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ONLINE BOOK REVIEW

Nathan Ensmenger
Indiana University

Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking
Gabriella Coleman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012)

This book is a thoroughly researched, well-written, and insightful analysis of the culture and politics of the Free/Open Source Software (F/OSS) hacker community. These hacker communities produce software products such as the GNU/Linux operating system, the Firefox web browser, and the Apache web server. They have long fascinated economists and political scientists, who wonder at their ability to coordinate and sustain large and complex software development projects without relying on either rigorously controlled corporate hierarchies or the self-interest of the profit motive. Coleman, a cultural anthropologist, turns her attention to the moral and political commitments of the F/OSS community, arguing the hackers are engaging in "a material politics of cultural action" (p. 185) that embody "an embedded critique of the assumptions that dominate the moral geography of intellectual property law." (p. 186)

Coleman opens with an exploration of a supposedly typical life history of a free software hacker, drawn from a series of more than seventy interviews that Coleman conducted. In the "relatively standard script" (p. 25) that most of these hackers use to narrate and make sense of their origins, their precocious mastery of technology is revealed in some youthful incident of creative destruction — for example when, as a boy, he both delights and dismays his mother by disassembling kitchen appliances. (The highly gendered nature of this script, and of the hacker community more generally, is noted by Coleman but not interrogated). Within a few years, the proto-hacker discovered the computer, and is immediately hooked. Over the course of the next few years, he immerses himself in a world defined by both technology *and* culture, discovering via computer bulletin boards or the Internet a community of like-minded individuals who share his interests and experiences. Coleman provides a valuable service by emphasizing the sociability of computer hackers — individuals who are often stereotyped as being uninterested or incapable of meaningful social interaction. She pays particular attention to the role of humor, puns, and other forms of wordplay in the formation of the hacker aesthetic, which she argues is central to the establishment of both a sense of community and a hierarchy of expertise within the hacker community. "By telling jokes," Coleman argues, "hackers externalize what they see as their

intelligence and gain recognition from technically talented peers" (p. 104). Words are important, she suggests, because for computer hackers, code and speech are essentially interchangeable.

Although Coleman provides a brief history of the F/OSS movement (which in reality encompasses a number of distinct, and sometimes contradictory, communities and ideologies), her focus is on configuration of software, social practices, political commitments, and legal arrangements known as Debian. Debian is a collection of software packages (known as a distribution) centered around the GNU/Linux operating system. Debian is maintained by a group of more than a thousand volunteers, each of whom is responsible for maintaining both technical excellence and a commitment to particular moral and political principles. Before a volunteer can contribute to the Debian project, he or she must participate in an enculturation process known as the New Maintainer Process (NMP) that requires them to study the legal and ethical principles of free software as well as to produce a written formulation of their own views on these principles. After participating in the NMP, Coleman argues, Debian volunteers have shared in a common ritual of entry into a community, but also have "started to learn a Debian-specific vocabulary with which to situate themselves within this world, formulate the broader implications of freedom, and continue the conversation on freedom, licensing, and their craft, with a wider body of developers" (p. 162). The practices of software development have become intimately linked to the articulation of shared political ideals.

What are these shared political ideals? At the heart of Coleman's argument is that the F/OSS highlights the tension between the traditional liberal commitment to free speech and the "neoliberal drive to make property out of almost everything, including software" (p. 2). By arguing the computer code was a form of speech, and therefore subject to liberal protections, F/OSS advocates provided an intellectual and legal framework for resisting the encroachment of increasingly rigorous intellectual property regimes aimed at the protection of digital content. In response to the passage of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), for example, a hacker named Jon Johansen developed a piece of open sources software that circumvented the technical mechanisms used to encrypt DVD content. His software, called DeCSS, was explicitly made illegal by the DMCA. In 2000, Johansen was arrested — despite the fact that, as a Norwegian citizen, the DMCA (which was US law) did not technically apply. Hackers around the world responded by transforming Johansen's software code into a case study in free speech protection: they posted it on their websites, printed it on t-shirts, and translated it into poetry, film, and music. Code might be functional, they argued, but it was also speech, and the right to free speech trumped the neoliberal imperative to protect private property.

There is so much that is good about Coleman's book — her vast and carefully cultivated body of ethnographic evidence, her clear and concise descriptions of complex legal and technological artifacts, and her sophisticated

incorporation of political and anthropological theory. It seems a bit churlish to complain about what this book does not do. But it is notable that in her discussion of a community that is defined by both its explicit commitment to openness *and* its demonstrable lack of diversity, that Coleman does not engage with the issue of gender. Although female participation in computing overall is lamentably low (around 25%, according to recent statistics by the National Center for Women & Information Technology), female participation in F/OSS projects is downright notorious (one study suggests rates as low as 1.1%) The culture and practices that many F/OSS male hackers see as being rational, meritocratic, liberal, and empowering is, for many female programmers, confrontational, aggressive, and exclusionary, as Reagle points out in his 2012 First Monday article, "Free as in Sexist?". There exists a large and growing literature exploring the profoundly gendered nature of computing culture, from notions of what constitutes skill, to the aesthetic values that determine whether code is viewed as good, to the norms that govern appropriate conduct — and yes, including what constitutes concepts such as freedom and openness. Thus it is disappointing that the word gender only appears once in *Coding Freedom*, and then only in a footnote. In the context of computing generally, and the F/OSS movement in particular, gender is not a marginal issue that can be conveniently bracketed; it is an absolutely fundamental category of analysis.