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Techno-activism and free software: Tools for the renovation of political action.

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Abstract:

For some considerable time now, the practice of developing and creating Free Software has been the centre of attention for studies related to economics, knowledge production, law and the legal and intellectual property framework. However, the practice that constitutes this initiative also means a call to rethink current forms of political action and the in-depth meaning of what we understand by “political”. This constitutes the field that we have called techno-activism. Along these lines we propose a particular reading of the political challenge that is Free Software from the standpoint of Hardt and Negri’s theoretical work (2000) and we put forward various contributions – regarding the organization, agents and the form of political action- which as we consider, poses a crisis for traditional proposals and urges us to renew our way of relating to information and the exercise of government in our current societies.

Keywords: Free Software, technoactivism, biopolitics, information, Michael Hardt, Toni Negri, Empire, Multitude, organization, political agents, political action.

We have to write a new generalised oath to the sciences as a whole, as all wise men have responsibilities of creation. They may swear it or not, it is their free choice. The one that writes it will open a new millennium.

Michel Serres (1994)

Introduction: Free Software as a political practice

The main transformation caused by the massive implementation of Internet in our day-to-day lives has not been, precisely, in the field of information transfer. We have to look

for it, to the contrary, in the field of imaginary (Flichy, 2001). Internet is above all a promise: of freedom and cooperation (Lévy, 1995). And if there is a paradigmatic practice of such a promise, it is the search for and promotion of Free Software. “Free” not because we wish for something for nothing (in relation to a price, a value or a measure), but because we are dealing with a particular concept of freedom in virtual environments. Hence the concept of “Free Software” refers to the irrevocable right to run, copy, distribute, study, modify and improve such software. A right which materializes in four specific practices: a) the freedom to run a program for any conceivable purpose; b) the freedom to study how the program works and adapt it to the needs of any user; c) the freedom to redistribute copies of the program and in this way help others; and d) the freedom to improve the program and put these improvements within reach of all and every community. [1.]

If we look back at the decade of the sixties, the moment when the computing phenomenon began, we can see that the concept of “Free Software” did not exist. Simply put: all software was free. Computer programs and their source codes (codes written by programmers and which are essential if we wish to know the internal functioning of the program) circulated freely among Internet users, who at the time were limited to small groups of academics and researchers. Developments were taken advantage of and reused by others, who improved them and, once again made them available to the rest. This way, a specific work became a group benefit and a tacit community of cooperation was set up which permanently generated innovation. The Unix project, the first multi-user and multi-task operating system that was based on respecting open code (source), was the paradigm of this logic. [2.]

The appearance of personal computers changed the situation. Private companies appeared which developed software and marketed licences to use it. Concealing the source code meant that other companies or programmers were prevented from knowing how it worked, the participation of users in its innovation and development was eliminated and all other uses other than simply running the program were prohibited. At the same time the user was forced to pay for updates or improvements, an activity that remained firmly in the hands of the company alone. Nowadays, most software that is used and distributed is of this type. [3.]

The Free Software movement is a reaction against this situation and vindicates the conditions under which telematics was born. In the extract below from the manifesto that Richard Stallman prepared to publicise his project we can see these pretensions clearly:

“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. The fundamental act of friendship among programmers is the sharing of programs; marketing arrangements now typically used essentially forbid programmers to treat others as friends. By working on and using GNU rather than proprietary programs, we can be hospitable to everyone and obey the law. In addition, GNU serves as an example to inspire and a banner to rally others to join us in sharing. Once GNU is written, everyone will be able to obtain good system software free, just like air. Complete system sources will be available to everyone. As a result, a user who needs changes in the system will always be free to make them himself, or hire any available programmer or company to make them for him. Users will no longer be at the mercy of one programmer or company which owns the sources and is in sole position to make changes. Finally, the overhead of considering who owns the system software and what one is or is not entitled to do with it will be lifted.”

<http://www.gnu.org/gnu/manifesto.html>). [4.]

