Afterword: Hackers and Makers Are Ordinary

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Raymond Williams wrote “Culture is Ordinary” in 1958, a sensitive analysis of everyday life that was influential on the then-nascent field of cultural studies, among others. In this chapter, instead of culture, I draw on Williams’ notion of “ordinary.” Ordinariness—the everyday, unexceptional, and mundane—is a useful hermeneutic to view collective action and identity in the context of hacking and making. This “ordinary” framing is a response to two types of presumed exceptionality. Critical scholars praise activism in hacking (Maxigas, 2012), while others look to hacking and making as the key to economic profitability (Anderson, 2012). Missing from these discussions is a more grounded reading of how those identifying as hackers and makers come to understand shared histories, organizing, and politics—the very themes of this book.

Hacking and making are each an odd bundling of concepts that can appear contradictory. For example, Etsy provides a platform for makers to sell crafts and obtain mutual support, even as they push them into more precarious labor (Close, 2014). Our broader argument in this book is that, while contradictions sensitize us to key problematics, we should start by unpacking the cultural logics and material arrangements that drive them. For example, hackers often tout that “anyone can be a hacker.” While this claim is dubious—participation is limited by technical inclinations, skills, and exclusionary practices—the sites and phenomena in this book have certainly help produce an idea of the “ordinary hacker.” We can observe hacking and making’s movements from subculture to mainstream, and from edgy to popular identities. In closing this book, I argue it is fruitful to return to Williams’ notion of “ordinary” during this moment of popularization. I hope this serves as a necessary counterpoint to the mythologies of hacking and making that still dominate.
In the 1950s Williams was responding to Marxism’s insistence on power residing primarily in production, and a frustratingly prescriptive notion of critique among its adherents. Through a rich personal history, he narrated how culture arose from action in agrarian society, which was often simply dismissed as uncultured. Williams inverted the negative connotations of “ordinary” to make everyday lived experiences of the working class noteworthy. In the past, “ordinary” referred to a legalistic definition of “persons able to act in their own right,” only later migrating to a more general sense of “the expected, the regular, the customary” (Williams, 1985, p. 225). The tea house snobs he derided took culture to refer simply to “high art.” This distinction rankled him because it ignored the pastiche of meaning – making that constituted everyday life. He wondered, why should we “call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work?”

A similarly constructed wall now exists between the exceptional and ordinary hacker/maker. Journalistic and academic writing defines hackers as resistant geeks capable of bringing about changes in governments and corporations. The hacker is cast as the powerful underdog, plotted against by the powers that be. Their anti-hero status is even more salient when viewing the trope of the hacker in popular media. We cheer for these exceptional hackers, as well we should. But by many readings, hacking’s subversive nature is assumed to be diluted by its mainstreaming, sometimes by making. For example, Evgeny Morozov (January 13, 2014) interpreted makers as no more than commodified hackers lacking a radical edge. With a typical shrug and sigh, Morozov believes they were been duped by a fraudulent ideology. Brett Scott echoes this perspective when he writes about how the “wild and anarchic” hacker ethos was gentrified by “yuppies” (2015). Hacking was a synonym for resistance, and popularization signaled its dilution, if not outright downfall.

Lambasting people for failing to live up to revolutionary promises was what Raymond Williams fretted drew attention away from lived experience. “To try to jump the future,” he wrote, “to pretend that in some way you are the future, is strictly insane.” His grounded perspective suggested there are limits to seeking out an essence to hacking/making, or reading them as ideal digital citizens or producers. It may not be a particularly popular defense at the moment (over-loaded as the term has become) but I do not believe hackers/makers are on a downward spiral. Rather, their popularization worldwide reveals new questions as they seep into new identities and political subjectivities grounded in particular contexts (Coleman, 2017). For example, this volume has explored unlikely collaborations between hackers
and bureaucrats, such as “civic hackers” in Los Angeles and the Chaos Computer Club (CCC) in Germany. In each case, civil society groups worked with government, even serving as proto-institutions (Lawrence, Hardy, & Phillips, 2002) for technology design and interpretation (respectively). The way power resides and is expressed is never a simple story, and our shared future might depend on such unlikely collaborations.

