

Ideology, Hegemony and FLOSS: A Brief Historiography

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ABSTRACT: How ideology and hegemony enter a relationship with each other and operate at different levels of the centre and margin can be explained in multiple ways. I will try to take up just one of these ways. In this paper I will try to read a movement called FLOSS (Free, Libre Open Source Software), popularized in 2001, and see how this has tried to open up a new horizon of resistance in the field of margin-centre interrelationship as a result of which the notion of the “new narrative” has entered into new dynamics with its authors and participants. What I wish to do in this paper is to locate the FLOSS movement within the parameters of a new kind of hegemonic discourse; within the key concepts of “non litigation” and “non property”; borrowed separately from Jean Francois Lyotard and Richard Matthew Stallman respectively. While “non litigation” was often seen as a hegemonic point of no return, where the “control” would inevitably win because the formulation of the laws are outright not applicable to the ruled subject; the notion of “non property” uses this hegemonic oppression to its advantage. I will try to locate “non-property” as an advantageous moment of erasure of the centre, decentre and margin in terms of FLOSS, and its cultural impact on Digital Collaborative Authorship and see if this can lead us to the study of a new kind of a narrative; the “digital collaborative narrative”. Also if participatory authorship culture does lead us towards a new kind of narrative, what are the paradigm shifts that have taken place in the formation of this narrative? My paper will try to question such key issues in Digital Collaborative Authorship and its impact on the “New Narrative”.

KEYWORDS: Ideology; hegemony; FLOSS; new media; media technology; open source software; differend.

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“We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist. The history of nature, called natural science, does not concern us here; but we will have to examine the history of men, since almost the whole ideology amounts either to a distorted conception of this history or to a complete abstraction from it. Ideology is itself only one of the aspects of this history.”

(Marx, 28)

In order to read what we attribute as social history, it becomes inevitable to look at the process of historical and material productions, reproductions and redistributions of not just power and surplus value, but also a process of generation, appropriation and redistribution of meaning. If “ideology” was to be read as “a” political category, then perhaps this category would act more to map the society in its own terms than be mapped by social realities which exist outside ideology itself. Perhaps ideology would try to posit itself as some kind of an intellectual map within a social-political landscape. Let us start by looking at the writings of Sir Francis Bacon in *The New Organon*, as early as 1620:

“Those who have taken upon them to lay down the law of nature as a thing already searched out and understood, whether they have spoken in simple assurance or professional affectation, have therein done philosophy and the sciences great injury. For as they have been successful in inducing belief, so they have been effective in quenching and stopping inquiry; and have done more harm by spoiling and putting an end to other men’s efforts than good by their own. Those on the other hand who have taken a contrary course, and asserted that absolutely nothing can be known — whether it were from hatred of the ancient sophists, or from uncertainty and fluctuation of mind, or even from a kind of fullness of learning, that they fell upon this opinion — have certainly advanced reasons for it that are not to be despised; but yet they have neither started from true principles nor rested in the just conclusion, zeal and affectation having carried them much too far.”

(Bacon, Author’s Preface 1)

In his writings, he makes a clear distinction between “belief” and “inquiry”. What is crucial here is the fact that Bacon saw “beliefs” as something deeply rooted in people’s minds. He asserted that those who firmly carried such beliefs, trusted entirely to the “force of their beliefs” and made no effort towards hard thinking, perpetual working and exercise of the minds. His argument tends to reach the lines of a binary; that between belief without proof and hard work which comes with documented evidence. Perhaps this is an instance where Bacon was trying to talk about an early notion of ideology, where a system of belief prevailed, rather strongly, without a demand of falsifiable proof embedded in it. Antoine Destutt de Tracy first coined the term “ideology” in 1796, and saw it as a “science of the formation of ideas”. Interestingly even around a hundred and fifty years

later, Tracy seems to be almost of the same opinion about a binary between actions born out of belief and others born out of certain concrete material reality; thus opining that the two necessarily were different.

“Let me be permitted then to mention here again, that I have reduced the whole science of logic to the observation of two facts, which result manifestly from the scrupulous examination of our intellectual operations. The first is, that our perceptions being everything for us, we are perfectly, completely, and necessarily sure of all that we actually feel. The second, which is but a consequence of that, is that none of our judgments, taken separately, can be erroneous, since, for the very reason that we see one idea in another, it must be actually there; but that their falsity, when it takes place, is purely relative to all the anterior judgments, which we permit to subsist, and consists in this, that we believe the idea, in which we see a new element, to be the same we have always had under the same sign, while it is really different, since the new element we actually see there is incompatible with some of those which we have previously seen there.”

(Thomas, 2)

However for Tracy, ideology was more of a method by which he proposed unquestionable governance and good to all. Iain MacKenzie, in his book *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* later opined that Tracy’s ideas did not find much ground during the rule of Napoleon for whom ideology was a set of false, even subversive ideas. Written during 1845-46, (published posthumously in 1932) we come across perhaps one of the most important works on ideology written collaboratively by Marx and Engels; *The German Ideology*. In this they argue that the production of ideas is directly related to the material conditions of human life. Therefore at the level of thought and conception, every human behaviour is born out of definite developments of the material relations of production.

