Hacking and Hackerspaces

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Sarah R. Davies, *Hackerspaces: Making the Maker Movement*, Cambridge and Malden, Polity Press, 2017, 192pp

Sarah R. Davies sets out in *Hackerspaces: Making the Maker Movement* to explain who hackers and makers are, what spaces they occupy and why, in her words, the movement is 'timely … necessary to this particular socioeconomic moment' (p11). To show how the maker movement is representative of 'the zeitgeist in some way' (p157), Davies employs a mixture of contemporary resources. The book is mainly formed from primary research she carried out in the form of interviews with the practitioners of hacking and making from around North American hackerspaces. She further draws on recent academic research from figures such as David Gauntlet, books from those who claim to represent the maker movement such as Mark Hatch's *The Maker Movement Manifesto*, and from journalistic articles.

Maker and hackerspaces (the two terms are used interchangeably by Davies) have become a source of burgeoning interest in the media. The resulting articles in the media provide a rich resource for Davies, as well as a way into discussions about what hackerspaces are and what the hacker spirit is. For example, Davies refers to the '*Do Something*' campaign in the *Guardian* as an example of a wider trend in society to pursue what sociologist Robert Stebbins calls 'active leisure' (p143). These articles illustrate both the hacker ethos and its prevalence, and lead her to claim that, to some extent, 'many of us, if not all, are hackers now'. More importantly, these examples from journalist articles are used to demonstrate the 'intense excitement' and optimistic 'rhetoric' about hackerspaces. This outlook is contrasted with the perspective of the hacker and maker interviewees to gain a better sense of what occurs in these spaces.

The interviews conducted at makerspaces are primarily focused on groups and individuals in urban areas. The specificity of creating a case study around people who live in these areas means that the book may be of relevance to urban anthropologists and cultural geographers. They would be rewarded in finding a useful case study of makers and hackers in urban areas, in addition to being given, as the author states, many questions that arise from the study beyond the book's allotted remit to examine (p172). The book, however, is not intended for a purely academic audience. Its balanced and engaging style will also prove illuminating for the lay reader who wants to examine the hacker and maker space mentality.

The book is engaging in the way that it sets out to tackle the main line of investigation, showing that the development of hackerspaces 'resonates

with wider developments in society' (p15). It does this through using a plethora of interesting examples of projects from hacker and makerspace that show the prevalence of the movement within society. Projects conducted in hackerspaces can include anything from those who knit to those who create their own robots. These projects are related to wider trends in technology and politics, or the politics of technology. Davies highlights these political trends in hackerspaces through her interviews. She describes how one interviewee used the hacking of everyday objects to understand their surroundings better, for example through hacking the 'magical black boxes' of closed software, such as iPhones. The ethos behind hacking consumerist technology is that until you have hacked something you do not really own it. This adage demonstrates what traits of the hacker are most valued: the hacker must be proactive, and should not passively accept consumerist technology. Furthermore, the hacker should undertake hacking independently. Davies claims that such traits - held in high regard among hackers - reveal a deeper truth of the hacker mentality: that hacker identity is formed through an energetic do-it-yourself individualism (p65).

The desire for the individuality of the hacker is contrasted to the community ethos of the hackerspace, and is one of the tensions that Davies claims can occur in these spaces. She states that the 'counter-cultural' ethos and the idea of community in hackerspaces is challenged by the fact that there is a 'central focus on individuals getting on and doing things'(p162). Ultimately, hacker and makerspaces become sites where community values come up against challenges of heightened individualism.

Davies suggests that hackerspaces are 'timely' because they invoke the idea that the individual is 'primarily responsible for their own lives', which is a main tenet 'of our neoliberal times'. She complicates this further with the dichotomy of emancipation and commodification in hackerspaces. The assumption of a hackerspace is that it is emancipatory, or a 'transgressive form of resistance to consumption' (p140). Yet commodities are still required, in the form of Chinese imported equipment, as well as a range of materials that include non-biodegradable plastics (p133). Therefore, maker culture can be seen as following the path of North American consumerism, despite not mirroring it precisely. Davies suggests a solution to this problem: that the space itself needs to be hacked (p140). Further nuancing of these spaces shows the complex threads that are at work in creating and sustaining a hacker and makerspace, where having a DIY ethos does not, on its own, guarantee the subversion of cultural norms.

The book reflects on how hacker and makerspaces can become subsumed into hegemonic discourse, while simultaneously providing resistance to neoliberal consumerism. These reflections do not engender lengthier discussions on the ramifications that this dualism has for these spaces, but this is not necessarily a criticism. Davies leaves room for the interviewees to tell their own experience of these idiosyncratic spaces, and in this way her

monograph provides an even-handed account of a nascent group with more stories to tell as it expands and grows.

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