

COPYLEFTISTS:

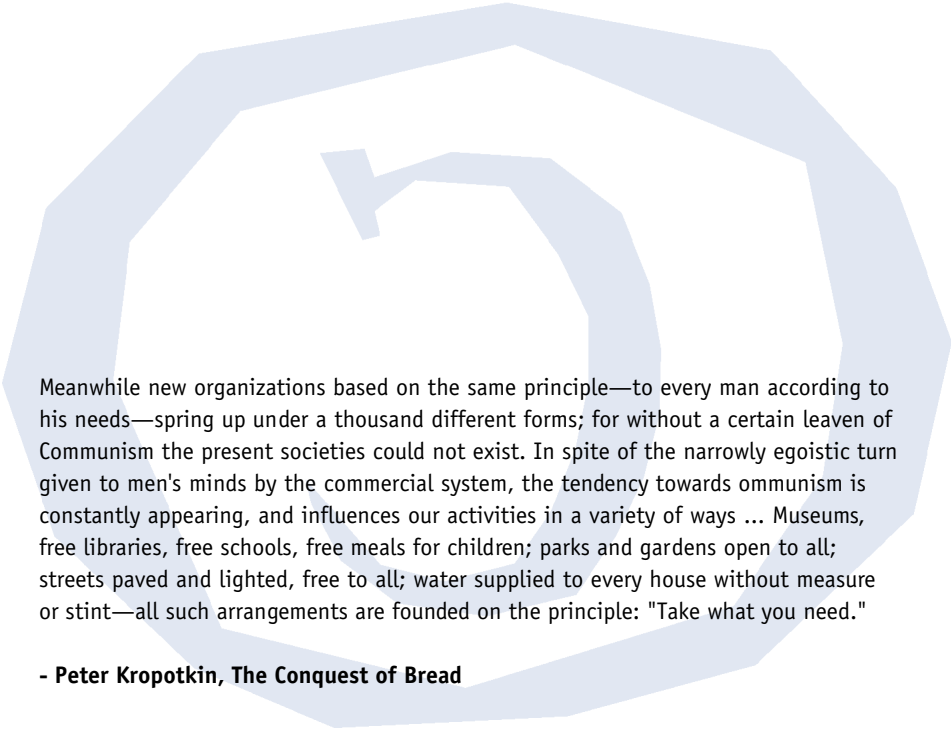


**The Free Software
Movement and
Anarchist Practice**
by wispy cockles

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Meanwhile new organizations based on the same principle—to every man according to his needs—spring up under a thousand different forms; for without a certain leaven of Communism the present societies could not exist. In spite of the narrowly egoistic turn given to men's minds by the commercial system, the tendency towards communism is constantly appearing, and influences our activities in a variety of ways ... Museums, free libraries, free schools, free meals for children; parks and gardens open to all; streets paved and lighted, free to all; water supplied to every house without measure or stint—all such arrangements are founded on the principle: "Take what you need."

- Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*

Against the papacy of Microsoft, the digital revolutionary cries out, "Information wants to be free."

- Tom Morton and Kevin Murray, *A Video Pre-History of the Third Millennium*

THE SEARCH FOR ANARCHISTS WITHOUT BLACK FLAGS

It was a dreary Tuesday night as I trudged to the bar for a cup of coffee and hopefully some old-fashioned bar room debate. I've taken up this hobby recently of going to bars and looking for arguments. My thinking has become stagnant in surrounding myself with like-minded revolutionaries and organizers, and I've gone out in search of some serious difference in opinion. Some good criticism in my sentiments against the war in Afghanistan or for a

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cles about them. In a society increasingly immersed in computers and the Internet, the grassroots Free Software Movement seeks to liberate these technologies from the multi-national corporations that seek to control them. They have created multiple free operating systems as an alternative to Microsoft Windows and other corporate controlled OS. As well most major corporately owned programs have Free Software alternatives. Instead of Adobe Photoshop one can use "The Gimp." For a word processor try K Word instead of Microsoft Word. Let this article be an advertisement, if you're using a PC get rid of windows and install the GNU Linux operating system. Not only will you're computer probably develop fewer problems. Not only will you get tons of great software for free. But you'll be able to boot up your machine knowing that no corporate executive is making money off of the software that you use.

As our radical movement for social change moves forward, it'll be imperative to find examples amongst the many different aspects of 21st century life that seem to contain a semblance of anarchism. If we believe that anarchist principles are so powerful that they could potentially take root amongst the many and varied peoples of this world we, as an anarchist movement, must begin to look around for examples of their manifestation in contemporary society. The examples we may find might not be perfect or pure by some anarchist's standards, but they may contain a libertarian seed that if nourished correctly will shed the toxicity of the hierarchy. As well when faced with the people who deride us as idealists and claim that our principles won't work out in practice, we need examples of our principles in practice that we can point out.

