

Free software and social movements

On March 18, 2007
Stefan Merten wrote:

* What kind of connection is there between social movements and Free Software exactly? What is the nature of this connection? How strong is it really?

Very interesting questions. But I think it would be useful to pose them in a more general way, trying first to clarify what can be meant by "Free Software" and by "social movements".

As Michael Bauwens, I think that Free Software is only a part of a more global reality. A reality which could be specified as the new non market practices allowed by the ICTs. I don't know whether there is a term to name that. Michael put the emphasis on P2P, but giving to that term a very general meaning, as he put-it: "the open/free (input), participatory (process/governance) and commons-oriented (output) solutions". That reality can be also seen through other (non contradictory) dimensions, as for example, different ways of "sharing" without commercial relationships:

sharing efforts: free software;

sharing digital goods: P2P;

sharing material means (computer power): Grid computing, (Stanford Folding, etc.)

In any case, I think it is more fruitful to take this global new reality to be analyzed in its links with the "social movements" and not only FLOSS.

About "social movements". The first reality considered by Stefan's is what he calls the "classical" social movements, in Latin America and in the more industrialized countries. Michel Bauwens conceives a more global social movement as he implicitly considers a movement leading to "the new society".

A social movement could be defined as a movement involving a more or less extended part of the society acting in order to try to have an effect on a specific aspect (or even on all aspects) of social life. As such, they may be more or less conservative or opposed to the reigning social order. Of course, those we are the most interested in are the second ones.

I will not enter here into questions as: is there a revolutionary class? Which one? etc. I just want to make two remarks: one on the term "(classical) social movement" and another on the reality of the "social movement" linked to FLOSS in Latin America.

It is common to assimilate the working class movement (low wage blue or white collars) to the official unions. Michael does it when he writes: "Could it be that the 'classic' social movements, of the labor movement, have not only been weakened, but are totally integrated in the state, and have been themselves in power for so long."

Official Unions have indeed since long become "totally integrated in the state". But that is not the case for the millions of workers who live under the power of that state. In the countries where unionization is not compulsory or "officially" recommended, even in some with a long tradition of social unrest like Spain and France, the unionization rate is below 10%. More important: during most of the most important and radical workers fights, the clashes between the rank-and-file movement and the unions machines are almost systematic.

This question takes all its relevance when you see that the ICT (specially Internet and mobile phones) played an important role during the social movements in France, in 2003 (against the pension reforms) and specially in 2006 (against a new low cost contract for young workers), helping the attempts of people trying to self-organize outside the control of the unions. The monopole of information and the representation of unions, these powerful weapons of the unions to keep their

control over the movements has been questioned and some times openly contested. IMHO, this is something that will develop in the future.

By the way, I just read that beginning March, in Copenhagen, during a week of fights between the police and youths defending the symbolic Ungdomshuset (House of youth) sold by the new mayor, Internet and mobile phones played also a useful role. The police draw the conclusion that it was necessary to find a way to trouble that kind of communication, specially a network of Internet sites.

About Latin America: Stefan asks how true is that Free Software has a "rather strong connexion" with "(classical) social movements". AFAIK, what you can see in Brazil and some other countries like Venezuela is a "movement" of people defending the need to adopt FLOSS within the economy. Some parts of the leftist nationalistic parties in power (but non only them) see in FLOSS a way to save money that otherwise would go to Microsoft (or other foreign corporations), and a way to stimulate the national informatics industry. To a certain extent you can call that a sort of "social movement", since they act for a specific change in society, but it is not a "classical" social movement, nor a "mass" or very "anti-capitalistic" one. That is why Kasper Souren can write in his mail commenting Stefan's one: "During my travels I haven't seen stronger connections [between FS and social movements] in non-industrialized countries." That is why Rafael Evangelista, when trying to quote examples of FS presence in Brazil, writes: "The 3st largest supermarket chain of the country is using (you can see the penguin in the cashier's computer screen). Some big department stores too. The largest state owned bank is using in some servers and starting to adopt in desktops."
(1)

Going back to the original question, the connection between social movements and FS et al, I would, like Michael, see as most important what he calls "the embedded values, and about prefiguring the new society by present actions... new values such as sharing and non proprietary relationships".

The most important weakness of all social movements provoked by the inhuman aspects of capitalism is the conviction that there is nothing beyond capitalism. You are then condemned to accept the capitalist logic as "natural" and to accept with fatalism your almost total impotence. Social practices that may show that humans can organize themselves in a different way, in a non capitalist way, is thus a vital element to overcome that deadlock. Helping to develop the visibility of what could be a non capitalist society is certainly one the most important connexions between FS, et al. and social movements. At a more immediate level, the new ICT and the "FS spirit" may transform the social movements themselves, the way they organize, their goals and means, increasing their power and fruitfulness.

"* Why in contrast is there no strong connection between Free Software and social movements in more industrialized countries?" (SM)

In fact, I think that the "connexion" between FS and social movements is, for the moment, almost inexistent or very weak in both, the less and the more industrialized world. The real development of these connexions is ahead, in the future. Even if the development of the new ICT has been spectacular in recent decades, it is far from reaching even the majority of world population. Even in the most "wired" countries, only a small minority of the low-wage population has an idea of what FS or Wikipedia mean. Things are changing allover the world, but it will take time before the main protagonists of important social movements get familiar with all the possibilities given by the new ICT and the "FS spirit". As this process will go along, the creativity of the social movements should develop and I don't think we can even imagine at present all the new possibilities of "connexion" that will arise.

That is not a reason for not working on that question as from now.

* What are the goals of these social movements and how does Free Software help these? How can Free Software help? (SM)

IMHO, how to "help" (contribute, participate in) social movements is certainly one of the most important and fruitful questions for Oekonux, as it is based on the idea that "the principles of the development of Free Software may be the foundation of a new economy which may be the base for a new society".

The answers are surely multiple and future developments of reality will be determinants to find them. It could be a good program of work for the future of Oekonux.

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(1) By itself, the fact that corporations and State machines (which work also to a certain extent as corporations) save money using Free Software, allowing them to increase their profits, is not very... subversive. The only interesting thing is that they introduce some "free practices" and thus extend them.