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76-101 E: Interpretation and Argument

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### Applying Open Source Philosophy to Consumerism

When one compares consumerism just a few years ago to consumerism today there is one thing in particular that stands out as a new method of consumption: buying products over the Internet. By comparing traditional consumer and market trends to those of buyers on the Internet, one can find new interpretations for the possible future of consumption. More specifically, the rising phenomenon and adoption of the open source philosophy by both consumers and corporations presents an interesting angle on one possible future for the marketplace: one in which consumers can both create demand for a product, and eventually, through combined effort, fill that demand themselves.

Before I begin to layout my argument and examine some critical views and case studies, I feel a definition of the term open source is necessary because its meaning is widely debatable. First of all, whenever I refer to products, I'm talking about *information*, designs, theories, and other intangible objects. A clear distinction must be made, however, between the inability to touch something, and the use of such a product. For example, movies and books are based purely on information, but people still consume them. A novel is useless if there is no paper to distribute it on or ink to write it with,

and similarly, software is useless without the hardware to run it. Software essentially performs a service, but like a book of recipes, it can be represented in print (unlike say a landscaping service or a therapeutic massage) and thus is termed a product. The best way to think about it is probably to equate software “product” with information, that when put on a digital device, performs a service. There are other products, like household appliances, that perform services, so this is not an unreasonable viewpoint in my opinion.

Keeping this definition in mind, Christopher M. Kelty, a professor of anthropology at Rice University, defines open source as software products which are made *freely* available to anyone through the use of special copyright licenses (503). This means that anyone can access, copy, modify, and distribute the software both legally and at no monetary cost. In a way, the philosophy itself challenges “the [modern] drive to make property out of everything, and... seemingly out of very little” (Coleman 509). Almost all open source products are made publicly available. In fact, licenses often require that any modifications or derivative works be distributed under the same shared and open premise.

Clearly, the topic of open source provides a modern and interesting perspective on consumption that intersects with some of the arguments presented by contemporary scholars and critics. I plan to contrast open source phenomena to the views of James Twitchell, Juliet Schor, and Thomas Frank. For example, Twitchell argues that consumers create the demand for products, and that this is driven by the basic human tendency towards things

(282-3). And while some corporations do contribute to the demand of open source, this is a recent addition to the already overwhelming demand generated by individuals who eventually end up using the same products. This fits perfectly into Schor's concern that consumption is becoming over-competitive and that people keep working harder only to find themselves in the same place on the social treadmill (457). Open source has become a collective response to inadequacies in the system of closed proprietary software: namely, the lack of customization, and the slow pace of system critical updates. In addition, Frank would recognize that the community of open source developers and users has broken the cycle of dissent via consumption. The dissent they are expressing is legitimate; it is not buying back into the consumer culture it is trying to critique. How could it be? Open source is free and consumers have designed the products they are using.

This falls directly in line with the beliefs of Twitchell, who feels that “[g]etting and spending [is] the most passionate, and often the most imaginative, endeavor of modern life” (290). I would argue that the future will not just be about getting and spending, but also about *designing*. In the context of open source, “getting” is the equivalent of searching for a product that already exists, and “spending” correlates well with putting in a little extra time to customize the product. And if there is no such product, why not get imaginative and design your own? Open source, and the collective development and implementation of ideas make this possibility a reality. Take for example, Mozilla's web browser, Firefox, which already has literally

hundreds of add-ons and extensions that each individual user can choose from. Because the browser is free and open source, individual users (or communities of users) who feel that a feature is lacking from the product can add it themselves and then make it available to anyone else who would like to use it. And herein lies the “passion” and ability for consumers to be “imaginative.” If people feel that things they possess have value beyond their physical use, then they must take pride in their own creations even more so. As long as this process remains a social activity, consumption (and creation) will continue indefinitely.