It's my feeling that the Free Software Movement might be one good example of anarchist principles being relevant to people other than anarchists. Its notions of Copyleft (communal ownership) and Free Software (freedom of information from proprietary constraints) are fairly explicit in their intent and principles. As well The Free Software Movement offers no compromise in its struggle against corporate domination of software or its opposition to the notion that ideas and information can be privatized. Sound familiar?

Personally, I encourage folks active in the anarchist movement to look into this movement themselves and dialogue with folks active in it. Some interesting relations could be cultivated that might advance both.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

The GNU and Free Software Foundation: www.gnu.org

Free Software Magazine: www.rons.net.cn/english/FSM/issue01

is that many of the ideas and practices of the free software movement are anarchist in nature. They are explicitly for communal ownership of software, for the free sharing of information, against the concept of intellectual property, and encourage the cooperation of individuals to create something that will not just benefit themselves but all people who use computers. I'd be thrilled if there existed a broad based militant anti-capitalist sentiment in this movement. Somehow, however, there is something a bit more thrilling about the lack of rhetoric and ideology. Something that speaks volumes about the depth and relevance of anarchist ideas: you needn't be an ideologue or a politico to realize that anarchist ideas of mutual aid, communal property, and the freedom of information make sense. As well, you needn't be spouting off fiery rhetoric to put anarchist ideas into practice in a way that makes them relevant to large numbers of people.

One of the ideas and practices that I find most intriguing in the free software movement is known as "copyleft." It provides not only promise in resistance to increasing privatization, but a tongue in cheek pun that, in my opinion, points towards its political implications albeit in a libertarian sense.

Copyleft is a general method for making a program free software and requiring all modified and extended versions of the program to be free software as well. Copyleft guarantees that every user has freedom "states the definition according to the Free Software Foundation." To copyleft a program, we first state that it is copyrighted; then we add distribution terms, which are a legal instrument that gives everyone the rights to use, modify, and redistribute the program's code—or any program derived from it—but only if the distribution terms are unchanged. Thus, the code and the freedoms become legally inseparable.

As the above quote illustrates the idea and practice of copyleft is a liberating one; its bottom line is not profit or power, but rather communal sharing and freedom. Its brilliance lies in the fact that it uses the institution of copyright as a means to not a private proprietary end, as it is intended to be used, but rather a communal proprietary end. It subverts the dominant paradigm.

To simply think of this practice as something applicable only to techie geeks and specialists in the IT (information technology) field underestimates its potential and intent. It's not just a concept to allow the IT specialist or producer more freedom with the code so that s/he can further innovation in the field, it's freedom for the consumer as well. In other words, it's a concept and practice that is relevant to anyone who owns or uses a computer. The concept is an example of the revolutionary notion, "From each according to their ability to each according to their need." As the Free Software Foundation explains, "Most of us are programmers, and we want freedom for ourselves as well as for you. But each of us uses software written by others, and we want freedom when using that software, not just when using our own code. We stand for freedom for all users, whether they program often, occasionally, or not at all."

Perhaps the most startling thing about these concepts of free software and copyleft is that I hear very little in anarchist or anti-authoritarian communist cir-

directly democratic politics has been found in the company of drunks. I've listened to the critique, bantered back and forth with my fellow debaters, and had some pretty heated exchanges about queer liberation, social equality, and the like.

This Tuesday was different; however, debate was not on the agenda, but rather an engaging discussion. I sat down to a few cups of coffee, and met a 46-year-old bricklayer named Mark. He started off the conversation by commenting on a newspaper article on the military actions in Afghanistan, and explained to me why the war is just gonna fuck everything up ten fold. "We gotta clean up our own backyard and stop telling other people how to live," he said. I asked him what he meant, and he began to rant about the massive inequality in America, how there should be no homeless people in the richest country in the world, about how people have no power to make decisions on what happens in their communities, how "corporate and government have all the power." He didn't claim to know what could take the current system's place, but that didn't stop his criticism. When I asked his opinion about Cuba and the old Soviet Union, he responded with a quote from a Who song, "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss." He's pretty much an anarchist who would probably never self-identify as such. That is, unless anarchist ideas were made relevant to his everyday life.

Unfortunately he's got no time to hang out with the Black Bloc kids; he works 50 hours a week and doesn't have the money to travel to wherever the protest of the week happens to be. He prefers Kenny Rogers to anarchist punk bands. As well, I'm guessing he'd get pretty bored with reading theory written by 19th century Russian guys with beards, but I could be wrong. I left the bar that night inspired by his common sense commentary, and wondering just how many anarchists by any other name I walk by in the street everyday. How many like minds does our movement for radical social change overlook in our petty, insular bickering about what color would best match the black flag?

