

Beware of Open Source Absolutists

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Open Source Is Not the Same Thing as Liberation

There is a peculiar form of ideological dogmatism that has emerged within parts of the FOSS movement. Even in anarchist circles, some people seem to believe that opposition to intellectual property must take precedence over virtually every other ethical consideration. After all, if copyright, patents, and other forms of intellectual property are inherently illegitimate, then any attempt to place limits on how the things we create are used or distributed must necessarily be reactionary, right? Even when those limits are intended to protect workers, creators, and wider communities from exploitation by capital?

Anarchists do not seek to abolish one particular category of property while leaving other relations of domination untouched. Nor do we advocate stripping workers of control over the fruits of their labor in the name of an ideological dogma that ultimately has little to do with fostering anarchism.

The rise of so-called “generative AI” has made this contradiction impossible to ignore. My recent essay on this technology was criticized by some open-source diehards because, in their view, no one has the right to restrict the flow of information — even when that flow gushes directly from the minds and labor of workers and creatives into the bulging bank accounts of Silicon Valley billionaires.

To be clear: I am not opposed to free and open-source software. The forum I run (Raddle.me) was built on software (Postmill) that my cofounder released into the commons from the outset under a FOSS license. Even when fascists forked her code to spread hate and harassment, and when a scummy developer violated the license and tried to pass her work off as his own for profit, we did not respond by retreating behind a closed-source license. As anti-authoritarians and anti-capitalists, we certainly could have justified doing so when her work was being used to harm marginalized communities and enrich capitalists, but the license was kept open.

The same principle applies to my own writing. I release all of my essays freely, and I give zine-makers permission to reprint them without restriction. I believe in sharing knowledge and making creative work accessible. People have the option to donate to support my work if they want to. What I oppose is capital taking that generosity, enclosing it within a for-profit ecosystem, and turning it into another mechanism for extracting wealth from the people who created it.

This is not an argument that copyright is inherently liberatory. It is an argument that the abolition of intellectual property is *not, by itself*, liberation.

That distinction is important.

I feel compelled to take a stand against the increasingly rigid open-source absolutism that has taken hold in parts of the milieu: against the ruling class taking our collective knowledge, privatizing it, and selling it back to us. I do not consider this a pro-IP argument, but I’m sure plenty of people will disagree. It is an argument against AI slop, against the enclosure of the commons, and against allowing capital to appropriate what we produce for private profit.

Billionaires extracting enormous amounts of wealth from other people’s labor while leaving their workers and communities with exploitation, ecological destruction, and hunger is fundamentally incompatible with the anarchist rejection of hierarchy and domination. If workers and creatives individually or collectively produce something of economic and cultural value, having that work appropriated by corporations and stripped from the control of its creators is not liberation. It is simply another form of dispossession.

The capitalists vacuuming up everything we produce to sell it back to us in the form of a “generative AI” product are not liberating information. They are concentrating control over it and generating enormous private profits from collective labor and knowledge, while the people who produced that value are left to bear the social and ecological costs of the new server-farm economy.

As anarchists, we have to recognize that the absence of copyright does not automatically mean the absence of exploitation. Making our work freely available does not have to mean surrendering all control over how it is used.

A corporation can freely consume the products of our collective labor while privatizing the profits that our labor generates. It can use open-source software, scrape publicly available knowledge, incorporate community contributions, and build enormous fortunes while the people who created and maintain that knowledge receive little or nothing in return. The information may be “free” in the narrow sense of being accessible, while the wealth, power, and prosperity generated from it remain concentrated among the wealthy.

For anarchists, the fight against domination has to take precedence over opposition to intellectual property as an end in itself. We can oppose intellectual property without defending capital’s right to appropriate our labor. We can support open-source software without supporting the privatization of the commons in this predatory capitalist society we’re forced to survive in. We can believe that knowledge should circulate freely without believing that billionaires should be free to enclose, monetize, and exploit the collective work of millions of people.

While Raddle remains open source, we have implemented strict measures to block the bots, crawlers, and scrapers that attempt to harvest our users’ contributions and creative work for corporations to monetize and sell back to us.

I’d argue we should go further: develop anarchist-aligned approaches to licensing and collective stewardship of the commons that refuse to treat unrestricted monetization as a virtue and explicitly protect communities from exploitative uses of their work, especially by corporations harvesting it to train generative AI systems as they strive to replace human labor altogether.

A key point here is that a license prohibiting commercial use may not technically qualify as “open source” under the conventional definition. That is precisely why we should not allow the label to dictate our analysis. Instead, when evaluating a particular licensing model, anarchists should ask whether it gives a community greater control over its labor and resources and, ultimately, whether it helps counter domination. The relevant question, then, is not whether a model conforms to an ideological definition of openness, but whether it enables people to exercise greater collective control over the conditions of their work.

Make our works free to the people, but never assume that they must therefore be free *for capital* to exploit.

If your opposition to intellectual property leads you to defend billionaires extracting obscene profits from our collective labor without returning meaningful value to the people who produced it or to the communities they live in, then you are not opposing hierarchy and domination. You’re reinforcing it.

