BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Steele, Robert David, *The Open-Source Everything Manifesto: Transparency, Truth, and Trust* (Berkeley, Calif: Evolver, 2012)

What is there not to like about "openness"? The premise seems to have virtue, particularly in the space of critique of government. From totalitarianism through to oligarchies, it can be argued that it is opacity and secrecy that have have contributed to abuses of power for many centuries. In other spaces, the notion has caught hold. In several scientific fields, it appears that a lack of openness can lead to misconduct and in some cases a slowness that may cost lives. In the humanities, we might say that its absence fosters insularity. In computer software production, open-source paradigms have led to remarkable developments such as the Linux kernel and allowed us to see the inner machinations of the code that is responsible for many aspects of our daily lives. There is much to be said for open practice.

And yet, there are some troubling aspects of "openness" that often go unexamined by those who fetishize the concept. The most obvious of these is the conflation of personal and public in demands for transparency; the famous ironic quip that if one has nothing to hide one has nothing to fear. The other is the way in which rhetorics of openness seem co-genetic with the growth of neo-liberalism, the political rationality in which politics is displaced by economics. Indeed, the idea of open practices as reducing "transaction costs" of interactions (whether societal or technological) is an example, *par excellence*, of neoliberal rationality's ubiquitous language of economics (Davies 2014; Brown 2015). We thus begin to see a tension between those who believe that open practices, across all spaces, might contribute to social justice and those who, ever more, claim the openness panacea in terms of economics, proselytizing transparency, visibility, rationality, trust, and individual libertarianism while all the time resting upon the theology of the *invisible* hand.

Robert David Steele, the author of *The Open-Source Everything Manifesto* is, by my reading, of the latter persuasion. Steele's biography makes the most of his previous career as a CIA spy but goes light on his prominent claims that all recent terrorist attacks in the US – including Sandy Hook and Boston Bombings – were "false flags", that is conspiratorial events that did not really happen. Steele calls Ron Paul – the Republican who denies the reality of global warming, opposes all abortion, supports the rights of businesses to discriminate on sexual orientation, and believes all hate crime laws to be unconstitutional – "ethical and consistent" (19).[1] Furthermore, for all his critiques of trickle-down economics as "what is really concentration of wealth" (144), Steele's book comes across as somewhat naïve, triumphalist and uncritical in its approach towards openness. Indeed, to continue the religious strain of the preceding paragraph, Steele comes to openness with the fervour of a True Believer, and his manifesto, in the way of that genre of course, is the Holy Text.

And be in no doubt: there's theology in this book. The word "God" appears alongside its patriotic counterpart of saintly nationhood, "We the People", on many occasions throughout. This is counter-balanced, however, by the author's insistence on jam-packing the volume full of near-indecipherable, and near-unexplained, technical diagrams and military-style acronyms (such as "M4IS2" (22)) for future progress. This intersection of the religious and the scientistic will certainly appeal to those in utopian studies as an object of study. For Steele posits a plan for what he calls a "World Brain" through openness that will achieve the positivist X-axis goal, as time unfolds, of "100% of Humanity World that Works for All [*sic*]" (115).

Futile as it would be to give a chapter-by-chapter summary of Steele's book – the text is free-wheeling and associative – the author's open future is rooted in the familiar right-libertarian critique

---

1   What I take Steele to mean here is that Ron Paul is not corrupt; he really believes what he campaigns for and can't be bought. Why this merits both the terms "ethical and consistent" I am unsure. I would say it is purely the latter.

of centralised government. "Central planning", Steele tells us, "does not work – the nanny state attempts to micro-manage what it does not understand" (xv). While it is true that such systems can be prone to "glossing over high crimes by financial enterprises", it neglects the serious achievements of centralised systems and resource pooling when they work well (the UK's NHS, for example). For Steele, though, the answer is better found in his application of Emie de Puydt's concept of "panarchism", the idea that open information flows between non-hierarchised individuals will result in a society of trust in which "normal average human beings [… will] arrive at better conclusions than experts or elites who rely on 'secret' information" (xv).

Some of this thesis may be true, but its logical problems can be unpicked by readings of statements such as: "The essence of this manifesto is found in the proven fact that transparency and truth foster trust, and trust lowers the cost of doing business" (139). Far from being a "proven fact" (Steele's panarchic society does not exist!), a counter-argument would be that the demand for transparency rests upon a complete culture of *distrust*. If I trust someone, my spouse for example, I have no need to demand that she transparently furnish me with her day's itinerary. The jealous lover, on the other hand, may feel such a need. If I distrust my bank or government, that is when I need transparency. Sometimes, there is very good cause to distrust such entities; not all of Steele's conspiracy theories are far fetched. But let us not pretend that this has created trust. It came about and is maintained as a disciplinary, panoptic-style mechanism whose underlying engine is a culture of distrust and mutual behavioural re-enforcement through gaze-like scrutiny.

Secondly from this sentence, the assertion that "trust lowers the cost of doing business" is contentious. The decentralized, panarchic mode of societal (non-)planning that Steele proposes can be seen as analogous to debates in computer science about micro- vs. macro- kernels. In theory, micro-kernels, in which many autonomous modules trade information freely with each other, are the most efficient, secure and rational way to build operating systems. In practice, Linux, Mac OSX and Microsoft Windows are all macro-kernels. The reason is that the "transaction costs" of transferring information, marshalling it into the correct structure, and enforcing interfaces between modules turn out to be enormous compared to a macro-kernel approach. For the societal analogy, governmental planning of, say, railway gauges so that they meet at the same size across States would be a good example of how a centralized approach can work out as more efficient and correct than a purely decentralized system. Steele would doubtless counter that such an approach would be achieved in his mode by the data being openly available. I'm just less convinced.

Steele's heart seems to me to be in the right place. His utopian urge to create a better world is strong and he seeks a pragmatic path. He writes correctly of the fragmentation of knowledge through the disciplinary division of labour and the pernicious divide between the "humanities and sciences" (54). But time and time again Steele begins well only to shoot himself in the foot. For instance, in his discussion of the historical marginalisation of women and "Others", Steele writes that a patriarchal history neglected "women and their potential". This does not progress to a sophisticated account, though, of female equality. Steele believes, very loosely citing through gesturing as a whole to Carol Gilligan et al.'s book on how the sexes speak of justice (Gilligan et al. 1990), that there is a "nuanced feminine instinct for compassion versus the male inclination to focus on black-and-white 'justice'" (103). Steele does not, though, ascribe any value to women here other than their compassion.

Overall, Steele's manifesto for techno-liberation was most interesting for me *as a representative of utopian genre.* The positivist pathology that afflicts the work is reminiscent of other technological-fetishist discourses that were historically shown to lead to disaster (futurism, for example). While Steele may encourage a world in which all is open, however, I cannot but recommend to readers that they leave this book closed.

Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. First Edition. New York: Zone Books.

Davies, William. 2014. *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gilligan, Carol, Janie Ward, Jill McLean Taylor, and Betty Bardige, eds. 1990. *Mapping the Moral Domain*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674548329.

Steele, Robert David. 2012. *The Open-Source Everything Manifesto: Transparency, Truth, and Trust*. Berkeley, Calif: Evolver.