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Michel Lallement, "L'âge du faire. Hacking, travail, anarchie." Paris: Seuil, 2015, 446 pp.

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Book Review

**Michel Lallement, “L’âge du faire. Hacking, travail, anarchie.”
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What is the future of work autonomy? In this volume, extensively documented with social and political science literature and a participant observation, Michel Lallement, labour sociologist of Lise-Cnam (Paris) offers some stimulating reflections on this topic. Lallement is a prolific author, mostly dealing with the analysis of work transformations concerning multiple dimensions. In his first work, *Des PME en chambre. Travail et travailleurs à domicile d’hier et d’aujourd’hui* [1990] he studied the relation between home-work and the industrial revolutions and the specificity of this form of employment, traditionally considered as marginal but fully integrated into the capitalistic system. Then, he devoted to the study of employment relations, also in a comparative framework. In this latter work, the author aims at observing the concrete expressions of doing in the heart of San Francisco Bay Area hackerspaces. He spent a full year at San Francisco hackerspace Noisebridge, placed in Mission District, attempting to describe how libertarian counterculture and economic liberalism can work together. The place chosen for developing the participant observation is not fortuitous: since the 1960s, San Francisco has become a city full of potentials, where the counterculture has fuelled alternative communities and subversive practices, whose hackerspaces are now the most delayed echo. In this area, underground movements, anti-war contestation, civil disobedience, the invention of personal computers and the internet have been coexisting by producing heterogeneous cultures and sub-cultures.

Between August 2011 and August 2012, Lallement carried out a participant observation at Noisebridge, one of the world’s most popular hackerspace, where “do-it-by-yourself and do-it-with-others” and “shut-up and hack” synthetize the leitmotifs within the community. Here, the author participated to three main activities: the cultivation of mushrooms, cooking activities and the practice of the German language. Among the hackers distributed in different hackerspaces, Lallement conducted 87 interviews designed to analyse the hacking practices and hackers’ biographies. The result is an intense work questioning different issues: the redefinition of “work” and “workplace;” the struggle and the resistance against the scientific organization of work; the subversion of work hierarchies; the emergence of “do-ocracy” and its material translation in work organization and the meaning of work autonomy in contemporary capitalism.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first part, Lallement analyses the historical roots of hacking and hackerspaces, mainly by observing the relations between technical innovations and the libertarian counterculture. In this section, Lallement specifically outlines the history of Noisebridge, founded in 2007 by two Californian hackers, Mitch Altman and Jacob Appelbaum, after having participated to a meeting organised by the Chaos Computer Club in Berlin. At Noisebridge, Lallement observes the hacking practices and rituals, activities, motivation, socialization and conflicts. The author unhinges some clichés about the hacker community: hackers are not lonely people, promoting the refusal of work and devoted to activities at the margins of legality if not mere

piracy. Hackerspaces allow the socialization of experiences as well as the sharing of both skills and projects. According to Lallement, the practice of sharing activities, exchanging experiences and promoting the free access to knowledge produce a new and alternative way to conceive both the interaction between humans and their working activity and the work organization itself. In the second part, Lallement focuses on Noisebridge. He interrogates the meaning of “make” and its influence in traditional work practices as well as the rituals to become hacker. The author observes the hacking as a social relation, which combines different forms of integration, shared representations, rules and a common identity but also conflicts to be solved. In the third part, the author examines the contemporary hacking, the opposition between “cracker” and “makers,” and the relation between hackers and social movements, to examine, then, the existing ambiguities between market, hacker ethics and beliefs with a particular stress on the analysis of the Californian Ideology debate [Barbrook and Cameron, 1996].

Several books have been written about the hacker culture, but here Lallement points out some key elements scarcely discussed. The first one relates to what Richard Sennett highlights in *The Craftsman* [2008]: the linkage between innovation, making repairs, fun and the development of abilities. Hackers refuse to dissociate the working activity from the artistic production: even if the reference to an authentic artistic production is arguable, the total rejection (also for its uselessness) of the one best way principle, as well as the standardization and the subordination derived from this principle, is clear. That implies both the possession of technical abilities and the desire to improve them. This tension is not far from the one expressed by the Artists’ Federation under the Paris Commune in 1871, recalled by Kristin Ross in *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* [2015]. In their manifesto, they stated that the gathering of all artistic intelligences would base on: “The free expansion of art, free of any government control and all privileges; the equal rights of all members of the federation; the independence and dignity of each artist put under the protection of everyone by creating a committee elected by the universal suffrage of artists. This committee strengthens the bonds of solidarity and realizes the unity of action.” [*Manifeste de la Fédération des Artistes de Paris*, p. 274]. It is also close, as underlined by Sennett [2008, 261-267], to the idea of pragmatism, focused on the craft of experience and the need of freedom from means-ends relationships in order to allow people to work well. In this way, the technical ability (hacking) supports the achievement of (or the permanent desire of achieving) a beauty, a perfection ideal, as promoted also by the Arts and Crafts movement, which prospered between 1880 and 1920, and counted William Morris as one of the leading members.

The second one concerns the dichotomy, which is increasing in our societies, between the promotion of individualism and the need to socialize, in times where firm size decreases, due to technologies and restructuring activities, and workplaces are increasingly similar to modern panopticon, as well as in times of multiple but fragmented affiliations, where mass mobilization has become an exception. In these terms, the observation carried out by Michel Lallement testifies the extensive need of the hackers interviewed and monitored to re-create communities, a sense of belonging, and to compensate the bad effects of common behaviours among hackers, e.g. excessive use of technology at the expense of human relations, bad hygiene, unhealthy eating and depressive

tendencies. At Noisebridge, Lallement observes the attempt to combine cooperation and individualism, virtual reality and material experiences (cooking, gardening, horticulture, sewing [...]). This attempt is supported by rituals, practices, meetings and discussions marked by formal procedures, thus nobody in particular takes the command, with all the consequences in terms of decision-making and conflictuality. The observation leads Lallement to emphasize that hackers communities can be considered as laboratories of social change; autonomy areas where can be experienced another way to innovate, to produce, to work, to decide, to define identities and destinies, where the realization of utopias converges in a practical dimension.

This work has the great worth of contributing to put in question consolidated, often mystifying, representations of hackers, hacking and hackerspaces. However, some issues remain debateable. Firstly, the exam of hackers' profiles testifies the enduring reproduction of the social differentiation within those communities: the hackers interviewed and observed are mostly young, male, white, middle class, and well equipped in terms of cultural capital. That means that relations between hackers and the social groups surrounding the hackerspaces are limited, in any case, unable or not addressed to overcome race, sex, and class divisions. Secondly, and consequently, it is hazardous to conceive that practices, ideals and activities flourished in the hackerspaces can represent a concrete utopia to be transferred in organizations and workplaces, where the deep-rooted and naturalized division of labour right on race, sex and class lines reproduces the unbalanced distribution of symbolic and material power. Finally, technology has never been neutral. As Zuboff [1988] reminds us, it has historically been used as a means both for avoiding the dependence of organizational elites on skilled workforce and for controlling workers' performance. In our societies, and specifically in workplaces, issues like power, information and democracy have become increasingly important but, at the same time, workers' rights and the representativeness of unions have been reduced, with the result of producing social exclusion and new poverties. In this scenario, utopias and radical practices risk to be confined to good intentions or to privileged groups who can experiment without any pressures to get a stable income and/or who are skilled/educated enough to preserve a substantial independence from hierarchies commonly existing in workplaces.

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Toffanin

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