Open Source Is a Tool, Not a Commandment

There is nothing inherently anarchist about the phrase “open source.” Open source is a set of practices concerning how software is developed, distributed, modified, and licensed. Those practices can be extraordinarily valuable. They can facilitate cooperation, decentralize technological development, increase people’s control over the tools they use, and undermine monopolistic control over knowledge.

All of those things can be compatible with anarchist practices. But they are not inherently anarchist.

An open-source project can exist within an intensely hierarchical workplace. It can be produced by poorly compensated workers and then folded into highly profitable corporate ventures. It can be maintained by idealistic volunteers whose unpaid labor effectively subsidizes a company that captures the overwhelming majority of the resulting economic value. It can become infrastructure for surveillance capitalism while the people who create and maintain it struggle to make ends meet.

Open source does not, by itself, transform these relationships of power. Calling the code “free” does not mean that the people producing it are free.

This matters because anarchism asks not only who owns something, but who controls the labor that produces it, who benefits from it, and who bears the consequences of its use. Anarchism is ultimately concerned with relationships of power, not merely the legal status of property. Changing the legal status of a product does not, by itself, transform the power relationships surrounding its creation and use.

Who does the work? Who controls the conditions under which the work is performed? Who makes the decisions about how the work should be structured? Who receives the benefits? Who bears the costs? And, crucially, who has the power to *say no*?

Who can withdraw their labor, challenge how their work is being used, or refuse to participate when a working relationship becomes exploitative or harmful to the worker or their community?

If open-source ideology is standing in the way of freedom of association, autonomy, mutual aid, and ultimately basic survival, what good is it to anarchists?

Those questions cannot be answered simply by asking whether the work is released under an open-source license. Anarchism must begin with an examination of the power relationships at play; debates over licensing cannot take precedence over those questions.

Software does not write itself. Neither do books, articles, illustrations, photographs, music, videos, or other creative works. Every repository, wiki, library, operating system, and infrastructure project represents human labor... Whether paid, voluntary, or some combination of both.

A developer maintaining infrastructure, fixing vulnerabilities, reviewing patches, writing documentation, or supporting a community is performing real labor. So is an artist creating an illustration, a writer researching and drafting an essay, a photographer documenting the world, or a musician composing and recording a song. A community collectively creating and maintaining knowledge, culture, or software that becomes economically or socially valuable is producing something real.

The fact that these products are intangible and can be copied or reproduced at negligible cost does not erase the people whose labor produced them.

This is where open-source absolutism can become disconnected from the material concerns anarchism has always prioritized. The debate can become so focused on whether anyone has a le-

gitimate claim to control an intangible product that it loses sight of whether the people producing it have meaningful control over their own labor — and ultimately their own lives.

The abolition of oppressive property relations should not mean giving capitalists unrestricted free access to our labor. It should mean dismantling domination and expanding our collective power over the conditions under which we live and work.

Since we do not live in a stateless, moneyless utopia, it is perfectly reasonable for workers and creators to demand some measure of control over how their labor is used, particularly when that labor is being appropriated by corporations to generate private profit.

Mutual Aid, Not Exploitation

Anarchists have long advocated for mutual aid, but mutual aid should never be confused with an obligation for one group to permanently subsidize another. Mutual aid is a relationship of solidarity and collective support. It does not have to be immediate, equal, or transactional, but it cannot be reduced to a one-way pipeline through which one group continually gives while another simply takes.

Too often, we forget the *mutual* in mutual aid and reduce solidarity to an unconditional ideological obligation to serve others. There is a difference between freely sharing what we have and surrendering what we create to those who are powerful enough to take it.

It's a difference between sharing with our communities and being dispossessed by capital.

When people collectively choose to release their work freely so that others can use, modify, learn from, and build upon it, that can be a powerful expression of solidarity. When a community voluntarily contributes its labor to a commons, it can provide an extraordinarily impactful alternative to capitalist production.

But the existence of a commons does not establish a blanket principle that everyone is entitled to extract from it indefinitely without regard for the people who maintain it.

When billionaires appropriate our labor, privatize the wealth it generates, and externalize the ecological and social costs of their extraction onto our communities, defending that arrangement in the name of opposing intellectual property is both ethically and politically bankrupt.

The fact that something has been freely shared does not give capital a moral entitlement to enclose it, monetize it, and exploit the people who created it.

There is also an important historical shift at play here that contemporary anti-IP absolutism tends to overlook.

Many anarchist arguments against intellectual property emerged in a world where intellectual property was primarily a tool of concentrated power: corporations and wealthy individuals used patents and copyrights to enclose knowledge, restrict access, and extract rents from everyone else. The target was therefore clear: property rights were being used by capital to prevent ordinary people from freely accessing and building upon knowledge.

The new generative-AI economy presents a different configuration of power.

Much of the material being harvested today consists of knowledge, writing, art, code, photography, and culture produced by millions of ordinary people — workers, artists, writers, programmers, philosophers, and commentators — often outside the control of any corporation. Corporations can systematically chew up that collectively produced cultural commons, concentrate it into proprietary models and infrastructure, and spit it out to generate enormous private profits.

