

# The Californian ideology

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*“Not to lie about the future is impossible and one can lie about it at will” – Naum Gabo<sup>1</sup>*

## As the Dam Bursts...

At the end of the twentieth century, the long predicted convergence of the media, computing and telecommunications into hypermedia is finally happening.<sup>2</sup> Once again, capitalism’s relentless drive to diversify and intensify the creative powers of human labour is on the verge of qualitatively transforming the way in which we work, play and live together. By integrating different technologies around common protocols, something is being created which is more than the sum of its parts. When the ability to produce and receive unlimited amounts of information in any form is combined with the reach of the global telephone networks, existing forms of work and leisure can be fundamentally transformed. New industries will be born and current stock market favourites will be swept away. At such moments of profound social change, anyone who can offer a simple explanation of what is happening will be listened to with great interest. At this crucial juncture, a loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists from the West Coast of the USA have succeeded in defining a heterogeneous orthodoxy for the coming information age: the Californian Ideology.

This new faith has emerged from a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley. Promoted in magazines, books, TV programmes, websites, 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 USA. As usual, Europeans have not been slow in copying the latest fad from America. While a recent EU Commission report recommends following the Californian free market model for building the information superhighway, cutting-edge artists and academics eagerly imitate the post human philosophers of the West Coast’s Extropian cult.<sup>3</sup> With no obvious rivals, the triumph of the Californian Ideology appears to be complete.

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<sup>1</sup> Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner, ‘The Realistic Manifesto, 1920’, page 214.

<sup>2</sup> For over 25 years, experts have been predicting the imminent arrival of the information age, see Alain Touraine, *La Société post-industrielle*; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages*; Daniel Bell, *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*; Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*; Simon Nora and Alain Minc, *The Computerisation of Society*; and Itiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies of Freedom*.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Bangemann, *Europe and the Global Information Society*; and the programme and abstracts on Virtual Futures ’95, Conference Website.

The widespread appeal of these West Coast ideologues isn't simply the result of their infectious optimism. 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.<sup>4</sup> However, by championing this seemingly admirable ideal, these techno-boosters 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 upon a wilful blindness towards the other – much less positive – features of life on the West Coast: racism, poverty and environmental degradation.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, in the not too distant past, the intellectuals and artists of the Bay Area were passionately concerned about these issues.

## Ronald Reagan v. the Hippies

On 15th May 1969, Governor Ronald Reagan ordered armed police to carry out a dawn raid against hippie protesters who had occupied People's Park near the Berkeley campus of the University of California. During the subsequent battle, one man was shot dead and 128 other people needed hospital treatment.<sup>6</sup> On that day, the straight world and the counter-culture appeared to be implacably opposed. On one side of the barricades, Governor Reagan and his followers advocated unfettered private enterprise and supported the invasion of Vietnam. On the other side, the hippies championed a social revolution at home and opposed imperial expansion abroad. In the year of the raid on People's Park, it seemed that the historical choice between these two opposing visions of America's future could only be settled through violent conflict. As Jerry Rubin, one of the Yippie leaders, said at the time: 'Our search for adventure and heroism takes us outside America, to a life of self-creation and rebellion. In response, America is ready to destroy us...'<sup>7</sup>

During in the 1960s, 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 post-war 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 which supposedly prefigured the libertarian society of the future. Above all, the Californian New Left combined political struggle with cultural rebellion. Unlike their parents, the

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<sup>4</sup> See Mitch Kapor, 'Where is the Digital Highway Really Heading?'

<sup>5</sup> See Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*; Richard Walker, 'California Rages Against the Dying of the Light'; and the records of Ice-T, Snoop Dog, Dr Dre, Ice Cube, NWA and many other West Coast rappers.

<sup>6</sup> See George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left*, page 124.

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Rubin, 'An Emergency Letter to my Brothers and Sisters in the Movement', page 244. The Yippies were members of the Youth International Party – an influential group within the American New Left of the late-1960s and early-1970s.

hippies refused to conform to the rigid social conventions imposed on ‘organisation man’ by the military, the universities, the corporations and even left-wing political parties. Instead they openly declared their rejection of the straight world through their casual dress, sexual promiscuity, loud music and recreational drugs.<sup>8</sup>

The radical hippies were liberals in the social sense of the word. 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 on 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.<sup>9</sup> For some hippies, this vision could only be realised 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.

‘Electronic media...abolish the spatial dimension... By electricity, we everywhere resume person-to-person relations as if on the smallest village scale. It is a relation in depth, and without delegation of functions or powers... Dialogue supersedes the lecture.’<sup>11</sup>

Encouraged by McLuhan’s predictions, West Coast radicals became involved in developing new information technologies for the alternative press, community radio stations, home-brew computer clubs and video collectives. These community media activists believed that they were in the forefront of the fight to build a new America. The creation of the electronic agora was the first step towards the implementation

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<sup>8</sup> For the key role played by popular culture in the self-identity of the American New Left, see George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left*; and Charles Reich, *The Greening of America*. For a description of the lives of white-collar workers in 1950s America, see William Whyte, *The Organization Man*.

