Open Office

Welcome to the Hungarian Parliament. I cannot say that this imposing building is second to none; as it is in truth the second largest parliament building in Europe, second only to Westminster in London, but certainly the largest of its kind on the continent. The size of the building reflects the preoccupation of its builders: it was meant as a compensation for the lack of a proper parliamentary system; it was all decoration like the baroque cupola on top of the fake Gothic walls. When after the defeat of the 1848-49 Hungarian revolution, Austria and Hungary finally negotiated an agreement, the compromise was based on mutual lies: according to the Hapsburg interpretation, Austria managed to secure its supremacy, keeping Hungary as an Austrian colony. In the reading of the Hungarian political elite, the compromise restored the sovereign status of the Hungarian state. The Hungarian government was not responsible to the Parliament but to the emperor, and this lack of authority and responsibility was compensated by the enormous size of the building. None of the interpretations were true: the Austro-Hungarian monarchy remained locked in a system of mutual lies that lead to the demise of the empire after World War I.

Today the government is not responsible to Parliament rather it is the Parliament which is responsible to the government that enjoys a 2/3 supermajority in the House. The Parliament once more has been turned into an ornament, a decoration, a mere theater with the Prime Minister as the director of the show. In practice, it is he who appoints the justices of the Constitutional Court, the executives of the state-owned media, the heads of the regulatory organizations, the President of the country, and his personal bodyguard to head the national counter-terrorism authority.

We should appreciate the irony that we open the open office world conference in the building that witnessed the passing of the recent law on secrecy and classification the exact procedures of which – according to the law – should remain unknown to the public. The law, introduced by the previous, socialist government, with the support of the present right-wing governing party, does not constrain the classifiers from classifying a document secret even if the publication would prevent the violation of the law or an obvious administrative mistake; even if it would preclude avoidance of market competition; or if

public access to a particular document would restore the fair name of an individual. The law does not restrict the classification of a document the publication of which would obviously be in the interest of the public more than keeping the document secret. There is no so called public interest test in the law, which restricts constitutional rights in a non-transparent, secret way. The citizens do not have the right to initiate a juridical review that would scrutinize the content of the classified document; courts have the right to review classification only from a formal point of view; weather the right stamp was put on the document.

Pervasive secrecy is not a unique Hungarian malady: the classified universe is most certainly larger than the unclassified one; this is worth to know at conference dedicated to open code. According to dark estimates, as many as a trillion pages are classified in the US alone – this would amount to the content of 200 Library of Congress. According to Peter Galison, the Harvard historian of science: "In 2001 there were thirty-three million classification actions [in the US]; assuming (with the experts) that there are roughly 10 pages per action, that would mean roughly 330 million pages were classified [in that single year alone]..By comparison, the entire system of Harvard libraries – over a hundred of them – added about 220,000 volumes (about 60 million pages). Contemplate these numbers: about five times as many pages are being added to the classified universe than are being brought to the storehouses of human learning, including all the books and journals on any subject in any language collected in the largest repositories on the planet."1

Secret documents are produced – in no small numbers – by using Open Office, at least in certain parts of the world. No so in Hungary, where despite all the efforts of the developer community and the Hungarian section of the Open Document Format Alliance (ODFA), the market share of Open Office is still barely 10 percent. According to the calculation presented by ODFA Hungary to the government, as a result of special agreements with Microsoft and the tainted public software procurement practices of the past decade, in every four years Hungary looses about $500 million, and calculating the indirect costs, the loss amounts to a billion US $ in a four year period, ie. $250 million annually. (Hungary's annual per capita GDP is $15,400.)

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1   Peter Galison, *Removing Knowledge.* In: Critical Inquiry, Vol. 31. No. 1 (Autumn, 2004) p. 230.

According to the usual, somewhat simplistic distinction, the expression "free software" carries with it a moral connotation, a motive "that is, at bottom, neither technical, nor mercantile, but moral".2 Supporters of the free software movement take Richard Stallman's view seriously that 鍍he freedom to share and modify is the most important thing, and that therefore if you stop talking about freedom, you've left out the core issue� Others feel that the software itself is the most important argument in its favor, that by sharing and the right to modify the code by the help of distributed collaboration, better solutions could be achieved. 吐or a long time�as �as Karl Fogel, author of *Producing Open source software* noted, and I quote him: 典hese differences did not need to be carefully examined or articulated but free software's success in the business world made the issue unavoidable. In 1998, the term open source was created as an alternative to free by a coalition of programmers who eventually became the Open Source Initiative, as an expression which is less ambiguous and more comfortable for the corporate world.3 As OSI explained the choice of term originally: 鍍he real reason for the re-labeling is a marketing one. We're trying to pitch our concept to the corporate world now...In marketing appearance is reality. The appearance that we are willing to climb down off the barricades and work with the corporate world counts for as much as the reality of our behavior, our convictions, and our software.4