Many authors (Rullani, 2005; González-Barahona, 2004) have centred their work on analysing how the Free Software movement forms a challenge and essentially economic confrontation with the large computer corporations. But we can see from the above that the movement is much more than just this. It recovers the promise of freedom and cooperation that Internet once meant and in its day-to-day practices and ways of doing things amounts to a phenomenon of political action. Free Software is computing and economics, of course, but above all it is politics. The use of Free Software refers to carrying out practices that challenge the politics and control operations of the very phenomenon of globalisation. [5.]

In fact, in this article we will show that the practices associated with Free Software mean a renovation of traditional political action. A renovation which is characterised by: a) putting information and communication technologies at the centre of such action and b) constituting a potential that challenges and answers the new forms of political control that appear with the phenomenon of globalisation. We have called this aforementioned renovation techno-activism. To understand the complex challenge that Free Software means to recent forms of control and power we refer to the work of Hardt and Negri (2000) on the political condition of our immediate present. [6.]

I.- The deployment of imperial biopolitics

The literature on the phenomenon of globalisation is extensive. Nevertheless, there is something lacking in it: there are hardly any studies on the political condition of the same. And much less any analysis that shows the connection between said condition and the growth of technologies of information and communication. In 2000, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri published a work entitled *Empire* that attempted to put a clear delimited face to the political dimension of globalisation. [7.]

Empire describes a global form of sovereignty. This is not based on borders or fixed barriers. Neither does its activity refer to any metropolis or dominant class, its domination is decentralised and de-territorialized. For the same reason, there is no identity linked to the power centre which is unitary and a basic point of reference. The concept of Empire refers to hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges by means of adaptable command networks. But the most important thing is that it attempts to give rise to an action which not only governs a territory and a population but also lays down the conditions to create reality. That is, Empire creates the world in which it lives itself. Therefore, it is a concept which describes a governing action which is, above all, ontological. The most remarkable effect of such an operation is shown in the area of life. Empire not only regulates human interaction, it aspires to a direct government of human nature, a total domination of social and biological life. In this sense, in the Empire the creation of value and wealth are connected with biopolitical production. And this takes its form in the paradigmatic rationality of government. As the authors admit, their proposal develops, to its greatest extent, the notion of biopolitics put forward decades before by Michel Foucault (1976). [8.]

Biopolitics is a notion developed by the author to describe the programme or rationality of government that emerges with the liberal project. This possesses two differentiated but narrowly linked dimensions. On the one hand it refers to acting on the body as a machine. In this sense it points to the development of a disciplined order and the

emergence of a normalization society (Michel Foucault, 1975). And on the other hand, it refers to acting on the body as a species, that is the production of truth regimes which allow for the government of human populations. The most paradigmatic example put forward by the author is sexuality (Michel Foucault, 1976). Hence, in the biopolitics of Empire the first aspect loses relevance in favour of the management or government of human multitudes. [9.]

Given the above, we should not make the mistake of thinking that this new form of sovereignty or rationality is imposed and exercised by means of macro cultural processes or states which are on a higher level than our day-to-day life. On the contrary. If there is anything interesting and novel about the notion of Empire it is, precisely, the lack of distinction between the micro and macro dimensions of reality. In fact, there would be no difference at all. Day-to-day life refers to small groups, practices and relationships that do not hold a lesser extension than any other formation that is, a priori, much larger, such as, the city, the state or the family. Given that the object of Empire's action is social life in its entirety, it refers, actually, to an operation, which nests or manifests itself in a multitude of small practices and formations which extend everywhere. But, what does such a practice or operation consist of? Of something very simple: in the deployment of a continuum with three completely dependent but differentiated phases. Firstly we have the inclusive phase. Any aspect of social life is taken without differentiation, and a homogenous homothetic space is created. This will be a common space for communication. In this space all people, things and relationships are equal. Secondly we have the differential phase. In this phase differences are highlighted as long as they are in the exclusively cultural field. If such differences refer only to a cultural dimension then they are therefore contingent, variable and in short, not transcendent. All references to differences of an ontological, political, economic nature etc are eliminated. Lastly, we have the administration of such differences: they are managed, ordered and therefore controlled. As Hardt and Negri (2000: 242) point out, one of the novelties that Empire contributes is that it is based on a permanent state of exception. Differences are administered by means of intervention which is always exceptional, even when it always happens. The establishment of this state of exception means that there are no codes or fixed guidelines for this management. They are established depending on the area of differences which are to be controlled. The criteria are, therefore, never the same. They vary: neither do we know the guidelines on variation nor the criteria on which such variation is fixed in a clear regulation. [10.]

