Commoning by doing it yourself! Thoughts from the hackerspace and its passengers

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In the 1990s, hackers began to think theoretically about developing hacking spaces to prove that they could be completely open about their work and ethics. The variety of names used by hacking communities reflects the diversity of the movement. While some groups and places that sound like hackerspaces don't want to be labeled as such because of the political resonance of the name, others proudly claim to be hackerspaces. The following lines are based on a doctoral journey and an ethnographic study of a hackerspace in France from 2016 to 2019. Far from being a place hidden from the world, the hackerspace brings together people who have decided to fight against technological accumulation and the hegemony of property, in a physical place that is visible and open to everyone. It is not meant to be a place for insiders, technophiles or only activists, but a place where everyone can meet and discuss issues freely and without constraints.

1. Draft Punk

In their struggle against proprietary technologies and standardized organizations, hackers have to walk the line between freedom and organization. But while they organize meetings to discuss the values and purpose of the space, at the same time - ... in the same place - ... these same hackers never stop 'doing'. They never stop replacing proprietary systems with free systems. They never stop setting up digital and electronic workshops to deconstruct technological complexity. They never stop giving beginner programming courses. They never stop teaching short-term travelers about astronomy, soap-making, and knot-tying. They never stop building online and physical libraries for as many people as possible. They never stop welcoming other alternative organizations and social movements. They never stop organizing conferences on the appropriation of techniques and technologies useful for the emancipation of all. They never stop opening their doors for meetings, demonstrations, presentations and friendly exchanges. They never stop offering a space for technological emancipation and digital survival.

Through 'doing', hackers continue and expand their struggle against property, managerialism, and technological hegemony, while relegating organization to last place. They see 'doing' as the sole purpose of the hackerspace. The governance spaces are not, and never have been, decision-making spaces, or even a particular moment where members with responsibilities within the space could meet to discuss future projects. Power, legitimacy and authority within the hackerspace have always been in the 'doing' and in all those who wish to embody it. Compared to corporate gatherings, meetings in hackerspaces have a very different ambition: to bring people together once again to discuss social issues freely, with the aim of promoting their emancipation. Unlike the other organizations it contests, the hackerspace does not divide the initiative into periods of reflection which would then lead to times for action, but maintains the existence of these spaces simultaneously, always giving decision-making power to those who do.

"There have always been a million theories about the content of the hackerspace. After that, everyone used it for what they needed, which is interesting, but doesn't make it a sustainable project. At the same time, it's interesting that the project wasn't completely written down from the start and that we didn't arrive with something, with rules to follow. It's important in terms of raising people's awareness that they themselves take part in the creation."

(Interview with a hacker).

The hackers' resistance to a dominant model is embodied in the creation of a site of experimentation that suggests a work in progress rather than a starting point or even a destination. The gathering of hackers is always complex to define the content and purpose of the place where hackers meet. It is the individuals who come to propose something that build the space. So, it's a space where individuals intertwine, for a moment or for a long time, to create something together. According to some members, there is a lack of usable equipment, lively workshops, pleasant premises, technical resources, and organization. The hackers experiment with technological and digital workshops as well as with organizational techniques. In addition, hackers construct a model that embodies their values and in which they would like to operate. It is this fabrication that could constitute the hackers' project. Not defined *a priori*, but constantly reloaded.

2. Host In The Shell

The place where hackers meet is very real, whilst the social transformation they are pursuing is at draft stage and the work still in progress. The hackerspace is having trouble sustaining its resources, and its activities still need to expand to reach more people and welcome more members. It could be that the purpose of the hackers is not just to challenge a dominant model, but to experiment with a different kind of space. While the members are sometimes torn between the desire to create a real place to develop projects and a technological support for social movements, they are not able to decide what ends the space should produce. They are also

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confused about the results for their members, for the civil society, for social movements and against the big digital companies.

The hackerspace thus achieves its most important results at the individual level. The members agree that the hackerspace is a proposal to others. The project is against the organizations monetize users' data, against the surveillance organized by companies and states, against the deprivation of users of their ability to appropriate technologies, but above all it is a place where 'doing' reigns. Hackers organize themselves to offer a place where people who want to participate in their emancipation can gather. The hackerspace is therefore a place created for citizens so that they themselves can contribute to their own emancipation. It's a place where kids come to learn the basics of coding, where teens come to 3D print replacement parts for their machines, and where adults come to modify their operating systems and encrypt their data. It's a place where people come to learn, but also to teach. Everyone can benefit from a shared space where all members of the hackerspace are involved collectively, even if they use the space individually.

"You only have to look at the people who turn up for the first time. You plug in three things, and they start an engine. You know they've done nothing, but for them, a world has opened up. It's certainly more interesting to do things while taking the piss and remaining open to everyone, than to start with a protest and then conform or not. That point is fatal. You have a situation where the framework is predefined, and the terms are already set. And you have another where you come in, you do cool things and I do cool things with you at the same time."

(Interview with a hacker).

The means that hackers use to promote the emancipation of citizens and to fight against dominant digital practices would become their ends. In the end, hackerspace residents, like the citizens who pass through its doors, never find a clear place (literally and metaphorically), be it against capitalism and private property, or for any form of freedom. What they do find is a place where they can study their own project and the shared space to understand how it works, modify and add to it, distribute it to other users and use it as they wish. This is how hackers think about commoning, by doing it themselves!