The sad fact is , however, that sometimes appearance becomes, in fact, reality. Companies, like Sun, might have provided real and important backing for open developer communities, but big business is seldom an altruistic undertaking. When developers tie their fate and that of the code to the goodwill of a multinational company, it is not the appearance of the behavior of the developer that defines the outcome of this liaison, but the interest of the corporation. It is true, free software is not necessarily freeware; companies might charge for the additional support, services, the bundle of software. There is always the temptation to replace the open code by proprietary software. One might argue that Oracle's decision to charge money for certain Oracle Open Office products might be the sign that the company takes competition seriously, that it decided to stand behind the open office software suit, that it really wants to challenge Microsoft's

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2   See: Karl Fogel, *Producing Open source Software. How to run a Successful Free Software Project?* 2005. Accessed on 24 August, 2010. p. 7.
3   Ibid. p. 7.
4   Http://www.opensource.org/advocacy/case_for_hackers.php#marketing

office product. This is not a convincing argument, however: the history of free and open software, including Open Office.org, since the code became open in 2000, shows that open developer communities are capable of mounting successful challenge without locking-in the code, without trying – usually in vain – to convince the corporation that ideas do not count, what is important is just the technical outcome.

According to the classic definition by Harold Demsetz: "Ownership rights come into being in order to internalize the externalities when the profit of internalization exceeds its costs." While in the case of tangible goods externalities, like the pollution of the environment, or depletion of grazing fields have negative outcomes, in the case of intangible goods, externalities like the spread of knowledge have positive consequences. What in the case of tangible goods is cost, is in the case of intangible goods profit. Information and knowledge are usually non-rival public goods the consumption of which does not prevent others from consuming them. Already in the fifth century BC, the sophists in Athens recognized that one could turn knowledge into a commodity, and sell it without depleting the stock of the seller. As Jefferson wrote in a famous letter to Isaac McPherson: "He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me."

Lewis Hyde in his recent book, "Common As Air. Revolution, Art, and Ownership" argues: "The 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, I believe, served to remove the primary oppositional force that had kept free-market capitalism on its best behavior for half a century. Absent that force, the West entered a period of unabashed market triumphalism, during which many things long assumed to be public or common—from weather forecasting to drinking water, from academic science to the "idea" of a crustless peanut butter and jelly sandwich*—were removed from the public sphere and made subject to the exclusive rights of private ownership." As a close witness of the fall of Communism and the end of the Cold War, I do not quite share Hyde's thesis. Still, Hyde, without recognizing it, has a point to make, although in a way the opposite than what he intends to say.

The fall of the Communist system that had compromised the notion and the system of common property, common ownership, and public goods, makes it extremely difficult to talk seriously about alternative systems of property rights . The communist regimes

started with the appropriation of the appropriators: on the basis of the 19th, 20th century economy, the radical questioning of property rights meant the nationalization of tangible goods, the means of production, private companies. And the appropriation of tangible goods could be achieved only by the help of violent, revolutionary changes. By the end of the 20th century, the tragic consequences of such radical solutions became obvious, and we have learned that the nationalization of the means of production does not lead to the democratization of political regimes. Microsoft or Oracle cannot be turned peacefully into a public good, unlike an alternative, open operation system. But it is possible to create an alternative property regime for intangible intellectual goods, without changing the property rights regime in a radical way. Intangible, intellectual public goods can coexist with proprietary software on the market, even if the coexistence leads to grave legal, economic and political conflicts. After the collapse of the tragic communist experiment, we feel that we are not in the position to contemplate about changing the unjust property system in general; the debate about alternative intellectual property rights regime serves as a proxy for ideas of a different, more just world, where everybody has the right to get access if not to health care but at least to information about illness and health; if not to the cure of malaria, at least to the right – even in Africa – to read the journal on Malaria (which, at the moment costs $4000 annually).

Free software as an idea and a practice was born in the 1980s. The Free Software Foundation was established in 1985 around the time when the enormous costs – both human and material – of the twenties century utopias became undeniably obvious. The emergence of the free software (movement) was co-temporal with the appearance of new technologies and new ways of coordination.

The twenties century can be presented as the story of centralized, deep, continuous, violent efforts of intervention on the macro scale in order to change the world. By the 1980s the tragic experiments of the century, fascism and communism, exhausted all their human, material, and ideological reserves. Economies, based on energy- and raw material-intensive technologies, largely inherited from the time of the industrial revolution of the 19th century, gave way to economic activities which are (self)-organized in a non-hierarchical, non-centralized, alternatively coordinated, dispersed way. The

available new technology and with it the new logic of organization provided the foundation for the free software movement, which in turn offered new stimulus to the emergence of both new practices and new ways to perceive, describe, and understand those practices. Following Michel Foucault's ideas about the micro physics of power, Bruno Latour, the philosopher of science, one of the fathers of actor-network theory, wrote: "Strength does not come from concentration, purity and unity, but from dissemination, heterogeneity and the careful planting of weak ties...Resistance, obduracy and sturdiness are more easily achieved through netting, lacing, weaving, twisting, of ties that are weak by themselves, and that each tie, no matter how strong, is itself woven out of still weaker threads..."5

Activists today are not fantasizing about the coming of the revolution rather about self-organizing systems, where software developers imitate the model of ant communities following supposedly simple rules that result in unforeseen complex patterns. The emphasis is always on hybridization, the collaboration of the social, the natural and the technical, on the the lack of central organizing principles.

