Cyber as space, cyber as conversation.
Setting up virtual empires.

Paper for the Panel *Empires and Differences*

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Remark: A high number of video-clips are quoted in this paper as evidence of my hypothesis. In order to find easily those evidences I prepared a hypertext. You can find the electronic version of this document on the Internet at the address http://www.sparethings.org/ljubljana/index.html

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the foundation of "cyberspace as space" as a conscious and aimed action set up by the emerging computer software industry during the 1980s and 1990s as a way to dominate an emergent (and very rich) market. There is in fact another way to conceive cyberspace, which was extremely powerful and shared by programmers during the 1970s. It was the conception of computer programs and protocols as a conversation, as a common language that allowed them to share information, help each other, give reciprocal (and free) advices. From that tradition derive those groups that are affirming the freedom of speech and information over the Internet nowadays. The struggle between people fighting for freedom from copyrights and from the mediation of big corporations (which, with the availability of cheap technology, are no longer necessary mediums) and copyright owners is grounded on a twofold conception of cyberspace as either space or conversation. In this struggle, big corporations are fighting for a privilege that no longer makes sense in the broadband connected world, where even teenagers can record and sell a song or other pieces of artistic production everywhere in the world from their own bedroom.

In order to set up an enterprise and ensure its competitiveness in an extremely fast market, corporations attempt to apply property rights also in cyberspace, which is grounded as common. This paper aims to underline the connection between the contested uses of the word "cyberspace", the claim of rights of properties, and privatization of public spaces in the Net giving account of ethnographic data collected in the most recent HackMeeting (Pisa, September 29-31, 2007).

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1. Public space in Cyberspace

1.1 The personal computer, or the democratization of a powerful tool

During the end of 1970s the computer market changed its nature, that was focused on big corporations and Universities, targeting laymen and small businesses. Differently from the 1950s and 1960s, when mainframes were so big and expensive that the could be bought just by Universities and Governments,[1] the foundation and sharp growth of enterprises such as Apple first, and Microsoft later shows us in which direction the computer industry was going: everybody wanted a computer and actually *needed* it, to simplify tasks and be more productive (see adv of Alligator).

In 1983 another important event occurred: Apple LISA (Local Integrated Software Architecture) was released. It was the first home (or 'personal', as advertisements started readily to call it) computer (actually, Xerox Star was the first, in 1981, but it cost $17,000, so we cannot consider it properly a home computer) with a GUI (Graphical User Interface). The logic procedure that the machine performed to run programs was hidden by a graphical interface that made the interaction with the machine easier and simpler. A mouse, a device that moves a cursor on the screen, allowed a perfect interaction between the space in the computer and the user's physical space. In 1984 the revolution became cheap and popular with Apple Macintosh. The use of the electronic landscape as a space was completed; the metaphor of cyberspace as a space was accomplished using the metaphor of the desktop as main workflow for users (see adv of Desktop). It was a strong change, and a conscious one: in a Macintosh manual the easiness of new computers is revealed and explained:

> *The secret of the easiness in which Macintosh works is neither the bit/map monitor, neither the mouse device: it is the metaphor. Instead of creating an alien environment in which the users have to memorize scores of commands in order to allow the computer to work, Macintosh programmers created a digital version on the screen of everyday use objects: desktop, buttons, volume knob, etc. (Norton and Heid 1992, 13) (personal translation from Italian)*

Since this moment, computers was becoming to be perceived more and more as a domestic appliance. The target for computer industries shift from programmers to users, and the easiness and usefulness of computers to manage the everyday affairs, from the family's expenses to the office's documents, the key that opened the wallet of millions of Americans during the '80s.

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[1] I need to underline here, even if just in note, the famous misquote attributed to Thomas J. Watson, Jr., president of IBM in 1943, which was supposed to say "I think there is a world market for about five computers" that probably derives from this quotation "IBM had developed a paper plan for such a machine and took this paper plan across the country to some 20 concerns that we thought could use such a machine. I would like to tell you that the machine rents for between $12,000 and $18,000 a month, so it was not the type of thing that could be sold from place to place. But, as a result of our trip, on which we expected to get orders for five machines, we came home with orders for 18." (you can find first quotation more or less everywhere around the Internet, while the second is the formal position of IBM, on http://www-03.ibm.com/ibm/history/reference/faq_0000000047.html, as visited on October 27th, 2007. It is important to note that even if (and specially if) it was a misquote, it was used prevalently to affirm that everyone could have a computer, that computers were easy to use, and useful for everyone. It surely was a cunning and successful marketing move.

