Many scholars, including many cited by Johan Söderberg and Maxigas in this book, have discussed hacking activities as manifestations of countercultures and resistance to the mainstream. [1] Söderberg and Maxigas not only distill such previously noticed resistance into one facet of the ongoing labor versus capital tug-of-war but also pay attention to the market process they call “recuperation,” where capital can use hackers’ innovations and reap hackers’ labor and skills with minimal cost (p. 6). The resistance Söderberg and Maxigas write about is therefore twofold: one is the hackers’ initial attempts at working freely outside of the labor-capital relation; the other is the constant resistance against market recuperation, which sometimes is successful and many times not, as shown by the authors’ selected cases.

In the book, the authors discuss four cases within three “time horizons” that they establish in the introduction. The first one is “the full life cycle of an individual hacker project and its concurrent hacker community” (p. 9). The second time horizon is larger scale compared to the first, where a collection of hacking activities and their communities developing alongside a branch of industry are considered together. The third time horizon is the broadest: the entire scene of capitalism. The last time horizon seems to aid the overarching argument of the book the most, as it situates hacking activities as a whole in the evolving backdrop of “informational capitalism,” enabling the authors to point out that hacking is essentially an element in the constant struggle between labor and capital.

The four hacker projects selected for case study displayed similar beliefs at their beginnings: providing free, open technological resources and creating worker autonomy. However, with different chronological settings, geographical backgrounds, and community/leadership traits, they ended up with different levels of success at resisting the current. The second and third cases, analyzed in chapters 4 and 5, represent the not-so-successful resistance, as both ended up being commercialized. RepRap (chapter 4) started as an ambitious 3D printing project that could produce
some of its own components and aimed to “create wealth without money,” thus challenging the existing consumer market order (p. 120). However, as the project gained traction and opportunities to profit emerged, leading members of the RepRap society claimed proprietary rights and went against their initial open hardware promise to commercialize the product, thus going along the current of recuperation. Söderberg and Maxigas analyze the RepRap case mostly within the first time horizon (individual project life cycle), while in chapter 5 they discuss the development of shared machine shops mostly in the second and third time horizons. Without tracking the life of any single shared machine shop, the authors trace different iterations of the idea: prehistory to hack-labs, hackerspaces, and finally accelerators and incubators. With each iteration, the difficulties related to keeping shared memories and dealing with contextual elements, such as the varied phases of urbanization, push shared machine shops further into the role of providing business innovations for capital.

In chapters 3 and 6, the Ronja FSO (free-space optical communication) project and the IRC (internet relay chat) project show different outcomes of keeping true to open-source projects despite the commercializing current. The Ronja project uses light propagation in free space to transmit data for computer networking, or in the authors’ words: “Ronja was a mechanical device for connecting computers point to point with visible, red light” (p. 60). It originated in the Czech Republic as a “user controlled” project but is described as facing pressure to commercialize when some users started to profit from the open hardware development, which created the risk that innovations stemming from the common project would not be given back to the community freely, and when infighting started in the leadership team over “conflicting entitlement claims” (p. 82). “Clock,” the founder, stood strong with his initial open hardware project idea under such conditions. His insistence, together with factors in the second time horizon, such as government regulation changes regarding Wi-Fi hardware, resulted in the failed recuperation of Ronja. Commercializing attempts made by branches of the community failed; no for-profit product was successfully developed from Ronja, and the project remains publicly accessible. At the same time, the project’s legacy lives on as it broadened the internet user base in central and eastern Europe, and, according to the authors, it foreshadowed the global movement of open hardware development. The IRC project was arguably more successful at resisting commercialization and institutionalization. According to Söderberg and Maxigas, “IRC is so anachronistic in the present media landscape that one could conceive of it as a time machine, which takes its users back to the norms and values that prevailed on the internet in the early days” (p. 187). They attribute such success largely to the IRC community being able to withstand the recuperative logic of informational capitalism for a long time, during which many different appealing business models, including but not limited to subscription and advertisement, presented themselves in front of the community. Söderberg and Maxigas thus argue that the IRC case shows the viability of hacker projects rejecting recuperation.

On top of analyzing varied cases within different time horizons to look at recuperation, reasons some projects gave in, and the ways some others resisted the current, Söderberg and Maxigas also discuss other relevant topics and develop theoretical claims in each case study chapter. For example, they analyze the donation model when combined with Ronja’s “user controlled” technology, and they tap into the existing conversation on gender imbalance in hackerspaces in chapter 5. [2] Most interestingly, they raise the distinction between “peer producers,” “crowds of users,” and “clouds of click workers” when analyzing firms using RepRap cloud workers to crowdsource components (p. 113). Overall, the book is rich with the-
ories, and the authors interweave case studies and theory discussions gracefully.

Methodology-wise, the authors rely on some online archived materials from the Wayback Machine and rely heavily on fieldwork. They also perform in-depth analysis based on their years of fieldwork to develop theoretical frameworks, including the different time horizons and the process of recuperation. It is worth noting that, other than the usual observations of participants and their activities, many subtle environmental details that they observed in their fieldwork are included in the analysis. For example, in chapter 5, changes in lighting are traced in different developmental stages of the concept of “shared machine shops,” showcasing the recuperation of hackerspaces in the second time horizon. Lighting in shared machine shops changed from the wide use of Christmas lights and other cheap, dim, repurposed lighting in early hacklabs to the use of “blinkenlights” for hacker self-management, then to accelerators being “lit well and evenly” so that hackers/workers are visible to management (pp. 145, 149). The wide range of details included from the fieldwork gives texture to hacker communities and their history, and also makes the book a good read.

I think one of the greatest contributions of the book is that it skillfully connects works on hacking activities and communities with business and labor history, including Max Webber, Marxism, Taylorism, and Fordism, and especially works discussing the rise of the new market order, in which surveillance capitalism takes the place of the more traditional market-labor relationship.[3] Such treatment not only gives readers a more contextual understanding of hacking activities but also shows hacking as an activity and a belief much more connected to mainstream culture and happenings. In other words, the book shows that hacking should concern more than just geeks, because it is one viable way of resisting the commercializing, institutionalizing current. As the authors say, one of the goals of the book is to help people learn how to “sniff out” market recuperation attempts, as well as how to resist them (p. 10). Let’s hope the authors’ efforts reach relevant populations: hackers and hacking culture enthusiasts—which probably include STS (science, technology, and society) scholars, media studies scholars, and anyone interested in resisting the current in any way—should all give this book a read.

Notes