Obviously, the sequence described above may be found in other administration and management practices prior to the establishment of the Empire. But the novelty of this *modus operandi* is its global dimension: in extension, as we have mentioned, it affects the whole planet; and in intension, it refers to any aspect of our social lives. We are dealing with total biopolitics! [11.]

The Empire feeds on the multitude

But Empire is only one of the terms of a relationship; on the other side we have the Multitude. Here we are dealing with a choice between one or the other. We do not have an Empire or a Multitude. No way! We have an Empire and a Multitude: a set. And we have a fear, a fear of the threat that the Multitude poses. Because this set, although it may sound paradoxical, is not a dichotomy. We are not offered two terms which look one another in the eye. Empire is a practice or operation which is defined by and thanks to the Multitude, to its exploitation and, at any moment, the Multitude might overwhelm

it. But, what exactly is the Multitude? [12.]

Firstly it is a name for the immanent, for that moment when people are liberated from transcendence and recognise that reality is something produced by themselves. Secondly, it is the name of this productive action. The Multitude is always creative and in movement. Multitude and working class is not the same. The latter is limited by the point of view of production and by that of social cooperation (it refers to some producers, workers who share a space, a consciousness...). When we speak of the exploitation of the Multitude by the Empire we are speaking about the exploitation of the cooperation of singularities, not the exploitation of individuals, of their work or their cooperation. The set of singularities that make up this group, the networks of these networks, is exploited... In the exercise of this exploitation there is no generation of individuals, all identical and equal. Empire deals with a more basic exploitation, which does not demand the constitution of a great apparatus which, while exploiting, also generates individuality. Hardt and Negri distance themselves from the Marxist notion of modern exploitation: the exploitation of individuals or agents. When Marx speaks of this exploitation he is speaking of industrial and objective production, not of cooperation. Thirdly the Multitude is, in Nietzschean concepts, the willingness of power, it expands, and it overwhelms its own frontiers, its own irruption or emergence. And above all, it acquires body, it becomes flesh, it expresses itself materially: in certain social movements, practices of resistance... Fourthly, the multitude is an event, irruption of the unexpected or contingent in the ordered space of the Empire. And additionally, in spite of what we might imagine, the multitude does not speak of multiplicity. A multiplicity is the sum, no more, of various elements, for example, we could enumerate red.. and car... and 35 and... a... and the white book... and... This is a multiplicity. But in the multitude there is a unity or plan which groups all of these elements together. This plan has to do with creation, with the fact that out of all these elements something appears which groups them together in a very novel way. [13.]

But above all, the Multitude, just like the Empire, is an operation, but not one of capture or exploitation. The important thing about the Multitude is that, as we have seen, it brings together singularities. Singular is that which we do not share, that which makes us unique, irreducible... And the multitude allows the singular to co-operate or work together. How is this possible? Thanks to the appearance of a middle ground in which such singularities meet, in this third space they share something and a meeting takes place. This space is a transformation; it is much more than the forms of each singularity. This meeting on something is novelty, creation, and the surprise which nests in the Multitude. Therefore, co-functioning, and a certain trans-formation are the moments of this. Hence, the Multitude is more than multiplicity: a meeting that respects singularity, but which also contributes the value of novelty and creation. This value is desired and exploited by the imperial form. [14.]

And, precisely, information is a field of play on which the Empire-Multitude tension is played out with special interest. On this field, as we will show below, a practice which we have called techno-activism is defined and manages to renovate traditional political action. [15.]