Ideology cannot be studied in isolation without considering other key concepts such as hegemony and discourse. A Marxist understanding of ideology suggests how a set of dominant ideas in any society more often than not reflect the interests of the ruling economic class. It is from this point that we need to look at the concept of “hegemony” in order to trace the movement of ideology from a key theoretical concept to a model of social implementation. If ideology is an attempt to link a mass consciousness into a mass consent then the social and material production, dissemination and redistribution of knowledge and human behaviour often seems to acquire its status through social inequities and gives rise to not any kind, but a particular kind of consensus. This consensus is a hegemonized one. However to state that ideology is a set of “values” or a stable body of knowledge which is transmitted only from the ruling class to its subordinate classes would not only be an oversimplification, but would enter the fallacy of the concept of unidirectional movement of power; the notion which is now largely challenged by the theoreticians of the postmodern strand of political thought. In fact, in the “overdetermination” model of social reality by Althusser, there is no fixity of one-way causality of hierarchies any more. As Althusser puts it, he wishes to use the term, in the absence of anything better, both as an index and as a problem, to mean a certain kind of “cumulative internalization”(Althusser, 101). Whether Althusser finally brings in yet another linear causality in this model in some other form has been widely debated by scholars later; but that surely lies outside the scope of this debate. Althusser seems to break away from the Hegelian notion of principle by consciousness of the self, which he calls ideology, and argues that the Marxian notion of Base-Superstructure was not so much of an intention to portray a “direction” as much as indices signifying “two ends of the chain”(Althusser, 111). When Antonio Gramsci uses the term “hegemony” to describe how the state and civil society ensure a certain kind of consent from the mass and situate them to class hierarchies within the frameworks of a capitalist society, the ideology that guides the process of this situating often pre-assumes the unidirectional flow of power. Much against the notion of this unidirectional traffic, hegemony can be read as an element hung in the complex network of relationships of production of power which increasingly lack a definite centre. However the decentralization of the new centre is far from the dream of decentralization of power.

How ideology and hegemony enter a relationship with each other and operate at different levels of the society can be explained in a million possible ways. I will however try to take up just one of these ways. I will try to read a movement called FLOSS (Free, Libre Open Source Software) and see how this has tried to open up a new horizon of resistance in the field of Marxist political economy. If the word “hegemony” itself is taken from the Greek word “hegemon” meaning a leader, perhaps it signifies a certain kind of an ideological leadership; that of the dominant ruling class. In this paper, I will not look at the politics of open source, hacking and the constitution of LINUX; which however needs to be done separately; in a different capacity. What I wish to do in this segment is to locate the FLOSS movement within the parameters of a new kind of hegemonic discourse; within the key concepts of “non litigation” and “non property”; borrowed separately from Jean Francois Lyotard and Richard Matthew Stallman respectively. A “differend” is a specific case of hegemonic position of powers where in a case of conflict between two parties, the conflict fails to be resolved because similar laws may not be applicable to the parties involved in the conflict. This differend is different from “litigation” where the conflict can be resolved, at least provisionally, because the criteria for resolving the conflict can be applied to the parties involved in the conflict. For the time being we will call this concept “non litigation”. While “non litigation” was often seen as a hegemonic point of no return, where the capitalist would inevitably win not because the state and civil laws are in their hands but because the formulation of the laws are outright not applicable to the ruled subject; the notion of “non property” uses this hegemonic oppression to its

advantage. Stallman suggested that in software and coding, the control codes should be transparent to all and “free software” is one answer to a world built in code:

“We could imagine a legal practice that was different —briefs and arguments that were kept secret; rulings that announced a result but not the reasoning. Laws that were kept by the police but published to no one else. Regulation that operated without explaining its rule.”

(Stallman, 18)

FLOSS tried to read the politics of the source code as the wealth of web networks; as personal property. It was such a code where the coders (labours) could only bear witness to the insoluble dispute of rights whose demands for justice could never be satisfied because the code needed to be hidden from the mass/users for the capitalist purposes of industrial monopoly. The state/police/patent held the code and the users were forced to use only parts of the software with limited access. Stallman saw this as the classical practice of alienation and echoed Marx’s attempts to mobilise the industrial proletariat against the alienation of their own work. The ideology put forward by the General Public License (GPL) came to be seen as a discourse on counter hegemony where provisionally the notion of workers and users got redefined and one came to mean the other immediately when the source code of a software was released. Such changes culturally came with a new meaning. In this new discourse, labours were not working towards a “free market”; because the labours were not working towards a pre-defined market. Each coder could now be seen as a hacker (independent coder?) but could not be subjected to litigation policies (like earlier hackers) because the same would not be applicable to coders under open source softwares. What was created out of this movement was a different notion of property which did not obey the hegemonic rules of private property. Also the ideology that previously bound the ground rules for property usage or consumption could now be easily negated under the new circumstances. In the new system, anybody could provisionally be a coder, gamer, author, commentator, etc. Stallman calls this the notion of the “non-property” which potentially began to challenge the relationship between ideology, hegemony and discourse.

Does this mean that such counter-hegemonic innovations would result in an end of existing ideological practices? Does this mean that ideology would be less interrogative in the digital age? Does this mean that hegemony would completely work at different levels and leave the domains of Open Source Software (OSS)? Perhaps we should begin by asking questions about the continued relevance of ideological thinking in itself as well as its relationship with new hegemony. If the world is shrinking in the digital media and becoming one universal entity, then shall we still end up having competing ideologies and cultural conflicts? Or are we once again, as the classical notion of Marxist ideology would suggest, heading towards the unidirectional flow of power in terms of ideology and hegemony?

We can only anticipate finding out the nature of such future.

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