

CHAPTER I

The Californian Ideology Revisited

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Introduction

It is twenty-five years since Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's article appeared in *Science and Culture*. In 1996, at a moment of profound socio-economic change, they identified the geographical epicentre of that change as the West Coast of the United States. Over the previous two decades, a belief system developed that managed to combine contradictory, yet highly appealing elements rooted in a commitment to technological determinism: the idea that technology would make the world a better place for everyone. Identifying an emerging ideology with roots in technological utopianism was not a new idea and it was not exclusive to the Bay Area in California. In the United States during the first few decades of the twentieth century, for example, philosophers, commentators and mainstream politicians made the case for technological solutions to social and political problems that captured the public imagination and did so from New York and Chicago, rather than San Francisco (see Jordan 1994). Nonetheless, Barbrook and Cameron (hereafter B&C) identified historical elements of the new ideology that were West Coast specific, emerging from the cultural politics of the 1960s and 1970s, an emergent yuppie entrepreneurialism in the 1980s along with the research nexus of universities and corporations in and around the Bay Area.

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In the generation since B&C wrote their seminal piece, there has been an evolution in thinking concerning technology and its relation to politics, power and society. This is in no small part due to technological advances and its associated properties of speed and ubiquity. The authors wrote their piece when personal desktop computing had just gained a foothold in the consumer market. The speed of connection to the internet was limited to the bandwidth provided by dial up modems and commercialisation of the web was in its infancy. Today, the iPhone and similar ‘affordable’ devices have made personal and wireless computing portable. Users are trackable through machine based legible content and Siri’s Artificial Intelligence permits the rapid enhancement of applications for intimate queries. This represents a new stage in the Californian Ideology (hereafter CI) that has seemingly emerged naturally and spontaneously. But, as the authors revealed in their original piece, there was very little that was either natural or spontaneous about the CI.

Returning to the authors’ original analysis and assessing it in the light of these and other changes seems timely. This chapter revisits two major claims of the original hypotheses. We consider how the electronic agora that emerged to describe a near-future society where personal communication between individuals was possible without the mediating institutions of government, transformed into largely unregulated social media platforms. Relatedly, we examine how the electronic marketplace subsumed the gift economy and morphed into a surveillance economy that nudges individuals into ongoing personal consumption.

The Californian Ideology

B&C’s approach to the development of personal computing and networked communications was both descriptive and normative. It described a particular moment in the life-cycle of technologies, the ‘convergence of the media, computing, and telecommunication hypermedia...’ (44), alongside a set of ideas that embraced this convergence. These ideas had, they claimed, formed a ‘heterogeneous orthodoxy’ (44) one that managed to combine contradictory elements into a pleasing whole: ‘the freewheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies’ (45).

Optimistic, libertarian, but also bohemian, the CI blended elements of both the New Left and the New Right with a uniform call to withdraw from the public sphere. While much attention has been paid to the emergence of the New Left in places such as Haight-Ashbury and Berkeley, less well known is the New Right’s emergence in Southern California. The New Right’s free market doctrine sought to counter the gains made by the New Left especially those associated with the Civil Rights Movement (Freund 2007; HoSang 2011). The CI rested, then, on a peculiar alliance between the anti-establishment cultural politics of the 1960s and a reactionary anti-government free market doctrine.

Despite these tensions, both components had enough in common to forge an ambiguous alliance: both were anti-establishment, suspicious of government and advocated self-empowerment. And both groups shared a belief in the liberating power of technology thereby providing a 'mystical resolution of the contradictory attitudes' inherent to the CI (56).

It mattered less that both visions looked nostalgically to the past, to the founding of the American republic, for a vision of the future. For the New Left, it was the ideal of Jeffersonian democracy that provided the model for the electronic agora. For the New Right, it was the freedom of individuals to keep what was theirs against the machinations of a foreign monarch. B&C point out that this was an unsettling view because it ignored the enormous suffering that made the American republic a possibility in the first place. Overlooked was the massive racialised inequality that was, at the time of the first dotcom boom (1995–2001) only deepening in California. And despite libertarian claims to the contrary, the origins of the computing industry relied less on the heroic efforts of computing pioneers and much more on state sponsorship in the form of Defense Department grants and clandestine work for the NSA and CIA (Kaplan 2000). From road networks to irrigation channels, to the university system, and other infrastructure projects, life as it existed in California would not have been possible without massive state funding as part of the mixed economy.

