

Free Software & GPL Society *

—Interview with Stefan Merten, Oekonux (DE)

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Oekonux — an abbreviation of “OEKOnomie” and “liNux” — is a German mailing list discussing the revolutionary possibilities of Free Software. Many people speak of Free Software and Open Source Software interchangeably — could you explain how you understand the differences between them?

The term “**Free Software**” is older than “**Open Source**”. “Free Software” is used by the **Free Software Foundation** founded by Richard M. Stallman in 1985. The term “Open Source” has been developed by Eric S. Raymond and others, who, in 1998, founded the Open Source Initiative. It’s not so much a question of definition as of the ideology behind the two parts of the movement — the differences between the definition of Open Source Software and Free Software are relatively few. But whereas Free Software emphasizes the freedom Free Software gives the users, Open Source does not care about freedom. The Open Source Initiative (OSI) was founded exactly for the reason to make Free Software compatible with business people’s thinking, and the word “freedom” has been considered harmful for that purpose.

Free software means the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software, and these freedoms are protected by the GNU General Public License. The definition presupposes open sources as the necessary condition for studying how the software works and for making changes, but it al-

so implies more. The definition of Open Source is quite close: it means the ability to read, redistribute, and modify the source code — but because this is a better, faster way to improve software.

Openness = speed = more profit.

The Open Source Initiative proclaims quite proudly that it exists in order to persuade the “commercial world” of the superiority of open sources on “the same pragmatic, business-case grounds that motivated Netscape.” But recently, it is the term “Open Source” that has gained popularity — and by analogy everything has become “Open” — open source society, open source money, open source schooling.

Indeed the Open Source Initiative has been extremely successful in pushing the freedom-subtracted term into people’s heads. Today people from the Free Software Foundation always feel the need to emphasize that it’s the freedom that is important — more important than the efficiency of production, which is the primary aim behind open source. Of course open sources are a precondition for most of this freedom, but open sources are not the core idea of Free Software and so Open Source is at least a misnomer because the freedom is an inalienable part of Free Software as well as of Open Source software. Openness only follows from the freedom.

How do you mean it’s a “misnomer”? The two movements exist and the names correspond to the different ideas behind them. And “Open Source” is the name the people from this initiative chose for themselves,

*this is a revised interview of the original copy published at <http://www.oekonnux.org/list-en/archive/> and http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors0/mertentext.html

and seems quite an accurate characterization of their focus.

Free Software and Open Source Software are not two movements, but a single movement with two factions, and as far as I can see the distinction plays a major role mostly in the more ideological discussions between members of the two factions. They are collaborating on projects, and sometimes unite, for instance, when it is a question of defending against the attacks of Micro\$oft.

And, no, “Open Source” is not an accurate characterization of this faction, since their focus has been making Free Software compatible with business people’s thinking. A more correct name would have been “Free Software for Business” — or something like that.

What seems misleading to me is that the leftist intelligentsia has begun to use “Open Source” as a cause to promote without realizing the pro-capitalist connotations behind the term.

Today the widespread inflation of the term “Open Source” has a deep negative impact. Often the core idea behind Free Software — establishing the freedom of the user — is not known to people who are only talking of Open Source — be it leftist intelligentsia or other people. I think this is a pity and would recommend using only the term Free Software because this is the correct term for the phenomenon. You don’t call “green” “red” if “green” is the right term — do you? After all, even “Open Source” software would not be successful if the practical aspect of freedom was not inherent in its production and use. Interestingly, in an article entitled “Its Time to Talk about Free Software Again,” one of the founders of the Open Source Initiative also considers the current development as wrong.

The idea behind Oekonux began, in kernel form at the first Wizards of OS conference in Berlin in 1999. How did the motivation to begin Oekonux develop from this context?