1.2 The Internet as new market place

In this scenario, where many computers were diffused many offices and houses of USA and everybody was starting to use a computer also for the most simple tasks, it began to be clear to everybody that it was no longer necessary be a programmer in order to use a computer. And that the newborn Internet could be the new market place to conquer. An instrument that deliver directly in the house of the users everything they desire, and through which they can see, get informed, and especially buy.

This shift implied that the "community of computing" no longer consisted only of artisans and experts creating their own programs and sharing them with people with similar passions and needs, as hackers used to do since the very beginning of the computing (Graham 2004, Gunkel 2001, Mosco 2004, Taylor 1999). Rather, a new class of people was created: the users. Users were the new target of a growing market. Normal people and (not more geek) were those to which the massive ads were addressed to. And in order to get more people using computers, it was absolutely necessary to make computers easy to use. The implementation of the graphical interface and the spreading of the mouse was a good strategy, and it was the concept that most of the ads were pointing at during the all 1990s (see ads on Mouse and Manuals).[2] The new coming users have attitude to consume and to see the Internet as a huge mall in which go and spend time in. In those years lot of chatting programs, interactive e-shops, and credit-card payment systems were strongly developed.

But the distance from the program language and final users was increasing slowly, and the metaphor of space was increasing its power too.[3] Cyberspace was slowly be compared to other spaces, as a new promised land to visit, colonize, and conquest. Step by step, the common practice to use the Net to share applications, information, programs, and files began to be more difficult and controversial. The private property – with the related rights – was preparing its entrance in the Cyberspace.

1.3 Hackers as continuers of first cyberspace

As we know, since the *English enclosure* of XV and XVI centuries, everywhere there is space there is private property. And since the property of intellectual production used to produce money, the protection of it became a priority, as copyright history teaches us.

But, regarding Cyberspace, at the beginning of programming nobody was working on computer programs as exclusive property, and their characteristic of collective, team work was a clear statement in the first computer industries.

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[2] See some Apple Tv ads on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaZgtQRmunA as visited on June 18th, 2008

[3] An impressive example of this metaphor is one of the commercial of Apple about the desktop: watch it on http://youtube.com/watch?v=Ghndp8htjMs as visited on June 18th, 2008

During the interview that Mr. Stallman released to me the past 22nd December, he was pointing out that "we had no passwords in our computer at the campus, because it made no sense to close our programs: the more that we were, the best the program was developing". No passwords, no closures, no encrypted code: the more the code was shared, the better this was for the development of computers and of the community related to them. That is the spirit with which hackers started to work together, and continued to do also when the GUI created that strong separation between the laymen and the programmers. Something was changing, evidently, but hackers' exploration of cyberspace was still going on as in the past "golden age" of cyberspace, when to explore and be curious was an appreciated and skilful characteristic of programmers (see Mitnick's interview).

This attitude of hackers to keep cyberspace a place in which freedom could still be a value got a strong supporter in Richard Stallman, that with the Free Software Foundation since 1984 is fighting to maintaining the code of application free, in order to keep the distance between users and programmers as small as possible or at least *potentially* – wherever some users want to begin to program – reduced to zero. This is extremely important for Stallman also nowadays: there is no reason to use programs that tied you and your enterprises to the will of another company where you can use a reliable, extremely powerful, and flexible software instead. The move of software house is to keep the power of programming away from people, according to the analysis of a hacker of Chaos Computer Club of Berlin (see this piece of interview) and Stallman (see this piece of interview) that are both keeping the power of doing things in the hands of the majority of people. In order to do this, Mr. Stallman provided a strong legal tool, as the GNU GPL license. This license is a copyleft one, that means that everybody can modify the software released under that license, watch inside, learn from it, and release his own modifications with the same license of the original program. For this reason the GNU GPL is called "viral license", because it perpetuates itself and it frees the application that are generated by the original one.

