Nightwork: Hackito Ergo Sum

Where the Sun Shines, There Hack They

by Professor Emeritus Samuel Jay Keyser HM

The title of Brian Leibowitz' historical compendium of MIT hacks, *The Journal of the Institute for Hacks, TomFoolery & Pranks at MIT* (MIT Museum, 1990 - now out of print) is itself a hack. Embedded in it are the initials IHTFP, which, as everyone at MIT knows, stand for "I hate this fucking place." This is not the acronym's only "public" commemoration. The Class of 1995 changed the date embossed on the Dome image in the class ring from MCMXVI to IHTFP, something obvious only with a magnifying glass or a sharp eye. Earlier classes have done similar recodings of the MIT ring.

During my years as associate provost for institute life, many of my colleagues approached me with this question: If students hate this place, then why don't they just plain leave it? It is a good question to which, I think, there is a good answer: they DON'T hate this place. But if they don't, the conversation continues, why say they do? An equally good question.

The answer lies, I believe, in unpacking the hacking. When we do, we find the practical joke-cum-parody lurking beneath. The practical joke is physical in character. One does not tell practical jokes. One plays them. Similarly, one does not tell hacks. They, too, are played. Here is how Arthur Koesler describes the practical joke in his Encyclopedia Britannica article:

The coarsest type of humor is the practical joke: pulling away the chair from under the dignitary's lowered bottom. The victim is perceived first as a person of consequence, then suddenly as an inert body subject to the laws of physics: authority is debunked by gravity, mind by matter; man is degraded to a mechanism.

The operative words here are "authority debunked." The hack is a physical joke designed to do just this. But it is not any physical joke. Hacks have a strong element of parody in them. They are physical jokes that parody the honest work of an Institute grounded in science and engineering. That is why MIT hacks, unlike hacks at other institutions, always have a strong engineering component. They make fun of engineering by impersonating it and then pulling the seat out from under. MIT hackers typically don't throw pies or wrap underwear around statues of founding fathers. Rather, they make large objects appear in inaccessible places, rewire lecture hall blackboards to go haywire when the instructor tries to use them, replace chiseled wisdom on friezes with silly sayings in what appears to be identical script and then do so, so cleverly that it takes a SWAT team of trained rappellers to dismantle them.

Why does MIT hacking have such a long half-life? The answer lies in something called "disobedient dependency." In order to stay in a dependent relationship that is both

desirable and yet threatening, one coping mechanism is disobedience. It distances the dependency, makes it bearable. Let me give an example drawn from my experience as a housemaster at Senior House. During the 1980s President Gray and his wife gave garden parties for the parents of incoming freshmen. The President's garden was filled with incoming sons and daughters and their parents. Several Senior House students took this as an opportunity to be ostentatiously disobedient. They would dress as grungily as possible. Then they would scale the wall separating the Senior House courtyard from the President's House garden and mingle with the well-dressed, well scrubbed guests, scarfing crabmeat sandwiches as if they were auditioning for the part of John Belushi in a remake of Animal House. The more outrageous the behavior, the better. Some of the more inventive students would dress up as characters from The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Most, however, did not, attempting to épater le bourgeois, as it were, without props. More often than not, someone would dump a bottle of detergent in the garden fountain in order to intensify the nuisance value of his or her presence.

The superficial motive behind such "disobedience" was to embarrass those in authority, the President, his spouse, the various deans, and housemasters who showed up for the occasion. The crashers were declaring their independence from the Institute and all its folderol. The deeper motive was to provide distance between themselves and the Institute so that its judgments of them, upon which they deeply depended, would be less painful when they were made.

Why do I say that students deeply depend on the Institute's judgments of them? The reason is that the values of the students and of the faculty are the same. For the most part, the faculty are the best at what they do. The students come here to be like them. When the faculty grades them, those judgments can be painful because the students believe they are true. At some level our students know that while they are all in the top five percent of their high school classes, they will soon be recalibrated downward. I say "at some level" because a poll taken not too long ago asked the incoming class how many of them thought they would end up in the top quarter. Something like seventy-five percent said they would! At least half of those responding were about to discover they were not as good as they thought, not an easy pill to swallow at any stage of one's life.

Unlike the extreme kinds of disobedience that one often finds in living groups, the hack is a socially acceptable form of disobedience. It is easily distinguished from its more extreme counterparts by three properties. Hacks are (1) technologically sophisticated, (2) anonymous, (3) benign. They are technologically sophisticated because they need to parody an MIT education. They are anonymous because were they otherwise, the Institute might be forced, if only for safety reasons, to do something about them. They are benign because their goal is not to inflict pain, but to cope with pain inflicted. They do this by making fun of the Institute, diminishing it, bringing it down to size so that its judgments are brought down to size as well.

The hack is a pact that the Institute and its students enter into. Keep it anonymous, harmless, and fun and MIT will look the other way. It will even be mildly encouraging because it recognizes, as do the students, that students need to turn the Institute into an adversary. This, by the way, is why the adversarial undercurrent between students and the Institute won't go away, no matter how supportive student services are or how solicitous our staff might be or how accessible the faculty makes itself.

The hack isn't the only buffering mechanism. Another is the special relationship that students have to their living groups. Why does where a student lives take on such monumental proportions at MIT? Part of the answer is that living groups function much like disobedience; namely, as a kind of protection against the slings and arrows of institutional judgment. Living groups are safe houses, ports in a storm, raingear to keep them dry once the firehose is turned on. This them/us division is so profound, in fact, that long after they have graduated, students talk in terms not of having been at MIT but rather of having been at Senior House, or Sigma Chi, or MacGregor. MIT tacitly acknowledges this as well, which is why changing the very peculiar system of residence selection called R/O is like pulling teeth. The buffering function of the resident system is as much a part of an MIT education as are the General Institute Requirements. The same is true of hacks.

Hacks and living groups, then, are to the Institute what sunglasses are to the sun: a form of protection that makes it possible to live with the light. Not every student hacks. Not every student feels the same degree of disobedient dependency. But every time hackers help to place a police car on the dome, they are providing shade in a very sunny clime.