Nation Hacking:
How ideas of making, participation and open design refigure governance, citizenship and livelihoods

Position Statement

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Open design, user creativity, and social innovation all stipulate everyday citizens as active participants not only in matters of technology production, but matters of social, economic and political concern. Across regions, grassroots tinkerers, corporations, and governments alike have endorsed this idea that the future of their regions and nations rests on citizens taking matters into their hands, i.e. to intervene in existing social and economic structures by democratizing technology design and production. To take but two examples; since 2012, the Obama administration has officially endorsed open source hardware and making as a way to engage American citizens in designing solutions to solve larger societal problems. By encouraging Americans to become makers of technologies and by opening up existing design and production processes to lay audiences, so the vision goes, the nation itself can reinvent itself and bring back – as Obama described it – a more enhanced and globally impactful version of "made in America." Similarly, in China,

government officials have begun endorse open hardware and maker production as a way to cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset and innovation thinking amongst "masses" of Chinese people and in so doing reposition China itself in the global imaginary from a place known as "made in" to "created in." Why has this idea that open design, making and hacking as the crux of reinventing whole regions and even nations, i.e. nation hacking, found support from regions as economically and politically diverse as China and the United States? What is the seductive draw of notions of open-ness, participation, innovation, problem solving and social change? Why do seemingly unlikely allies such as grassroots tinkerers and politicians come together around the idea that bottom-up citizen engagement is the crux for societal and regional futures?

The answer I argue lies in the promise of a better and more hopeful future that ideas of open-ness, participation, and hacking hold. From hardware tinkering and making to open innovation, methods of participation promise people a sense of control amidst increasing precarious times. Making, for instance, promises a hands-on engagement and in-depth understanding of the inner workings of technology, and by extension an ability to "hack," i.e. open up, previously closed systems from tech products to governance and social organization. What is overlooked and often even rendered invisible because of this exact focus on opportunity, a sense of control and possibility, is how the implementation of open design and innovation models has gone hand in hand with and was in part propelled forward by a proliferation of increasingly precarious work conditions. The language of open-ness and participation masks a broader shift towards a form neoliberal governance that demands of individuals to become self-inventing and self-actualizing entrepreneurial citizen-subjects, all the while stripping away infrastructures of security from retirement and health insurance to stable job environments. Indeed, long-term employment, state intervention, and larger organizational structures are rendered as holding both individuals and nations back from becoming truly innovative and capable to address the challenges of an increasingly insecure world. What is needed advocates of open production and government officials alike argue is a self-regulating system of individuals capable of designing their own immediate responses to challenges at hand. Protection by the state or academic research structures are portrayed as backwards and as too slow and as such incapable to respond to a world that demands quick, micro-entrepreneurial and agile interventions as its environment, climate, and political situation is experiencing increasing havoc. What is needed instead, so the story goes, is an opening up of old structures of governance, research and society towards entrepreneurial

intervention and experimentation as the only possible pathway to live in an increasingly precarious world.

What do we as researchers and designers in academic and industry networks who have long argued for open-ness and participation in design make of this shift in governance that has turned participation itself into a site of neoliberal expansion? What is our role and responsibility as the values we advocate become taken up by powerful players to redesign work, social organization, and livelihoods?

In the panel, drawing from more than six years of ethnographic research and designerly engagements with the topics of making, open innovation, and entrepreneurship and innovation discourse in China and the United States, I will provide concrete examples to the issues and points I raised above.