II.- Techno-activism: the renovation of political action.

As we have mentioned above, the appearance of personal computers transformed an initial situation of complete cooperation into one of absolute competition. Suddenly, the

world of information was commercialised and access to goods that up till then had been free, collective and unlimited was capitalised. Justifying such action on certain patent laws, what is known as Corporative, Proprietary or Private Software arose. With it came a blocking of creative processes and cooperation, the exploitation of what had once been the fruit of an entire community, the restriction of global benefits which had before been open and the appearance and privilege of certain owners above that of a great mass of users and consumers. The constant creation which had arisen previously from a Network (albeit small) of endless, unrepresentable and self-organized cooperation of singularities; now by means of a profitable operation facilitated by property laws and restrictive patents became a scarce resource owned by a few: just a few corporations (with time, basically just one monopoly: Microsoft) that subsumed what was social in capital in order to administer it. And in such a way that the only freedom left was that of the choice, in exchange for money, of running one product or another. With this panorama as a historical backdrop, the GNU project ("*GNU is Not Unix*") and the Free Software movement appeared in 1984, promoted by Richard Stallman, with the aim of creating an operating system completely based on open code. [16.]

Then a space for work and cooperative practices opened up in which people could relate to others without giving up their singularity and where the sharing of such a heterogeneity of experiences and knowledge fostered the emergence of creativity. Forms of work that continued in Free Software project development. Hence from an unexpected error of software programming, from pure immanence and chance, came the occasion to join together, to sum, cooperate, transform; to operate, in short, as "Multitude". In this way Free Software becomes an unlimited, free and public good which arises out of group creativity and cooperation. And in this operation of planetary cooperation it is impossible to point to a central or proprietary command. A representation. So that in this self-organised "Multitude" there is no law, no contract, no rules that articulate it further than itself and its own action. The simple freedom of choice mentioned above is replaced by freedom of action. And to achieve this, this type of Software is articulated in terms of Copyleft licence, which in the form of the GPL licence (General Public Licence), acts as an "infrastructure of free excess" (Holmes, 2003) favouring development, growth and circulation freely. Ensuring its survival and expansion at the same time as protecting it from capture and domination by intellectual property, patent and Copyright laws. It protects it without limiting it, preserving its use rather than its ownership, guaranteeing its liberties rather than restricting them, and ensures its growth thanks to the circulation of knowledge, favouring contagion and the constant sum of forces. [17.]

But in spite of this there are attempts to impose control and regulation upon this creative practice. A clear example is the attempt to create an European regulation on software patents. This tried to prohibit the use of patented ideas or codes even if they had been "discovered" or created by means other than those registered. Such a regulation may be conceptualised as a constitutive practice of what we have referred to as imperial operations. Firstly it is presented as something absolutely inclusive, in extension and intension: its aim covers social life as a totality, as a whole. And, secondly, it is formulated in order to govern, and at the same time, to become the only possible condition for the emergence of this social reality. In the terms of Hardt and Negri, we are facing biopolitical actions based on the management of information.[18.]

However, the Free Software movement may be understood as a multitude which overwhelms such operations as the above. To do so it is essential to establish a global

group network of cooperative work. A network which is governed by common benefit and interest. Where something is given (time, work, etc..) and shared in order to produce a third distinct inaugural space (in the form of the software itself, in the program, but also in the social network in which it arises) which will allow a relationship between those involved. A space to connect, transform and then generate novelty. Hence, from each of the singularities that make up this multitude a totality is generated which materializes in something as immaterial as software. This is the expression of a meeting that causes, among other things, two great social effects that are worth mentioning. Firstly, the redefinition of meanings and the reopening of certain political debates on the notions of “public”, “free” or “ownership”. And secondly, it shows that the hegemonic regulations and practices that rule us are contingent, are open to change and may be repoliticised. [19.]