<sup>9</sup> In a best-selling novel of the mid-1970s, the northern half of the West Coast has seceded from the rest of the USA to form a hippie utopia, see Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia*. This idealisation of Californian community life can also be found in John Brunner, *The Shockwave Rider*; and even in later works, such as Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge*.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of attempts to create direct democracy through media technologies, see Richard Barbrook, *Media Freedom*.

<sup>11</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pages 255-6. Also see Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*; and Gerald Emanuel Stern (ed.), *McLuhan: Hot & Cool*.

of direct democracy within all social institutions.<sup>12</sup> The struggle might be hard, but ‘ecotopia’ was almost at hand.

## The Rise of the Virtual Class

Who would have predicted that, in less than 30 years after the battle for People’s Park, squares and hippies would together create the Californian Ideology? Who would have thought that such a contradictory mix of technological determinism and libertarian individualism would be becoming the hybrid orthodoxy of the information age? And who would have suspected that as technology and freedom were worshipped more and more, it would become less and less possible to say anything sensible about the society in which they were applied?

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 hi-tech and media industries. Although companies in these sectors can mechanise and sub-contract much of their labour needs, they remain dependent on key people who can research and create original products, from software programs and computer chips to books and TV programmes. Along with some hi-tech entrepreneurs, these digital artisans form the so-called ‘virtual class’: ‘...the techno-intelligentsia of cognitive scientists, engineers, computer scientists, video-game developers, and all the other communications specialists...’<sup>13</sup> Unable to subject them to the discipline of the assembly-line or replace them by machines, managers have organised such skilled workers through fixed-term contracts. Like the labour 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 digital artisans not only tend to be well-paid, but also have considerable autonomy over their pace of work and place of employment. As a result, the cultural divide between the hippie and the organisation man has now become rather fuzzy. Yet, on the other hand, these skilled 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-fulfilment for much of the virtual class.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See John Downing, *Radical Media*.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein, *Data Trash*, page 15. This analysis follows that of those futurologists who thought that ‘knowledge workers’ were the embryo of a new ruling class, see Daniel Bell, *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*; and economists who believe that ‘symbolic analysts’ will become the dominant section of the workforce under globalised capitalism, see Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations*. In contrast, back in the 1960s, some New Left theorists believed that these scientific-technical workers were leading the struggle for social liberation through factory occupations and demands for self-management, see Serge Mallet, *The New Working Class*, Spokesman Books, Nottingham 1975.

<sup>14</sup> See Dennis Hayes, *Behind the Silicon Curtain*, for a description of contract work in Silicon Valley; and, for a fictional treatment of the same subject, Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs*. For more theoretical

The Californian Ideology offers a way of understanding the lived reality of these digital artisans. On the one hand, these core workers are a privileged part of the labour 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 freedoms of hippie artisanship. This bizarre hybrid is only made possible through a nearly universal belief in technological determinism. Ever since the 1960s, liberals – in the social sense of the word – have hoped that the new information technologies would realise their ideals. Responding to the challenge of the New Left, the New Right has resurrected an older form of liberalism: economic liberalism.<sup>15</sup> 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 onwards, Alvin Toffler, Ithiel 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.<sup>16</sup> This retro-utopia echoed the predictions of Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein and other macho sci-fi novelists whose future worlds were always filled with space traders, superslick salesmen, genius scientists, pirate captains and other rugged individualists.<sup>17</sup> The path of technological progress didn't always lead to ecotopia – it could instead lead back to the America of the Founding Fathers.

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examinations of post-Fordist labour organisation, see Alain Lipietz, *L'audace ou l'enlèvement; Mirages and Miracles*; Benjamin Coriat, *L'atelier et le robot*; and Toni Negri, *Revolution Retrieved*.

<sup>15</sup> As Seymour Martin Lipset points out, anti-statism liberalism has – and still is – the underlying basis of American politics on both the Right and the Left: 'These [liberal] values were evident in the twentieth century fact that...the United States not only lacked a viable socialist party, but also has never developed a British or European-style Conservative or Tory party.', see Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, pages 31-32.. The convergence of the New Left and New Right around the Californian Ideology, therefore, is a specific example of the wider consensus around anti-statism liberalism as a political discourse in the USA.

<sup>16</sup> For McLuhan's success on the corporate junket circuit, see Tom Wolfe, 'What If He Is Right?'. For the use of his ideas by conservative thinkers, see Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages*; Daniel Bell, *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*; Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*; and Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies of Freedom*.