Ignoring this collective history, however, enabled adherents to the CI to oppose regulation and compliance with tax authorities on the one hand, and offer high-tech solutions to intractable problems like racialised poverty on the other. The absence of any sense of a social reality, permitted a 'mish-mash of hippie anarchism and economic liberalism beefed up with lots of technological determinism' (B&C, 56) forming a persuasive and alluring set of self-justificatory ideas. B&C's conclusion was poignant. The CI was not the only path to the future. It was decidedly parochial:

developed by a group of people living within one specific country with a particular mix of socio-economic and technological choices. Its eclectic and contradictory blend of conservative economics and hippie radicalism reflects the history of the West Coast – and not the inevitable future of the rest of the world. (63)

From the Electronic Agora to Social Media

Early participants in the text-only Bulletin Board Server *Whole Earth 'Electronic Link* (WELL), like Howard Rheingold, were motivated by a strong sense to 'rediscover the power of cooperation, turning cooperation into a game, a way of life – a merger of knowledge capital, social capital, and communion' (1993, 110). The virtual community, consisting of discussion

forums called ‘conferences’, was contrasted against the corporate power of the mainstream media. Rheingold’s (1993) *The Virtual Community*, advocated for participatory democracy and was peppered with references to thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas (1989) and his theory of communicative action. It was precisely those elements of Habermas’ theory that emphasised open access, voluntary participation, rational argument, and the freedom to express opinions that was required, Rheingold argued, for ‘authentic engagement’ (1993, 243–6).

Similar ideas were in circulation at the time that the WELL was established in 1985. Benjamin Barber (1984) noted in *Strong Democracy* that the heart of the political process was ‘democratic talk’. Along with the creation of public spaces like parks, urban farms and neighbourhood associations, he recommended the construction of assemblies for between five and twenty-five thousand citizens to engage and deliberate. The electronic agora obviated the need for such costly construction projects. However, by the time B&C wrote their piece, the Habermasian public sphere was under assault. Numerous critics pointed to the exclusionary nature of the public sphere (Fraser 1992). Habermas and his followers were charged with failing to recognise more complex notions of identity given expression within numerous counterpublics (Mouffe 1993).

While some attempt was made to salvage the Habermasian project (see Benhabib 1992), the clash of opinions within the WELL and the (at times) uncivil communicative style of the interlocutors had not gone unnoticed. This tension had, in fact, been identified much earlier. Richard Sennett’s (1977) *The Fall of Public Man* considered the problem to be both historical and technological. Historical self-understanding had shifted from a person possessed of ‘natural character’ concerned with the public good, to the far more private ‘personality’ concerned only with like minds. Personalised politics, suggested Sennett, was destined to result in *destructive Gemeinschaft* drawing upon the animosities that existed between friends and enemies. This feature of modern life was exacerbated by electronic media: ‘[t]he media [television and radio] have vastly increased the store of knowledge groups have about each other but have rendered actual contact unnecessary’ (282). By 1995, an impasse appeared to have been reached.

And yet, as Fred Turner (2005) notes, the search for the public sphere was only one component of the WELL experiment. Equally important was the commune movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. The ‘New Communalists’ were inspired less by Jefferson and more by the writings of Alvin Toffler and Buckminster Fuller. Their goal was to retreat from mainstream society and politics and to establish new, isolated communities. Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog* was intended to provide the raw materials and ideas to make this vision possible and served as the model for the WELL and, later, social networks. Turner (2005, 489) notes, ‘the Catalog both depicted the products of an emerging counterculture and linked the scattered members of that culture to one another. In that sense, it became a ‘network forum.’ From the outset, the idea of ‘virtual community’

was heralded by those who craved a revitalised public sphere uncorrupted by commercial interests *and* by those who embraced a technology-infused communalism that was libertarian politically and economically.

It is hard to overestimate the impact of Rheingold's notion of virtual community on the political imaginary within the US. Despite numerous theoretical and empirical challenges to Rheingold's (1993) claims, the virtual community took its place – alongside the 'digital agora', 'electronic town-hall meeting' and 'digital public sphere' – as part of the ongoing American political story (see also Kirk and Schill 2011; Kruse, Norris and Flincham 2018).

By the mid 1990s, the popularity of the WELL had peaked. With increasingly sophisticated Graphical User Interfaces (GUI), file sharing programs and platforms that enabled billions of people to 'connect' rather than a few thousand on a variety of devices, bulletin boards and the 'electronic agora' were being displaced. It was Rheingold's influence again this time in a 2002 book, *Smart Mobs*, that analysed the rise of mobile computing and the use of reputation systems to generate trust that helped fuel the rise of social media platforms. Nevertheless, this also coincided with a period of prolonged and steady decline in trust in government that began in the 1960s (Griffin 2015). Americans did not merely 'bowl alone' (Putnam 2000) but 'sorted' themselves into groups in increasingly homogenous communities. As Bill Bishop (2008, 40) noted, by the early 21st century, the United States was a country,

where everyone can choose the neighbours (and church and news shows) most compatible with his or her lifestyle and beliefs. And we are living with the consequences of this segregation by way of life: pockets of like-minded citizens that have become so ideologically inbred that we don't know, can't understand, and can barely conceive of 'those people' who live just a few miles away.