In recent correspondence Cindy Millstein, a social anarchist thinker from Chicago, summed up my sentiments exactly: "People needn't all become anarchists, but anarchism's principles are a damned good framework for a better society by whatever name (s.)" To try to convert people to "anarchism" or any other "ism" would exemplify the vanguardist tendencies we supposedly abhor. The ideas of anarchism need to stand by themselves, and must be relevant to people's everyday lives if they are to be widely adopted in society. Classic anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin had great ability to see anarchist communism in the society of his day. As the quote at the beginning of this article illustrates, he was able to see a semblance of anarchist communist practice in such apolitical institutions such as museums, libraries, and public gardens.

Where do we draw examples in our current post-modern landscape?

My comrade here at Queer Paradise (a.k.a. The Richmond Queer Space Project), Em, informed me that we were going to switch our computers over to an operating system commonly known as Linux. I'm not a techie by any standard of measure, so I asked him what it was all about. He explained that it would solve a lot of the problems we've been having with our machines which currently use

Microsoft Windows, and as well that it was consistent with our politics, since it was not privately owned, but rather common property. He told me about this concept called "free software" on which a movement had been built to make free alternatives to commercially owned software and to agitate against the patenting of software. That evening I started doing research and sent out a flurry of e-mails to sympathetic geeks. What was this "free software" movement all about? Is it a good example of anarchism by any other name?

PROPRIETARY SOFTWARE IS THEFT

"The enemy is proprietary software," the GNU project Web site (www.gnu.org) boldly states. In the autumn of 1984 a programmer by the name of Richard M. Stallman left his job at the MIT Artificial Intelligence lab to create a UNIX like operating system that would be free from commercial control, the name of the operating system was to be GNU (pronounced guh-new) which stands for GNU's Not Unix. The reason for the project was not simply of a technical nature, not exclusively an egotistic attempt to show off his programming wizardry, but also had its roots in the principle to keep software free from commercial control. RMS had worked at the MIT Artificial Intelligence lab since 1971 and had been a part of what is commonly known as the first generation of hackers. Commonly confused simply with someone who breaks computer security measures, many hackers take the term to mean "someone who programs and is clever about it." The first generation of hackers were the computer geeks in the '60s and '70s hovered around university and company mainframes and did the groundbreaking programming work that laid the foundations for modern computer technology. In the early '80s private industry began to see benefits in commercializing software, and began forcing users to sign non-disclosure agreements that forbid them from sharing or altering the source code, the set of instructions that makes a program do what it does.

RMS laments on the GNU Web site about how things were before the first wave of privatization hit, "We did not call our software "free software" because that term did not yet exist; but that is what it was. Whenever people from another university or a company wanted to port and use a program, we gladly let them. 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."

As the first wave of software commercialization took hold it began to destroy the original character of the hacker community which was largely based around the free sharing of information. Also it created a massive brain drain as hackers left their jobs, mostly university positions, for jobs in the commercial sector.

RMS faced what he says was a stark moral choice, " With my community gone, to continue as before was impossible."

He could have joined the proprietary software world and profited from the

commercialization of software or he could have walked away from the computer field completely, his heart however pulled him in a different direction. "I asked myself, was there a program or programs that I could write, so as to make a community possible once again? The answer was clear: what was needed first was an operating system. That is the crucial piece of software that one must have to use a computer. With an operating system, you can do many things; without one, you cannot run the computer at all. 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. Thus the GNU project and the free (as in freedom) software movement was born.

The GNU project ran itself then as it does today on a shoe string budget. Most of the equipment needed to get it going was donated and the labor was voluntary and cooperative.

In 1991, a startling turn of events stole the spotlight from the GNU project. The GNU project had succeeded in writing the bulk of code for it's Unix like operating system, but lacked what is known as a kernel. A kernel is the aspect of an OS, from what I understand, that kind of pulls everything together, kind of a hub in a sense. Without a kernel an OS is completely useless. Having developed a kernel, a bright young Swedish programmer named Linus Torvalds combined it with the work that the GNU project had already done. Thus an operating system free from commercial control came into being. Now generally known as Linux, but more properly called GNU Linux operating system.

Since then many programs have been written that run on the GNU Linux operating system and a whole electronic culture has sprung up around it. The original thrust of the movement, based on the free software ideal, maintains a strong, no compromise presence to the idea that software must not be proprietary. However, segments of the movement have gone in different less idealistic directions. One current known as the Open Source Movement is very similar in practice to the Free Software movement, but downplays the original ideals that sought an end to proprietary software, ideals, as we shall see, that are pretty impressive.

ANARCHY IN THE FREE SOFTWARE MOVEMENT

In this article I do not intend to paint the free software movement as an anti-capitalist movement per se; to do so would be dishonest. Many companies have used Linux and other free software, citing technical and cost-saving measures, to a profitable end. In that sense the free software is creating a product which is, whether intentionally or not, beneficial to the capitalist market. As well by no means is the free software movement united in an explicit opposition to all exchange economies. Although you'll find a great deal of anti-market sentiments amongst its adherents and anti-authoritarian sentiments comprise much of the backbone of the philosophy of the movement. What is fascinating to me, however,