<sup>17</sup> Heroic males are common throughout classic sci-fi novels, see D. D. Harriman in Robert Heinlein, *The Man Who Sold the Moon*; or the leading characters in Isaac Asimov, *The Foundation Trilogy*; *I, Robot*; and *The Rest of the Robots*. Hagbard Celine – a more psychedelic version of this male archetype – is the central character in Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, *The Illuminati Trilogy*. In the timechart of 'future history' at the front of Robert Heinlein's novel, it predicts that, after a period of social crisis caused by rapid technological advance, stability would be restored in the 1980s and '90s through '...an opening of new frontiers and a return to nineteenth-century economy!' Robert Heinlein, *The Man Who Sold the Moon*, pages 8-9.

## Electronic Agora or Electronic 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 next stage of capitalism. As Shoshana 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.<sup>18</sup> If only for competitive reasons, all major industrial economies will eventually be forced to wire up their populations to obtain the productivity gains of digital working. What is unknown is the social and cultural impact of allowing people to produce and exchange almost unlimited quantities of information on a global scale. Above all, will the advent of hypermedia will realise 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 criticising either of them.

On the one hand, the anti-corporate 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 counter culture 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 hi-tech gift economy. Already bulletin board systems, Net real-time conferences and chat facilities rely on the voluntary exchange of information and knowledge between their participants. In Rheingold’s view, the members of the virtual class are still in the forefront of the struggle for social liberation. Despite the frenzied commercial and political involvement in building the information superhighway, the electronic agora will inevitably triumph over its corporate and bureaucratic enemies.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, other West Coast ideologues have embraced the laissez-faire ideology of their erstwhile conservative enemy. For example, *Wired* – the monthly bible of the virtual class – has uncritically reproduced the views of Newt Gingrich, the extreme-right Republican leader of the House of Representatives, and the Tofflers, who are his close advisors.<sup>20</sup> Ignoring their policies for welfare cutbacks, the magazine is instead mesmerised by their enthusiasm for the libertarian possibilities offered by new information technologies. However, although they borrow McLuhan’s technological determinism, Gingrich and the Tofflers aren’t advocates of the electronic agora. On the contrary, they claim that the convergence of the media, computing and telecommunications will produce an electronic marketplace: ‘In cyberspace... market after market

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<sup>18</sup> See Shoshana Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine*. Of course, this analysis is derived from Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*; and ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production’.

<sup>19</sup> See Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, and his home pages.

<sup>20</sup> See the gushing interview with the Tofflers in Peter Schwartz, ‘Shock Wave (Anti) Warrior’; and, for the magazine’s characteristic ambiguity over the Speaker of the House’s reactionary political programme, see the aptly named interview with Newt Gingrich in Esther Dyson, ‘Friend and Foe’.



is being transformed by technological progress from a “natural monopoly” to one in which competition is the rule.’<sup>21</sup>

In this version of the Californian Ideology, each member of the virtual class is promised the opportunity to become a successful hi-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. In place of counter productive regulations, visionary engineers are inventing the tools needed to create a free market within cyberspace, such as encryption, digital money and verification procedures. Indeed, attempts to interfere with the emergent properties of these technological and economic forces, particularly by the government, merely rebound on those who are foolish enough to defy the primary laws of nature. According to the executive editor of *Wired*, the invisible hand of the marketplace and the blind forces of Darwinian evolution are actually one and the same thing.<sup>22</sup> As in Heinlein’s and Asimov’s sci-fi novels, the path forwards to the future seems to lead back to the past. The twenty-first century information age will be the realisation of the eighteenth century liberal ideals of Thomas Jefferson: ‘...the...creation of a new civilisation, founded in the eternal truths of the American Idea.’<sup>23</sup>

## The Myth of the ‘Free Market’

Following the victory of Gingrich’s party in the 1994 legislative elections, this right-wing version of the Californian Ideology is now in the ascendant. Yet, the sacred tenets of economic liberalism are contradicted by the actual history of hypermedia. For instance, the iconic technologies of the computer and the Net could only have been invented with the aid of massive state subsidies and the enthusiastic involvement of amateurs. Private enterprise has played an important role, but only as one part of a mixed economy.

For example, the first computer – the Difference Engine – was designed and built by private companies, but its development was only made possible through a British Government grant of £17,470, which was a small fortune in 1834.<sup>24</sup> From Colossus to

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<sup>21</sup> Progress and Freedom Foundation, *Cyberspace and the American Dream*, page 5.

<sup>22</sup> See Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control*. For a critique of the book, see Richard Barbrook, Pinnocchio Theory.

