Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in Californian Ideology

CALIFORNIAN IDEOLOGY

“This new faith has emerged from a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the high-tech industries of Silicon Valley. Promoted in magazines, books, TV programs, Web sites, newsgroups, and Net conferences, the Californian ideology promiscuously combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies. This amalgamation of opposites has been achieved through a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies. In the digital utopia, everybody will be both hip and rich. Not surprisingly, this optimistic vision of the future has been enthusiastically embraced by computer nerds, slacker students, innovative capitalists, social activists, trendy academics, futurist bureaucrats, and opportunistic politicians across the United States. As usual, Europeans have not been slow in copying the latest fad from America. While a recent European Union Commission report recommends following the Californian “free-market” model for building the “information superhighway,” cutting-edge artists and academics eagerly imitate the “posthuman” philosophers of the West Coast’s Extropian cult. With no obvious rivals, the triumph of the Californian Ideology appears to be complete.” 364

LIBERTARIAN ROOTS

“Above all, they are passionate advocates of what appears to be an impeccably libertarian form of politics: they want information technologies to be used to create a new “Jeffersonian democracy” where all individuals will be able to express themselves freely within cyberspace. However, by championing this seemingly admirable ideal, these technoboosters are at the same time reproducing some of the most atavistic features of American society, especially those derived from the bitter legacy of slavery. Their utopian vision of California depends on a willful blindness toward the other, much less positive features of life of the West Coast—racism, poverty and environmental degradation.” 364

CALIFORNIAN NEW LEFT

“During in the 1960s [sic], radicals from the Bay Area pioneered the political outlook and cultural style of New Left movements across the world. Breaking with the narrow politics of the postwar era, they launched campaigns against militarism, racism, sexual discrimination, homophobia, mindless consumerism, and pollution. In place of the traditional left’s rigid hierarchies, they created collective and democratic structures that supposedly prefigured the libertarian society of the future. Above all, the Californian New Left combined political struggle with cultural rebellion.” 365

INFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM ON THE CALIFORNIAN NEW LEFT

“The radical hippies were liberals in the social sense of the world. They championed universalist, rational, and progressive ideals, such as democracy, tolerance, self-fulfillment, and social justice. Emboldened by over twenty years of economic growth, they believed that history was one their side. In sci-fi novels, they dreamt of “ecotopia”—a future California where cars had disappeared, industrial production was ecologically viable, sexual relationships were egalitarian, and daily life was lived in community groups. For some hippies, this vision could be realized only by rejecting scientific progress as a false god and returning to nature. Others, in contrast, believed that technological progress would inevitably turn their libertarian principles into social fact. Crucially, influenced by the theories of Marshall McLuhan, these technophiliacs thought that the convergence of media, computing, and telecommunications would inevitably create the *electronic agora*—a virtual place where everyone would be able to express their opinions without fear of censorship. Despite being a middle-aged English professor, McLuhan preached the radical message that the power of big business and big government would be imminently overthrown by the intrinsically empowering effects of new technology on individuals…” 365-366

“The creation of the electronic agora was the first step toward the implementation of direct democracy within all social institutions.” 366

AMBIGUITY OF THE CALIFORNIAN IDEOLOGY—DIGERATI, THE VIRTUAL CLASS, AND KNOWLEDGE WORK

“The Californian Ideology derives its popularity from the very ambiguity of its precepts. Over the last few decades, the pioneering work of the community media activists has been largely recuperated by the high-tech and media industries. Although companies in these sectors can mechanize and subcontract much of their labor needs, they remain dependent on key people who can research and create original products, from software programs and computer chips to book and TV programs. Along with some high-tech entrepreneurs, these skilled workers form the so-called virtual class—“the techno-intelligentsia of cognitive scientists, engineers, computer scientists, video-game developers, and all the other communications specialists.” Unable to subject them to the discipline of the assemblyline or replace them by machines, managers have organized such intellectual workers through fixed-term contracts. Like the “labor aristocracy” of the last century, core personnel in the media, computing, and telecoms industries experience the rewards and insecurities of the marketplace. On the one hand, these high-tech artisans not only tend to be very well paid but also have considerable autonomy over their place of work and place of employment. As a result, the cultural divide between the hippie and the organization man has now become rather fuzzy. On the other hand, these workers are tied by the terms of their contracts and have no guarantee of continued employment. Lacking the free time of the hippies, work itself has become the main route to self-fulfillment for much of the virtual class.” 367

CONTRADICTIONS OF THE VIRTUAL CLASS ARE ONLY POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF BELIEF IN TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

“On the one hand, these core workers are a privileged part of the labor force. On the other hand, they are the heirs of the radical ideas of the community media activists. The Californian Ideology, therefore, simultaneously reflects the disciplines of market economics and the freedom of hippie artisanship. This bizarre hybrid is made possible only through a nearly universal belief in technological determinism.” 367

