

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Baruch College

2023

A Genealogy of Open

Betsy Yoon

CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/bb_pubs/1257

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

A Genealogy of Open

by Betsy Yoon

Abstract/In Brief

The term *open* has become a familiar part of library and education practice and discourse, with open source software being a common referent. However, the conditions surrounding the emergence of the open source movement are not well understood within librarianship. After identifying capitalism and neoliberalism as structures that shape library and open practice, this article contextualizes the term *open* by delineating the discursive struggle within the free software movement that led to the emergence of the open source movement. An understanding of the genealogy of open can lend clarity to many of the contradictions that have been grappled with in the literature, such as what open means, whether it supports social justice aims, and its relation to neoliberal and capitalist structures. The article concludes by inquiring into how librarianship and open can reframe practices that are typically oriented toward mitigation and survival to encompass an orientation toward life and flourishing.

Suggested citation: Yoon, B. (2023). A genealogy of open. *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*.
<https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2023/genealogy-of-open/>

Introduction

Open education and the open movement more broadly have been around for more than two decades and have a strong presence in higher education and librarianship. *Open* is an expansive term and encompasses a series of initiatives, policies, and practices that broadly stand for ideals of transparency, accessibility, and openness. Practices such as open pedagogy, open science, open data, open government, open educational resources (OER), and open access all fall under the umbrella of open. What it means to be open in practical terms depends on the area—the specific qualities that demonstrate openness in journal article publishing will be different from those qualities that evince openness in the classroom. On the theoretical plane, the concept of *open* is broad and subject to debate and contestation, and the question of what open education can do for students, educators, and librarians has been and continues to be deeply examined in the library literature.

As open has risen to prominence in library discourse, open practices and initiatives have received generous amounts of funding from both government bodies and private philanthropic organizations. For example, New York State has been allocating \$8 million in grant funding annually to City University of New York (CUNY) and State University of New York (SUNY) schools to promote OER initiatives since 2017.¹ How does open practice relate to neoliberal practice?

An experience at a previous job (an adjunct position funded by OER grants) highlights some of the contradictions that emerge when engaging in open practice under conditions of austerity. I was part of organizing an Open 101 symposium for campus faculty. We sent our program and informational materials to the campus printing department with time to spare, but shortly before the event, the printers informed us that they had run out of printing supplies and would be unable to print our materials. We had some quick discussions: was it too complicated to use the grant

¹ The annual grant from New York State for OER initiatives has typically been applied to adjunct labor, rather than toward full-time employment. Meanwhile, CUNY remains chronically underfunded (Chang, 2022) and in 2019–2020, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union that represents CUNY staff and faculty, engaged in contract negotiations that fell far short of demands, particularly as related to equal pay for adjunct labor (Hoff, 2019).

funds with an external printer, did our chief librarian need to use her personal funds, *how* exactly was it that the campus printers had run out of supplies in the middle of the semester? The materials were eventually printed, and we deemed the event a success, but the juxtaposition of an under-resourced campus with funds that were difficult to apply (conditions that are certainly not unique) in service of promoting an initiative aimed at saving students money and improving pedagogy has stayed with me.

This article emerges from my grappling with such contradictions and is intended to add to the library discourse about open by first examining how the library literature has understood the question of open practice in relation to neoliberal practice and then by extending the understanding of the genealogy of OER and open discourse through an examination of the free software² and open source movements. I conclude by placing open practice in conjunction with revolutionary initiatives and offer suggestions for next steps.

The Neoliberal Context of Open

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is the present-day context of library practice and is accordingly a frequent topic in the library literature in general and open literature in particular. This article builds upon the existing discourse on the open–neoliberal dynamic within librarianship by *more explicitly* placing neoliberalism within the larger context of capitalism, which then impacts how we can understand possibilities for struggle against neoliberalism.³

David Harvey identifies neoliberalism as both a political project and a counterrevolutionary project “carried out by the corporate capitalist class” (Risager, 2016, para. 6). Neoliberal policy

² The *free* in free software does not refer to price but rather to the concept of freedom. This is discussed in more detail later.

³ This framing does not presume that individual scholars who have contributed to the literature on neoliberalism and open in librarianship are unaware of the larger structural context of capitalism as it relates to neoliberalism or that such analyses are without value, but rather that this structural relation is often either implicit or lightly gestured to. For example, in their excellent and impactful analyses of open and neoliberalism, neither Almeida (2017), Macintyre (2015), nor Kansa (2014) mention the structure of capitalism.

is “characterized by cutting taxes, curbing public budgets, privatization of the public assets, commodification of relationships, banking system deregulation, and flexibilization of labor laws” (Guilherme & Picoli, 2021, p. 1966). This article uses Martin Hart-Landsberg’s schema in which neoliberalism is a set of policies (such as “liberalization, deregulation, and privatization” [2006, para. 1]), while capitalism is the system. Although neoliberal practices and policies became predominant with Reagan and Thatcher (Lee & Cifor, 2019, p. 3; Seale, 2013, p. 59), it bears clarification that this temporal marker is not meant in any way to imply that neoliberalism is the manifestation of a capitalism gone particularly badly or “[encourage] the view that a wide range of policy options simultaneously exist under capitalism, with neoliberalism just one of the possibilities”; in reality, neoliberalism is simply “the essence of contemporary capitalist practices and policies” (Hart-Landsberg, 2006, Dynamics section). Identifying this structural relationship should not be taken to mean that neoliberalism and capitalism are static and unchanging, but rather that as these structures evolve and adapt to changing conditions, the macro-level coherence should not be forgotten.

