Marxism and Free-Software [1]

I will deal with three questions:
1. To which extent is Marxism confirmed by the reality of free-software?
2. To which extent is Marxism questioned by this reality?
3. Which relation between class struggle and free-software?

But, first I want to make some remarks on the meaning I give to these concepts: free-software and Marxism.

Here I understand by free-software an "ethic" with specific attitudes towards software. I take 4 characteristics:
1. No merchant/trade relations;
2. No fatherlands;
3. Cooperation as the basis of activity;
4. The pleasure of being useful to the community as a goal of production.

Marxism can be more complicated to summarize. Raymond Aron, used to say that Marxism has the specificity that it can be explained in 5 minutes, 5 hours, 5 years or half a century. Here I only want to make two remarks.
- I don't call Marxism the Stalinist ideologies. Stalinism is not Marxism, or it is a falsification that leads to the opposite of the Marxist project: instead of a non-merchant worldwide economy Stalinism defend a nationalist state capitalism. The Marxist left communists in Germany and Holland knew that since the 20s.
- I understand by Marxism the theory that says, among others, that the evolution of capitalism leads to the creation of the possibility of a post-capitalist new society,
without merchant relations (and first of all without wage-labor);
without fatherlands ("The working men have no country.");
based on the free association of producers (without classes);
where "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all".

The parallel between Marxism and free-software is striking. And that leads us to the first question:

To which extent is Marxism confirmed by the development of free-software?

Marx did not invent communism. In a primitive form, communism is a very old idea: the slaves of the antiquity dreamed it, as some of the first Christians, or the revolted peasants of the Middle age. I do not know all the religions that believe in a heaven, but I do not know any for which merchant relations and money rule the heaven.
What Marx developed is the idea that for the first time in history the material possibility of that dream was created by the development of capitalism, as the possibility of capitalism had been produced centuries before by the development of feudalism. The new society will be the result of the revolt of the productive forces against the capitalist relations of production.
For Marx, history has not a goal, but a direction of movement: the development of the productive forces, the human and material means of producing social life. The relations of production are the relations that men establish between them in order to use these forces. "In last instance" these relations are determined by the need of the development of these forces. A well-known sentence of Marx says: "The hand mill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam-mill with the industrial capitalist".

This evolution is not harmonious. Its flow is irregular, contradictory, with great leaps forward and periods of drawing back. It is the result of the pressure of contradictions. For example: feudalism

allowed the development of trade. But, at a certain degree of development, feudal relations became a hindrance to trade. Within feudalism, any merchant transporting goods through a fief had to pay a toll to the local lord. But, the more the trade developed in quantity and distances the more the tolls appeared as an absurdity, a hindrance to its development. To allow this advance the movement of trade it-self and the men who defended the interests of trade rebelled against the feudal laws.

Free-software result from the development of technologies created within capitalism: transistors, computers, etc. Software is a tremendous advance in productive forces. It is a human product, which can be a mean of production like a system driving an assembly line, or a mean of consumption like a film or a game, and has the new and specific capacity of being reproducible without significant cost. But capitalist laws prevent the full development of this capacity: copyright, private intellectual property, etc. Free-software is a revolt of the new productive forces against the old capitalist relations of production.

Marx did not know computers, nor software. But the reality of the contradictions that gave birth to free-software is a perfect confirmation of his vision of history.

But that is not all. Free-software is also an evidence of the Marxist idea that the post-capitalist society can be a worldwide non-merchant society, and not a bureaucratic wage-slave society, for example. Finally, it confirms the Marxist conviction that communist ideas are not the product of some brilliant individual brain but the movement of capitalist society itself. Even if many hackers still think that "Marxism" means a hundred million deaths in the 20th century, they are acting, without knowing it, some of the basic ideas of the true Marxism.

To which extent is Marxism questioned by the reality of free-software?

For Marxism there is no possibility of development of a communist economic form within capitalism. The revolutionary class, the working class, is an exploited class, without power on the economy. It cannot have the power to build a new social organization without making first a political revolution, contrary to the past where the revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie, for example, had built his economic power within feudalism, within the old society.
Graham seaman, in a mail in the English list said that this idea "doesn't seem to be ever explicit in Marx… but it certainly seems to be taken for granted by every communist after Marx".
Marx wrote about the workers cooperatives, which where an important part of the workers movement in the19th century. He said that the capitalist -worker relation was to a certain degree eliminated inside the cooperative. But he insisted on the fact that they remained prisoners of the surrounding capitalist world, that the workers were in fact their own collective capitalists and that they would not resist to the development of the trusts and monopoles. Marx never developed a theory about a possible coexistence between capitalism and lasting, stable germs of communism.
In that sense, if we understand free-software as germs of a communist society, it contradicts a specific aspect of Marxism.
But many questions remain:
- Can these germs easily coexist with capitalism?
- Is a war between the two worlds avoidable?
- Can these germs develop to the point of supplanting capitalism?
- Is this possible without a political revolution?

After a certain degree of development of the free-software reality, may be in 10 years, or 20, the question will be openly posed.
Personally I think that a revolution remains necessary. There will be a war. It has already started, as we can see with all the new laws to protect the copyright, etc.