<sup>23</sup> Progress and Freedom Foundation, *Cyberspace and the American Dream*, page 13. Toffler and friends also proudly proclaim that: ‘America...remains the land of individual freedom, and this freedom clearly extends to cyberspace’ in Progress and Freedom Foundation, *Cyberspace and the American Dream*, page 6. Also see Mitch Kapor, ‘Where is the Digital Highway Really Heading?’.

<sup>24</sup> See Simon Schaffer, Babbage’s Intelligence.

EDVAC, from flight simulators to virtual reality, the development of computing has depended at key moments on public research handouts or fat contracts with public agencies. The IBM corporation only built the first programmable digital computer after it was requested to do so by the US Defense Department during the Korean War. Ever since, the development of successive generations of computers has been directly or indirectly subsidised by the American military budget.<sup>25</sup> As well as state aid, the evolution of computing has also depended upon the involvement of DIY 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 amongst hobbyists was a necessary precondition for the subsequent success of products made by Apple and Microsoft. Even now, open source programs still play a vital role in advancing software design.

The history of the Internet also contradicts the tenets of the free market ideologues. For the first twenty years of its existence, the Net's development was almost completely dependent on the much reviled American federal government. Whether via the US military or through the universities, large amounts of tax payers' dollars went into building the Net infrastructure and subsidising the cost of using its services. At the same time, many of the key Net programs and applications were invented either by hobbyists or by professionals working in their spare-time. For instance, the MUD program which allows real-time Net conferencing was invented by a group of students who wanted to play fantasy games over a computer network.<sup>26</sup>

One of the weirdest things about the rightwards drift of the Californian Ideology is that the West Coast itself is a creation of the mixed economy. Government dollars were used to build the irrigation systems, highways, schools, universities and other infrastructural projects which makes the good life possible in California. On top of these public subsidies, the West Coast hi tech industrial complex has been feasting off the fattest pork barrel in history for decades. The US government has poured billions of tax dollars into buying planes, missiles, electronics and nuclear bombs from Californian companies. For those not blinded by laissez-faire dogmas, it was obvious that the Americans have always had state planning: only they call it the defence budget.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, key elements of the West Coast's lifestyle come from its long tradition of cultural bohemianism. Although they were later commercialised, community media,

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<sup>25</sup> See Jonathan Palfreman and Doron Swade, *The Dream Machine*, pages 32 – 36, for an account of how a lack of state intervention meant that Nazi Germany lost the opportunity to build the world's first electronic computer. In 1941 the German High Command refused further funding to Konrad Zuze, who had pioneered the use of binary code, stored programs and electronic logic gates.

<sup>26</sup> See Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*.

<sup>27</sup> As President Clinton's Labor Secretary puts it: 'Recall that through the postwar era the Pentagon has quietly been in charge of helping American corporations move ahead with technologies like jet engines, airframes, transistors, integrated circuits, new materials, lasers, and optic fibres...The Pentagon and the 600 national laboratories which work with it and with the Department of Energy are the closest thing America has to Japan's well-known Ministry of International Trade and Industry.', see Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations*, page 159.

new age spiritualism, surfing, lesbian & gay liberation, health food, recreational drugs, pop music and many other forms of cultural heterodoxy all emerged from the decidedly non-commercial scenes based around university campuses, artists' communities and rural communes. Without its DIY culture, California's myths wouldn't have the global resonance which they have today.<sup>28</sup>

All of this public funding and community involvement has had an enormously beneficial albeit unacknowledged and uncosted effect on the development of Silicon Valley and other hi tech industries. Capitalist entrepreneurs often have an inflated sense of their own resourcefulness in developing new ideas and give little recognition to the contributions made by either the state, their own labour force or the wider community. All technological progress is cumulative it depends on the results of a collective historical process and must be counted, at least in part, as a collective achievement. Hence, as in every other industrialised country, American entrepreneurs have inevitably relied on state intervention and DIY initiatives to nurture and develop their industries. When Japanese companies threatened to take over the American microchip market, the libertarian computer capitalists of California had no ideological qualms about joining a state sponsored cartel organised to fight off the invaders from the East. Until the Net programs allowing community participation within cyberspace could be included, Bill Gates believed that Microsoft had no choice but to delay the launch of Windows '95.<sup>29</sup> As in other sectors of the modern economy, the question facing the emerging hypermedia industry isn't whether or not it will be organised as a mixed economy, but what sort of mixed economy it will be.

## Freedom is Slavery

If its holy precepts are refuted by profane history, why have the myths of the free market so influenced the proponents of the Californian Ideology? Living within a contract culture, the digital artisans lead a schizophrenic existence. On the one hand, they cannot challenge the primacy of the marketplace over their lives. On the other hand, they resent attempts by those in authority to encroach on their individual autonomy. 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, anti-statism 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

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<sup>28</sup> For an account of how these cultural innovations emerged from the early acid scene, see Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Interestingly, one of the drivers of the famous bus was Stewart Brand, who is now a leading contributor to *Wired*.