The emerging networks consist of both humans and non-humans; – like technology that is both constraining and enabling – the distribution of properties among these entities; the connections established between them, the circulation entailed by these attributions, distributions and connections. Not only the engaged human actors define the characteristic and logic of the collaboration; the non-human elements of the network, like technology shape the form of the interaction as well. From this perspective, in a region and especially in a country with endemic systemic corruption, the choice of Open Office instead of a proprietary software solution might, in itself help in decreasing corrupt state practices. On June 18, this year, the report by the state secretary in charge of environmental protection made public the fact that non-transparent public procurement practices that eliminate proper market competition, the exclusive use of proprietary software on the basis of privileged contracts with one single multinational corporation, inevitably lead to further corrupting the state. Still, the changes introduced by the present government this summer make public procurement even less transparent. The experience

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5   Bruno Latour, *On Actor Network Theory: A few clarifications ½*. At: www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9801/msg00019html Accessed on 4 August, 2010.

of the some of the member states of the European Union prove, however, that open standards, open document-formats, and the use of open source software might contribute, to the elimination of shady procurement practices, overpricing goods and services purchased by the help of taxpayers money.

It is safe to assume that the community behind Open Office.org should be considered a so called "concerned group". As Michel Callon, the French sociologist and theoretician of science formulated it: "A group is qualified as concerned when its formation is strongly contingent on the existence of matters of concern shared by its members". Patient organizations, like the French association of patients with muscular dystrophy (AFM) or the recent French umbrella organization, the Alliance of Rare Diseases, which comprise of more than 140 member-organizations are typical concerned groups. Concerned groups are engaged in exploring alternative worlds, as usually, the political context and/or the working of the market provide certain privileges to a relatively restricted number of scientific and technical options, so some important demands and needs are not taken into consideration. "This provides the ground for the likely emergence of groups that decide to embark on activities that will enable them to explore untried new options, to define the problems and seek possible solutions."(p. 2)

The search for alternative solutions could be perceived as collective experiments, made on us by us and for us, "in which the ratio of world to experimental set up is 1:1, with both running in real time" - as Bruno Latour stated it provocative argument. The experimentation lead from open software to the world-wide movement of open access, to open patents, open databases, to the Cape Town Declaration in 2008 on Open Education Resources, and to the fist Open Science World Summit last month in Berkeley, where the issue was opening up the laboratories, the lab notebooks, solving mathematical problems in realtime collaboration, like the "polymath project", engaging lay people in collaboration with experts in solving scientific problems, like the GalaxyZoo project of the Sloan Digital Sky Survey that crowdsources the interpretation of images captured by the Huble telescope. Instead of the so called "Public Education Model" which strictly distinguishes scientific knowledge from lay knowledge, allegedly characterized by unfounded beliefs and superstitions, alternative practices lead to the spread of the "Co-production of Knowledge Model" that eliminates the demarcation between expert and so

called lay knowledge, and "actively involves lay people in the creation of knowledge concerning them".6

The work of the open source community is important not only for moral or technical reasons. "A world in which there is great diversity of technology and goods accessible to as many people as possible is better than a world with less diversity."7

These observations, not unlike the work of open source developers look undeniably utopian, like Albert Wohlstetter's address at President Havel's "Peaceful Road to Democracy" conference back in 1990 at the moment of the peaceful and miraculous transition in East and Central Europe. Albert Wolhlstetter, who was the inspiration behind Stanly Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,* delivered his address with the title: *The Fax Shall Make You Free*. "Computers. Laptops. Modems. Fax machines. Copiers. Satellites. Flexible 'packet' networks enabling individuals to skip the bottleneck of central control to talk with each other. These have dispersed rather than concentrated information. They've been decentralizing. In the , are now the most powerful engine driving innovation and economic growth, creating world markets and reducing the costs and uncertainties of innumerable widely separated voluntary transactions. In the East, the same technologies have helped dissidents escape Big Brother's clutches. Even the Anarchist Party in the Soviet Union processors."

The fax machine – as experience shows, contrary to the expectation of the Cold War warrior - did not make us free. Technology, networks, besides feeding utopian ideas, can contribute to turning dystopias into reality. The Russian government can use the Internet to mount attacks against the critics of the regime; the Iranian authorities turn to the Internet to find those who have the courage to demonstrate against autocracy; the US government makes use of the free traffic on the Internet to identify supposed enemies of the state; the Internet enables Google to find out our hidden, secret preferences; fascists and neo-fascists in Hungary and elsewhere, use the Internet to incite, to organize racist, anti-Roma and anti-Semitic campaigns. Our use of the Internet has its dark side, the Internet, similarly to the fax machine, will not set us free.

Still, as Oscar Wilde wrote in his essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism": "A map

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6   See, Michel Callon, *The role of Lay People in the Production and Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge.*In: Science, Technology & society, 4:81 (1999).
7   Ibid. p. 410.

of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at".

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