THE LAW AND ECONOMICS OF ARTICLE 82 EC

Robert O'Donoghue and A Jorge Padilla



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To my loving parents, Geoffrey and Mary, for instilling the confidence to do great things, and the belief to always try to do good things.

Robert O'Donoghue

To Araceli, Aitana, and Claudia for their unconditional support and infinite patience

A Jorge Padilla

FOREWORD

Article 82 has always been a subject of considerable intellectual and practical difficulty. The first question (can it apply to a merger?) was answered only in 1973. The next question (does it require different kinds of analysis for exploitative and anticompetitive abuses?) was answered affirmatively later, but raised further questions. What is the test of "unfair" prices or contract terms under Article 82(a)? What tests distinguish legitimate competition from anticompetitive conduct under Article 82(b)? Is harm to consumers necessary for an abuse under Article 82(c)? Can conduct be unlawful as a reprisal abuse if it would not be illegal anyway? Is there an "unexpressed" category of abuses which do not fall under one of the four clauses of Article 82, but which result from the "special responsibility" of dominant companies, and if there is, what could it be? Can lawyers and economists agree on the answers to these questions, and until they do so, what advice (if any) can usefully be given to companies?

It is perhaps surprising that these, undoubtedly difficult, questions have not been more thoroughly analysed. Every company which is, or may be, dominant has to have a pricing policy. A too-broad concept of anticompetitive abuses would discourage legitimate competition. *Per se* rules would be unjustifiable, but some economists seem to believe that no useful general tests or guidelines are possible either. In particular in recent years, lawyers and economists have criticised what the Commission and the Community Courts said in particular cases, but usually without offering constructive suggestions. National competition authorities in EC Member States have always had power to apply Article 82, but most of them did not try to develop principles on which they could do so.

Questions that are so important and have caused so much difficulty for so long need to be dealt with by combining legal and economic knowledge and experience. This Robert O'Donoghue and Jorge Padilla have done. They have identified and analysed all of the fundamental questions concerning the interpretation and implications of Article 82. They have offered carefully considered answers, making it clear where their conclusions suggest that the Commission and the Community Courts have expressed themselves, in individual cases, in ways that obscure rather than clarifying the general principles which underlie the case law. They have formulated general principles which seem to me to be sound and reasonable, both as law and as economics. They have written a new kind of competition law book, deliberately avoided merely compiling case summaries, but providing an intellectual framework.

Above all, they have dealt with one of the most important and difficult issues, the test of anticompetitive abuses, by returning to the language of Article 82. As long ago as 1975 the Court of Justice, in the *Sugar Cartel* judgment mostly concerned with what is now Article 81, decided that Article 82(b) prohibits conduct by a dominant company which limits the production, marketing or technical development of

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its competitors, that is anticompetitive abuses. That little-noticed finding (since confirmed in other judgments) was in fact more important than the description of an anticompetitive abuse given later in the *Hoffmann-La Roche* judgment. "Methods different from those which condition normal competition", the phrase in the judgment, does not provide a useful test of anticompetitive conduct. "Limiting" possibilities of production, marketing or technical development which would, but for the supposedly unlawful conduct, be available to competitors provides a test, and may well provide the only possible or necessary definition, of anticompetitive conduct.

By regarding Article 82(b) as the legal basis for all cases of foreclosure, exclusionary or anticompetitive abuses, the authors clarify the whole law on abuse of dominance. There are, in essence, three kinds of abuses: exploitative abuses (Article 82(a)), exclusionary abuses (Article 82(b)), and discrimination between companies not associated with the dominant enterprise (Article 82(c)). Discrimination in favour of the dominant company's own operations comes under Article 82(b). Tying and bundling (Article 82(d)) can be either exclusionary or exploitative, or both. Reprisal abuses are exclusionary, since they discourage aggressive competition. The test for exclusionary conduct is that set out in the Treaty, which is both theoretically sound and suitable for use by dominant enterprises.

The most important consequence, in practice, is to make possible a rational and operational approach to pricing by dominant companies. Price reductions which are conditional on the buyer buying exclusively from the dominant company are illegal, except in very special circumstances. Other price reductions, such as quantity rebates, benefit consumers and do not "limit" marketing possibilities otherwise open to competitors. This solves the greatest single problem facing dominant companies under the Commission's practice up to now, and does so in a way which, because it is based on the words of the Treaty and the case law of the Court of Justice, will be difficult for any competition authority to reject. It provides much more legal certainty than any economic test which has been suggested, and avoids the ambiguity of the Commission's "exclusivity inducing" test. Exclusivity, in the sense of buying only from one source, can also result from the dominant company offering the lowest price or the best value. By analysing the case law, the authors have brought out the underlying principles, and clarified both the principles and the issues unresolved by the case law, or indeed created by apparent inconsistencies in it.