When frameworks such as capitalism or neoliberalism become unmoored from their concrete structures and impacts, they risk becoming what Almeida calls “social abstractions” (2017, p. 14), vague entities to be resisted or opposed. When this rhetorical distancing occurs, critiques tend to point to specific features that exist under these larger structures—such as competition (Lee & Cifor, 2019), efficiency (Gregory & Higgins, 2018), or textbooks (Crissinger, 2015)—as necessary objects of transformation. However, it is not that efficiency, competition, textbooks, or even the idea of productivity are inherently oppressive, but rather that neoliberalism (and by extension, capitalism) has leveraged these features in such a way that they generate a negative social impact. Take the example of needing to adequately nourish a population of people with a fixed amount of resources—whether it on the scale of a household or of a nation—and the question of efficiency and productivity can make a big difference in meeting people’s needs. Or, in a social structure where you are not alienated from your labor, you might find value in efficiency. This is not to say that these tendencies should not be critiqued at all, but rather that such critique will be most effective and impactful when the relation of the phenomenon to the structure of capitalism is explicitly incorporated.

In addition, a focus on neoliberalism without an *explicit* recognition of how neoliberalism is situated within the system of capitalism runs the risk of giving the impression that the struggle against neoliberalism does not need to extend to the struggle against capitalism.⁴ This misapprehension consequently limits possibilities for resistance by altering the scope of analysis and obscuring root causes. For example, Seale (2013) concludes an excellent analysis of the neoliberal character of information literacy discourse by calling for “alternatives to neoliberalism [...] that began with Thatcher and Reagan” (p. 59). Similarly, Lee and Cifor (2019), in their important intervention into neoliberalism and the field of library and information science (LIS), begin by saying, “Neoliberalism is a way of thinking, which means that we can re-think our way out of it” (pp. 4–5) and conclude by calling upon their readers to “imagine and build a world beyond neoliberalism and self-enclosed individualism” (p. 5). The argument is not that these conclusions are wrong, but that they come too soon. In their analysis of ideology and materialism, Ponce de León and Rockhill (2020) argue that efforts at transforming the world cannot be rooted solely in ideas and thoughts, but must involve “intervening in the socioeconomic framework” (p. 110). Thus, re-thinking our way out of it is only the first initial step; in truth, we think in order to act (or intervene) our way out of neoliberalism. And we can only intervene in neoliberalism if we—at the very least—persistently, explicitly, and repeatedly identify how it functions within and its relationship to the overarching structure of capitalism.⁵ As Lee and Cifor note, “the forces of neoliberalism [have] become so naturalized and so ubiquitous that we rarely take note of them (nor are we intended to)” (2019, p. 2). Part of the work of making the everyday workings of neoliberalism visible includes ensuring that the larger structure of capitalism does not slip away into our peripheral vision.

Shoshana Zuboff’s *Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019) is one example of how an analysis is limited when one particular understanding of present-day conditions (surveillance capitalism) is treated as distinct from the larger structure of capitalism and instead is viewed as one of multiple ways in which capitalism could have

⁴ In an interview, David Harvey notes that “the danger is, when I listen to people talking about anti-neoliberalism, that there is no sense that capitalism is itself, in whatever form, a problem (Risager, 2016, para. 74).

⁵ This is a necessary precondition for effective action, it is not action itself.

developed. Kapczynski (2020) and Morozov (2019) both demonstrate how Zuboff's argument is fundamentally limited and circumscribed by this perception that surveillance capitalism represents a wholly new order distinct from "traditional" capitalism. Kapczynski (2020) writes that "Zuboff longs not for any fundamental reworking of our market order, but for a capitalism with the humanity of old" (p. 1475), while Morozov (2019) states that Zuboff sees the drawbacks of capitalism as the "avoidable consequence of particular organizational arrangements" (section II). While Zuboff's main point of analysis is surveillance capitalism rather than neoliberalism, her characterization of neoliberalism throughout her text indicates that she finds it to be a negative phenomenon. For example, she writes that "neoliberal ideology and policy also provided the habitat in which surveillance capitalism could flourish" (2019, Part 1 Section VI). Evidently both neoliberalism and surveillance capitalism are unwelcome deviations from a maligned capitalism. Zuboff is introduced here not for her particular analysis of neoliberalism, but as an example of the type of analytical disjunctures that can occur when the larger structure of capitalism is cleaved from the phenomena it engenders.

In terms of libraries and capitalism, Gregory and Higgins (2018) cogently demonstrate how the structural shadow of capitalism shaped the emergence of US librarianship in the 19th century. The call to orient neoliberalism explicitly within its larger capitalist framework is an extension of this analysis. In order to properly and materially address the harmful impacts of neoliberalism, it is necessary to explicitly identify that it is part of, and in continuity with, the capitalism that generated it. Much as environmental depredation and the climate crisis are an inevitable result of a capitalist system that prioritizes growth and profit over human lives and sustainability,⁶ neoliberalism is the capitalist system's inevitable response to declining profits and the need to create new areas for exploitation and capital accumulation. Bagchi (2021, p. 2012) writes, "Neo-liberalism is a symptom of capitalism in extremis, of the involution of the system, when it regurgitates resources it has already captured to try and draw nourishment from them." Thus the struggle against neoliberalism extends far beyond reversing specific policies that were established in the 1980s, and while no single intervention will accomplish this, it should remain a

⁶ See Prádanos (2015) for an excellent example of how a discussion around pedagogy and climate crisis is explicitly placed within the context of capitalism.

clear goal.

