reviews can also warn the public against the uncritical acceptance of certain theses. In a review for the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Adam Selby (1988) tried to draw the public's attention to the inattention paid to the radical meanings of the rentier state theory. More recently, reviews in the *African Review of Economics and Finance* by Thomas Glendinning (2013) and Danielle Spryut (2012) have provided important qualifications to analyses that the general public may otherwise not know. Eric Yeboah (2012) and Kim Neverson (2013) in the same journal have strongly recommended certain books not yet widely known by the public. Reviews help to correct factual problems, contest simplistic accounts and offer other perspectives to those contained in recently published books. Others can encourage interest in books which the general public may not ordinarily be willing to welcome. To emphasise, reviews can be used to engage the public, especially when done for open access journals or newspapers to that access is free. These reasons for writing reviews do not only apply to recently published books or books hot off the press. They also apply to reviews of classics or seminal books published several decades ago. It has been established that this 'deferred review' can have the added advantage of determining what impact a book has had on scholarship, policy and societal practices (Nord, 2006, p. 197). In short, reviews - whether they are of new or old books - are mightily useful and hence very worthy of writing.

## Conclusion

In spite of the pecuniary-based reasons for the rejection of book reviews, perceived broadly within a historical materialist context, they offer immense contributions to the reviewer, the scholarly community and the public. They may not be as tedious to write as research papers, but it

takes significant intellectual effort to do them well. Done well, they can help the reviewer to get ideas, recollect ideas, sharpen research and writing skills, develop evaluative skills and get known in one's discipline. These benefits accrue at no cost, and should provide good incentive to review. Besides, book reviews help the scholarly community to appreciate the significance of new books, or the ways new books break new ground. In turn, they constitute one of the elements that promotion committees may consider in elevating a scholar. For the public, book reviews, especially those published in newspapers or open access journals, can help to warn against or draw attention to new books.

Paradoxically, the present state of affairs generates immense contradictions. Academics are discouraged from writing book reviews, but reviews of their books help in making their promotion decisions. Additionally, book reviews help the author to become more informed and sharpen their ideas, but academics are cajoled into publishing mainly journal articles. PhD students can benefit from writing and reading book reviews, yet reviews are discouraged. And, members of the public, whose taxes are used to fund research, also benefit from reviews, but the current policy context threatens to remove this social benefit. Pursued, the current orientation will continue to encourage selfish behaviour among academics, who will expect their books to be reviewed but will not wish to extend the same service to the community of scholars.

We should write book reviews for all these reasons, benefits, tensions and contradictions. The writing of book reviews will need to be encouraged across the different sections of the academy. PhD supervisors have a role to play and editors have a role to play, too, as do disciplinary associations. PhD supervisors can encourage their students to read reviews of the concepts and theories they propose to use and write reviews of books in their fields. Editors should encourage the citation of book reviews in their journals and/or elsewhere to help improve the visibility of reviews and thereby enhance their greater non-pecuniary uses. Disciplinary associations can be more active in encouraging members to write reviews to be published in association journals and newsletters. Publishers, whose role I have not highlighted in this essay, can help by making reviews free. Scholars ought to review only books that touch very directly on their own research, present or future. That way, the benefits of writing book reviews will be maximised.

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