Book Review: Hacked: A Radical Approach to Hacker Culture and Crime by Kevin F.Steinmetz

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"Hackers" and "hacking" occupy a complicated place in twenty-first century American life. Images of misfit teenagers, sinister manipulators of the democratic process, and monomaniacally-focused corporate intruders abound. Kevin Steinmetz acknowledges that those archetypes have some legitimacy but makes a convincing case that "craftsperson," "guild member," and "exploited proletarian" should be added to the iconography of hacking. On his account, hackers and hacker culture occupy an interesting and important place in American culture and the post-Fordist economy, one that can be fruitfully explored with a "radical" (Marx-inspired) approach. The book provides a worthwhile overview of the breadth of hacking and hacker culture for those who are unfamiliar with the phenomenon and provides some real insights into the political economy of hacking in the twenty-first century.

Hacked's greatest original contributions lie in its conceptualization of hacking as a "craft," with all of craftsmanship's political economic connotations. Defined as "doing something well for its own sake" (p. 74), Steinmetz is able to explore some of the internal life of those he considers hackers, drawing clear and legitimate parallels to practitioners of other crafts. This allows him to specify a specific hacker mindset (a "hacker ethic," *pace* Levy 1984) that, on his analysis, differentiates hacking from other technological avocations. This is probably appropriate but does raise analytic problems later in the work.

Another noteworthy contribution lies in describing the social/ideological construction of hackers as a "problem population" (p. 172). Steinmetz notes that the term "hacker" has generally become conflated with "criminal," and situates the social construction of hackers and hacking into the broader context of moral panics, which generally result in the citizenry ceding more and more autonomy to the state. There is ample room for follow up work here on the intersection of media framing of hackers and changes in cybersecurity law.

Also deserving of amplification or future work is the distinction between hackers as *criminals* and hackers as *nuisances*. Steinmetz references Steven Spitzer's (1975) ideas of "social junk" and "social dynamite" here, appropriately. Exploring this distinction and the process by which these two identities are constructed, overlap, and conflict would be most welcome.

One of *Hacked*'s greatest strengths also serves as one of its greatest weaknesses. Steinmetz correctly takes a broad view of hacking, encompassing early assembly language programmers working tirelessly to optimize code, phone "phreaks" exploiting telephone systems, security consultants, pranksters, free and open software developers, and myriad other branches. This diversity, while refreshingly comprehensive and accurate, muddies much of the analysis. Discussing, for example, the economic exploitation of hackers (p. 158-169), Steinmetz often seems to be speaking of the entire software industry or perhaps much of the technology sector,

but it seems clear early on that not all programmers are hackers – that the latter are a distinct entity.

Hacked is an interesting and accessible work for anyone seeking an admirably broad portrayal of hackers and hacker culture without a simultaneously deep interest in technology. The book provides a good overview of the phenomenon and a very good bibliography for follow-up reading. While the original empirical work is not its most persuasive feature, Steinmetz goes beyond the existing literature in important ways by construing hacking as craft and its practitioners, craftspeople, and provides valuable insights about the political economy of technological work in general. Recommended.

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