What we might be seeing in expectations of exceptionality is a kind of generational disappointment—a downfall narrative of hacking and making. This too is hardly new. All evidence to the contrary, many still take Steven Levy’s *Hackers* to be a guide to an innate identity from the 1980s that is still cast in stone today. Even in the 1990s “golden era” hackers from academia and information security experts alike looked to writer like Levy when they were frustrated at the emergent of “script kiddies” who they saw lacking in technical prowess (Thomas, 2002). People identifying as makers are similarly attracted to origin myths when they look to the past as evidence that we have lost what we once had: an authenticity grounded in hands-on work and tinkering. Given that both hacking and making have been so rooted in white masculine models of prowess and knowledge, worrying that hacking might be “gentrified,” as Scott did, brings up a further irony. I believe that hacking’s expansion beyond circles of tech-savvy, affluent white males—and making’s increasing recognition—demonstrates attention to diversity, not homogeny. Seeking out how histories re-emerge is one thing, while returning to apocryphal origins that deny the progressive goals that hackers and makers aspire to is quite another. For this reason, it is dangerous to seek an essence of hacking/making. I feel that the more productive perspective is hacker/maker pluralism, with distinct spaces, politics, and histories.

Ordinariness is not meant to revive historical divisions between cultural studies and European critical traditions, or downplay questions of power. Instead, it is meant to be a sensitizing concept to explore how identities are constructed, and the socio-technical situations that sustain them over time. Hackers and makers are shaped by society, not born. In *Coding Freedom*, Gabriella Coleman described how an open-source hackers’ identity emerged from a fervent brew of digital connectivity, technological concepts, and shared work (Coleman, 2012). Political awareness was only connected to liberalism through shared work with open-source and code over time. Neither is my suggesting that hackers are “ordinary” meant to discard a concern with exceptional hackers/makers. We should be concerned with the Chelsea Mannings and Limor Frieds of the world, and the causes they champion. We should not, however, confuse myth for experience, or simplify complex stories to have a more appealing narrative.
Hackers and makers are ordinary: this is where we must end. Encountering her as human opens new avenues of inquiry, rather than regarding her with disappointment or as a folk hero for the information age. Taking the hacker off the museum wall may be controversial since the term is synonymous with resistance. By contrast, the maker has always been presumed to be ordinary and, as a result, often invisible. However, a return to ordinariness is hardly unusual (Gregg, 2007). Goffman paid attention to common rituals, while Malinowski famously advocated for anthropologists to consider the “imponderabilia of everyday life.” Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward (2012) used the term to refer to how people interpret their experiences with materialities. An explicit framing of ordinary—approachable, common, and attainable—enables us consider how collectives and identities are forged among everyday people in unremarkable spaces and material contexts, not simply playgrounds for the already technically-literate and affluent. Neither are everyday interactions, feelings and events foreign to studies of hackers and makers. Among others, Paul Taylor (1999) and Gabriella Coleman (2012) wrote sensitive ethnographies of hackers that unearthed their lifeworld.

What might Raymond Williams make of the ordinary hackers and makers in this book? I hope he would find its empirical grounding appealing, as he advocated for “a new equation to fit the observable facts” during a time when what was considered culture was expanding. Similar to Williams, the patterning of a term—how it evolved over time and was interpreted—helps us understand its social and economic impacts (Williams, 1985). Despite the boldness of our book title, ordinary hackers and makers are as much produced by collective “worlds” (Becker, 2008) as they are in control of exotic technologies that change society at large. Williams might also be intrigued to see the continued importance of hands-on work, reciprocity, and leftist politics. For their part, hackers and makers should find much in common with Williams’ progressive embrace of technology paired with disdain for formalized education. After all, Williams wasn’t wistful for pre-industrial society, which he saw as increasing quality of life. It gave the, “gift of power that is everything to men [sic] who have worked with their hands.” Viewing hackers and makers from afar, how they might give back is only beginning to be revealed.

References