Interestingly enough, James Bessen, a researcher at the Boston University School of Law, claims that because such a large number of people are collaborating and working on the same project at the same time, open source software changes and improves at a rate that “far exceeds the rate of feature enhancement for comparable commercial products” (22). It is precisely this rapid product evolution that corresponds to a property that physical products have in the market. Drawing on evidence from a psychology study which shows that people are very likely to cherish items most if they are associated with positive memories, Twitchell concludes that “most of the ‘work’ of consumption occurs after the act of purchase...” and that things are “forever being assembled” (288). This is very similar to the rate at which open source projects change; one of the reasons being that developers are motivated by learning, community participation, and reputation (Bessen 22). Particular products that come to mind are used for telecommunication

(Asterisk), encryption (OpenPGP), word processing (OpenOffice), image editing (GIMP), and other related systems. A more interesting product, though, is Vores Øl, a beer whose recipe is freely usable, openly debated, modified, and improved. And the speed at which these products are changed is a testament to the dedication of the community developing them.

It is precisely this collective determination and motivation that drives the open source movement forward. And although open source exists as a direct competitor with producers of proprietary software, now some firms are even supporting and investing resources into the movement. Juliet Schor, the editor of The Consumer Society Reader and the author of her own essays on consumption, is urging the public to abandon what she terms “competitive consumption” (448). In addition, these ideals are shaped by a larger social context, “a collective, not just an individual, response is necessary” (452). Most of the solutions that Schor ends up proposing to solve these problems are radical changes to the foundation of consumer culture: government intervention in the marketplace, consumers only buying what they need, employees opting for more time off rather than increased wages, etc. Since she wrote her essay in 1999, just when the open source movement was starting to gain momentum, it is not unusual that she chose to neglect it in her discussion. But looking closer, open source embodies collaboration and cooperation rather than competition, and the communities that have formed are responding to the limited choice offered by traditional producers—precisely the conditions Schor claimed were necessary for productive change.

Just a few years ago, the software market was completely and utterly dominated by Microsoft and its products, Windows, Internet Explorer, Outlook Express, MSN, Microsoft Office, and Media Player. If you did not like what these products had to offer, you were out of luck because there was little to no other viable choice. In fact, in 2000, I was using every single one of those products, and today, I'm using only one of them. The rest have been replaced with open source equivalents. Considering that open source is still in its infancy, this is very telling that there is certainly a future for products developed in an open forum.

But some critics would puzzle at this line of reasoning, and say that because the open source movement does not represent a large part of the overall consumerist marketplace, it cannot even attempt to address some of the more basic and pressing problems facing society today: the trends towards outsourcing and foreign worker abuse, the rising gap between the rich and the poor, as well as the alarming levels with which advertising is invading public space. While there certainly is some truth to these conclusions, they are certainly not beyond the scope of the open source *philosophy*.

Admittedly, open source has not solved any of these problems, but at least it has brought some of them to the forefront of discussion, between both online communities of citizens and the corporations that previously were selling their technology overseas. Open source is actually an extension of the private market for goods, and as such offers even more choice to consumers at large. Take, for example, the efforts that lead the Peruvian government to

eventually end up using open source software for all of their systems, as studied by MIT researcher Anita Chan. Before I begin, let it be noted that while certain advocates and prominent members of the open source community would try to distance themselves from tying free software development to politics, because they feel that it could lead to a dependence on the government for support. This seems a bit silly because open source is already so successful. According to critics like Bessen, open source already has a firm rooting and staying power in the marketplace because it is also in the best interest of private corporations. Economics aside, for Peru the choice was obvious. Without the proper funds to pay for the software required to run the government smoothly, Peru's government estimated that 90 percent of its own software was pirated before the move to open source (Chan 536). According to Chan, Peru actually used the transition to open source, and the publicity surrounding the legislation, as a way to challenge the “global dynamics of power that disproportionately privileged developed national and transnational corporate interests” (536). Instead of stealing its software so that funds can be dedicated to more important projects like public health and safety, Peru adopted an open source projects. To be honest, yes, there was some initial monetary overhead in making the switch to free and open software, but the flexibility and freedom from corporate software packages gained far outweigh the initial cost as evident by the fact that other countries are following suit (Chan 533). Critics that claim open source has no effect on some of the more prominent problems of consumer society today fail to recognize cases like this

one.