Neoliberalism and Open

To locate the debate around neoliberalism specifically as it pertains to open discourse, I draw upon the framework offered by Macintyre (2015), in which the author queries the “rhetoric and stated ideals” of the OER movement and identifies two main themes in discourse about OER’s relationship to neoliberalism: (1) OER as tool of resistance to neoliberalism or (2) OER as having been co-opted by neoliberalism. Finding these two themes to be insufficient, Macintyre (2015) posits a third possibility, which is that (3) OER is itself a product of neoliberalism (p. 1).

I characterize Macintyre’s three themes as indicating stages of evolution in OER discourse. Thus, an initial discursive thread (the first theme) focused on OER’s “potential to undermine the commodification of education” (2015, p. 1). This argument relies on an understanding of the “spirit of OER” as being, at heart, an essentially positive intervention. For the purposes of this analysis, I extend the spirit of OER to include claims about its inherent nature that do not necessarily speak directly to the question of neoliberalism but which project some vision of positive social change. Many claims made on behalf of OER, particularly in the policy and practitioner worlds, rely on a version of this narrative. For example, Weller (2014) states that open’s “foundations lie in one of altruism and the belief that education is a public good” (p. 2). The Open Education Conference, which has met annually since 2004, describes the purpose of the conference as being to “[celebrate] the *core values* of open education that strive to realize education ecosystems that are accessible, affordable, equitable and inclusive to everyone” (The Open Education Conference, n.d., emphasis added).

Then, in the face of contradictions and a lack of materialization around OER’s potential capacity for resistance, the second theme of co-optation emerged (p. 2). It is important to note that the framing of co-optation relies on the assumption that the subject of co-optation is in an initially uncorrupted state. Thus this second theme still takes the first as its premise. For example, in an important intervention, Crissinger (2015) critiques the ways in which current OER discourse and practice have become “disconnected from its political underpinnings” (Introduction section).

One example Crissinger offers is the way global education discourse posits OER as a solution to the problem of underdevelopment,⁷ which often results in a one-way flow of information from the global north to the global south without consideration of context or reciprocity. Almeida (2017) writes that open “is dangerously at risk of being appropriated, misused, and emptied” (p. 2). In an examination of how the EDUPUNK movement informs OER practices, Miller (2017) notes the ease with which “open education can be readily diluted by neoliberal hegemony” (p. 171). In these cases, because co-optation is always presented as potential and immanent, the initial premise, the spirit of open, remains able to provide a space for resistance.

However, noting that in fact “Open is part and parcel of neoliberalism,” Macintyre’s third theme introduces yet another evolution, which holds that neoliberal ideals are in fact baked into our construction of open (p. 2). While the other two categories are common elements of OER discourse, this third theme is less so.

Put another way, these three themes can be interpreted as a debate over the spirit of open. Are there basic, underlying principles that endow open with the capacity to enact social justice⁸ and resist forces of neoliberalism and oppression? If this is the case, then the discourse around the ways in which open is co-opted is indeed an important mechanism by which to ensure that open practice lives up to its ideals. If, however, open is a component piece of how neoliberalism operates, an effective analysis that serves as a basis for concrete change would require scholars and practitioners to recognize and incorporate into their understanding the role that OER plays “in the creation of the neoliberal state” (Macintyre, 2015, p. 4).

I position “Reflections on 20 Years of Open Content: Lessons from Open Source,” written by David Wiley in 2018 for [OER18: Open to All](#),⁹ as a springboard for delving into these two divergent narratives around the spirit of open. In this text, Wiley narrates how he coined the term *open content* as part of his efforts to develop a way to apply “an open source approach” to

⁷ See Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) for why I use *underdevelopment* rather than *development*.

⁸ Here I use the term *social justice* to refer to the spectrum of large and small-scale efforts aimed broadly at achieving greater equity in society, and not as a proxy for revolutionary or anti-capitalist aims.

⁹ OER18 was the 9th annual conference for Open Education research, practice, and policy where Wiley was also a keynote speaker.

“educational materials” (2018, para. 10). He recounts how he reached out to both Richard Stallman and Eric Raymond for guidance, who were seen as leading figures for the free software movement and the open source software movement, respectively, and evaluates the relative merits of each. He concludes with lessons that the OER movement should take from the open source movement.

Wiley’s historical account is important to address for a few reasons. First, Wiley is well known as a foundational figure in OER and is frequently cited in the OER literature. He continues to write and speak about open content and has played an influential role in shaping how the library field talks about open. After advocating for OER in the capacity of an academic for over 10 years, Wiley left academia to co-found Lumen Learning, an OER content and delivery platform.^{10,11} It is instructive to look at one piece of “founding mythology,” so to speak, and understand how this has shaped the field. Second, his article functions somewhat as an intervention into the narrative of open in the sense that while open source software is a well-known referent in OER and open discourse, its history and origins in the free software movement are less well known. If free software is mentioned at all in the library literature, it is typically in the technology-related literature, which tend not to delve into the historical development or discursive differences between the two (e.g., Joseph, Guy, & McNally, 2019; Miller, 2017). Weller (2014) does address differences between open source and free software but does not dig into the emergence of open source and instead cites them as related movements. Wiley (2018) thus offers important context for a term that has come to be used expansively not only in academia, but in policy and government as well. Third, in putting forth one particular narrative of open, Wiley (2018) creates an opportunity for further contextualization by inviting us to see how his narrative might differ from other accounts.