The direction of appropriation has changed.

Rather than corporations simply using intellectual property to keep knowledge away from the public, corporations are increasingly taking knowledge produced by the public and converting it into private capital.

An anti-IP politics developed to oppose the enclosure of the commons should not become so rigid and dogmatic that it ends up celebrating whenever capital finds a new way to enclose it.

When we release our work under permissive licenses, corporations can appropriate it at enormous scale while giving little meaningful compensation or control to the people who created and maintain it (and often without even giving us credit). And when we object — when we dare to push back against the automated, industrial-scale appropriation of our labor — some of our fellow travelers respond by castigating us for punching up at some of the most powerful corporations on the planet because “IP bad.” Suddenly, the worker objecting to the exploitation of their labor is treated as though they are the exploiter, while the corporation doing the exploiting gets to hide behind the supposed moral purity of openness.

Maybe it’s time to reconsider our priorities in the new techno-feudalist world we find ourselves in.

This all becomes even more appalling when we consider the environmental and social costs of the infrastructure built around these technologies. Servers consume enormous amounts of energy and water; workers endure long hours and precarious conditions; and communities absorb pollution, infrastructure costs, and other consequences while corporations capture the resulting wealth.

The openness of the software does not compensate workers, clean up pollution, democratize ownership, or give communities control over corporate decisions.

Free access to information is not an acceptable substitute for social ownership.

This is ultimately an argument about what it means to say that workers should control the fruits of their labor. If a person or community creates something collectively, they should have meaningful power over how that creation is used and how the benefits generated from it are distributed.

That does not necessarily require copyright.

There are many possible ways of organizing production and distribution without conventional intellectual property: cooperatives, worker-owned enterprises, commons-based production, voluntary associations, reciprocal licensing arrangements, public institutions, community ownership, and countless arrangements that have not yet been fully imagined.

The point is precisely that we should not mistake one particular legal mechanism for the underlying objectives anarchists have.

In an ideal anarchist society, we might abolish copyright while simultaneously ensuring that workers and communities retain substantial control over the economic and social value they create. But we do not live in that society. We live under capitalism, where corporations already possess enormous power to appropriate and monetize the products of our labor.

We cannot simply pretend that abolishing one legal mechanism will make those power imbalances disappear.

The question is not whether workers should have property rights for their own sake. The question is how we prevent our labor from being appropriated by those who already possess vastly greater economic and political power.

Open-source absolutism presents a false choice: either intellectual property exists, or everyone must be free to appropriate everything from everyone else.

Those are not the only possibilities.

We can reject monopolistic intellectual property while also rejecting capitalist exploitation. We can defend the technological commons while defending workers' control. We can encourage the free circulation of knowledge while insisting that the people who produce it have meaningful power over how their labor is used.

Indeed, we can believe that software should be freely shared without concluding that workers should be freely exploited to allow for this sharing.

The Freedom to Say No

Everything anarchists do should work to increase our autonomy from systems of domination. Open source can contribute to that goal: it allows people to inspect the tools they depend upon, modify them according to their needs, collaborate across institutional and geographic boundaries, and reduce dependence on proprietary monopolies.

These are valuable achievements.

But anarchists viewing open source as an absolute moral principle can undermine the very values that make it useful to us.

A commons is not simply a pile of resources that everyone is entitled to extract from indefinitely. It is an ongoing social relationship built through cooperation, contribution, and collective stewardship.

Anarchists should be skeptical of intellectual property when it serves artificial scarcity, rent extraction, monopoly power, and control over human knowledge. But opposing those things does not require us to become indifferent to exploitation in other forms.

Nor should every restriction on copying be treated as equivalent to capitalist domination, while every unrestricted act of appropriation gets claimed as liberatory.

The ultimate anarchist goal shouldn't be to preserve intellectual property nor to abolish it for its own sake.

The goal should be to create social relations in which people have genuine control over their labor, their communities, and the institutions that shape their lives.

Sometimes that means freely sharing knowledge or creating a commons. Sometimes it means collective ownership, worker control, or refusing corporate appropriation of community labor. Sometimes it means employing informational secrecy to practice good security culture or community-protection. Sometimes it means developing institutions that fit neither the categories of private property nor intellectual property.

That is the creative promise of anarchism: not replacing one absolute rule with another, but continually challenging the institutions and relationships through which people dominate one another. Open source is merely one tool among many for advancing those goals. The tool is not the objective; liberation is. When a tool stops serving anarchy, it's okay to move onto a more useful tool.

Abolishing copyright while leaving capital untouched is not the abolition of hierarchy.

Making software freely available while leaving workers powerless is not liberation.

Allowing corporations to appropriate collectively produced value without meaningful reciprocity is not mutual aid.

We can believe that knowledge should be free and that workers should be free. We can defend the commons and defend the people who create and maintain it. We can oppose intellectual property without becoming apologists for capital.

If we're genuine about dismantling domination, we can't lose sight of this.

The question is not merely whether the code is free.

The question is whether the people who create the world are free within it.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
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