Despite this, the second wave of digital democracy characterised by networked technologies was heralded by advocates as a step towards the development of critical counterpublics. Social networks contained within them the potential to challenge traditional forms of media via citizen journalism and activism (WikiLeaks), inspiring social movements that precipitated political revolution (the Arab Spring of 2010–11), and highlighted issues like economic and racial inequality (Indignados, #BlackLivesMatter). Scholars noted both the speed and frequency with which protest movements coalesced around transient issues, responding to perceived crises in real time (Castells 2012).

Unfortunately, as with the electronic agora, it is difficult to gauge how far social media measures up to the aspirations of democratic theorists. Digital enclaves have tended to emulate their physical counterparts. In the absence of shared norms that regulate speech online, there has been a marked rise in populist rhetoric and extremism. The inability to determine factual from fake sources of information has further undermined the possibility of shared goals.

Finally, the apparent contradiction between digital public spaces free from monetary interests and social media platforms that are an integral component of 'surveillance capitalism' is an ongoing concern (Zuboff 2019).

From Electronic to Capitalocentrist Marketplace¹

B&C noted the malleability of the CI as it embraced two seemingly opposing visions of the electronic marketplace. The New Left saw the emergence of a hi-tech 'gift economy' that would, 'replace corporate capitalism and big government' (52). The other adhered to a neoliberal political economy ascendant in the late 1970s culminating with the election of former Republican California Governor Ronald Reagan as President in 1980. Led intellectually by Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich along with Alvin and Heidi Toffler, the New Right envisioned a limitless electronic capitalist marketplace. The entrepreneur hero would be released from the shackles of government regulation and the domination of oligopolistic firms.

Barbrook (2005) would be one of the first scholars to understand that both visions would exist side-by-side, as information would be interchangeably shared and sold. An undertheorised aspect of B&C's analysis, however, was the role played by financial capital, namely venture capitalists, and the implications of financialisation as the dominant logic of capitalist accumulation. Sand Hill Road, near Stanford University, is synonymous with Silicon Valley's start-up culture. Prior to 1993, however, would-be entrepreneurs and venture capitalists were unaware of the financial opportunities that the internet represented (Ferguson 1999). This changed with Netscape's initial stock offering in 1995 where its valuation more than doubled in the first day reaching nearly \$1 billion (Kenney 2003).

Four impacts are worth noting. First, this would signal to others that internet start-ups could be extremely lucrative (Zook 2003). Larger companies such as Cisco Systems, for example, began to buy out start-ups paying enormous multiples making early venture fund investors, firm founders and employees immensely wealthy (Mayer and Kenney 2004). This would lead to a new cycle with further investments, employees establishing their own start-ups or moving onto other start-up ventures. Second, Netscape's success cannot be attributed to its profitability as it was not profitable (Amazon, Tesla, Twitter and Uber are other examples of this trend). Instead, it was the perception that the web was a rebellious force irrevocably reshaping the media landscape (Streeter 2010). The term *disruption* would become part of the naturalised ethos of the CI, as technology driven change was seen as inevitable. Third, as Microsoft sought to undermine Netscape's domination of the browser market, it began bundling its Internet Explorer software free of charge within its new operating systems. Preloaded and releasing rapid downloadable updates that expanded its operation and functionality, Microsoft understood that the key to profitability

was in keeping users within an ecosystem. In a widely circulated article, Tim O'Reilly (2005) described how the post-bubble internet, dubbed Web 2.0, was emerging where firms sought user participation as a means to profitability. Facebook, for example, is essentially an empty site requiring user-generated content to ensure (on-going) use. Participation, O'Reilly noted, was not linked to democratic aims, but rather to ensure user-generated content even when users were self-interested.

Fourth, unable to compete, in 1998 Netscape began distributing the source code of its browser with the hope that the community of users would help to maintain and improve the browser more quickly and with greater success than its engineers. This seemed to epitomise the electronic agora model espoused by the New Left. It was a do-it-yourself solution that transcended the capitalist marketplace, as it remained free.

What Netscape had effectively done, however, was to reaffirm the CI by shifting away from freeware and shareware to a new hybrid form of sharing and capitalist accumulation in the form of Open Source. This term, and its ensuing practices, were more palatable to corporate interests. Retained would be the idea that the role of technology is to encourage freedom and thereby renew democracy. A critical difference, though, was that with Open Source the labour utilised to change the software could now be claimed as part of the original code and receive copyright protection (Söderberg 2008). Soon other corporations, such as IBM with Apache HTTP Server, would enter the Open Source space as they too saw the profit potential of this new format.

Unable to challenge Microsoft's monopoly, corporations would offset the costs of software development by relying on the gift economy as a means to generate profits (Barbrook 2005). A more recent example is Google's Android. As a Linux based Open Source project, Google has been able to secure third party application development while retaining control over the direction of Android development. Android also collects usage data from its users in order to launch and refine applications as well as to develop location and user specific services and advertising.