THE NEW RIGHT AND ECONOMIC LIBERALISM

“Responding to the challenge of the New Left, the New Right has resurrected an older form of liberalism—economic liberalism. In place of the collective freedom sought by the hippie radicals, they have championed the liberty of individuals within the marketplace. Yet even these conservatives couldn’t resist the romance of the new information technologies. Back in the 1960s, McLuhan’s predictions were reinterpreted as an advertisement for new forms of media, computing, and telecommunications being developed by the private sector. From the 1970s onward, Toffler, de Sola Pool, and other gurus attempted to prove that the advent of hypermedia would paradoxically involve a return to the economic liberalism of the past.” 367-368

AGORA OR MARKETPLACE?

“The ambiguity of the Californian Ideology is most pronounced in its contradictory visions of the digital future. The development of hypermedia is a key component of the digital future. As Zuboff points out, the introduction of media, computing, and telecommunications technologies into the factory and the office is the culmination of a long process of separation of the workforce from direct involvement in production.” 368

“Above all, will the advent of hypermedia realize the utopias of either the New Left or the New Right? As a hybrid faith, the Californian Ideology happily answers this conundrum by believing in both visions at the same time—and by not criticizing either of them.” 368

“On the one hand, the anticorporate purity of the New Left has been preserved by the advocates of the “virtual community. According to their guru, Howard Rheingold, the values of the counterculture baby boomers are shaping the development of new information technologies. As a consequence, community activists will be able to use hypermedia to replace corporate capitalism and big government with a high-tech “gift economy.”” 368-369

“On the other hand, other West Coast ideologues have embraced the laissez-faire ideology of their erstwhile conservative enemy.” 369

“In this version of the Californian Ideology, each member of the ‘virtual class’ is promised the opportunity to become a successful high-tech entrepreneur. Information technologies, so the argument goes, empower the individual, enhance personal freedom, and radically reduce the power of the nation state. Existing social, political, and legal power structures will wither away to be replaced by unfettered interactions between autonomous individuals and their software. These restyled McLuhanites vigorously argue that big government should stay off the backs of resourceful entrepreneurs who are the only people cool and courageous enough to take risks.” 369

DIY CULTURE VERSUS NEW RIGHT VERSION OF CALIFORNIAN IDEOLOGY

“As well as state aid, the evolution of computing has also depended on the involvement of do-it-yourself culture. For instance, the personal computer was invented by amateur techies who wanted to construct their own cheap machines. The existence of a “gift economy” amongs hobbyists was a necessary precondition for the subsequent success of products made by Apple and Microsoft. Even now, shareware programs still play a vital role in advancing software design.” 370-371

\*I INCLUDE THIS DISTINCTION BETWEEN DIY AND CA IDEOLOGY TO POINT TO HOW DIGERATI ARE SO EASILY CO-OPTED TO BECOME PART OF MARKET IDEOLOGY; BARBROOK ON THE OTHER HAND INTRODUCES IT INTO THE DISCUSSION TO POINT TO THE DEPENDENCY OF THE MARKETPLACE ON NON-MARKET FORMS OF PRODUCTION

“Hence, as in every other industrialized country, American entrepreneurs have inevitably relied on state intervention and d.i.y. initiatives to nurture and develop their industries.” 372

THE PROBLEM WITH THE CALIFORNIAN IDEOLOGY IS IT PREACHES LIBERTARIAN INDIVIDUALISM DESPITE BEING BUILT ON THE FOUNDATION OF STRUCTURES BUILT OUT OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

“By mixing New Left and New Right, the Californian Ideology provides a mystical resolution of the contradictory attitudes held by members of the “virtual class.” Crucially, antistatism provides the means to reconcile radical and reactionary ideas about technological progress. While the New Left resents the government for funding the military-industrial complex, the New Right attacks the state for interfering with the spontaneous dissemination of new technologies by market competition. Despite the central role played by public intervention in developing hypermedia, the Californian ideologues preach an antistatist gospel of high-tech libertarianism—a bizarre mish-mash of hippie anarchism and economic liberalism beefed up with lots of technological determinism.” 372-373

CALIFORNIAN IDEOLOGY IS THE PRODUCT OF STATE REPRESSION AND CULTURAL COOPTION—PERFECTLY ENCAPSULATES THE DEFEAT OF THE “VIRTUAL CLASS” 373

VIRTUAL CLASS SELLOUTS—HAVE BOUGHT INTO VISION OF INDIVIDUALISM AND MARKET VALUES

“Although they enjoy cultural freedoms won by the hippies, most of them are no longer actively involved in the struggle to build “ecotopia.” Instead of openly rebelling against the system, these high-tech artisans now accept that individual freedom can be achieved only by working within the constraints of technological progress and the “free market.” 373