The next section views Wiley’s narrative in conjunction with other narratives surrounding the free software and open source software movement. In order to evaluate the debate about the

¹⁰ Lumen Learning does not charge for OER per se, but has monetized OER provision through the structures it develops around the content, such as courseware and learning tools.

¹¹ SUNY has [partnered with Lumen Learning](#) to provide OER to SUNY students; this partnership is one example of how public money can be redirected toward the private sector through OER. Thanks to Ian McDermott for pointing this out. See Lederman (2019) for more information.

spirit of open, we need to understand how and why open emerged as a narrative. I first explain the meaning of free software and describe the emergence of open source. I then explore the implications that this split has had on practice and discuss unintended impacts.

Origins of Open Discourse

Free

As mentioned in this article's introduction, the *free* in free software does not refer to price. In explaining the differences between the two movements, Stallman (2022) writes,

When we call software “free,” we mean that it respects the users’ essential freedoms: the freedom to run it, to study and change it, and to redistribute copies with or without changes. This is a matter of freedom, not price, so think of “free speech,” not “free beer.” (para. 1)

These two understandings of free revolve around a distinction in terms of what is centered or emphasized. Is it the object that is free, or is it the user? The understanding of free in terms of cost places the attribute of free on the commodity in question. In contrast, the understanding of free software as describing the freedom of the user places the emphasis on the person. To further disambiguate the notion of free(dom) from price, the free software movement is compatible with charging for software. Observe that the definition above does not say anything about free software being zero cost; in fact, Tozzi (2017) notes that “Being free of cost is not a defining characteristic of either free or open source software” (p. 5).¹²

The free software movement emerged in the early 1980s at a time when software licenses were becoming increasingly restrictive¹³ and computer programmers were fighting “against what its members perceived as arbitrary restrictions on the way they could use software” (Tozzi, 2017, p. 33). One of the many concrete accomplishments of the free software movement was the

¹² Software whose central characteristic is being zero cost is known as *freeware*.

¹³ In an era where software access is increasingly sold on a subscription basis, it may be surprising to learn that it wasn't until the 1970s that software was considered monetizable or commercial (Broca, 2014; Gonzalez-Barahona, 2021).

development of the [GNU General Public License](#) (GPL), which created a legal framework for protecting user freedoms (Morozov, 2013; Tozzi, 2017).

Open

Wiley (2018) characterizes the emergence of open source in 1998 as a natural evolution in the free software movement that occurred when “a group of advocates got together for a strategy meeting to discuss how they could advance the cause of free software.” In contrast, Tozzi (2017) depicts the emergence of open source as the “FOSS¹⁴ civil war” in which “two groups [...] found themselves battling for control over the meaning of the FOSS revolution and software freedom” (p. 212). Morozov (2013) refers to the emergence of open source as a “coup” enacted by “several business-minded members of the free software community” (para. 19). These three different perspectives all reflect different orientations to the principles that were at stake in the emergence of open. For Morozov (2013), this shift represents an “ideological cleavage”:

It’s easy to forget this today, but there was no such idea as open source software before 1998; the concept’s seeming contemporary coherence is the result of clever manipulation and marketing. Open source software was born out of an ideological cleavage between two groups that, at least before 1998, had been traditionally lumped together. (para. 13)

In terms of what was at stake, Wiley and Stallman both cast the distinction between the two movements as being between principle and practicality. Wiley (2009) writes, “While advocates of free software focus their message on the philosophical principle of freedom, advocates of open source software focus their message on the pragmatic benefits of being open” (para. 3). Stallman (2022) similarly says, “The free software movement campaigns for freedom for the users of computing; it is a movement for freedom and justice. By contrast, the open source idea values mainly practical advantage and does not campaign for principles” (para. 8). However, these descriptions point to general tendencies, not hard and fast rules. Stallman (2022) and Tozzi (2017) both point out that these broad categories do not mean that no one in the open source

¹⁴ It is common to see FOSS (free and open source software) and FLOSS (free/libre open source software) as terms used to encompass both movements. For more information on the limitations of these terms, see Stallman (2021).

camp cared about freedom or that free software proponents were never practical. In fact, Stallman (2022) specifically notes that in practical terms, open source and free software often describe the same set of programs and that proponents of each can and do work together. However, in the narrative struggle that ensued after open declared itself, the distinction between the two movements was emptied of nuance and meaning to paint free software proponents as overly ideological or impractical and the open source software movement as eminently practical. Tozzi (2017) reflects that “portraying Stallman and his GNU stalwarts as uncompromising ideologues who alienated many potential developers and users was a common practice for advocates of the open source movement in the late 1990s” (p. 104). Morozov writes that during this time, “the messaging around open source occasionally bordered on propaganda” (2013, para. 21). Twenty years later, Wiley perpetuates this practice and characterizes those who advocate for free software as coming across as “incredibly judgmental and holier-than-thou” (2018, para. 3).