Therefore, Free Software is something more than just a program or a grammar describing sequences of instructions open to the public. It constitutes an exercise in disaffection which enables the creation of other worlds of experiences –a non-state public sphere as an author such as Virno (2003) would say- that are considered inappropriate and cannot be appropriated by means of these Imperial operations which are patent, proprietary software or Copyright licences. Free Software is, above all, an affirmative action which blocks cooption and appropriation of its productive forces by networks of intellectual property thanks, precisely to the permanent public circulation of the same. And it is possible to understand this as an auto-institutive practice of lines of flight which seek to diffract some of the dominant biopolitical logic. In other words, the political merit and the novelty of the GNU/Linux system lies especially in the socio-technical mechanisms which are brought into play by its development and use, which are able to generate conflict and force which can repoliticise the field of information and communication. [20.]

We have called this action techno-activism. This concept brings together these “multitude” operations which overwhelm what is deployed by the Empire in its exercise of global political domination. But we argue that it possesses a characteristic which differentiates it from other possible resistance and protest operations: information. We are facing actions or operations which are deployed in and from the management of information and communication technology. For this reason we believe that the Free Software movement is a paradigm of techno-activism. It possesses the power to redefine some of the traditional dimensions of political action (Callén, 2006). Let us look at some of the most important. [21.]

a) The appearance of new organizational figures

Free Software projects allow knowledge and functionality to be articulated with an ease that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. It deals with generating a common production thanks to the deployment of an open network structure which is distributed where a productive tension between what is common (projects, tools, products, etc.) and what is singular (materials, time, spaces, knowledge and skills, etc.) arises. But this tension, rather than being a problem is seen as the condition which enables the emergence of the aforementioned common work. Each participant or local community functions as a node connected to other nodes in the network and whose work points to particular local conditions, while also being immersed in global action and production of group knowledge. In such a way that the singularity of each locality is not denied or annulled to foster a supposed final unity, but rather is reinforced by feedback with the

return of the collective product in which it has been partially involved. This type of work breaks with the notion of centre-periphery, or hierarchy, command or status; because each part which is involved is equivalent to the rest (in an epistemological sense) but such equality comes from, precisely, the difference, the specific nature and irreducible singularity of each part. Hence the traditional distinction between developer-producer-active subject and user-receiver-passive object is diluted in favour of a network of political agents with distributed co-responsibilities. [22.]

b) Redefinition of agents and political subjects

The above organizational system means, also, the definition of a new political subject. The idea of an identity which is closed, homogenous and stable in terms of its attitudes and commitments, as a form of privileged organization for political action which aspires to generate lasting effects in space and time is replaced by one of agencies which articulate “one with another“ to achieve specific aims. They do not renounce at any time their own singularity. They connect and operate thanks to the “between”, to that preposition which gives them meaning (Whithead, 1925). The “between” keeps them separate and distinct, but at the same time links them. It allows a constitutive, creative difference to arise, which allows groups to include, simultaneously, what is common and what is multiple. Techno-activism exploits the possibilities of action thrown up by group articulation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 1992; Haraway, 1991, 1992). It shows us that the networked, hybrid, partial, and unnecessary connections between singularities are viable and that, by means of such collective work, can generate wide-ranging effects. [23.]

Techno-activism and the Free Software movement are good examples of this, and vindicate what some authors have called “post-identity politics” (Mouffe, 1992; Haraway, 1995). This points to the fact that the fragmentation, incompleteness and plurality of emerging identities does not necessarily mean a loss in political capacity. Quite the opposite, by betting on partial or temporary identifications which articulate and connect us momentarily in common socio-technical projects means accepting cooperation and co-functioning between the heterogeneity of human -and non-human-singularities as the central productive element of political action. [24.]

c) Rejection of teleological action

Techno-activism shows us that there are other organizational forms which produce political effects and other subjects which are susceptible to engaging in political action. And as a consequence, it also redefines the notion of political action itself. [25.]

The classical concept of political action (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) calls for deployment and engagement in teleological action programmes which are shared by a group. At the same time it calls for the need to establish a regulatory dimension in this action which should guide its development, ensuring proper compliance and equal engagement on the part of all those involved. Against this notion, techno-activism assumes that a new political subject, articulated in organizations which are not strictly hierarchical, does not aspire to the above. On the contrary, their objective is diffraction (Haraway, 1992). This means irruption, transformation, decomposition, opening up the status quo in a multitude of differentiated possibilities, even if this should be based on a miniscule feature or characteristic. [26.]