<sup>29</sup> Dennis Hayes, *Behind the Silicon Curtain*, pages 21-2, points out that the American computer industry has already encouraged by the Pentagon to form cartels against foreign competition. Gates admits that he'd only recently realised the 'massive structural change' being caused by the Net, see Bill Gates, 'The Bill Gates Column'.

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 anti-statist gospel of cybernetic libertarianism: a bizarre mish-mash of hippie anarchism and economic liberalism beefed up with lots of technological determinism. Rather than comprehend really existing capitalism, gurus from both New Left and New Right much prefer to advocate rival versions of a digital Jeffersonian democracy. For instance, Howard Rheingold on the New Left believes that the electronic agora will allow individuals to exercise the sort of media freedom advocated by the Founding Fathers. Similarly, the New Right claim that the removal of all regulatory curbs on the private enterprise will create a marketplace of ideas worthy of a Jeffersonian democracy.<sup>30</sup>

The triumph of this retro-futurism is a result of the failure of renewal in the USA during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Following the confrontation at People's Park, the struggle between the American establishment and the counter culture entered into a spiral of violent confrontation. While the Vietnamese at the cost of enormous human suffering were able to expel the American invaders from their country, the hippies and their allies in the black civil rights movement were eventually crushed by a combination of state repression and cultural co-option.

The Californian Ideology perfectly encapsulates the consequences of this defeat for members of the virtual class. 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 digital artisans now accept that individual freedom can only be achieved by working within the constraints of technological progress and the free market. In many cyberpunk novels, this autistic libertarianism is personified by the central character of the hacker, who is a lone individual fighting for survival within the virtual world of information.<sup>31</sup>

The drift towards the right by the Californian ideologues is the helped by their unquestioning acceptance of the liberal ideal of the self-sufficient individual. In American folklore, the nation was built out of a wilderness by free booting individuals the trappers, cowboys, preachers, and settlers of the frontier. The American revolution itself was fought to protect the freedoms and property of individuals against oppressive laws and unjust taxes imposed by a foreign monarch. For both the New Left and the New Right, the early years of the American republic provide a potent model for their rival versions of individual freedom. Yet there is a profound contradiction at the centre of this primordial American dream: individuals in this period only prospered through the

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<sup>30</sup> See Howard Rheingold's home pages, and Mitch Kapor, 'Where is the Digital Highway Really Heading?'. Despite the libertarian instincts of both these writers, their infatuation with the era of the Founding Fathers is shared by the neo-fascist Militia and Patriot movements, see Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America*.

<sup>31</sup> See the hacker heroes in William Gibson, *Neuromancer*; *Count Zero*; and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*; or in Bruce Sterling (ed.), *Mirrorshades*. A prototype of this sort of anti-hero is Deckard, the existential hunter of replicants in Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*.

suffering of others. Nowhere is this clearer than in the life of Thomas Jefferson – the chief icon of the Californian Ideology.

Thomas Jefferson was the man who wrote the inspiring call for democracy and liberty in the USA's *Declaration of Independence* and – at the same time – owned nearly 200 human beings as slaves. As a politician, he championed the right of American farmers and artisans to determine their own destinies without being subject to the restrictions of feudal Europe. Like other liberals of the period, he thought that political liberties could be protected from authoritarian governments only by the widespread ownership of individual private property. The rights of citizens were derived from this fundamental natural right. In order to encourage self-sufficiency, he proposed that every American should be given at least 50 acres of land to guarantee their economic independence. Yet, while idealising the small farmers and businessmen of the frontier, Jefferson was actually a Virginian plantation-owner living off the forced labour of his slaves. Although the South's 'peculiar institution' troubled his conscience, he still believed that the natural rights of man included the right to own human beings as private property. In Jeffersonian democracy, freedom for white folks was based upon slavery for black people.<sup>32</sup>

## Forward Into the Past

Despite the eventual emancipation of the slaves and the victories of the civil rights movement, racial segregation still lies at the centre of American politics especially on the West Coast. In the 1994 election for governor in California, Pete Wilson, the Republican candidate, won through a vicious anti immigrant campaign. Nationally, the triumph of Gingrich's Republican party in the legislative elections was based on the mobilisation of 'angry white males' against the supposed threat from black welfare scroungers, immigrants from Mexico and other uppity minorities. These politicians have reaped the electoral benefits of the increasing polarisation between the mainly white, affluent suburbanites – most of whom vote – and the largely non-white, poorer