I had the idea that Free Software is something very special and may have a real potential for a different society beyond labor, money, exchange — in short: capitalism — in 1998. In September 1998, I tried to make that a topic on the Krisis mailing list. However, next to nobody was interested. In July 1999, I attended the first Wizard of Open Source conference organized by mikro in Berlin, and was especially interested in the topic “New economy?”. However, in the context of the idea I mentioned above — the potential to transform society — I found the ideas presented there not very interesting. After the talks I took the opportunity to organize a spontaneous BOF (Birds Of a Feather) session and luckily it worked well. So we sat there with about 20 people and discussed the ideas presented in the talks. At the end I asked all the people to give me their e-mail address.

After the WOS conference, mikro created a mailing list for us — and that was the birth of the Oekonux mailing list which is the core of the project. In December 1999 I created the web site www.oekonux.de. Its main purpose is to archive the mailing list. Texts and other material created in the context of the project is presented there as well as links to web sites and pages relevant to our discussion in some way.

There is also an English/international part of the project, www.oekonux.org, which archives list-en@oekonux.org, however, this is still nearly non-existent. I find this a pity but unfortunately until now there is nobody with enough free time and energy to give this part of the project a real start. So until today all the material is in German and there are only a few translations of some texts. In June 2000 I created another mailing list, projekt@oekonux.de, which is concerned with the organization of the project.

During April 28-30, 2001 in Dortmund we had the first Oekonux conference, which brought together people from different areas who were interested in the principles of Free Software and the possible consequences of these principles on their particular field. The conference was attended by about 170 persons from a very broad range of ages and backgrounds,

from software developers, to political theorists and scientists. It was a very exciting conference with a perfect atmosphere and another milestone in the way we and — if we're not completely wrong — the whole world is going. The next conference is planned to take place in Nov 1-3, 2002.

How active and large is the list?

From the start we have had very interesting discussions with some silent periods but usually an average of 6-8 mails a day. The atmosphere on the list is very pleasant and flames are nearly unknown. Fortunately it has not been necessary to moderate the list, as it regulates itself very well. The discussions are very contentful and this interview would not have been possible without them. They cover a wide number of details but nearly always stay on the central topic of the list: the possible impacts of Free Software on society. At the moment we have about 200 subscribers at [liste@oekonux.de], who come from a wide range of intellectual traditions and areas of interest. Though of course they all share a common interest in political thought, there are people from the Free Software and Hardware areas as well as engineers of different brands, hard core political people as well as people with a main interest in culture and so on. Though the traffic is quite high we have nearly no unsubscriptions which I think is a proof for the quality of the list.

In a previous interview by Geert Lovink you mentioned that the relationship between free software and Marxism is one of the central topics debated on the list ... Do you think Marx is still relevant for an analysis of contemporary society? Could you give an idea of the scope of this debate on the list?

First of all we recognize the difference between Marx' views and the views of the different Marxist currents. Although different brands of Marxism have distorted Marx' thought to the point where it has become unrecognizable, I tend to think that only Marx' analysis of capitalism gives us the chance to understand what is going on today. The decline of the labor society we are all witnessing in various ways cannot be

understood without that analysis. The Krisis group has offered a contemporary reading of Marx, claiming that capitalism is in decay because the basic movement of making money from labor works less and less. This doesn't mean that capitalism must end soon, but it won't ever be able to hold its old promises of wealth for all. A number of people on the Oekonux mailing list have built upon the Krisis theories and carried them onto new ground. On the list among other things we try to interpret Marx in the context of Free Software. It's very interesting that much of what Marx said about the final development of capitalism can be seen in Free Software. In a sense, part of our work is trying to re-think Marx from a contemporary perspective, and interpret current capitalism as containing a germ form of a new society.

According to many circles, Marx is obsolete — he was already obsolete in the sixties, when the mass social upheavals and the so-called new social movements showed that not class but other forms of oppressive power had become determining instances and that the economic base was not the motor that moved contradictions.