2. Hackers attitude in Italy: reclaiming skills and freedom from induced-necessities

In Italy there were hackers since the very beginning, as almost everywhere in the developed countries during the 1970s and 1980s. Many communities of programmers were flourishing all around the Italy and, during the 1990s, the use of the Internet began to be diffused also there.

The power of the tool was quite soon realized by movements. There was a strong grassroots tool to easily connect and share ideals, ideas, strategies, and political views. Quite soon, since the first half of 1990s, political movements started to massively use the Internet to communicate with each other and to set up their campaigns. Besides the communities of

programmers started to flourish a high number of communities that used to take the Internet and programming as a tool to free the minds and ideas of people, as a tool for propaganda.

Of course we can find this type of movements almost everywhere: "Electronic Civil Disobedience" and "Hacktivism" are not Italian expressions to define an Italian phenomenon, so there is no originality in this expression. But the Italian peculiarity is that those movements were since the beginning co-opted by the political scenario. In a sort of monopoly of dissent, there was little room for those hackers that wanted to be part of a hacker community without being also automatically part of a movement of disagreement and civil disobedience. The hacker P., that I interviewed the past February, told me that the group of hacking that he and a bounce of him friend started in Cosenza, were forced to stop their activity because they refused to take their meeting in the local committee of a political party, instead of in a private rented room.

The risk that since the very beginning the hackers perceived was that in that way the possibility to be seen as criminal and a threat for civil society was already high and intensifying. Instead of give freedom of programming, they were risking of being the cause of the repression. And in some occasion, that strong connection with the groups of dissent provoked a failure and destruction of some local hackers' clubs, as in Cosenza, where they were dispersed. Local groups that transferred all their activity on the Net, saving and empowering in this way lot of connections, but that were losing the human experience of meeting together.

By the way, to hack is a term definitively under stress and pressure everywhere: from the original meaning, it started to mean to program skilfully and then to do things with cleverness and humour, and nowadays it could be applied to so different fields: <u>art</u>, <u>crimes</u>, <u>furniture</u>, <u>literature</u>, bikes (<u>this</u> and <u>this</u>). Mr. Stallman himself points out how to hack has to be intended as "a way to do difficult things playfully" (see <u>interview</u>), and so that activity is completely human and natural.

But hacking, and the way in which we hack, could be driven by lot of reasons and personal motivations, social contestation, and community based protest. Stallman's motivation, for example, is the positive rebellion to a system that would own also the job of a big group of researchers and programmers (see <u>interview</u>); other hackers rebel against an incomprehensible and repressive authority (see this <u>interview</u>), or a strong believe that software is something that could not be owned by someone because it is intrinsically free (see the <u>interview</u>).

In Italy the hacking movement is intertwined with many movements of re-appropriation of spaces and the time that consumerism stole from us. In an economy that claims for more-production/more consumption, hackers are part of the movement that asks to their participants if they really *need* to consume and produce more, or rather if the thing that

they need is to empower and reconstitute a web of knowledge, traditions, customs, relationships, and people. In this way to hack, and not necessarily computer-aided, became a way to express themselves rather then a way to infringe laws and copyrights. To hack became a way to free themselves and to help the neighbour to do the same, in his/her way.

It is self evident that if conceived in this way, to hack becomes a political act before than a practical act. It is not just "a playfully way to do something", according to Stallman, rather it became a playfully way to *change* something. Or, at least, to try to change the reality. To hack becomes a practice that could be apply to different situations and activities, and a tool to fight against a society that would lead people to be just passive, and for a society of responsible, autonomous, collective citizens.

Hackers are conscious of their power in this developed world, but they are also aware that they really can change the world using this power helping people and giving them the tools to be autonomous and so intrinsically free. As Mr. Stallman pointed out,

> *But the entire developed world now needs and uses software, so software developers now control the way the world lives, does business, communicates and is entertained. The ethical and political issues are not addressed by the slogan of "freedom of choice (for developers only)".[4]*

3. Hackers in Pisa: ethnographic data

3.1 The physical location

Pisa is a small town in Tuscany, in the very centre of Italy. Close to the sea, a few miles away from Florence, with a small airport that provides many low-cost flights throughout Europe, Pisa is a town that both historically – in perennial fight with Florence and Livorno especially during the Medieval Age – and nowadays is a city where people are keen on freedom and independence. Its convenience, and its symbolic (and historical) role as a bastion of leftist politics, made it a particularly appropriate location for the 2007's edition of the HackMeeting. The meeting was preceded by huge TV and radio news, and newspaper campaign that gave to the event a big exposure. I myself learnt by a radio transmission about the meeting.

