Book Review

Incorporating the Digital Commons: Corporate Involvement in Free and Open-Source Software
Benjamin J. Birkinbine
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Aaron Heresco

The development and struggle over the "digital commons" reveals ongoing tensions between the ethos of a sharing economy and efforts to generate profit from user-generated materials. From websites like Wikipedia to open-source software such as Linux or OpenOffice, software products, services, and digital spaces are increasingly relying on users not just as customers, but as beta testers, quality assurance, contributors, or even developers. Such decentralized means of digital production suggest that contests over licensing, distribution rights, and authorial control will be increasingly important objects of struggle between labor and capital. As daily life becomes increasingly experienced through the lens of platforms and digital software, the manner in which this software is produced and distributed contains the potential for critical, if not radical, interventions. The control and usage of "common" resources are particularly fraught in digital software spaces, and here the distinction between "free" and "libre" in open-source software is crucial. Free open-source software generally refers to the cost to the end-users: free software (free as-in-beer) costs nothing to use. Libre software, on the other hand, refers to open-source software that allows users to "run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software . . . [f]ree software is first and foremost a matter of liberty, not price" (LibreOffice.org, 2021). These two articulations of "free" software have important historical antecedents (pp. 8-13) and long-term implications for the digital praxis and political organization of and through open-source software (pp. 109–115).

Ben Birkinbine's "*Incorporating the Digital Commons*" offers multiple points of critical engagement with the Free (Libre) and Open-Source Software (hereafter FLOSS) movement. The author is particularly interested in the intersection of open-source digital production and the ways in which capital enterprises encourage and/or enclose such digital products. Rather than universally lauding such efforts, Birkinbine notes that "the purportedly revolutionary changes brought about by FLOSS and commons-based peer production are now becoming incorporated intro corporate strategies and corporate structures" (p. 3). Birkinbine begins the work by situating

open-source software within a brief theoretical analysis of "the commons." It is worth noting here the author's point that "commons" can be conceived as a noun *or* a verb – as either a collection of property held *in common,* or as a process through which there is an "active pooling of common resources with a deep connection to the history, culture, and ecology of the place where they exist" (p. 43). Whether commons exist as a material phenomenon or a process is not merely an ontological question, but also a teleological one – the action of *commoning* connects conviviality, cooperation, and community to a process through which radical social change is possible. The relationship between FLOSS and the commons/*commoning* is compelling but would be further strengthened by more specific integration/discussion throughout the work.

In terms of structure, the manuscript is bookended by theoretical interventions/analysis: Chapter 2 is a brief structural analysis of circuits of value within FLOSS while Chapter 6 provides an institutional analysis and summary of how entities within the software industry engage with FLOSS. The middle chapters offer three case studies considering how specific enterprises (Microsoft, Red Hat, and Oracle) navigate the complex relationships with open-source communities and the software they produce and maintain. Chapter 3 focuses on Microsoft's shifting stances toward FLOSS, ranging from the anti-FLOSS Halloween Documents of 1998 to *Microsoft Open Technologies* initiative in 2012. Chapter 4 consider Red Hat Linux and the partial incorporation of free software. Chapter 5 concludes the case studies with a closer look at Oracle and Sun Microsystems and the ways the FLOSS communities and boundary organizations attempted to protect FLOSS from corporate enclosure.

The case studies are the primary strength of the work. The author's presentation of institutional histories, including primary documents, paints a vivid portrait of the complexities that exist for both open-source communities and the corporations that support them. For open-source software communities the introduction of corporate involvement opens up avenues for additional resources at the expense of community control. For corporate entities, FLOSS presents a valuable source of "free labor" at the expense of potential revenue generation and product control. The case studies demonstrate not only these tensions, but also explore the strategies used by various communities/corporations to negotiate contentious issues. One strategy, discussed most prominently in Chapter 4, is the use of boundary organizations – council's set up "to negotiate and establish boundaries between two parties who may have both shared and disparate interests" (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2008). In the case of FLOSS, boundary organizations are generally comprised of members of both the open source and corporate community and negotiate issues of membership, collaboration, production, and licensing. Beyond merely pointing to one of the ways that FLOSS community/corporate complexities are resolved, the discussion of boundary organizations also offers a compelling tactical analysis of decentralized and democratic governance. Governance of the commons, or the commoning of FLOSS governance, features prominently in the concluding chapter. Boundary and subversive commoning and discussions of various licensing configurations offer an intriguing wrap up to the case studies in the book's middle section.

If the institutional analysis found in the case studies are the strength of the book, the structural analysis, particularly that found in Chapter 2, leave the reader wanting additional details and explanation. The analysis of the circuits of value, particularly surrounding issues of machines and labor, pose a number of important questions. Specifically, further exploration of the character of

open-source labor and the ownership of the means of digital production would add critical theoretical nuance to the work. Birkinbine makes some gestures toward these issues, noting, for example, that "if FLOSS labor can be said to be alienated from their production, it is at least qualitatively different to more classical forms of industrial production" (p. 40). This qualitative difference is briefly mentioned again two pages later; however, issues surrounding the means of production, the nature of the open-source commodity, and the production/distribution of value (each stage of the simple M-C-M' formulation) are left vague. Some of these paths are gently tread in the concluding chapter, as the author cites Meretz (2014) and Rigi (2014) in arguing a) that free software is not a commodity and b) that some open source licensing changes the process of value creation and abolishes knowledge rent. Such claims offer numerous avenues for critical inquiry but introducing them in the concluding chapter leaves little room for theoretical development or application to the case studies presented. A further explication of the tension between FLOSS as capitalist continuity and FLOSS as potential for radical change would add additional theoretical novelty and more clearly articulate the stakes of the books' arguments.

Birkinbine's *Incorporating the Digital Commons* is a successful and accessible analysis of corporate involvement in free and open-source software. The author transitions effectively from structural to institutional analyses, concluding with a consideration of the commons as a space/process of radical potential. The book is not a polemic, but an invitation to reconsider enclosure, resistance, and the future of a commons-community. The book is highly recommended for those interested in open-source software, digital commons, or digital enclosure and resistance movements.

Reference List

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Aaron Heresco (aheresco@callutheran.edu) is an associate professor in the department of Communication at California Lutheran University.