Yet still, five years after the legislation proposal in Peru, some naïve critics claim that because open communities are generally liberal and frequently change, that open source is only a fad enjoyed by idealists that are motivated by altruism, and hence cannot have any long term impact on the market (Bessen 16). An appropriate question to ask proponents of these views would be exactly how did the ideals of the counter-cultural revolution come to be adopted successfully by the corporations of today, and how do the similarities to the open source movement point to a rather large market for open software developed by communities of users?

A little explanation of this question and its relation to open source is necessary to show exactly how it responds to the view that open source cannot have a large impact on the market. Thomas Frank, the founder and editor of The Baffler, a cultural-political criticism journal, addresses this question directly in his essay “Why Johnny Can't Dissent.” While the two communities are very different, the parallels between the counter-cultural and open source movements with regards to consumerism are striking. Counter-culture was a direct response to the homogeneity sponsored by corporate America in the '50s and '60s (Frank 317). People wanted to be unique. Similarly, the open source movement was motivated because the menu of proprietary software failed to cater to the unique needs of the individual user. And in addition, open source software has provided a “transposable model” for broader fields like intellectual property law and cultural studies (Coleman 509).

Imagine if everyone in the country pooled their ideas about banning smoking in public places, and perfected it into a piece of legislation that was to be presented to Congress. Eventually, every counterpoint would be adequately defended and precisely worded, and only the most poignant of examples would be included. Furthermore, since the entire community worked to write the legislation, obviously it has a huge base of support. This is essentially the same spirit and dedication programmers put into open source software, and this is precisely what led to the success of open source's adoption in Peru.

The more important similarity, however, is that not only did both philosophies challenge the ideals of the contemporary marketplace, but both were eventually adopted by corporate America. In 2002, when Frank wrote his essay, he observed that “[r]evolution,’ once the totemic catchphrase of the counterculture, has become the totemic catchphrase of boomer-as-capitalist” (322). The ideals of the movement were absorbed by the businesses and marketed back to the consumers embracing them. For instance, one can buy pre-ripped and faded jeans and other similar apparel which were once a sign of rebellion, and now are a sign of conformity and marketing. And that is the reason that Frank finds and holds that the average consumer cannot “outrun” the marketing of “cool” by staying on their racetrack (327). In contrast, corporations that invest in open source software work with consumers to make the final product. For example, the open source web server, Apache, which holds 64 percent market share is often extended and used by private firms selling traditional commodities over the web (Bessen 22). The nature of open

source, however, makes these extensions available, modifiable, and usable by absolutely anyone, despite their use to sell a different product. Corporations that choose this route, ultimately do so because of the flexibility it provides over trying to negotiate deals with privately owned companies. The key difference between this and the counter-cultural movement is that the open source community still retains its power to influence corporate decisions through software development. Both the public and private domains are cooperating to produce a highly customizable product that fills an aggregate of diverse demands.

But this *philosophy* does not solely apply to the realm of computer software. Licenses made by the GNU and the Creative Commons which were originally designed specifically for software are used in various other contexts: college courseware, music, books, and movies (Coleman 507). Theoretically, the philosophy could also be successfully applied to areas like design, marketing, and consulting. On the other hand, because of the nature of capitalism, open source philosophy would not apply well to the *production* of tangible goods such as toys or clothing. The ideas behind the goods could certainly be created by an open community. Consider a T-shirt for a high school class. If it was done under the philosophy of open source, many students would submit their original designs and they would be discussed, amended, changed, and perfected by everyone who was a potential buyer. Now there would be multiple designs that appealed to a wide variety of people, even the ones that were not artistically capable of designing their own

aesthetic shirt from scratch. Certainly people love their things, but I believe that they love *sharing* their creations even more, and that this is why open source will only continue to grow.

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