To reach the meeting was particularly simple. Situated in a old, abandoned, and squatted industrial building close to the train station of Pisa Centrale, the building is a old factory that the municipality bought some years ago, and which is still awaiting renovations. It seems that the municipality wants to destine the building to some social services, as a public gym, but nowadays the building is still partially damaged and no works were provided by the

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[4] this essay was written by Richard Stallman with Bradley M. Kuhn. It was published in the volume *Free Software, Free Society: The Selected Essays of Richard M. Stallman*. However, this quotation was taken from the website of the Free Software Foundation, at the address http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/freedom-or-power.html, as visited on August 20th 2008.

municipality in the past years. So some groups of young people, in between the anarchist movement and the extreme-left political area, squatted in it, named the place *Rebeldia* (rebel + dia, that in Latin means day), and started to organize social and cultural events. The location is pretty perfect: close to the train station (the train is, in Italy, the cheapest way to travel), to the bus station, and with a huge parking lot just turned the corner, *Rebeldia* has lots of rooms, of different size, that can host at least four different events simultaneously. It has also a couple of rooms dedicated to a kitchen, and a couple to host whose who want to sleep there. Basic toilets are provided, but lots of people prefer to go out and use the toilets of the bars and restaurants around the zone. The population is partially hostile to *Rebeldia*, but it is also clear to the people that lot of culturally good and important events are provided by the centre.

It is the first time that HackMeeting come to Pisa. Every year, it is hosted by different hackers' groups around Italy, since 1998. The first HackMeeting was kept in Florence (1998), than in Milan (1999), in Rome (2000), in Catania (2001), in Bologna (2002), in Turin (2003), in Genova (2004), in Naples (2005), and in Parma (2006). All the meeting were kept in Centri Sociali as *Rebeldia.* The very first meeting caused some problems to the organizing committee, which was sued by the municipality. Some of promoters are still under process because of the supposed danger of the event that they organized.

3.2 The cyber location

The cyber location was multiple. It is first of all a website (www.hackmeeting.org) that was set up at the end of July and invited all the hack communities around the Italy (and Europe) to join the organization of the HackMeeting in the following September. The whole organization of the meeting was conducted through the web, and there were no organization meetings with all the components organizing the meeting until the day before the meeting occurred. People were in charge of various pieces of the organization, and they were directly responsible for those things, and completely autonomous in the organization as well. The discussion about the opportunity to include or exclude some activities from the meeting was conduced strictly online and using a wiki, so every participant could say their opinion and leave their message open to criticisms and suggestions.

Then there was a particular cyber-location there, during the meeting. A huge (the biggest available, actually) room was filled with cables, switches, servers, and lan-cables. Every one could join the network, share their disks, go to the Internet, and set up a strongly encrypted connection to the server. Lots of people arrived with the flags of their hacking group and set up a small fortress, both physical and virtual, inviting the other hackers to try to break the protections. Someone put a Jolly Roger, the pirates' flag, on the bottom of the hall, where there are some tables and sofas, to relax and sleep, or to get a beer chatting about the just shared movie, song, or book. At the entrance of the hall, a promotional area welcome all

those groups (and private sponsors) that would exhibit products (like t-shirts, books, promotional flyers) to support their groups. There are the "Turin Hack Group" that sells funny t-shirts and cool hyper-technological-bijoux; the editor "Eleuthera", specialized in anarchist and libertarian books; an interesting hack group from Padua that is trying to provide to the city a free and gratis wireless Internet connection (www.copy-riot.org) and that provides all the technical features to export the project also in other cities; a couple of private sellers of what I call "che-guevara-and-other-riots" t-shirts.

Even if strictly physical, this is a virtual space. It is the place of ideas, ideals, propaganda of course, but also the place where things are shared: books, movies, music, programs. And a huge presence of GNU/Linux operating system users that push other OS users to join the community and free the knowledge.