By establishing basic principles and identifying and discussing the questions which arise from them, the authors have provided an intellectual framework into which all the case law can be fitted and analysed, and from which conclusions can be drawn about important questions which the accidents of litigation have not so far raised. They have offered tests and conclusions more, it seems to me, than most other authors who have summarised the cases and made general comments, which were true but which have not always provided much practical guidance except in clear situations.

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This book will make it necessary in future for anyone writing seriously about Article 82 to take into account the fundamental legal principles to which the authors have called to our attention, to propose rules and make comments which reconcile both legal and economic analysis, and to suggest tests which can be used in practice and which give answers which would be generally accepted as correct. In short, they have greatly raised the intellectual level of the discussion of Article 82, and provided practical and acceptable answers to many of the questions which have concerned lawyers, economists and companies for many years.

This book also creates another precedent, which others should follow. Books on substantive competition law are better if they are written jointly with economists and books on competition economics are better if they are written jointly with lawyers. One of the strengths of this book is that it combines so well the legal framework and the economic analysis. That combination is particularly important in Article 82 cases, but it is also essential in cases involving State measures restricting competition, which are subject to Article 86 EC.

The Commission has published a Discussion Paper on the interpretation of Article 82. Whatever the final version of this may be, it is clear that it will not answer all the important questions about Article 82 which will inevitably arise. All of the issues discussed in this book are likely to come before the Community Courts (and increasingly also national courts). It may be some time before the Courts have given their answers to all these questions. But judgments, even in leading cases, cannot reasonably be expected to provide an intellectual framework for an entire area of law: judges are not legislators, and their role is to decide individual cases. The framework which the authors have provided will be of great value to everyone concerned with Article 82 in the future, and will enable courts and national authorities to decide Article 82 cases correctly with greater confidence than has been possible up to now.

In an area of law such as this, no book can be expected to be both seminal and definitive in all respects at the same time. But a book can create a new paradigm which provides a basis for subsequent analysis, and be definitive on some issues, in the sense that some of the conclusions reached are so clearly convincing and correct that nobody questions them again. It seems to me that this book has achieved both.

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AUTHORS' PREFACE

This idea of this book was conceived in 2003 at the European University Institute's roundtable entitled "What is an abuse of dominance?" Perhaps unusually for a lawyer and an economist, the authors found themselves in agreement on a number of issues. In particular, we were dissatisfied with traditional competition law text-books that ignored the influence of economics and equally unhappy with competition economics textbooks that ignored the need for administrable rules and legal certainty. Fortified with this initial consensus, we set out to produce a textbook that would be useful to both lawyers and economists.

The subject of the book—abuse of dominance under Article 82 EC—is topical. In addition to the European University Institute roundtable mentioned above, Article 82 EC has received detailed comment from the Global Competition Law Centre's Research Papers on Article 82 EC (2005), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Competition on the Merits study (2005), the Economic Advisory Group on Competition Policy's An Economic Approach to Article 82 (2005), and, most notably, DG Competition's Staff Discussion Paper on Article 82 EC (2005). Similar initiatives are underway in the United States in the context of their on-going antitrust modernisation review.

Significant interest in Article 82 EC has been prompted by a series of factors. First, distinguishing abusive unilateral conduct from legitimate competition is inherently difficult, since they often look similar (e.g., low prices). Unless competition law is to have the perverse effect of chilling competition, clear rules are needed.

Second, Article 82 EC has been the "poor relation" of EC competition law in that it has not benefited from modernisation to bring it into line with economic thinking in the same way as have Article 81 EC and the merger control rules.

Third, with the advent of modernisation, national authorities and courts will apply Article 82 EC and equivalent national laws much more frequently than they have done in the past. Indeed, this is already a reality with significant fines for abusive conduct increasingly becoming the norm at national level. It is vital for firms operating in multiple jurisdictions that similar principles are applied and that levels of expertise are relatively uniform.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our practical experience in counselling firms is that the application of Article 82 EC is unclear in material respects. Firms with 40% market shares often unnecessarily worry that they are, or may be, dominant, with the significant consequences that this entails for their commercial practices. The welfare cost of this lack of clarity and excessive caution must be enormous to the EU economy as a whole—something the EU can ill-afford given its lack of competitiveness relative to other international blocs and the stated objectives of the Lisbon Agenda in this regard.

This book does not, as such, seek to develop new principles for the application of Article 82 EC. Our primary objective is to inform readers of the current law, both as to the constituent elements of Article 82 EC and in more detail for the main categories of exclusionary and exploitative abuses. Although we have been involved in a number of the cases discussed in the book—sometimes on opposing sides—we hope that the law is stated clearly and neutrally (or at least that our respective biases have cancelled each other out).

But the book is also hopefully more ambitious in certain respects. In the first place, each chapter on the main categories of abuse includes a detailed section on the applicable economic principles. We have endeavoured to present these principles in a non-technical manner to the fullest extent possible, bearing in mind the advice of Professor Stephen Hawking ("Someone told me that each equation I included in the book would halve the sales.").

