

Ayşe Şat & Hakan Karahasan  
Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus

***Free Software and Open Source: A Grass Roots Movement Under Capitalist System?***

*Ignorance is the curse of God. Knowledge is  
the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.*

William Shakespeare

Cees J. Hamelink - **The Ethics in Cyberspace**

**Introduction**

Knowledge is an essential human resource. For its development and application proper balance should be established between the ownership interests of knowledge-producers and the public good interests of knowledge-users. It is very doubtful whether the emerging global governance of intellectual property right could provide such a balanced approach (153).

The issue that Hamelink points out is not a new phenomenon. Although the roots of this phenomenon go back to very early, it has a new dimension with the new communication technologies, such as the development of the computer industry and the Internet.

Free and open software development take a significant place in this global age. They are working together to establish free software for everyone that can be used for different purposes. Although “Free Software” and “Open Source” can be seen within the same spectrum, they also have major differences. For example, according to “Free Software”, free software gives freedom to people. However, “Open Source” is working with corporations and tries to sell the products.

The main idea behind the open source is, in open source “you can look at the source code”. Though, as it is indicated in the definition of Free Software: “Free Software is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of ‘free’ as in ‘free speech’, not as ‘free beer’”. In other words, both of them work for people. However, Open Source allow one to see the codes and improve them and “they might be able to ‘sell’ the software more effectively to certain users, especially business”. Therefore, one can say that it gives one to limited freedom to use or to

see the codes, but at the same time it is working with the companies to earn money. Another feature of Free Software is, “A free program must be available for commercial use, commercial development, and commercial distribution. Commercial development of free software is no longer unusual; such free commercial is very important”. This means that same as the Open Source Software, both of them selling their products, and by this way they are trying to gain money under the name of the “free”?

One of the characteristics of capitalism is that it allows one to create new things or give a new shape to the social structure and these kinds of changes can be accepted by the regime. In addition, one can challenge it according to its rules or the reality that the system imposes over people. For example, Free Software and Open Source are free and they seem that they are working for the benefit of community. However, one also can find some examples that both of them are used for commercial purposes. Both Free Software and Open Source sell their products in order to exist. GNU/Linux operating systems are good examples for that. Such as Red Hat, Mandrake, Yellow Dog etc. What these examples show that neither Free Software nor Open Source are not offering ‘a new way of looking’ but ‘a new option’ within the capitalist system.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, in this paper we want to focus on the relationship between capitalism and Free Software and Open Source, which based on the logic of freedom. However, they have limits inside of the social order because they are part of the capitalist system and they become just a different choice within the system. Considering these, this essay is an attempt to analyse Free Software and Open Source within the context of capitalism. Can we regard Free Software and Open Source in terms of grass-roots movement? Or, they are just a different voice within capitalist system? In other words, do Free Software and Open Source offer completely ‘a new way of looking’, an alternative view, or they are just a substitution of something else (i.e., proprietary

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<sup>1</sup> However, we are also aware the fact that most of the GNU/Linux operating systems are free to distribute in terms of gratis. Nevertheless, this does not change offering a new way until they are against the system on fundamental level.

software)? As rock music entered to the mainstream, Free Software and Open Source are also entering the mainstream as well? On the whole, Free Software and Open Source are only a substitution within the capitalist system and they try to be more powerful by using the net and playing with the words? These are some of the questions that we will address in our presentation.

### ***Free Software and Open Source: What Are They?***

The roots of *Free Software* go back to 1984. Free Software was born when Richard Stallman, who has worked at MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab, faced a problem about software sharing. As he asserts in “The GNU Project”,

When I started working at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab in 1971, I became part of a software-sharing community that had existed for many years. Sharing of software was not limited to our particular community; it is as old as computers, just as sharing of recipes is as old as cooking. But we did more than most... If you saw someone using an unfamiliar and interesting program, you could always ask to see the source code, so that you could read it, change it, or cannibalize parts of it to make a new program.

In the same essay, he tells that this ‘the first software-sharing community’ radically shifted to proprietary software by hiring nearly all hackers at the MIT AI Lab. With this changing, Stallman decided to not to join the proprietary software world. Instead, he wanted to maintain the idea of ‘sharing software with thy neighbour’ and he started to work on an operating system, based on Unix. For him, the reason why he chooses to create an operating system based on Unix because, as Stallman puts it: “I chose to make the system compatible with Unix so that it would be portable, and so that Unix users could easily switch to it”.