Besides these, many super-computers were exposed as trophies. A climate of curiosity and admiration, willing of learning and teaching was clearly noticeable.

By the other hand, it was difficult to take photos and to video-interview some hackers, as I planned to do. The perception of being outsider in a close and highly technical community is pretty strong.

3.3 The contested place: the Centro Sociale *Rebeldia*

Arriving to Pisa I parked not so far from *Rebeldia* but, even if the place is pretty simple to find, I got lost. I finally find a police station that give me directions: the *Rebeldia* is almost 50 mt. from the Police Station, and this is the first thing that deserves to be underlined: a squatted and illegal structure cohabit with the police, which were ready to tell me where the hackmeeting is and how I can reach it. Nobody asked me why I want to go there, and certaintly did not ask if I am a cybercriminal.

Now, it is necessary to say what a "Centro Sociale" is, in order to understand why the location is so important. A "Centro Sociale" is, according to the definition of Peter Lamborn Wilson (a.k.a. Hakim Bey)(1991), a Temporary Autonomous Zone (or T.A.Z.), a place in which, temporarily, people can meet each other and share information, political believes, culture. It could be both private or public, but the most extreme "Centri Sociali" are squatted, and so quite temporary. In a "Centro Sociale" exhibitions focused on genocides, wars, social problems, and other often banned information, which rarely could take place in other public or private spaces, find their natural location. The place hosts them and the people are seriously interested to watch, get informed, get involved. A "Centro Sociale" is a place of activism, and of strong involvement of people. There are also concerts, groups of discussion, reading groups, and controversial protests and meetings are hosted. For all those reason, "Centri Sociali" are traditionally quite extreme politically. Of course there are "Centri Sociali" of the left and the right, even if the number of left party's one are the majority.

Arriving a the *Rebeldia* I was pretty astonished: a decadent structure was waiting for a three-days-long meeting, and it seemed totally unsafe. I walked in. Some guys watch over the entrance, the more to ask for a small contribution (expressly voluntary) than to control who is getting in. In fact they are eating a sandwich and drinking red wine (it is midday). The climate is totally relaxed and with no pressure. Someone narrates when he was put down to the police records because he was going around in the past HackMeeting location; someone else asks for advices about his Linux setting; someone points out that another newspaper just published the press release that the organizing committee released the day before. Once in I am in the parking lot, where lots of cars and some campers gives to the location a really post-urban setting.

The *Rebeldia* is an excellent structure for this type of events. In the small hall close to the kitchen was placed a small *fair trade* bar, in which you could find beer produced by a small local producer that resists the big corporation of beverages; just brewed fair trade coffee, from some cultivation in Colombia and Peru; organic juices and organic cold tea in glass bottles; home-made cakes that participants bring from their homes. Everything there oozed "conscious" political choices.

The bar shares the room with five workshops a day. Those are some arguments: an introduction to Linux; a meeting to set up a questionnaire against the prohibitionist propaganda; some considerations about the rule of hackers in the fight against the System; an introduction to an algorithm called AKS; an introductive course on preparing and baking the bread (with practical exercitations); a speech about the necessity of "hack the science" and put it under question.

Close to the bar there is the common kitchen. There are three meals: in the morning, around the two in the afternoon, and around the nine in the evening. Time schedule is highly flexible, and when the meals are ready a small bell is played in all rooms. All meals are made with local fresh organic products. There are multiple menus for vegetarians, vegans, and the others. The dishes are, unfortunately, made by plastic, but some people have their own dishes and glasses.

The main structure of the *Rebeldia* has two big rooms. One of these is the one that I described before, and it is full of groups, computers, and a small bar. Both Friday night and Saturday night the room became a cyber-disco where free and open source music is played until the four or the five in the morning, or at least until people dance. The big room, the one with the computers, never closes and there are no official meetings in there. Just computers, and nerds.

The other room is a rock-climb gym, in which lot of people set up their sleeping bag. In there almost 80 people could take seat and, counting the standing, there would be room for at least 120 people. The main events are there: Emmanuel Goldstein – one of the historical

hacker and hacktivist, founder of the New York based "2600" magazine – speaks here, and other presentations of security issues, counter-information, and free and open source program take place during the days. At Goldstein's speech the room was so full that it was impossible to move: lot of people went to the cybermeeting just for him, and just that evening.