We argued above that techno-activism possesses the potential to reinvent the field of political action. This does not mean that its project is assured success and triumph. It simply implies that there is a new promise in our reality. Its success depends on all of us. And especially on the relationship that we establish with this atom that constructs, day by day, such reality: information. Our future depends on the contract we enter into with it. [27.]

III.- Conclusions: The Informational Contract

Many centuries ago the growth of cities and nation-states forced us to rethink the basis of human relations. It was the era of the social contract. Two decades ago, ecological problems and environmental disasters led the philosopher Michel Serres to propose to the United Nations the need to think in-depth about our relationship with nature. He put forward to the world the need for a natural contract. Along similar lines the Free Software movement, in particular, and what we have called more generally techno-activism, point in the direction of a reflection on our relationship with information. They point to the possibility of an Information contract. [28.]

Contract is a word which comes from Latin and means “rope”. Contracts are the ropes which connect, unite and tie up the conditions for a more convenient life. Just like the social and natural contracts the Information contract aspires to lay down the conditions for a more liveable world. By considering the practices and ways of life which tell us, precisely, of how what is given *may* be another distinct thing. We consider there are three great issues on its agenda. [29.]

Firstly it would redefine the notion of technology itself. Habitual political practices usually use a completely “technocratic” concept of the political-technological relationship. This understands that the former is merely a set of values and projects which the latter materializes as a mere tool at its service, drive belt which does not produce any distortion and represents a true picture. In the face of this concept, it is possible to vindicate an image of technology as a poetic and creative dimension, a mediator (Latour, 1999; 2002). Constitutive of what we are constituted by what we do. In fact, “what we call “technologies are the ways of ordering our world” (Winner, 1987). [30.]

The Information contract shows us that we have always been faced by a process of mutual domestication between the human and the technological the result of which erases all traces of any fiction about independent and alien origins. Technology is incorporated into our routines and everyday habits, of course, but these are also transformed and adapted by the artefacts which surround us. [31.]

The second issue deals with a set of principles which recognise that information allows us to establish connections between absolutely heterogeneous entities, which are multiple and different from each other (between humans and non- humans, machines and organisms, lay persons and experts, physical things and virtual things, local and global...). Such hybridisation frees us from the modern dichotomies which have so marked our knowledge and social practice. Here we are referring to the individual-group, masculine-feminine, human-technological, culture-nature tensions, etc. The mixture, the absence of clear limits, rather than a problem of functioning, would operate as a preventative mechanism against totalitarian temptations. As Haraway (1991, 254) argues:

“The cyborg is our ontology, it provides us with our politics...” “its struggle is against perfect contamination, against the single code which translates all meanings perfectly. It insists on noise and supports pollution, taking delight in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine” [32.]

Lastly we would recognise that our relationship with information, as in the political proposal of Free Software, produces constitutive affirmative potential that is, it allows groups, proposals and ideas to emerge, which, in their creative character, pose a challenge to the market’s regulatory operations and the global economy. Creation is subversion, a challenge and a transformation of the status quo. But it should not be understood as an anti-power operation or reactive contra-power, but rather it talks of overwhelming power. In the same way we should not think that the Information contract rejects technology, the law or the global situation... No way! Its proposals are simpler: our relationship with information allows for the creation of and generation of more liveable worlds from within the limits marked by the aforementioned. [33.]

In its desiderata, the Information contract states that it does not promise utopia, something unreachable, a brave new world. It simply argues that social change and transformation do not depend on State power nor globality, nor on thinking of the future as a promise (communist perspective) nor a disaster (post-modern Apocalypse perspective). It depends, although it may seem somewhat insignificant, on understanding the creative potential of our everyday relationship with information. And the experience of Free Software is a good example of this. [34.]

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