The main idea behind to create a new operating system, according to Stallman, was derived from the idea that “With a free operating system, we could again have a community of cooperating hackers –and invite anyone to join. And anyone would be able to use a computer without starting out by conspiring to deprive his or her friends”.

With this in mind, Stallman argues that a programme is a free software if,

- You have the freedom to run the program, for any purpose.
- You have the freedom to modify the program to suit your needs. (To make this freedom effective in practice, you must have access to the source code, since making changes in a program without having the source code is exceedingly difficult.)
- You have the freedom to redistribute copies, either gratis or for a fee.
- You have the freedom to distribute modified versions of the program, so that the community can benefit from your improvements.

On the other hand, *Open Source Initiative* established in 1997. Simply, “Open source doesn’t just mean access the source code”. Nevertheless, according to Open Source Initiative, software must be freely redistributed, allows one to see and modify the source code, “may restrict source-code from being distributed in modified form only if the license allows the distribution of “patch files” with the source code for the purpose of modifying the program at build time”. Also, there should be no discrimination against anyone or any group as well as no discrimination against ‘fields of endeavor’. “License must not be specific to a product, *License must not restrict other software*”, and “License must be technology-neutral”.<sup>2</sup>

Although both Free Software and Open Source could be seen as the same thing, they are not the same but in terms of aims and so on they have many things in common. The main controversy between Free Software and Open Source lie, as Stallman quoted one person in “Why “Free Software” is better than “Open Source””, “Open source is a development methodology; free software is a social movement”. For Stallman “For the Open Source movement, non-free software is a suboptimal solution. For the Free Software movement, non-free software is a social problem and free software is the *solution*” (emphasis added).

For Open Source, the significant thing is, in order to be open source software; it must follow the criteria that were written by Bruce Perens. One of the main differences between Free Software and Open Source is the point that Stallman touches as “For the Free Software movement, non-free software is a social problem and free software is the *solution*” (emphasis

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from <http://www.opensource.org/docs/definition/php> (emphasis added - last accessed 4/10/2004).

added). As the ninth criterion of Open Source suggests, “License must not restrict other software”. In other words, as “The Open Source Definition” points out, “The license must not place restrictions on other software that is distributed along with the licensed software. For example, the license must not insist that all other programs distributed on the same medium must be open-source software”. Open Source software does not argue that the license of a distributed software must be open source software, whereas for Free Software all software must be free.

### ***Free Software and Open Source: Toward a Grass-Roots Movement?***

Considering these, is it possible to consider Free Software and Open Source as grass-roots movement? Although both Free Software and Open Source has the potential, it is not so easy to say that especially Open Source carries that kind of objection. As the definition of Open Source suggests, Open Source did not come up with the idea sharing software for free, whereas in the webpage of the Free Software Foundation (FSF) GNU Operating System is defined as “Free as in Freedom”. In other words, as Stallman puts it, “For the Free Software movement, non-free software is a social problem and free software is the only solution”.

In terms of grass-roots, then, one can say that Free Software has more philosophical dimension than Open Source but one also can argue that in terms of practical solutions (or recommendations in Stallman’s term) Open Source is quite significant.

Nonetheless, in “The Subject and Power” Michel Foucault discusses the subject and its power in terms of power relations. He gives examples from some ‘anti-authority struggles’. Such as, “opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people to live” (Foucault 1983: 419). He outlines what are the common things about these ‘anti-authority struggles’ (Foucault 1983) and one can think are they applicable to Free Software and Open

Source movements. For Foucault, the similar points of the ‘most of the anti-authority struggles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century’ are,

- 1- They are “transversal” struggles; that is, they are not limited to one country.
- 2- The aim of these struggles is the power effects as such. For example, the medical profession is not criticized primarily because it is a profit-making concern but because it exercises an uncontrolled power over people’s bodies, their health, and their life and death.
- 3- These are “immediate” struggles for two reasons. In such struggles people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals.
- 4- They are struggles which question the status of the individual: on the one hand, they assert the right to be different, and they underline everything which makes individuals truly individual. On the other hand, they attack everything which separates individual, breaks his links with others, splits community life, forces individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way...
- 5- They are opposition to the effects of power which are linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification: struggles against the privileges of knowledge. But they are also an opposition against secrecy, deformation, and mystifying representations imposed on people...
- 6- Finally, all these present struggles revolve around the question: Who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence, which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is.

To sum up, the main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much “such or such” an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but rather a technique, a form of power (Foucault 1983: 419-420).