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<sup>32</sup> According to Miller, Thomas Jefferson believed that black people could not be members of the Lockean social contract which bound together citizens of the American republic: 'The rights of man...while theoretically and ideally the birthright of every human being, applied in practice in the United States only to white men: the black slaves were excluded from consideration because, while admittedly human beings, they were also property, and where the rights of man conflicted with the rights of property, property took precedence', see John Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, page 13. Jefferson's opposition to slavery was at best rhetorical. In a letter of 22 April 1820, he disingenuously suggested that the best way to encourage the abolition of slavery would be to legalise the private ownership of human beings in all States of the Union and the frontier territories! He claimed that '...their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier, and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation, by dividing the burden on a greater number of coadjutors [i.e. slave-owners]', see Merrill Peterson (ed.), *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, page 568. For a description of life on his plantation, also see Paul Wiltach, *Jefferson and Monticello*.

inner city dwellers – most of whom don't vote.<sup>33</sup> Although they retain some hippie ideals, many Californian ideologues have found it impossible to take a clear stand against the divisive policies of the Republicans. This is because the hi tech and media industries are a key element of the New Right electoral coalition. In part, both capitalists and well-paid workers fear that the open acknowledgement of public funding of their companies would justify tax rises to pay for desperately needed spending on health care, environmental protection, housing, public transport and education. More importantly, many members of the virtual class want to be seduced by the libertarian rhetoric and technological enthusiasm of the New Right. Working for hi-tech and media companies, they would like to believe that the electronic marketplace can somehow solve America's pressing social and economic problems without any sacrifices on their part. Caught in the contradictions of the Californian Ideology, Gingrich is – as one *Wired* contributor put it – both their 'friend and foe'.<sup>34</sup>

In the USA, a major redistribution of wealth is urgently needed for the long term economic well being of the majority of the population. However, this is against the short term interests of rich white folks, including many members of the virtual class. Rather than share with their poor black or hispanic neighbours, the yuppies instead retreat into their affluent suburbs, protected by armed guards and secure with their private welfare services.<sup>35</sup> The deprived only participate in the information age by providing cheap non-unionised labour for the unhealthy factories of the Silicon Valley chip manufacturers.<sup>36</sup> Even the construction of cyberspace could become an integral part of the fragmentation of American society into antagonistic, racially-determined classes. Already 'red-lined' by profit hungry telephone companies, the inhabitants of poor inner city areas are now threatened with exclusion from the new on line services through lack of money.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, members of the virtual class and other professionals can play at being cyberpunks within hyper-reality without having to meet any of their impoverished neighbours. Alongside the ever widening social divisions, another apartheid is being created between the 'information-rich' and the 'information-poor'. In this hi-tech Jeffersonian democracy, the relationship between masters and slaves endures in a new form.

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<sup>33</sup> For California's turn to the Right, see Richard Walker, 'California Rages Against the Dying of the Light'.

<sup>34</sup> See Esther Dyson, 'Friend and Foe'. Esther Dyson collaborated with the Tofflers in the writing of The Peace and Progress Foundation's *Cyberspace and the American Dream*, which is a retro-futurist manifesto designed to win votes for Gingrich from members of the 'virtual class'.

<sup>35</sup> For the rise of the fortified suburbs, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*; and *Urban Control: the Ecology of Fear*. These 'gated suburbs' provide the inspiration for the alienated background of many cyberpunk sci-fi novels, such as Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*.

<sup>36</sup> See Dennis Hayes, *Behind the Silicon Curtain*.

<sup>37</sup> See Reginald Stuart, 'High-Tech Redlining'.

## Cyborg Masters and Robot Slaves

The fear of the rebellious ‘underclass’ has now corrupted the most fundamental tenet of the Californian Ideology: its belief in the emancipatory potentiality of the new information technologies. While the proponents of the electronic agora and the electronic marketplace promise to liberate individuals from the hierarchies of the state and private monopolies, the social polarisation of American society is bringing forth a more oppressive vision of the digital future. The technologies of freedom are turning into the machines of dominance.

At his estate at Monticello, Jefferson invented many clever gadgets for his house, such as a dumb waiter to deliver food from the kitchen into the dining room. By mediating his contacts with his slaves through technology, this revolutionary individualist spared himself from facing the reality of his dependence upon the forced labour of his fellow human beings.<sup>38</sup> In the late-twentieth century, technology is once again being used to reinforce the difference between the masters and the slaves.

