Dedicated to the Syrian imprisoned internet activist Bassel Khartabil, written for the Cost of Freedom booksprint as part of a global campaign to free Bassel. Download here as pdf or epub.

The Cost of Internet Freedom by Geert Lovink

"Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being." Albert Camus

Let's translate Isaiah Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty* from 1958 to our age. Berlin distinguishes between negative and positive freedom: there is the negative goal of warding off interference and the positive sense sense of the individual to be his or her own master. In both cases a fundamental distinction is made between the autonomy of the subject and the crushing reality of repressive systems. For Berlin, freedom is situated outside of the system. Written in the shadow of totalitarianism, at the height of the Cold War, there wasn't much else to expect. In this period the notion of freedom as an everyday experience, was absent. The existentialist gestures after World War II emphasized the legal rights of the individual-as-rebel who stood up against evil outside forces.

Right at the beginning of his famous essay, Berlin formulates Evgene Morozov-type sentences that sound remarkably familiar to those involved in contemporary 'net criticism' debates. "Where ends are agreed, the only questions left are those of means, and these are not political but technical, that is to say, capable of being settled by experts or machines, like arguments between engineers or doctors." And he continues: "That is why those who put their faith in some immense transforming phenomenon, must believe that all political and moral problems can be turned into technological ones." Berlin reminds us of the phrase of Friedrich Engels about "replacing the government of persons by the administration of things." Sounds very timely, no? But wait, is this an old communist phrase or a libertarian dogma, preached by Silicon Valley billionaires?

Fast forward ten or twenty years and the concept of 'the system' is no longer perceived as alien. In the 1970s the idea spread that (computer) systems were man-made and could be programmed, designed, and thus democratized. The critique of the technocratic society that we can trace in the memories of Albert Speer, published in 1969, was soon to be forgotten and taken over by a fascination for the do-it-yourself spirit of the garage hackers. Instead of looking at IBM mainframe computers as a tool of 1984's

Big Brother, the personal computer was introduced as a portable counter-cultural alternative, intended to undermine power as such and break it up into a 1001 fragments of decentralized, distributed expressions of human creativity.

Again thirty years later internet freedom activists run up against very clear boundaries and setbacks. The liberal obsessions with privacy and copyright are still interesting but no longer essential in order to understand the big picture. What's at stake is much larger than a bunch of legal issues, defined by lawyers. What's necessary is a comprehensive understanding of the political economy of the Net, combined with critical knowledge of global politics. The legal strategies have run empty. It is now all about power politics and organization of the field. The lose ties that social media have left us with do not foster long-term collaborations but force us into a 24/7 cult of the update.

The philosophical question, can we find freedom inside the machine, should be answered with a definite no. So far programmers, geeks and artists have stressed the possibilities to carve out small pockets for themselves, in order to realize their free software and creative commons projects. This 'temporary autonomous zones' approach had a liberal consensus as its premise that the 'internet' would tolerate such experiments within its infrastructure. The original internet freedom within the system is shrinking as we speak, and we lack the appropriate tools and strategies to do something against it. Soon we will be back at square one and demand a freedom of the internet. The ideal of freedom outside of the Matrix will not necessarily be Luddite in nature. The coming uprising against the internet as a tool of surveillance and repression will be technologically informed and needs to be distinguished from the related human right to have time off work and have a life. This ain't no offline romanticism. Our memes need to communicate this simple message: Positive internet freedom is the road to serfdom. We need to revolt against the soulless, mechanical ideas of the Silicon Valley engineering class and their solutionist marketing slogans. In order to prepare ourselves, we need an understanding of the Two Concepts of Internet Liberty.

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