A couple of common rooms for sleeping and bathrooms take place upstairs, and the organization's room where all servers and telephone connections are in a small room over there. That one is the only room that is locked, while all the others are always open and accessible.

The big parking lot is alternatively a place in which to eat, to smoke, and to camp, and also a place where there are a couple of seminars, as how to pick locks and how to made a home-made wi-fi antenna. The climate is actually fitting the camp sensation: people going around, going in and out all the time, chatting, meeting, smoking, taking showers, eating, going around with their laptop, reading.

The style of the meetings is like a chat between friends, seminars in which everybody can participate to learn but also to teach, to report their experience and problems that they face and successful solve. Generally the seminars exceed the time that they were planned for: people stay there talking and chatting and sharing experience since the one, two in the morning.

Because of the characteristic of pretentious illegality of the meeting, I was discouraged to take photos. I found something on the Net, but it is not enough to describe the structure and the buildings. I sketch up a 3D model that could help to figure out how the *Rebeldia* could look like. Here ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)) some draws of it.

The [list](#) of the seminars did not exclude anybody and nothing. The seminars were set up through the website in the months before the meeting, so there is always someone that is in charge of calling and collecting the people that want to participate, someone that speech, and all the need for the execution of the speech, as computers, boards, projectors, or flour and yeast, in case of the bread's seminar. All seminars were proposed and discussed through the forum in the website before being approved, so they always have at least a bounce of people that participate and interact with the speaker.

A small garage close to the main hall is used as experimental office of a well known group of hackers (Freaknet lab, the first free and open European laboratory to hack and learn programming) and there old computers are re-assembled, mixed, fixed, and brought to new life with light versions of GNU/Linux. Here an there some passionate hackers are collecting material for their computer museum, and trying to take back to work computers that the evolution of GUI and operative systems have left in the cellar of some offices or houses, and which are totally fun to program, interact, modify (some photos of their old computer here and here the list to the computer open to everybody want hack and play with them).

Then old electronic devices of different kinds are dis-assembled and mixed together to have new (sometimes useful, often useless) gadgets: a small tone generator token from a toy guitar became part of a complex music machine; a group of led lights from an old spectroscope became a fun displayer; pieces of computer became external devices; old radio came back to life and diffused light music on the air. A sort of laboratory, or an enormous dump depending on the point of view, in which nothing is wasted, and everything could be an essential part of a new project, a different, new, and creative object.

4. The rhetoric of freedom

All the Hackmeeting was invested a strong rhetoric of freedom. As I underline above describing the location, more than a meeting of people passionate about computers, the meeting was a reunion of people who have strong political views, and are trying to apply these beliefs in everyday tasks. Paradoxically, computer hacking is *one of the ways* in which the belief in a "world more fair and just" could be generated by using better and more conscientiously the resources. So, for example, just after the workshop about an algorithm and in the same room the workshop about "how to bake our own bread" was taking place.

The Manifesto of the meeting – in Italian, English, and Spanish – pointed out this attitude: to hack is a new way to express an old and eradicate dissension more than a new verb that identify a precise and clear activity. I think that this is a result of a long process of appropriation of the term actuated by the movements of dissension, and this is not a process that was exclusively actuated in Italy.

I will demonstrate this through the analysis of two interviews that I took during the HackMeeting. The first is with Caparossa, one of the organizers and a hacker, "but not computer hacker" as he told me. The second is an interview with a representative of the group "Copy-Riot", of Padua, who speaks about the freedom of share internet connections (through wi-fi signal), but also books, music, and movies.

4.1 Caparossa

Caparossa is an old Italian hacker. Tall, with little beard and a smart glance he definitively is a young 40 years old man. He accepted with pleasure to be interviewed, and his broad preparation about the history of social movements in Italy is incredibly accurate.