Part of what makes this characterization so compelling is the notion that ideology is something that can either be present or not present.¹⁵ Thus free software is ideological, while open source is not. Morozov (2013) points out the flaws in this depiction: “What Raymond and O’Reilly failed to grasp, or decided to overlook, is that their effort to present open source as non-ideological was underpinned by a powerful ideology of its own—an ideology that worshiped innovation and efficiency at the expense of everything else” (para. 31). Morozov identifies that what distinguishes the two movements is not the presence or absence of an ideology, but rather two competing ideologies. However, in contrast to Morozov’s characterization of the non-ideological point of view as an example of flawed logic that individuals perpetuate, Ponce de León and Rockhill (2020) describe how “material practice formats our perceptual matrix in such deep and fundamental ways that the world is ‘naturally’ delivered to us through the lens of ideology” (p. 100). In other words, ideology is how we perceive the world; its imperceptibility is due to how “it imposes itself as the sole and unique reality, meaning the *only* one that *makes sense* and has the power of *making sense*” (p. 100, emphases in original). This aligns well with Lee and Cifor’s (2019) earlier observation that the invisibility of neoliberalism is a feature, not a bug.

¹⁵ This belief that ideology can either be present or absent also manifests itself in debates around the role of neutrality in librarianship.

The Spirit of Open

In deciding between the terms free and open to describe what we now know as *open content*, Wiley (2018) writes, “I was philosophically more aligned with open” (para. 13). He also thought that *open* was more conducive to corporate interests, as *free* was “downright scary to businesses” (Wiley, 2018, para. 4). One of the main lessons he wishes for OER practitioners to take from open source is the need to be welcoming to the business perspective: just as “the open source movement proactively worked to reach out to businesses” (para. 21), OER practitioners should “be more inclusive, welcoming, and supportive of newcomers—even those from private enterprise” in order to “grow and have the kind of dramatic impact we all want it to have” (para. 26).¹⁶ For Wiley, the use of open was both clearer and more beneficial to the broad expansion of open.

However, scholars have observed that the term *open* does not necessarily engender a sense of clarity (Almeida, 2017; Lambert, 2018; Macintyre, 2015; Tozzi, 2017). The history and emergence of open discourse can shed some light on why this lack of clarity persists outside of locating it in the shortcomings of practitioners and theorists themselves. For Morozov, the issue is not necessarily that scholars and practitioners need to imbue the discourse with more precision. Rather, discourse around the spirit of OER and its co-optation reflect Morozov’s assertion that “‘openness’ was the kind of multipurpose term that allowed one to look political while advancing an agenda that had very little to do with politics,” resulting in a “quest for ‘openness’ [that was] politically toothless from the outset” (para. 30). Nor was this shift unintentional. It was part of a “conceptual imperialism” (para. 3) that has engendered an “enduring emptiness” (para. 4) in technology debates. A debate that had been about freedom, curtailing of private power, and the user was now contained into a conversation about economics, efficiency, and practicality. Greene (2021) refers to a similar reframing in debates around how technology can alleviate inequality, which he refers to as the “access doctrine.” The access doctrine is used to “explain the relative poverty or economic inactivity of specific

¹⁶ When he wrote this, Wiley was speaking not from the position of a practitioner, but from the perspective of private enterprise as Chief Academic Officer of Lumen Learning.

populations, regions, and countries through the skills individual workers possess” (p. 7) wherein “the problem of poverty is transformed into a problem of technology” (p. 5).¹⁷

Narratives of efficiency¹⁸ that redirect the focus from larger systemic issues to individualized problems that can be addressed separately are part of the neoliberal discourse; they belong to what Greene (2021) refers to as “political common sense” or what Rockhill (2017) terms the “dominant political imaginary.” This redirection then shapes the way in which institutions and practitioners relate their work. Greene writes, “Schools and libraries threatened by fiscal austerity or accusations of obsolescence embrace the access doctrine as their mission in order to restore their legitimacy, garner much-needed resources, and simplify the host of social problems with which they are confronted daily” (p. 5). In much the same way, McDermott (2020) describes the impact literature as oriented toward the interests of funders and administrators: “OER efficacy studies tell the tidiest story: saving students money is good and OER may improve student learning. In this respect, these studies conform to the logics of funders and administrators, not students, faculty, librarians, and staff” (Conclusion section). Kansa (2014) levies a similar claim: “There’s been too much of an instrumentalist justification for open data and open access. Many advocates talk about how it will cut costs and speed up research and innovation” (para. 2).

The history of open demonstrates that this emphasis on outcomes is not simply a co-optation of the ideals of open, but part of an intended discursive shift. From the start, open was chosen as a more malleable term that was meant to facilitate partnerships with capital. Morozov speculates (perhaps overly optimistically) that had free software not been superseded by open, “we might already be living in a world where the intricacies of software used for high-frequency trading or biometric identification presented no major mysteries” (2013, para. 16). A lack of familiarity

¹⁷ In terms of the dynamic between technology and historical change, Rockhill (2017, p. 41) writes, “technology is neither a determinant in the last instance nor an element fully determined by external forces. This is the case for several reasons. In the first place, in order to understand what we call technology, we cannot separate it from social practices. The isolation of technology is in fact an abstraction, for no technology exists independently of its social, cultural, and historical inscription.”

¹⁸ As stated earlier, the issue is not with the concept of efficiency. This is an example of how efficiency is being wielded strategically as a form of misdirection.

with or understanding of these origins can result in uncritical adoption that leads to unintended impacts.