Before going to the third question, it may be interesting to look into the difference between the world of cooperatives and the one of free-software. Will free-software be integrated, swallowed by the

capitalist word as were the cooperatives? Cooperatives stay on the terrain of trade, of commercial exchange at least in the relation to the "external" world. They sell what they produce and buy what they need. The possible "non-capitalist" nature remains closed within the relations between the members of the cooperative. The free-software community is the opposite. It is not only between its members that social relations are different from capitalism. Fee-software is open to the external world. The hackers' community "gives" its products outside their world and in doing so tend to export a new economic relationship. This is a most powerful "weapon" to survive and develop.

It is, and it will be difficult for capitalism to fight against this development. Free software is "free", cheap, and this is important for a system where production is based on competitiveness through low costs. IBM, for example, adopted Linux mainly to escape to Microsoft monopole but also to be more competitive. But, in doing so it allows and stimulates the development of free-software. To a certain extent, a parallel can be drawn with the situation of feudalism fighting against capitalism. Capitalism developed mainly in the feudal cities. But the kings, in France for example, in their fights against the other landlords, had to support the cities, facilitating the development of capitalism. At the end, the cities destroyed by a revolution the power of the kings.

The reality of free software contradicts Marx on a specific question: the possibility of the emergence of germs of communism within capitalism. But the idea of the inevitability of a political confrontation, a revolution, to allow these germs to become the basis of a new society remains valid.

The third issue I wanted to deal with is the relation between free-software and class struggle. According to Marx's theory, the post-capitalist society will be built by the working class, it means by the humans exploited according to the capitalist laws: wage-labor and profit. Since the Commune of Paris, in 1871, this idea has been confirmed by history in different occasions. At least partially, as we could see millions, or hundred of thousands, of workers defending anti-capitalist ideas and the need of a new society: Russia 1905, Russia 1917, Germany 1918-19, Hungary 1919, Italy 1920, Spain 1936, Hungary 1956, during the end of the 60s and the 70s in France, Italy, Argentina, Portugal, etc…But all these movements ended in defeats. They are many reasons to explain that. But, in all of them, there was an enormous weakness: the lack of a clear, concrete vision of what could be a post-capitalist society. The Russian model, the Stalinist model was and is still a misleading model, a repulsive one. In the past transitions from one society to another, humans had more or less the possibility to see in practice the forms of the new society. Feudal economic relations developed within ancient slavery, capitalist relations within the feudal society. For example, a serf man could escape his fief, run into a "free city" and become a "free man". To a certain extent, he had a "choice". The "free cities" were a sort of practical model of what a new society could be.
Free-software could represent in some years also a kind of "model", even if partial, of a post-capitalist society. Free software can only be "germs" of a new society, as it can not involve the total production. But it proves, in practical terms, that humans can produce the most modern and advanced products without merchant relations and without a State.
For the moment, only a very small minority of the world population, even in the most developed countries, knows what free-software is. It can hardly play that role yet. But it may in the future.
A good example is the "Oscar project". It is a project to design a car with open source software. It began in Germany and developed to integrate also American professional designers. (Last year they seem to have interrupted their work. The web site said first that they had to stop and that they could dot say anything else. Later it announced that it would be back beginning of 2004. But till now, it is silent). Just imagine that the project is realized and that you could see it in the street and tell: "look at this car, it is one of the best and it has been designed without the spirit of profit, just for the pleasure of making something good and beautiful for the community". That kind of realizations can make more for the development of the conviction of the possibility of a new society than thousands of books and publications.

In every social struggle of the wage-earners (as for example in the strikes and demonstrations which developed in France during the spring of 2003 against the pensions reforms), there is a double

tendency. One is to ask for higher wages or refuse the worsening of the conditions of work and life but remaining on the capitalist terrain. The other is the tendency to put into question the logic of capitalism itself, questioning the fact that the conditions of life depend on the laws of profit. These two tendencies coexist, even if the second one is generally very minor. This last appears more easily when the movement expands to different sector of workers (as it happened in France during the spring movement). But it is immediately hindered, stopped by the lack of perspective, the absence of conviction that a new post-capitalist society is possible.

Some "Marxists", especially after the defeats of the 80s and the 90s, concluded that class struggle had become a dead-end, a part of capital auto-regulation. But I think that is wrong. The development of the free-software reality, the fact that it may become an important and visible experience can open and stimulate the revolutionary content, which appears in any social important fight.

Class struggle and free-software do not exclude each other; they may fertilize each other.

Conclusions

Many hackers ignore Marxism, or, worst, they assimilate it to Stalinism. They would reject the idea that, to some extent, they work in a Marxist perspective when they develop free-software. Is that important? No that much, for the moment. The most important is the real work they do. But, as free-software will increase its presence in social life, the radical problems will arise and then this ignorance will be a weakness.

On Marx's gravestone one can read: "Philosophers have interpreted the world in different ways. The point is however to change it". Hackers are changing the world. Sooner or later they will need to have a general philosophy of history to understand all the dimensions and perspectives of their actions. May be then they will discover and develop Marxism as a tool for their practice.

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