I think that at that time the economic base was not as mature as it has become today. In the last ten to twenty years Western societies started to base their material production and all of society more and more on information goods. The development of computers as universal information processors with ever increasing capacity is shifting the focal point of production from the material side to the immaterial, information side. I think that today the development of the means of production in capitalism has entered a new historical phase.

The most important thing in this shift in the means of production is that information has very different features than matter. First of all, information may be copied without loss — at least digital information using computers. Second and equally important, the most effective way to produce interesting information is to foster creativity. Free Software combines these two aspects, resulting in a new form of production.

Obviously Free Software uses the digital copy as a technical basis. Thus Free Software, like any digital information, is not a scarce good; contrary to the IPR (intellectual property rights) people, the Free Software movement explicitly prevents making Free Software scarce. So, scarcity, which has always been a fundamental basis for capitalism, is not present in Free Software: Existing Free Software is available for next to zero price.

More importantly, however, the organization of the production of Free Software differs widely from that of commodities produced for maximizing profit. For most Free Software producers there is no other reason than their own desire to develop that software. So the development of Free Software is based on the self-unfolding (from the German term “Selbstentfaltung”, similar but not completely the same as “self-development”) of the single individual. This form of non-alienated production results in better software because the use of the product is the first and most important aim of the developer — there simply is no profit which could be maximized. The self-unfolding of the single person is present in the process of production, and the self-unfolding of the many is ensured by the availability of high quality Free Software.

Another important factor is that capitalism is in deep crisis. Until the 1970s capitalism promised a better world to people in the Western countries, to people in the former Soviet bloc and to the Third World. It stopped doing it starting in the 1980s and dismissed it completely in the 1990s. Today the capitalist leaders are glad if they are able to fix the biggest leaks in the sinking ship. The resources used for that repair are permanently increasing- be it financial operations to protect Third World states from the inability to pay their debt, or the kind of military operations we see in Afghanistan today.

These processes were not mature in the 1960s but they are today. Maybe today for the first time in history we are able to overcome capitalism on the bases it has provided, by transcending it into a new society that is less harmful than the one we have.

How can Free Software “overcome” capitalism from the bases it has provided? The idea of a dialectical negation of capitalism (an immanent critique from the inside that takes over the same presuppositions of the system it negates) has frequently been discredited. Both Marx’s and Lenin’s ideas of a dialectical negation of capitalism preserved the imperative of productivity, the utility of instrumental technology, the repressive apparatus of the State, police and standing army, as a necessary “first stage.” And if you start from the inside, you will never get anywhere else ... the argument goes.

Free Software is both inside and outside capitalism. On the one hand, the social basis for Free Software clearly would not exist without a flourishing capitalism. Only a flourishing capitalism can provide the opportunity to develop something that is not for exchange or for pure subsistence. On the other hand, Free Software is outside of capitalism for the reasons I mentioned above: absence of scarcity and self-unfolding instead of the alienation of labor in a command economy. This kind of relationship between the old and the new system is typical for germ forms — for instance you can see it in the early stage of capitalist development, when feudalism was still strong.

In what sense is the production of Free Software not “alienated”? One of the reasons that labor is alienated is because the workers sells a living thing — qualitatively different forms of productive activity which in principle can’t be measured — in exchange for a general measure, money. As Marx said somewhere, the worker does not care about the shitty commodities he is producing, he just does it for this abstract equivalent, the money he receives as compensation.

It seems you’re talking about the difference between use value — the use of goods or labor — and exchange value — reflected in the price of the commodities that goods or labor are transformed into by being sold on the market. It’s true that the use value of goods as well as labor is qualitatively different. It’s also true that the exchange value of a commodity — be it a commodity or wage labor — is a common measure,

an abstraction of the qualitative features of a product. But after all you need a common measure to base an exchange on. One of the problems of capitalism is that this abstraction is the central motor of society. The use of something — which would be the important thing in a society focusing on living well — is only loosely bound to that abstraction. That is the basis of the alienation of work performed for a wage. In Free Software because the product can be taken with only marginal cost and, more importantly, is not created for being exchanged, the exchange value of the product is zero. Free Software is worthless in the dominant sense of exchange.