In reflecting on the unintended impacts of open, Kapczynski (2020) writes, “Though we did not wish it, our ideas [promoting open] have helped consolidate, or at least have not adequately contested, these vast new forms of private power” (p. 1467). As noted by Kapczynski, others have argued that this is because such efforts were misdirected; for example, rather than “demanding openness at a certain technological layer” (p. 1493), efforts should be directed more firmly at legal doctrine. In contrast, however, Kapczynski identifies the lesson to be a question of scope rather than a particular target, and that these unintended impacts actually point to “the limits of ‘hacks’ to the property system in the absence of more transformative changes to our market society.” She points to the need to incorporate “not only an analytic of power but of market society and capitalism” in order to effectively create more fundamental change in a way that doesn’t produce such unintended consequences (p. 1496). Open discourse, open source software, and free software can all be categorized under what Kapczynski describes as hacks to the property system. The next section offers recommendations for how we can work to move toward more fundamental change.

Conclusion

Macintyre (2015) asked us to consider the possibility that open educational practice functions to sustain the neoliberal state. On a practical level, we have seen how a focus on funding OER enables the neoliberal state to transform questions of social inequality and poverty into a question of a particular type of educational resource. The question is no longer, why does education cost so much? Or, why are students living in poverty? Or, what is this economic structure that forces a choice between a textbook or food? Instead, open discourse focuses on specific components at the expense of a larger systemic analysis. The question then becomes, how can we reduce the costs of this one specific expense (in this case, textbooks)? And the

answer is often, through the labor of others.¹⁹

Joy James's theorization of the captive maternal is useful to understand the different dynamics at play here. The captive maternal is an ungendered subject "whose generative powers have been stolen by the state" (James, 2019) and "whose very existence enables the possessive empire that claims and dispossesses them" (James, 2016, p. 255).²⁰ Captive maternals are those who stabilize and support a community that has been made precarious by the state—and it is this work of stabilization that James refers to as "labor [that] is expropriated by the state" (James, 2019).

Practitioners and proponents of OER can be viewed as paralleling the captive maternal dynamic in that they are trying to stabilize an educational system that has been systematically hollowed out through neoliberal practices. In their efforts to care for students, OER practitioners are creating mechanisms that enable the neoliberal state to continue implementing austerity measures. The labor of creating and deploying OER is, per James, labor that is being expropriated by the state.

The captive maternal, however, does not have to exist in a static state of perpetual expropriation. Joy James describes four stages of the captive maternal (Springer & Williams, 2021, 57 min), with stage one being the beginning of an awareness of the contradictions in your position, that your role is to stabilize oppressive structures. From there the captive maternal moves to open rebellion (stage two), then to the creation of structures and zones of liberation (stage three), to war resister, in which the zones of liberation need to be defended (stage four). In laying out the stages of struggle, James is not prescribing *how* struggle will happen but is instead offering a framework for properly assessing one's conditions and identifying a path forward.²¹ Another way

¹⁹ Questions of labor in open are reflective of larger problems of labor in library practice and in society more generally. The question of labor with regard to open practice is a question of labor with regard to society at large.

²⁰ The figure of the captive maternal is rooted in the Black experience of enslavement and the role of chattel slavery in creating and sustaining capitalism and imperialism. However, James notes that not all Black people are captive maternals, and not all captive maternals are Black (J. James, personal communication, November 27, 2021). My use of James's framework is not to argue that librarians, in their capacity as librarians, are captive maternals; instead I use the framework provided by James as a way to clarify the stakes and identify a path forward.

²¹ These stages are not metaphorical; James uses the example of the Attica Uprising to describe each stage.

of interpreting the stages of the captive maternal is that these are stages of moving from survival to life. It is important to emphasize that James takes care to note that any way forward must reckon with the need to “directly confront predatory structure.” To do otherwise is to engage in “promissory discourse” wherein practices that do not directly confront predatory structures are portrayed as the way forward (James, 2019).

Open has been characterized as liberatory, as a tool for social justice. The question to ask is, does open practice facilitate movement to the next stage? What purpose does open discourse serve? Does its origins in obfuscation and diversion play out in open practice today? OER and open discourse are often seen as tools of survival, of how we can *mitigate* (or hack, per Kapczynski) existing conditions. Survival is essential—but we must not confuse survival with living.

Writing about global education, Gert Biesta identifies that

...we need to make a shift away from sheer survival towards an orientation on life. After all, survival entails an orientation on the question how we can adapt and adjust to ever changing circumstances, whereas the question of life asks us that we first explore whether the circumstances we find ourselves in are worth adapting to, or whether the first task is actually to try to create better circumstances. (cited in Guilherme & Picoli, 2021, p. 1976)

In the realm of policy discourse, Greene (2021) writes, “The access doctrine makes these problems appear natural and immutable, like an earthquake, and teaches individuals and organizations how to survive them” (p. 6). In terms of OER and open, the language around the spirit of open has served to obfuscate the very real processes and practices that coalesced to create the impression of open as a phenomenon. In contextualizing open discourse in its discursive origins, it is hoped that this article contributes to a reorientation of library practice toward life, rather than survival. How can we move beyond an overemphasis on survival and mitigation of harm and shift library practice and discourse such that we are oriented toward identifying material, concrete ways to move toward life and flourishing?