Second, we have tried to put forward a more coherent framework for the consistent analysis of particular types of conduct. A simple but important example concerns exclusionary abuses. Commentators are struggling to verbalise tests for exclusionary conduct and various alternatives have been proposed. But it seems to us that Article 82(b) already contains a good basic test: conduct is exclusionary when it "limits" rivals' production and causes "prejudice to consumers." This captures the two key features of abusive conduct: that it materially harms rivals and causes consumer harm. Similarly, a lot of confusion has arisen under Article 82 EC concerning discrimination. We make a modest, but important, suggestion: that all discrimination aimed at rivals should be analysed as exclusionary conduct, and not as discrimination per se. Discrimination may be necessary in this regard, but is not generally sufficient to prove an exclusionary abuse. This would mean that the residual importance of discrimination under Article 82 EC would be limited—essentially to situations of secondary-line injury (for which we see no convincing basis for competition law intervention)—which is consistent with economic thinking and would aid clarity considerably.

Finally, we consider a number of issues or practices that have not received detailed treatment under Article 82 EC, setting out the arguments for and against particular conclusions, and tentatively suggesting the way we think the issues should be analysed.

We are reluctant to attach a label to the overall approach adopted in the book. Our hope is that it is more or less the right one. But we consider that the choice sometimes posited between an approach based on legal form and one based on economic effects is false. Relying only on legal form almost certainly leads to incorrect conclusions by ignoring the mixed economic effects of many unilateral practices. Proponents of an economic effects analysis, however, also need to recognise that the law would be *much* less clear than it is already if each case depended on an assessment of the economic benefits and harm of conduct, most of which can only be assessed *ex post* (if at all). Economists sometimes underestimate the importance of legal certainty to businesses.

An intermediate approach—which we support—is to use simple error-cost analysis based on economic evidence to structure administrable legal rules ("structured rule-of-reason"). Take above-cost unconditional price cuts. There is a case in economic theory that such price cuts can harm consumer welfare in certain circumstances. But no clear legal rule has been devised to say when harm to consumer welfare occurs. Absent a clear rule, restricting unconditional above-cost price cuts is likely to greatly chill price competition. The optimal solution is therefore to do nothing, even if in so doing certain anticompetitive practices thereby escape censure.

This book is a first edition, but comes at an important juncture. The Commission may well publish guidelines on Article 82 EC in the next 12–18 months. Important cases are also pending before the Community Courts, including *Microsoft* (tying and refusal to deal), *British Airwaysl Virgin* (rebates), *Wanadoo* (predatory pricing), *Deutsche Telekom* (margin squeeze), and *AstraZeneca* (use and abuse of patent approval system). A second edition therefore seems likely sooner rather than later.

As with any endeavour of this kind, we have benefited from the input and assistance of numerous people, without whom the book would never have been completed. These include: Paul Bury, Alexandra Deege, Alfonso Donato Giuliani, Tanya Dunne, Rupert Elderkin, Simon Genevaz, Thomas Graf, Rogier Groen, Urs Hagler, Hertta Hyrkas, Joachim Keller, Philip Kienapfel, Paul Marquardt, Joanna O'Sullivan, and Brendan Reddy.

A number of other individuals deserve special mention. Nicholas Levy (Cleary Gottlieb) and David Evans (LECG) were very supportive of the idea of the book and helped obtain the support of our respective firms for this project (including, in one case, a leave of absence). Caroline Brennan (Arthur Cox), Christopher Cook (Cleary Gottlieb), Cynthia Ngwe (McDermott Will & Emery), Ian Reynolds (BP Collins), and David Spector (Paris Science Economiques) each helped on various chapters, which we gratefully acknowledge. We also benefited from discussions with a number of people that greatly improved our understanding and presentation of certain issues, including Christian Ahlborn (Linklaters), Maurits Dolmans (Cleary Gottlieb), Inmaculada Gutierrez (LECG), Alison Oldale (LECG), and Romano Subiotto (Cleary Gottlieb). We also had first-rate paralegal, secretarial, and library assistance from Axelle Arbonnier, Kevin Copeland, Henk Dekeyzer, Satu-Anneli Kauranen, Barbara Martinez, Anneliese Rosengarten, and Karl Willemijns (all Cleary Gottlieb). Our publishers, Hart Publishing, have been excellent and Richard Hart in particular has always been flexible and responsive. Finally, John Temple Lang has been a constant source of encouragement from the inception of this book until its conclusion. He also kindly agreed to write a foreword, which is fitting since he has, for many years, been the leading thinker on Article 82 EC issues.

In the time-honoured tradition, none of the above is responsible for any blunders that follow. Equally, each co-author blames the other for anything said in this book that might later prove inconvenient or embarrassing before a court,

competition authority, or other tribunal. Finally, we should make clear that any opinions expressed in this book are personal only and do not represent those of our respective firms or clients.

The law is stated as of March 31, 2006.

ROBERT O'DONOGHUE A. JORGE PADILLA

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