Free Software may be produced for numerous reasons. If there is no external motivation — like making money — there must be internal motivations for the developers. These internal motivations, which are individually very different, are what we call self-unfolding. Without external motivations, there is not much room for alienation.

Of course self-unfolding is a common phenomenon in other areas, such as art or hobbies. However, Free Software surpasses the older forms of self-unfolding in several ways and this is what makes it interesting on the level of social change:

- Most products of self-unfolding may be useful for some persons, but this use is relatively limited. Free Software, however, delivers goods which are useful for a large number of persons — virtually everybody with a computer.
- Most products of self-unfolding are the results of outmoded forms of production, like craft-work. Free Software is produced using the most advanced means of production mankind has available.
- Most products of self-unfolding are the fruits of the work of one individual. Free Software depends on collaborative work — it is usually developed by international teams and with help from the users of the product.

- All products of self-unfolding I can think of have been pushed away once the same product becomes available on the market. By contrast, Free Software has already started to push away software developed for maximizing profit in some areas, and currently there seems to be no general limit to this process.

So contrary to older forms of self-unfolding Free Software provides a model in which self-unfolding becomes relevant on a social level. The products of this sort of self-unfolding can even be interesting for commercial use.

Some theorists have analyzed the internet as a kind of “gift” economy. In other words, it is not subject to measure and exchange. Things are freely produced and freely taken. And unlike exchange, which has a kind of finality (I pay one dollar I buy one bottle of Coca Cola, and it’s over), the gift, since it cannot be measured, is a kind of infinite reciprocity. Gifts are not about calculation of value, but about building social relationships. Do you see Free Software as a gift “economy”?

I don’t like talking about gifts in Free Software or in terms of the Internet in general. There is no reciprocity in Free Software as, similarly, there is no reciprocity on the Internet. I have used thousands of web pages and millions of lines of code contained in Free Software without giving anything back. There simply is no reciprocity and even better: there is no need for reciprocity. You simply take what you need and you provide what you like. It’s not by chance, that this reflects the old demand of “Everybody according to his/her needs”.

Indeed there are several attempts, which are at best misleading, to understand the Internet and/or Free Software in terms of capitalist dogmas. The talk about “gift economies” is one of them, because it focuses on gifts as some sort of — non-capitalist but nonetheless — exchange. Even worse is the talk of an “attention economy” which defines attention as a kind of currency. The Internet, and especially Free

Software are new phenomena which can't be understood adequately by using the familiar thought patterns of capitalism.

In what sense is “GPL Society” beyond the familiar thought patterns of capitalism?

With the term “GPL Society” we named a society based on the principles of production of Free Software. These principles are:

- self-unfolding as the main motivation for production,
- irrelevance of exchange value, so the focus is on the use value
- free cooperation between people
- international teams.

Though the term has been controversial for some time, today it is widely accepted in Oekonux. I like the term particularly **because** you can't associate anything with it that you already know. GPL Society describes something new, which we try to discover, explore and understand in the Oekonux project. Ironically, part of this process of understanding has reached the conclusion that a GPL Society would no longer need General Public License because there won't be any copyright. So at least at this time maybe it should be renamed ;-).

As I tried to explain Free Software is not based on exchange so neither is a GPL Society. How a GPL Society may look like concretely can't be determined fully today. However, at present there are many developments which already point in that direction.

- One development is the increasing obsolescence of human labor. The more production is done by machines the less human labor is needed in the production process. If freed from the chains of capitalism this development would mean freedom from more and more necessities, making

room for more processes of self-unfolding — be it productive processes like Free Software or non-productive ones like many hobbies. So contrary to capitalism, in which increasing automation always destroys the work places for people and thus their means to live, in a GPL Society maximum automation would be an important aim of the whole society.