According to some visionaries, the search for the perfection of mind, body and spirit will inevitably lead to the emergence of the post-human: a bio-technological manifestation of the social privileges of the virtual class. While the hippies saw self-development as part of social liberation, the hi-tech artisans of contemporary California are more likely to seek individual self-fulfillment through therapy, spiritualism, exercise or other narcissistic pursuits. Their desire to escape into the gated suburb of the hyper-real is only one aspect of this deep self-obsession.<sup>39</sup> Emboldened by supposed advances in Artificial Intelligence and medical science, the Extropian cult fantasises of abandoning the ‘wetware’ of the human state altogether to become living machines.<sup>40</sup> Just like Virek and the Tessier-Ashpools in William Gibson’s *Sprawl* novels, they believe that social privilege will eventually endow them with immortality.<sup>41</sup> Instead of predicting the emancipation of humanity, this form of technological determinism can only envisage a deepening of social segregation.

Despite these fantasies, white people in California remain dependent on their darker skinned fellow humans to work in their factories, pick their crops, look after their children and tend their gardens. Following the recent riots in Los Angeles, they increasingly fear that this underclass will someday demand its liberation. If human slaves are ultimately unreliable, then mechanical ones will have to be invented. The search for the holy grail of Artificial Intelligence reveals this desire for the Golem a strong and loyal slave whose skin is the colour of the earth and whose innards are made of sand. As in Asimov’s *Robot* novels, the techno-utopians imagine that it is possible to obtain slave like labour from inanimate machines.<sup>42</sup> Yet, although technology can store or amplify

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<sup>38</sup> See Paul Wilstach, *Jefferson and Monticello*.

<sup>39</sup> See Dennis Hayes, *Behind the Silicon Curtain*.

<sup>40</sup> For an exposition of their retro-futurist programme, see the Extropians, FAQ.

<sup>41</sup> See William Gibson, *Neuromancer*; and *Count Zero*.

<sup>42</sup> See Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot*; and *The Rest of the Robots*.

labour, it can never remove the necessity for humans to invent, build and maintain these machines in the first place. Slave labour cannot be obtained without somebody being enslaved.

Across the world, the Californian Ideology has been embraced as an optimistic and emancipatory form of technological determinism. Yet, this utopian fantasy of the West Coast depends upon its blindness towards – and dependence on – the social and racial polarisation of the society from which it was born. Despite its radical rhetoric, the Californian Ideology is ultimately pessimistic about fundamental social change. Unlike the hippies, its advocates are not struggling to build ecotopia or even to help revive the New Deal. Instead, the social liberalism of New Left and the economic liberalism of New Right have converged into an ambiguous dream of a hi-tech Jeffersonian democracy. Interpreted generously, this retro-futurism could be a vision of a cybernetic frontier where digital artisans discover their individual self-fulfillment in either the electronic agora or the electronic marketplace. However, as the zeitgeist of the virtual class, the Californian Ideology is at the same time an exclusive faith. If only some people have access to the new information technologies, Jeffersonian democracy can become a hi-tech version of the plantation economy of the Old South. Reflecting its deep ambiguity, the Californian Ideology's technological determinism is not simply optimistic and emancipatory. It is simultaneously a deeply pessimistic and repressive vision of the future.

## **There are Alternatives**

Despite its deep contradictions, people across the world still believe that the Californian Ideology expresses the only way forward to the future. With the increasing globalisation of the world economy, many members of the virtual class in Europe and Asia feel more affinity with their Californian peers than other workers within their own country. Yet, in reality, debate has never been more possible or more necessary. The Californian Ideology was 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. For instance, the anti-statist assumptions of the Californian ideologues are rather parochial. In Singapore, the government is not only organising the construction of a fibre-optic network, but also trying to control the ideological suitability of the information distributed over it. Given the much faster growth rates of the Asian 'tigers', the digital future will not necessarily first arrive in California.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See William Gibson and Sandy Sandfort, 'Disneyland with the Death Penalty'. Since these articles are an attack on Singapore, it is ironic that the real Disneyland is in California – whose repressive penal code includes the death penalty!



Despite the neo-liberal recommendations of the Bangemann Report, most European authorities are also determined to be closely involved within the development of new information technologies. Minitel – the first successful public interactive network in the world – was the deliberate creation of the French state. Responding to an official report on the potential impact of hypermedia, the government decided to pour resources into developing ‘cutting edge’ technologies. In 1981, France Telecom launched the Minitel system which provided a mix of text-based information and communications facilities. As a monopoly, this nationalised telephone company was able to build up a critical mass of users for its pioneering on-line system by giving away free terminals to anyone willing to forgo paper telephone directories. Once the market had been created, commercial and community providers were then able to find enough customers or participants to thrive within the system. Ever since, millions of French people from all social backgrounds have happily booked tickets, chatted each other up and politically organised on line without realising they were breaking the libertarian precepts of the Californian Ideology.<sup>44</sup>