Taken together these four points reveal that it was a short step to monetising user content beginning in the early 2000s. New firms sought to keep users engaged on their respective platforms. For example, Facebook's introduction of the 'like' button in 2009, along with Twitter's 'retweet' function, provided a public metric to assess the popularity of online content as well as a means to predict which content a user might prefer in future postings. Kosinski, Stillwell and Graepal (2013) note that clicking the like button can reveal personal information such as sexual orientation, religion and political party affiliation to Facebook without the user's explicit knowledge. Likes then produce commodifiable information that can be packaged and sold to third parties.

Likes also push rationality aside in favour of emotion. As one leading commentator put it, the social media environment provides the ideal context to employ psychological techniques to encourage addictive behaviours thereby '...

suppress[ing] the areas of the brain associated with judgment and reason while activating the parts associated with wanting and desire' (Eyal and Hoover 2014, 10). Likes feed into this as the search for active intensity and distraction, where users pause rather than swipe or scroll away, is now an integral part of social media success (or failure) (Dean 2010; Paasonen 2016).

Social media has evolved since the early 2000s when platforms such as Friendster, MySpace and Facebook first made their appearance. In design, these platforms shared similarities with Rheingold's virtual community offering tools to connect with (albeit) existing friends. But, as a result of a series of enhancements to their services, social media moved closer to elements contained within the New Communalist model. As Tarleton Gillespie (2010) argues, these platforms then model the democratic ideal by giving all participants a voice while simultaneously appealing to advertisers as a safe and productive site to host them. Under a veneer of neutrality, they have also been highly effective in evading governmental regulation (Taplin 2017).

Conclusion

B&C understood how both the New Left and Right envisioned the computer revolution as a moment when the tools of the establishment could be placed in the hands of the people. Once the people knew how to work the machine, they could fix the system. They would possess, in addition, all the information that resided in hitherto closed bureaucracies. The virtual community formed part of the fantasy of liberation within the CI, where techno-populism and counter-cultural techno-fetishism met in the electronic agora and marketplace (Dean 2002, 89).

By the mid-2000s, the original promise of the electronic agora was struggling against competing notions that saw it as a virtual marketplace of ideas and consumables. Rather than promoting an informed and engaged citizenry, social media has also facilitated consumption, gossip and the increased sorting of the population into exclusive ideological groups. In this sense connectivity cannot be disassociated from ambivalence. The promise of a burgeoning gift economy has instead become subsumed within oligopolistic firms. From concerns with surveillance (Zuboff 2019), algorithmic discrimination (Noble 2017), tech-addiction and anxiety (Dean 2010), the creation of enormous wealth disparities in places such as the Bay Area (O'Neil 2017) and the possibility of technological mass underemployment and unemployment (Gray and Suri 2019) the CI has been challenged. These ruptures trigger new political claims that require a re-imagining of subjectivities.

The 'Big Five' of Alphabet-Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft (GAFAM) nevertheless continue to extend their capabilities and reach (van Dijck, Nieborg and Poell 2019). Implicit in this latest iteration of the CI is the imperative force of risk mitigation and management, corporate-technocratic

control and a new understanding that the lifeworld is irrevocably integrated into digital systems. Implied here is the modification of behaviours both for individuals and groups at scale. What is being produced is a neoliberal subjectivity whereby 'the good' is increasingly shifted away from the individual. Social media platforms function simultaneously as a 'virtual community' and a laboratory for psychological and economic modelling. The widespread monitoring of online sentiment, and the collection of emotional and biometric data through cameras as well as through wearable technologies, is a development unforeseen in B&C's original analysis. The holy grail of platform capitalism today is ubiquitous data collection delivering real-time information about customers' desires and emotions. As McStay (2016, 5) notes, 'data and understanding of emotions are of the highest importance to help give people what they really want, rather than what they say they want.' In this way algorithms remove agency (a key component of the original CI) and empower others who profess to know a person's individual preferences better than they do themselves. Connecting with individuals in ways that extend beyond ones' perception of self, these technologies render the possibility of greater insight as well as error.

Twenty-five years on from the publication of 'The Californian Ideology', techno-utopians have altered their message to account for the move out of the agora to the surveilled space of social media. Public reason, they complain, has been replaced by an advertiser-driven media space that devalues the most important aspects of 'humanity' (Lanier 2011). Conversation has been replaced by electronic forms of communication that are fragmented and exhibit a forced intimacy, collapsing the distinction between private and public (Turkle 2017). It is no little irony that some of the founders of social media networks have abandoned them, barring their children from using the technologies that they helped develop.

Note

- ¹ The term capitalocentric/ist used in the subheading for this section was taken from Gibson-Graham (1996).

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