- In every society based on exchange — which includes the former Soviet bloc — making money is the dominant aim. Because a GPL Society would not be based on exchange, there would be no need for money anymore. Instead of the abstract goal of maximizing profit, the human oriented goal of fulfilling the needs of individuals as well as of mankind as a whole would be the focus of all activities.
- The increased communication possibilities of the Internet will become even more important than today. An ever increasing part of production and development will take place on the Internet or will be based on it. The B2B (business to business) concept, which is about improving the information flow between businesses producing commodities, shows us that the integration of production in the field of information has just started. On the other hand the already visible phenomenon of people interested in a particular area finding each other on the Internet will become central for the development of self-unfolding groups.
- The difference between consumers and producers will vanish more and more. Already today the user can configure complex commodities like cars or furniture to some degree, which makes virtually each product an individual one, fully customized to the needs of the consumer. This increasing configurability of products is a result of the always increasing flexibility of the production machines. If this is combined with good software you could initiate the production of highly customized material goods allowing a maximum of self-unfolding — from your web browser up to the point of delivery.

- Machines will become even more flexible. New type of machines available for some years now — fabbers are already more universal in some areas than modern industrial robots, not to mention stupid machines like a punch. The flexibility of the machines is a result of the fact that material production is increasingly based on information. At the same time the increasing flexibility of the machines gives the users more room for creativity and thus for self-unfolding.
- In a GPL society there is no more reason for a competition beyond the type of competition we see in sports. Instead various kinds of fruitful cooperation will take place. You can see that today not only in Free Software but also (partly) in science and for instance in cooking recipes: Imagine your daily meal if cooking recipes would be proprietary and available only after paying a license fee instead of being the result of a worldwide cooperation of cooks.

This sounds very utopian: Free Software as the sign of the end of capitalism and the transformation of the new society? How do you predict this transformation will come about — spontaneously, as the economic basis of capitalist production just withers away?

I hope these more or less utopian thoughts give an idea of the notion of a GPL Society as it is currently discussed within the Oekonux project. It's not Free Software in itself which may transform capitalism. Instead, the principles of the production of Free Software — which have developed within capitalism! — provide a more effective way of production on the one hand and more freedom on the other. The main question is how is it possible to translate these principles to other areas.

I tried to explain how Free Software — as a germ form of the GPL society — is inside as well as outside of capitalism. I think Free Software is only the most visible of the new forms which together have the potential to lead us into a different society. Capitalism has developed the means of production to such an ex-

tent that people can use them for something new. Of course, the transformation also requires a political process and although historically the preconditions now are better than ever before there is no automatic step that will lead to the GPL society. People have to want this process. However, I'm quite optimistic that they will, because Free Software shows us, in microcosm, how a better life would look, so the GPL Society is in the best interest of people. And Oekonux is there to understand the process of this change, and perhaps at some point our thoughts may help to push the development forward :-).

About Stefan Merten He lives in Kaiserslautern, Germany and works as a computer scientist and software engineer. He has been engaged in the political scene in several ways since 1989 (it was by chance that it was in 1989 — and not the result of the fall of the Berlin wall).

In the summer of 1999 he founded and is currently maintaining Projekt Oekonux, which explores the possibilities of free software to lead to a form of production beyond capitalism. Stefan can be reached by email: smerten@oekonux.de

[OpenPKG 1.0 released] January 11, 2002, Ralf S. Engelschall announced the release of OpenPKG 1.0 — eases installation and administration of Unix software across platforms of GNU/Linux, FreeBSD and Solaris, also portable across mostly all modern Unix flavors. It was created in Nov 2000 and after over one year of development it is already a mature technology in production use.

The license of OpenPKG is two-fold: the part we wrote (all the package specification files, the additions scripts, etc. pp) are placed under a simple BSD/MIT-style license. All other parts (the vendor stuff on which OpenPKG is based) is kept under the original license of the vendor. All of its licensed parts are at least compatible with the GPL, its BSD/MIT-style license has not an advertisement clause.
