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What Are the Theoretical Lessons when Agnostic Hacker Politics Turn to the Right?

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The debate is on what role media theory has played and should play in the aftermath of the US presidential election campaign, especially as concerns the surge of alt-right neo-fascism. Particularly distressing from the point of view of media theorists is that the alt-right movement spawned from Internet subcultures and discussion forums, which had previously been seen as allied with left-liberal causes. As culture-jamming tactics swing from the left to the right, the theories and philosophies underwriting these phenomena need to be re-examined too. Indeed, the question must be brought to theory itself: how did it fail us, and what theoretical responses remain at this point in time?

What has carried on undistorted in the transition from left to right is the framing of one's own standpoint as that of David in a cosmic fight against Goliath. This goes to the heart of hacker self-imagery, which revel in rhetorical figures and visual graphics of themselves as the born Outsider. In this, hackers are not so unique, but they are rather just one exponent of a more general predisposition in political struggles from 1968 and onwards, where the authentic Self stands opposed to a vaguely defined, and hence, omnipresent, System. While this is a constant, what is shifting is who the Philistines are in this epic battle. The freedom to write-in just about any subject position in this struggle is what makes this kind of hermeneutical suspicion so slippery.

The once towering influence of the Free Software Foundation within hackerdom helped to stabilise the ethical commitments of hackers around a core set of issues: opposition to proprietary software and associated intellectual property rights (such as software patents), paired with a rejection of surveillance and censorship, as well as network architectures that compartmentalise Internet traffic (i.e. the net neutrality question). Here the opponent was fixed on the computer industry, pointing the broader political outlook in a leftist-reformist direction. Since then, corporate media outlets have been planted within the hacker subculture, diminishing the capacities of every new generation of hackers to develop an independent analysis and self-understanding. The birth of the “maker”-identity is a case in point. But the reason that a consensus could be reached around these limited issues – to the point that they got the appearance of apolitical common sense – might owe as much to self-preservation, what Chris Kely once named “recursive politics”. That is to say, consensus is built around the technical and legal preconditions for the “geek public” to sustain itself. Recursive politics is geared towards strengthening and expanding the conditions for the geek public’s continued existence (Kely, 2008).

With reference to an older tradition of philosophy, the same thing could be described in terms of the self-determination or autonomy of the hacker collective vis-à-vis external entities. The fending off of social media platforms, intellectual property laws, or business strategies that would integrate hacker projects as an appendage of some other structure or process, are resisted on the basis that it would deprive the community of its autonomy. But this leaves us with the troubling question, what becomes of so to speak “non-recursive” politics? For instance, gender equality in the high-tech industry, or solidarity with maquiladora workers producing consumer electronics (Toupin, 2014)? While both have bearing on the existence of the computer industry and its auxiliary “underground”, they are not implicated in sustaining the autonomy of that subculture. On the contrary, gender equality or issues of economic redistribution are often seen by hackers as something being imposed on them from an outside. In other words, it threatens their autonomy as much as the introduction of software patents. This has long been a source of tension

between (left-leaning) activists and politically engaged hackers, on one hand, and hackers of an avowedly apolitical persuasion, on the other (Coleman, 2003).

One may recall Lenin's complaint about restricted 'trade-union consciousness' in relation to the public good of the whole. Indeed, once we put aside our prejudices against the lack of direct reimbursement in the free-labouring software development community, its aspect as a form of union strategy can be more clearly seen. It serves as a pool of for-hire employees and as a source of life-long learning (Irani, 2015). It is a back-handed form of union politics, perfectly adapted for a profession whose privileged position in capitalism comes from selling the means for undercutting the demand for the labour of others.

Even when hackers stick with the narrow set of recursive politics that have grown out of their practices, internal fraction lines reappear. This is because the points of contestation that they rally around, i.e. software patents, net neutrality, etc., must nevertheless be made sense of, and there are competing interpretative frameworks for doing so. In contrast to a traditional social movement, where it is the interpretative framework that the members gather around, hackers are drawn from diverging, sometimes opposing, ideological backgrounds. The solving of engineering problems is instead their common ground, and playing down ideological differences is what enables contributions to flow from the edges of the network, unhindered by political colours. Every engineering project must make a claim on the David-vs-Goliath struggle (from the '1984' video of Macintosh against Big Brother to Makerbot's "reclaim the means of production"-rhetoric), as elementary hype management, and every project must at the same time remain vague in defining who that opponent is, in order not to alienate the next contributor with the "better idea."

These ambiguities hunt the long tradition of politicised engineering culture. It extends back to that original drift towards populist, one-leader authoritarianism, "Bonapartism." The engineer-trained followers of Saint Simon started out as utopian radicals and enemies of the state, only to do the biddings of Napoleon III later in their careers. An explanation might be that the ambiguities in political outlook mirror the ambiguities of the engineering practice itself. The two most important ones concern whether or not technology is a destiny or a vector for changing society, and

whether the profit motive is at odds with instrumental rationality and the public goal of betterment, or rather, if cost reduction is a neutral benchmark against which technical efficiency can be measured.

Where does all of this leave media theory? Theory shipwrecked when its flag was nailed to the mast of David. If reasoned scepticism is subjugated under politics of affection, as so many post-theories and post-philosophies demand of us, then the alt-right will harvest what was sown by the self-abdicating intellectual. But the opposite stance has not fared much better, i.e. the hyper-theoretical and paranoid attitude which, partly an artefact of the logics of academic publishing, spirals into a search for the more-critical-than-thou high-ground. The hopeful stance that the hacker movement and its many off-shoots once inspired media scholars to adopt needs to be critically re-examined in light of the recent, right-wing drift of hackerdom, but it must not be debunked.

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Johan Söderberg is associate professor in Theory of Science at Göteborg University. His research is situated in-between STS, critical studies of innovation, and social movement studies. Most recently he investigated how the psychonaut subculture copes with biochemical risk outside of legal jurisdictions. This case served as a canary bird of our common situation on a "laboratory planet" in post-regulation times.

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