He started to use the computer in 1998, and he is working as a computer assistant in a private corporation. I asked him what means the word "hacker" for him. He said, "if you intend hacker as someone that is a genius setting up a computer, so I am not an hacker; but if you intend hacker as someone that is a person with curiosity, and use the computer for social means, so I am an hacker, and I am hacker since 1998. I am someone that uses the computer for social meanings". For this reason, he said, "in Italy since the very beginning – as in the rest of the world, actually – the world of hackers was associated to the world of the

people politically engaged. Of course there are a big number of hackers – the informatics hackers, the ones that hack a computer I mean – that say that they are not engaged politically, but actually the HackMeeting, that is a real important Italian meeting, took place since the 1998 in *Centri Sociali*".

There are three aspects to underline in these sentences. The first is the declared disconnection of the term "hack" from the computer environment. Caparossa is using the term out of its context consciously, and he is claiming this use of the term for a new and broader meaning. This broader use of the term – and this is the second thing to underline – date back for him since the very beginning of the hacking, and everywhere, not just in Italy. Then there is his assertation regarding the obviousness of this claim, when he said that there are some hackers, "the computer hackers", that they could say that their activity is not political but, as counterbalance, there is the *fact* that the HackMeeting is hosted in *Centri Sociali* since the very beginning.

In the next part of the interview, Caparossa explain better how the politic of hacking is just a tool to improve freedom, rather than a clear political action against the System.

"Ours is not, strictly speaking, a political view. To hack is free flow of information. Or better, is free flow of knowledge. If you look inside the world in which we are living, the mainstream system is exactly the opposite. For example, yesterday we made a joke. The newspaper "La Nazione" ask us what we think about Burma, but from the technical point of view. And the journalist asked us to write down what is happening, from our point of view. And so we write down a fake press release in which we were telling a story about the regime that was taking control over the Internet through a virus called HOAX. And today it is published in the newspaper. Now, it means that the journalist published a news item? without verifying the source. So, to hack the information it means to create another way to stay together, another way to spread knowledge and information. A way that is not more from the top to the bottom, but dialogical, in perennial discussion. And to do that, the tools to verify the information and the knowledge are the key to be free. Indymedia, for example, was conceived with this reasoning. That are of course a mix of politically action and technics, but there is especially an attempt to use fruitfully technologies in order to put the people in condition to use them, and in this way to be free. [...] I spent days and weeks and months inside the Centri Sociali trying to convince people there that to crack Windows is not at anti-imperialistic move, because you are still using Windows, and you get accustom to it; and now inside the Centri Sociali there are only GNU/Linux, that is a free and open system that teach you how to program, and so you have the freedom of programming by yourself, and so to not be dependent from proprietary and closed software of big corporations."

To hack is conceived as a way to free people, to invite people to think broadly and deeply about our society, and the strong connection that we have with the object as given,

conceived and produced expressly for one and only one use. Otherwise to hack opens our mind to a world of opportunities and misuse of objects, that free people from the slavery of advertising and stimulate their creativity.

In the conclusion of the interview, Caparossa pointed out how the relations in the hack-groups are based on horizontality, and so are open to the discussion and the participation in the community's life.

"In these type of movement, in the past years since nowadays, the keyword is horizontality, that is the Peer-to-Peer brought in the social life. So, those movement are totally not anarchist, but they are based on affinity. And that is the most beautiful thing.[...] Parliament is a part of politics, for me the degenerated one. With this I can live the politics in the Greek sense of the term, and so live actively in a community".

4.2 Ciro, Copy-Riot Representative

Ciro, a graduate student, is a representative of a group of students who, in Padua – in which there is one of the oldest and biggest universities in Italy – are setting up a free wi-fi connection all over the city and a centre in which people can share their movies, music, and books. The office in which the group organize their meetings is also a bar for students, open twice or three times a week, in which it is possible to drink a coffee and download a book or a movie in the same time.

I asked him which motivations pushed them to set up an officially? illegal group like that, which expressly goes against an Italian law that forces everyone who has an Internet connection to trace every single user that connects to the Internet through his or her contract (the so called Legge Urbani, promulgated with anti-terrorist proposals after the 9/11 and the London's attacks).