Just as free software and open source software often cover many of the same programs, the distinction between a program that is oriented toward survival and one that is oriented toward

living can be found in the scope of its aims and how it is carried out, and not necessarily in the form itself. For example, the Black Panther Party ran a Breakfast for Children program that provided free breakfast for children in their communities. Not only was the program itself connected to the party's larger revolutionary aims (for example, hunger was explicitly identified as a means of oppression), but it belonged to a series of efforts that was made cohesive by the Party's 10-point program (Foner, 1970). The Young Lords also had a breakfast program, rooted in a larger revolutionary program inspired by the Black Panthers Party and others "that outlined a clear vision of the interrelationships of oppression and of the need for systemic societal change" (Enck-Wanzer, 2010, p. xiii). In contrast, the Food and Nutrition Service of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) runs a [school breakfast program](#) that could only with the most cursory of glances be interpreted as functionally serving the same purpose. All three programs serve breakfast; two were aimed at building power among the people, while the other, in not contextualizing the political causes of hunger and restricting its aims to food distribution, serves to maintain the status quo arrangement of power.

Of the revolutionaries of the 1960s and 1970s, James says, "they were engineers, and they crafted blueprints" (James, 2019). Her call is not to simply replicate the blueprints of the 1970s but to direct our aims toward new blueprints that are based on past learning and present conditions. Derek Ford argues that "We need to relocate ourselves within the history of the actually-existing struggle against capitalism and imperialism [...] We have moved beyond capitalism. We have shown that there is an alternative. We²² have expropriated the expropriators" (2017, p. 9).²³ Ford is not arguing that past and existing formations are without flaw but that in disavowing genuine engagement with their accomplishments as well as their contradictions, we

²² Here, *we* refers to working and oppressed peoples. (D. Ford, personal communication, February 8, 2023).

²³ This article is not the appropriate venue for an in-depth examination of the validity, weakness, and strengths of past and existing efforts to create alternatives to the capitalist framework. However, any such analyses should consider what Rockhill refers to as the dominant political imaginary, which "subjects us to an appalling—and dishonest—blackmail according to which any attempt to truly change the course of history would be responsible for all of the consequences, including the violent reactions of those who refuse change" (2017, p. 32). It is this same dominant historical narrative that "promotes the passivity of citizens before their supposed common destiny by creating a climate of defeatist resignation. By hearing again and again that it is impossible to change our destiny, who would not end up believing it?" (p. 20).

abrogate our own possibilities and future.²⁴ Ponce de León and Rockhill cite Raúl Zibechi as one example of “how another world is already being composed all around us through myriad social projects” (2020, p. 110). We can model our blueprints on both past and currently existing demonstrations that alternatives are possible. Again, the intention is not to simply replicate past efforts, but to engage in thoughtful investigation of what worked and what did not, and how conditions differ, with the aim of actually creating a blueprint.

But who makes these blueprints? Blueprints are not something that will be created only by librarians or through librarianship, but collectively. No single discipline, whether that be librarianship, education, the law, or computer programming, will by itself enact the fundamental change necessary. It’s critical that anyone (whether a librarian or not) interested in enacting such fundamental change join an organization that has this as an explicit aim. An organization will provide the environment for collective and collaborative learning and action. For those who seek to engage in such change, membership in an organization that is aimed at fundamental (rather than mitigating) change will provide the necessary political education and grounding through which to consider your library practice.²⁵ Calling for an end to capitalism is not abstract or remote, nor does such a call imply that this is something that will happen overnight. The survival programs of the Young Lords and The Black Panther Party show how survival efforts can and should be contextualized within a larger program of fundamental change; mitigation efforts that operate outside of this larger framework often only serve to uphold current relations of power and oppression. Margaret Thatcher wanted us to believe that [There Is No Alternative](#) to neoliberal capitalism. History has shown that there are alternatives and that we can create them. We, in our capacity as librarians and rooted in a political home, should actively orient our practice toward ending capitalism and participate in collective efforts to create the blueprints needed to create a life-affirming world that supports not only survival, but also flourishing.

²⁴ See Parenti (1997) for an example of this type of genuine engagement.

²⁵ This article does not recommend specific organizations for multiple reasons, including the fact that what is right for one person may not work for another. The process of choosing an organization includes assessing what is most suited for where you happen to be in your political journey.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Ian Beilin and Ian McDermott for their invaluable comments and feedback during the writing of this article. Thank you also to Ikumi Crocoll for patiently shepherding me through the publication process!

References

- Almeida, N. (2017). Open educational resources and rhetorical paradox in the neoliberal univers(ity). *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 1(1), 1–19.
- Bagchi, A. K. (2021). Neoliberalism and imperialism. In I. Ness & Z. Cope (Eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism* (pp. 2006–2026). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29901-9_144
- Broca, S. (2014, October). Free software v the commercialised web; fighting the online giants. *Le Monde Diplomatique*.
- Chang, S. (2022). CUNY enrollment declines as billions in repairs are delayed. *Gothamist*. <https://gothamist.com/news/cuny-enrollment-declines-as-billions-in-repairs-are-delayed>
- Crissinger, S. (2015). A critical take on OER practices: Interrogating commercialization, colonialism, and content. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/a-critical-take-on-oer-practices-interrogating-commercialization-colonialism-and-content/>
- Enck-Wanzer, D. (Ed). (2010). *The Young Lords: A reader*. New York University Press.
- Foner, P. S. (1970). *The Black Panthers speak*. Da Capo Press.
- Ford, D. R. (2017). Making Marxist pedagogy magical: From critique to imagination, or how bookkeepers set us free. *Critical Education*, 8(9), 1–13.
- Gonzalez-Barahona, J. M. (2021). A brief history of free, open source software and its communities. *Computer*, 54(2), 75–79.
- Greene, D. (2021). *The promise of access: Technology, inequality, and the political economy of hope*. MIT Press.
- Gregory, L., & Higgins, S. (2018). In resistance to a capitalist past: Emerging practices of critical librarianship. In K. P. Nicholson, & M. Seale (Eds.), *The Politics of Theory and the*

