

Richard M. Stallman: Rebel or Revolutionary?

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“GNU serves as an example to inspire and a banner to rally others to join us in sharing. This can give a feeling of harmony which is impossible if we use software that is not free.”

~ Richard Stallman, GNU Manifesto, 1985

To truly live harmoniously with each other and with our natural environment, society must undergo 'a complete revolution in our hitherto existing mode of production, and simultaneously a revolution in our whole contemporary social order,' wrote Frederick Engels.”

~ “Where We Stand”, The International Socialist Organization,

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Frederick Engels and Richard Stallman both set forth a vision of a society rooted in freedom from divisive exploitation and the equitable distribution of resources. Stallman and the influential socialist thinkers of the past 200 years advance this vision by thinking broadly about how the structure and behaviors of people within their respective spheres of concern are intrinsically connected to their single, trans-national notion of a post-revolutionary society. The socialist notion of revolution invokes images of thriving worker councils and cooperative engagement around every aspect of material production. Rooted in hundreds of years of human struggle, death, and, at times, even dramatic victories against capitalist enemies, this socialist vision carries warnings and promises embedded in the legacies of its own martyrs revolutionaries. Richard Stallman's GNU project and the vision of sharing and cooperation he injects into its core also concerns itself with the struggle of scarcity and human creativity but lacks the centuries of experiential development that under girds the socialist struggle. This essay will seek to draw connections between this centuries old system of thought and the relatively recent development of a thriving free software movement headed, in part, by Mr. Stallman.

Pick any copy of Wired or the New York Times and coverage of the latest battle between humans and robots is sure to tally its winners and losers, complete with body counts and predictions of future conflict. With popular media following suit by posting articles about “The most *robot-proof* professions of the 21st century,”¹ the deep permeation of the trauma surrounding the increasingly tenuous questions about how to survive is immediately evident. Thus, in an age where compliant and servile robots may literally be found taking over the cubicle or workstation of nearly any human worker, Richard Stallman's call for a community and harmony to take precedence over profit and control certainly are more relevant today than when the GNU manifesto was written thirty years ago.

Thus, then any realization of a social revolution aligned to the values of the socialists will necessarily center around the tension surrounding human and computer production of goods and control of bodies. This essay will explore the overlap and differences between the philosophy of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the Free Software Movement (FSM) in order to illuminate the contributions and tensions each philosophy brings to the shared goal of realizing a more just and harmonious society.

With the litany of literature available on both the ISO and the FSM, many illuminating sets of documents exist to conduct this investigation. Concerning the ISO's philosophy, I chose to consider their formal statement of political position called the “Where We Stand” pamphlet.² This 35-page document lays out both the high-level vision of the socialist movement as well as specific political positions of the organization with respect to current issues of the day, such as the dominance of two corporate parties in the United States, structural and institutional racism in America, as well as

1 For example, see ZDNet's article on Ten Jobs Automation won't kill off. <http://www.zdnet.com/article/ten-jobs-that-are-automation-proof/>

2 Accessed via the ISO website: <http://www.international-socialist.org/pdfs/WhereWeStandPamphlet.pdf>

statements about the need for free and open immigration and an end to all nation-based war machines.

In contrast, the GNU Manifesto³ is the product of one man only, Richard Stallman, with footnote edits available based on his own conversations with others in the FSM since its original publication. The document provides close points of comparison to *Where We Stand* because Stallman also provides theoretical rationale for the movement's approach as well as specific responses to commonly leveled arguments against the philosophy. Even though the GNU manifesto is not a community approved document in the same way that *Where We Stand* is created and shaped by ISO members collectively, each document attempts to encapsulate the essence of each movement's philosophy and rationale. I will compare each movement's positions on community building and my conclusion will suggest gaps in the FSM's approach to social development that *Where We Stand* illuminates.

Socialism, Software, and Community

Regardless of one's access point to the history of economics and capitalism, the core control tactic of division and conquering quickly becomes evident. The ISO asserts that "Capitalism ... divides workers by forcing them to compete with one another on the job market; and it is this competition that provides the ruling class with a basis to promote division of language, race, and sex" (*Where we stand*, p. 7). It is important to note that this kind of division is in addition to the obvious structural gap between owners and workers which, according to the Marxian tradition, forms the basis of both the capitalist exploitation of the worker *and* the workers' ability to unite with one another to overthrow the capitalists and gain collective control of the production systems.

Therefore, the division that the above ISO quotation is referring to is a secondary, strategically created one in which the capitalist owners understand that their most potent enemy is a coordinated, unified worker base. A divided worker base must therefore be maintained to preserve their profit extraction. A concrete example often cited by leftist historians is the concerted effort by slaveholders and their political representatives to implant animosity and tension between black slaves and the white poor during the era of slavery. Even though both racial groups were (and still are) suffering from exploitation by capitalist owners, a web of legal requirements to return fugitive black slaves and arrest anybody aiding in such endeavors effectively drove a wedge between white working poor who would be in the best position to act in solidarity with the oppressed slaves. It is this kind of internal division that prevents and dismantles meaningful communities of solidarity among those exploited by the capitalists.

Richard Stallman points out a parallel process occurring within the software development community in the Manifesto: "I consider that the Golden Rule requires that if I like a program I must share it with other people who like it. Software sellers want to divide the users and conquer them, making each user agree not to share with others. I refuse to break solidarity with other users in this way. I cannot in good conscience sign a nondisclosure agreement or a software license agreement." His comments illuminate ways in which the legal regime of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) mimics legal and social barriers erected to divide working class people since the beginning of capitalism. In other words, he is implying the parallel functioning of the, say, the fugitive slave laws of the 19th century and the NDAs which coders today are forced to sign in order to work for a closed-source software development group, such as Google or IBM. Both documents illustrate how this kind of legal regime creates tangible, non-trivial barriers to building meaningful communities of solidarity out of which people can mount meaningful challenges against the creators of laws for personal gain and envision alternative ways of working and living together.