Is it possible to consider these movements in terms of ‘a form of power’? In other words, how Free Software and Open Source attack to ‘such or such’ institution of power’? (Foucault 1983). Or, these movements should be seen within capitalism because capitalism, by its nature, allows these kinds of movements? In the coming section, we will address this question.

### **The Relationship between Capitalism, *Free Software* and *Open Source***

The very brief definition of capitalism can be defined as: “The project of capitalism is a very material one. It aims to accumulate the maximum amount of profit” (Tetzlaff 1992: 68). Taking this definition as taking for granted, one can ask how the definition of capitalism and the Free

Software and Open Source are related. The main point might be, although both Free Software and Open Source movements seem a little bit opposed to the system that we live in (i.e., capitalist world), what we argue in this paper is the fact that these struggles are against the system but the boundaries of these movements have been shaped before. So, these movements can be seen as opposing, which they are, but the pawn can play only on the chessboard; and in order to play chess, one should follow the rules...

Nevertheless, what both Free Software and Open Source suggest is the choice within the boundaries that we live in. As Brian Massumi (1992) talks about democracy: “every body’s “free choice” to delegate its becoming in return for living out its “productive life” in the despotism it most desires. Choose you quasicause. “Democracy” is the quasicause representing the choice of quasicauses: equal opportunity despotism” (125). However, it is not possible to argue that Massumi’s argument about democracy can be applicable to Free Software and Open Source. Instead, these attempts can be seen as a way of challenging the system however the question is, as always, is it possible? And if so, how?

One can give an example of how ‘an anti-struggle’ became a mainstream by giving rock music. With the 1970s, rock music and 68 movements began as a challenger to the system. However, what one can see now is the fact that with the institutionalisation of rock music, it mainstreamised.

One of the features of capitalism, according to David Tetzlaff (1992)

Capitalism can easily suffer those struggles that fail to address the social relations of profit accumulation. It is even in its interest to encourage them. They draw attention and energy away from the prevailing economic structure and its effects. In allowing these struggles, capital also gives its subjects as sort of reward or bribe in the form of limited autonomy (63).

As Tetzlaff (1992) argues, Free Software and Open Source are also considered as problems to the system. Microsoft’s panic about Open Source and the uncovering of *the Halloween Documents* can be a good example for that. However, one also should bear in mind that Free

Software and Open Source are not threatening the system. IBM and Sun Microsystems support to Open Source indicate that especially Open Source is not a ‘threat’ to the system.

According to Tetzlaff (1992)

When cultural struggle does produce popular discourses that might challenge capital’s position, capital becomes alerted to its weaknesses and is able to identify the next target for incorporation (although the motivating force behind incorporation is generally an attempt to exploit markets for new cultural products, rather than any Machiavellian political intent). Over the long term, many of our struggles may merely be part of the ritual of domination. They give us a chance to play in the great sport of self-determination, and so we keep showing up for the games, even though its all fixed and we lose every time (63).

The situation of rock music and Green movement are good examples about Tetzlaff’s argument. Same can be true for Free Software and Open Source. Red Hat is a good example of how GNU/Linux operating system became a ‘new industry’. Although neither Free Software nor Open Source are against selling software, however, the position that we are standing now should be understood in terms of a slightly modified Foucaultian view, which is, especially Open Source, are not against the system but “rather a technique, a form of power” (Foucault 1983: 420). In other words, they just want to be a substitution instead of proprietary software. The position of Free Software is a little bit different because, in the writings of Richard Stallman, he claims that same as in the past, when software could be distributed freely, software should be free as the right of freedom.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper questioned the phenomenon of Free Software and Open Source in terms of grass-roots movement. Throughout the essay, one would find that, the purpose of this essay is to reveal the fact that although these two movements are opposed to the capitalist system, they are not ‘threatening’ the system but, unfortunately, serve the benefit of it. David

Tetzlaff's "Popular Culture and Social Control in Late Capitalism" (1992) show how capitalism allows one to challenge but at the end it is the capitalism that that wins the game.

The other thing that we analysed these phenomenon within a Foucaultian framework, which is, like most of the movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Free Software and Open Source movements are also movements that are not criticised the system but a form. However, one also should bear in mind that in terms of criticising system there is a difference between Free Software and Open Source: Free Software does not accept any kind of co-operation with proprietary software; however, for Open Source this is not a problem.

Nonetheless, these do not mean that we are against the Free Software and the Open Source movement. Instead, we believe that for the benefit of society, more people should read and understand the principles of Free Software and Open Source. By doing this, as Richard Stallman argues, one day software will be free...

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