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The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age

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The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age


Review by Drew Harrington <harrington@pacificu.edu>
University Librarian, Pacific University

“There are no technological revolutions without cultural transformation,” Manuel Castells notes in the epilogue of this book. One such transformation is the development of the “Hacker Ethic,” explored here by Himanen (Univ. of Helsinki; Univ. of Calif., Berkeley). Readers should not confuse the creatively motivated “Hacker” with the maliciously motivated “Cracker;” this book is not about the dark underbelly of the computer world. It is an exploration of an emerging work ethic that challenges the Protestant Ethic under which most of us labor, whether or not we are Protestant. The Protestant Ethic places work squarely in the center of life, with work as an end in itself, regardless of the amount of meaning the work may hold for the worker or for society. If we work long enough and hard enough during our earthly lives, the Protestant Ethic suggests we will finally earn leisure-time in heaven. Unfortunately, a Protestant work ethic combined with today’s technology that increasingly makes room for work in all areas of our lives (i.e. cell phones, convenience foods, laptops, etc.), can damn us to a model that makes Sisyphus a hero. By contrast, the “Hacker Ethic,” which is not necessarily confined to computer folk, is based on innovation, creativity and living a passionate life. The “Hacker Ethic” in its purest form is based on three elements: challenging society; undertaking activities motivated primarily by a desire to create something that one’s peer community would find valuable, and freedom of expression combined with open access. It is about optimizing time for playfulness and about working at experiments that may not have immediate goals. Hacker time is not based on the nine-to-five model, or any proscribed schedule, but on “doing something” rather than “doing time.” While the “Hacker Ethic” is not an entirely new concept—artists, artisans, academics and Thoreau embraced a similar ethic long before computer hackers came along—it is new to see it applied to the power structures of today’s workplaces and economy. This little black book is itself an innovative and creative collaboration between Pekka Himanen, Linus Torvalds and Manuel
Castells, and could spark mini-revolutions.

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