"We are setting up this Net because we think that the so called anti-terrorist law (Legge Urbani) that forces you to block all wi-fi connection and have a list of all people that connect to the Internet through your connection is a violation of the privacy and the right of everybody to share their own contract, as an Internet connection is. And this limitation is possible just because they are instilling unjustified fear and terror in the mind of people. But there is no reason in this. It is a system set up in order to force people to submit their freedom to them. And so all the people will tend to buy security devices, padlocks and heavy steel doors, and so everybody becomes more close and suspicious toward the neighbourhood."

The sense of a disappearing and missing community, the closure toward the extraneous that people demonstrate is generally generated by the ignorance of technical issues, for the Copy-Riot group. But there is no reason in not sharing, for example, and that is a volunteer submission to the power of law, which expresses itself without reason and justification, according to the group.

The slogan of Copy-Riot is "Let's pirate, let's spread, let's share". I asked Ciro why they chose this slogan. He answered me: "we do not believe in the copyright. The copyright has a sense and it deserves to be protected but just if it is not depriving people to know. If a student has no way to accede to a text, and s/he needs it to study, s/he has the right to download it. Of course we are pushing the alternative, as Creative Commons, but until the creative commons are not a valid and effective alternative, we have the right to do that. When someone write a book, s/he is drawing knowledge and information from the common knowledge, and s/he is putting his or her piece of information, his or her perspective. So, sharing books we are giving to the people the opportunity to be part of this process and take advantage of a knowledge that belongs to mankind."

"What we are trying to do is introduce the sharing of the internet connections as a mind setting, as a path toward the sharing of also other things. We are graduate students, and we have not enough money to buy all the books that are suggested. So we scan all the expensive books that the University of Padova suggests as reading for the students and those are free on-line in our internal Net."

Copy-Riot symbol is a Jolly Roger, the black flag of pirates. I asked him why did they choose that symbol, and not something else, as a Robin Hood for example. "It was an aesthetic choice. And there was a huge discussion among us about the opportunity using that symbol. We think that pirates are people that are fighting for their knowledge, also with actions that are not fully legal, but that are trying to free for everybody. Copyright is a way to close the knowledge. Pirates are opening that knowledge, freeing it toward the use of everybody."

5. Conclusion

In this paper I reported some ethnographic data about the Italian HackMeeting, that took place in September 2007. I tried to demonstrate how the fight against a privatization of cyberspace took place both through the hackers' computer programming, and through the use of the verb "to hack" in a broader sense of the term. The fact that the meeting took place in a Centro Sociale; the fact that people there were considering and using hacking as a counter-hegemonic act supported with political motivation; the evidence of a shared and horizontal organization of the tasks both preparing and during the event shown us how the term spread out from its original meaning to a new and extensive meaning, that implies being curious, open, and questioning about the market and the society.

While the consumerist society is trying to conquest and monopolize with the market mindset every new territory, such as the Internet, the very existence of dissident groups that work for freedom of the code, and that try to spread knowledge and culture, ensures to everybody the existence of a different way to consider human relationship. Working under

GNU GPL license, for example, this freedom is kept all the time and donated to the community with the added value of the expertise of each member. The main aim of those movements is to avoid the privatization of public knowledge, through the popularization of something that was in the past a source of power. While the asymmetry of knowledge ensures that someone will stand over someone else, the use of the Net in spreading the information is trying to give back to people a common patrimony of knowledge.

But even if there is good faith to do that, a question remained unanswered during the all event: "What happens with those that do not agree? How do you answer to those that do not accept your point of view? With violence?"

While in fact to give a concrete answer to the market – through the free software, or the open source, or the creative commons – is a concrete way to put on the table an idea that self-sustain itself, that could successfully face those that do not like free and open knowledge and information, the position of who that justify piracy and cracking as a sort of people's expropriation suffers the paradox of tolerance: with those that do not accept this point of view the only possible alternative is a violent one, as the cracking and the illicit copying demonstrate.

But in Pisa the climate was definitively not this one. Of course there were also the angry pirates, as I tried to show, but the majority was of people enthusiastic for a project, rather than people angry, with the anger that the victims of thefts demonstrate. A community that is building a new world; a group of people *for* something, instead of a group of people *against* something. With the happiness that every beginning implies. And with the consciousness that they have to defend this freedom with all their forces because, as history shown us, all the commons territories are fragile zones to protect, to conserve, to love, and to share.

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