- Practice of Critical Librarianship* (pp. 21–38). Litwin Books.
- Guilherme, A., & Picoli, B. A. (2021). Neoliberalism and education in the global south: A new form of imperialism. In I. Ness & Z. Cope (Eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism* (pp. 1966–1978). Springer International Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29901-9_144
- Hart-Landsberg, M. (2006). Neoliberalism: Myths and reality. *Monthly Review*.
<https://monthlyreview.org/2006/04/01/neoliberalism-myths-and-reality/>
- Hoff, J. D. (2019). CUNY reaches “historically” bad contract agreement with faculty union. *Left Voice*.
<https://www.leftvoice.org/cuny-reaches-historically-bad-contract-agreement-with-faculty-union/>
- James, J. (2016). The womb of western theory: Trauma, time theft, and the captive maternal. *Carceral Notebooks*, 12, 253–296.
- James, J. (2019). *The architects of abolitionism* [lecture]. Brown University.
<https://youtu.be/z9rvRsWKDx0>
- Joseph, K., Guy, J., & McNally, M. B. (2019). Toward a critical approach for OER: A case study in removing the “big five” from OER creation. *Open Praxis*, 11(4), 355–367.
- Kansa, E. (2014). It’s the neoliberalism, stupid: Why instrumentalist arguments for open access, open data, and open science are not enough. *London School of Economics Impact Blog*.
[nsa/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/01/27/its-the-neoliberalism-stupid-ka/)
- Kapczynski, A. (2020). The law of informational capitalism. *The Yale Law Journal*, 129(5), 1460–1515.
- Lambert, S. R. (2018). Changing our (dis)course: a distinctive social justice aligned definition of open education. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 5(3), 225–244.

-
- Lederman, D. (2019, June 13). OER at the enterprise level. *Inside Higher Ed*.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/06/13/new-partnership-between-suny-and-lumen-aims-take-open>
- Lee, J. A., & Cifor, M. (2019). Evidences, implications, and critical interrogations of neoliberalism in information studies. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 2(1), 1–10.
- Macintyre, R. (2015). An uneasy relationship: Open educational practice and neoliberalism. *Proceedings from the Internet and Social Media at a Crossroads: Capitalism or Commonism? Perspectives for Critical Political Economy and Critical Theory*.
- McDermott, I. (2020). Open to what? A critical evaluation of OER efficacy studies. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*.
<https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2020/open-to-what/>
- Miller, J. (2017). From EDUPUNK to open policy: Critical technology praxis within higher education. *The Professional Geographer*, 70(1), 165–173.
- Morozov, E. (2013). The meme hustler. *The Baffler*, 22.
<https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-meme-hustler>
- Morozov, E. (2019). Capitalism's new clothes. *The Baffler*.
<https://thebaffler.com/latest/capitalisms-new-clothes-morozov>
- Parenti, M. (1997). *Blackshirts and reds: Rational fascism and the overthrow of communism*. City Lights Books.
- Ponce de León, J., & Rockhill, G. (2020). Towards a compositional model of ideology. *Philosophy Today*, 64(1), 95–116.
- Prádanos, L. I. (2015). The pedagogy of degrowth: teaching hispanic studies in the age of social inequality and ecological collapse. *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, 19, 153–168.

-
- Risager, B. S. (2016, July). Neoliberalism is a political project: An interview with David Harvey. *Jacobin*.
<https://jacobin.com/2016/07/david-harvey-neoliberalism-capitalism-labor-crisis-resistance/>
- Rockhill, G. (2017). *Counter-history of the present: Untimely interrogations into globalization, technology, democracy*. Duke University Press
- Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*. Black Classic Press.
- Seale, M. (2013). The neoliberal library. In L. Gregory & S. Higgins (Eds.), *Information literacy and social justice: Radical professional praxis*. Library Juice Press.
- Springer, D., & Williams, D. A. (2021). The plurality of abolitionism [Podcast interview]. *Groundings Podcast*. <https://groundings.simplecast.com/episodes/joy-james>
- Stallman, R. (2021). *FLOSS and FOSS*. Free Software Foundation.
<https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/floss-and-foss.html>
- Stallman, R. (2022). *Why open source misses the point of free software*. Free Software Foundation. <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/open-source-misses-the-point.html>
- The Open Education Conference. (n.d.). *About the open education conference*.
<https://openeducationconference.org/about>
- Tozzi, C. (2017). *For fun and profit: A history of the free and open source software revolution*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Weller, M. (2014). *The battle for open: How openness won and why it doesn't feel like victory*. Ubiquity Press.
- Wiley, D. (2009). *Defining "open"*. <https://opencontent.org/blog/archives/1123>
- Wiley, D. (2018). *Reflections on 20 years of open content: Lessons from open source*.
<https://opencontent.org/blog/archives/5354>

Zuboff, S. (2019). *Surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Public Affairs.