

Free software \neq Open source¹
(I wish I could always read the source)

1. It's all about politics – a methodological matter is not an objective

Software and hardware choices are generally thought as bare technical, on the contrary they're absorbed in politics and normally people don't even realize it. Open source and Free Software are two different political movements, even if both agree to the same practical recommendations and in this direction they often work together, both potentially share a similar free-trade approach to economy (in background or in foreground), their political issues are not even similar: *different names convey different ideas*².

A readable source code in a software is a methodological matter, pointing out that no code is written starting from scratch, we should then consider the objective: the everlasting chance to read the code.

But a simply readable code (which is a tool for Free Software movement, an achievement for Open Source) doesn't grant this objective. It's a matter of intellectual property: software barely licensed as Open Source for instance, can be mixed up with proprietary software, and the result wouldn't be available as Open Source anymore.

The birth of the name Open Source in 1998 with the opening of the Netscape code, sealed the rising of compromises between a part of the Free software communities with proprietary software, market, mighty companies and the rules of neo-liberism. The silent «civil war»³ of Licences began⁴.

¹ Title is due to a paragraph of Ippolita, *Open non è free. Comunità digitali tra etica hacker e mercato globale*, Milano, Elèuthera, 2005, p. 41.

² <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-software-for-freedom.html>

³ M. Berra, A. R. Meo, *Libertà di software, hardware e conoscenza. Informatica solidale 2*, Torino, Bollati-Boringhieri, 2006, p. 210.

2. A Licence is the passport towards future

Some guidelines, that allow open source and proprietary software to mix up, were adopted and elucidated by the *Open Source Initiative*⁵. Against this pragmatism, purists as Richard Stallman rose up denouncing the way open source would be used to get rich stepping over competitive trading system and obviously defeating any cooperational logic⁶.

One of the most important step in the history of Free Software (and The Free Software Foundation, born in 1985) is the release of GPL⁷ (GNU/General Public License) in 1989, a peculiar licence often described as “viral” (or rather a vaccine?), whose purpose is to permit an everlasting freedom to read, modify, improve and distribute any development in the code demanding that any change is released under the same licence.

Opposers of the Free Software often criticize this point of the licence as a lack of freedom, but its aim is precisely to fit the concept of freedom, strictly connected with the idea of equality, as a grant that nobody should be debared from any right, neither when the motivation is disguised as a free-trade issue.

⁴ For an overview: <http://www.gnu.org/licenses/license-list.html>, <http://www.opensource.org/licenses/category>.

⁵ Open Source Definition: <http://www.opensource.org/docs/osd>

⁶ Richard M. Stallman, *Software libero, pensiero libero*, Roma, Stampa alternativa, 2 vv., 188-218 pp., available at the url: <http://www.stampalternativa.it/>

⁷ A comment of Richard Stallman on the last version of this licence, called GPLv3 and compatible with Apache License is available at <http://gplv3.fsf.org/rms-why.html>, last changes on the draft: <http://gplv3.fsf.org/gpl3-dd4-rationale.pdf>.

3. The objective: freedom

The adjective Free in Free software is not used as a matter of money or price, as in free beer, but in the meaning of free speech. Selling free software or assisting users is allowed.

There's no issue against free-trade, but a self-defence for users, where a user is not only considered as an unconscious illiterate (as proprietary software wants us to be), on the contrary an open source code allows a different approach man-machine. A man is not a user, just overwhelmed by worries about his personal privacy and freedom, but a potential developer, coder, hacker, or someone who can contribute to the community testing, writing documentation, translating, stimulated to education, anyone has tools and can become aware of communicating to a machine and contribute to general development and knowledge.

Freedom given by open source reminds me of the popular distinction drew by Benjamin Constant on political freedom between the «Liberty of the Ancients» and the «Liberty of the Moderns». Free software allows us not just to enjoy free and protected spaces from any other's interference (civil rights), but allows us to participate, to influence directly any software we need, without letting others plan our duties and needs.

4. A new organization of work

The engine of Free Software is the organization of work: not a closed and hierarchical model as in proprietary software (due to company organization, a model similar to a factory), or just a closed participation for an élite, but a bazaar⁸, where an anarchist system permits self-regulation of exchange and development between thousands of coders, working as craftsmen: a system of homeostasis is possible through models of gift economy and cooperation in communities⁹.

5. Concept of culture

This peculiar perspective arose with the hacker movement, imbued with libertarian culture, self-education, the accuracy possible only with passion; all this call to mind some of the features of culture for Gramsci. In a *für ewig* perspective: self-discipline, awareness, socialization of culture, and, in a wider view, Free Software influences not just bytes, but its revolutionary push with the concept of copyleft¹⁰ invades other fields of culture afflicted by insane rules of copyright.

*The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying This is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society*¹¹.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 1754.

⁸ E. Raymond, *The cathedral and the Bazaar*, Cambridge (Mass.), O'Reilly, 1999, the url: <http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/>

⁹ M. Berra, A. R. Meo, *Libertà di software...* cit., pp. 163-200.

¹⁰ Copyleft is a concept of permission of author: <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/>

¹¹ J. J. Rousseau, *Origine della disuguaglianza*, traduzione a cura di Giulio Preti, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1994, p. 72, english version: <http://www.constitution.org/jjr/ineq.htm>.