Stallman's use of historically socialist terminology such as *breaking solidarity* underscores the degree to which the principles of effective social action drive any successful change effort, regardless of its scope or historical connections. It would seem reasonable to conclude that both

3 Accessed via gnu.org: <http://www.gnu.org/gnu/manifesto.en.html>

the ISO and Stallman's FSM embrace the reality of this method of social manipulation on the part of capitalists and have thought carefully about bulwarks against such tactics. What, then, is Stallman's contribution to the software community by echoing socialist critiques of capitalist power structures?

He plays the role of a Jeremiah to the hackers of today by illuminating the central role that NDAs play in curtailing and manipulating the kinds of relationships that are possible (i.e. legal) within our development communities. This observation pushes coders today to conceptualize the ways in which the NDA regime should be seen as more than just a hassle for productivity-oriented coders who would like to be able to freely move from project to project and share insights and lessons with new teams as their careers develop. Social manipulation on a sector, and indeed, economy-wide scale is so often masked by the individual orientation with which many of us approach our daily lives and our work. Community members like Stallman and the great socialists such as Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky play the tiresome role of coaxing their *own communities* to think more broadly about how a given member's tension with her employer over a particular clause in an NDA agreement are actually symptoms of a deep and impenetrable wedge that has been intentionally driven in between a coder and her community.

A holistic read of Stallman's Manifesto underscores how adamantly he connects his critiques of any one problematic aspect of the software development field (such as NDAs) to the need for a complete and total change to how we relate to one another in society. In this way, he transforms himself from an internal agitator against the frustrating aspects of his particular field to a revolutionary who happens to have experience in software development and thus has the highest impact within that particular community.

In fact, Stallman is clear in the Manifesto how his vision for the software development community is consistent with a harmonious way of relating that extends to the entire society. He explains: "In the long run, making programs free is a step toward the post-scarcity world, where nobody will have to work very hard just to make a living. People will be free to devote themselves to activities that are fun, such as programming, after spending the necessary ten hours a week on required tasks such as legislation, family counseling, robot repair and asteroid prospecting." Just as programming is intrinsically *fun* for some, Stallman broadcasts a philosophy of society that clearly embraces the goal of extending the chance to experience joy in one's work to all fields. He also offers his own version of the common socialist community structure in which individuals have tasks to perform on behalf of the larger society but which do not become consuming; one should, according to Stallman and the ISO, be able to go asteroid prospecting *and* write Emacs extensions without experiencing complete exhaustion. He has used his experience in the micro-community of software developers to fashion a political agenda that has relevance to people in all fields.

The ISO provides a similar vision for a society in which the capitalist accumulation drive is transformed into a system that can meet the needs of all people: "The constant pressure on individual capitalists to outsell their competitors on the market creates a constant drive for innovation that was unheard of in previous societies; we are awash in wealth that, if used rationally, could provide everyone with adequate food, shelter, education and sanitation." The ISO's statement about the malignant nature of hyper competitive forces in global capitalism, once again, dovetails with Stallman's critique of the more limited software development industry: software companies' drive to place profit over community ultimately results in a grotesque inequity of access to basic resources necessary for life. By overcoming these capitalist forces through incremental reforms aimed at social revolution, a society of equity of access to basic needs becomes within reach.

While both the ISO and the FSM share a commitment to a more just society based on a transcendence of the eroding forces of capitalism, his position as a coder in 1985, when most of the members of that community were white and male, likely led to the woeful lack of attention he paid to the dangerous dynamics endemic to white patriarchal systems. The ISO's interpretation of

the downfall of the labor movement in the American North post slavery is illuminating in this regard. *Where We Stand* describes how “racism (as well as xenophobia) also persisted in the North. The main trade unions often refused to organize Blacks (except sometimes in segregated locals) and immigrant workers (in many cases, also women workers), disfiguring the labor movement and rendering it unable to resist the bosses’ attacks.”

This historical insight, if appended to Stallman's Manifesto, would add an overlooked dimension to his vision for a more humane software community—that of the need to build not only free and sharing communities, but to build communities where people of all backgrounds and experiences in the capitalist system can harmoniously collaborate to create new realities. Of course, such an overlooked dimension is not unique to the software community; even ultra-leftist groups struggle to transcend the divisiveness of American identity politics and the interpersonal difficulty of unpacking one's own internal *racisms* and *biases*. The software community, while not unique in this global sense, is particularly susceptible to insulation from this dimension of the community building process because there are so few women and folks from low-income backgrounds in the Linux and open source community. Conversations around these issues may feel wholly foreign and disconnected from what is going on in any particular project such that a call for even a 'conversation' might receive very little attention. It thus becomes the challenge of the next wave of coders to wrestle with the barriers within the community and innovate new approaches to building development communities comfortable to a range of members.

In conclusion, both the ISO and Mr. Stallman's visions for a new society carry with them the weight of some of history's great humanitarians and creative thinkers. While the grandiose language of *revolution* and *anti-capitalism* feel extreme and, perhaps, even outlandish, the users of these terms themselves have provided road maps and moral foundations upon which progress toward the realization of these grand visions becomes a palpable reality.