Far from demonising the state, the overwhelming majority of the French population believe that more public intervention is needed for an efficient and healthy society. In the recent presidential elections, almost every candidate had to advocate – at least rhetorically – greater state intervention to end social exclusion of the unemployed and homeless.<sup>45</sup> Unlike its American equivalent, the French revolution went beyond economic liberalism to popular democracy. Following the victory of the Jacobins over their liberal opponents in 1792, the democratic republic in France became the embodiment of the ‘general will’. As such, the state was believed to defend the interests of all citizens, rather than just to protect the rights of individual property owners. The discourse of French politics allows for collective action by the state to mitigate – or even remove – problems encountered by society. While the Californian ideologues try to ignore the taxpayers’ dollars subsidising the development of hypermedia, the French government can openly intervene in this sector of the economy.<sup>46</sup>

Although its technology is now increasingly dated, the history of Minitel clearly refutes the anti-statist prejudices of the Californian ideologues – and of the Bangemann committee. The digital future will be a hybrid of state intervention, capitalist entrepreneurship and DIY culture. Crucially, if the state can foster the development of hypermedia, conscious action could also be taken to prevent the emergence of the

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<sup>44</sup> For the report which led to the creation of Minitel, see Simon Nora and Alain Minc, *The Computerisation of Society*. An account of the early years of Minitel can be found in Michel Marchand, *The Minitel Saga*.

<sup>45</sup> According to a poll carried out during the 1995 presidential elections, 67% of the French population supported the proposition that “the state must intervene more in the economic life of our country”, see *Le Monde*, ‘Une majorité de Français souhaitent un vrai “chef” pour un vrai “Etat”’.

<sup>46</sup> For the influence of Jacobinism on French conceptions of democratic rights, see Richard Barbrook, *Media Freedom: the contradictions of communications in the age of modernity*. Some French economists believe that the very different history of Europe has created a specific – and socially superior – model of capitalism, see Michel Albert, *Capitalism v. Capitalism*; and Philippe Delmas, *Le Maître des Horloges*.

social apartheid between the ‘information rich’ and the ‘information poor’. By not leaving everything up to the vagaries of market forces, the EU and its member states could ensure that every citizen has the opportunity to be connected to a broadband fibre optic network at the lowest possible price.

In the first instance, this would be a much needed job creation scheme for semi-skilled labour in a period of mass unemployment. As Keynesian employment measure, nothing beats paying people to dig holes in the road and fill them in again.<sup>47</sup> Even more importantly, the construction of a fibre optic network into homes and businesses could give everyone access to new on line services and create a large vibrant community of shared expertise. The long term gains to the economy and to society from the building of the the Net would be immeasurable. It would allow industry to work more efficiently and market new products. It would ensure that education and information services were available to all. No doubt this construction project will create a mass market for private companies to sell existing information commodities films, TV programmes, music and books across the Net. At the same time, once people can distribute as well as receive hypermedia, a flourishing of community media and special interest groups will quickly emerge. For all this to happen, collective intervention will be needed to ensure that all citizens are included within the digital future.

## The Rebirth of the Modern

Even if it is not in circumstances of their own choosing, it is now necessary for Europeans to assert their own vision of the future. There are varying ways forward towards the information society – and some paths are more desirable than others. In order to make an informed choice, European digital artisans need to develop a more coherent analysis of the impact of hypermedia than can be found within the ambiguities of the Californian Ideology. The members of the European virtual class must create their own distinctive self-identity.

This alternative understanding of the future starts from a rejection of any form of social apartheid – both inside and outside cyberspace. Any programme for developing hypermedia must ensure that the whole population can have access to the new on-line services. In place of New Left or New Right anarchism, a European strategy for developing the new information technologies must openly acknowledge the inevitability of some form of mixed economy – the creative and antagonistic mix of state, corporate and DIY initiatives. The indeterminacy of the digital future is a result of the ubiquity of this mixed economy within the modern world. No one knows exactly what the relative strengths of each component will be, but collective action can ensure that no social group is deliberately excluded from cyberspace.

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<sup>47</sup> As Keynes himself says: “To dig holes in the ground”, paid for out of savings, will increase, not only employment, but the real national dividend of useful goods and services.’, see J.M. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, page 220.

A European strategy for the information age must also celebrate the creative powers of the digital artisans. Because their labour cannot be deskilled or mechanised, members of the virtual class exercise great control over their own work. Rather than succumbing to the fatalism of the Californian Ideology, we should embrace the Promethean possibilities of hypermedia. Within the limitations of the mixed economy, digital artisans are able to invent something completely new – something which has not been predicted in any sci-fi novel. These innovative forms of knowledge and communications will sample the achievements of others, including some aspects of the Californian Ideology. It is now impossible for any serious movement for social emancipation not to incorporate feminism, drug culture, gay liberation, ethnic identity and other issues pioneered by West Coast radicals. Similarly, any attempt to develop hypermedia within Europe will need some of the entrepreneurial zeal and can-do attitude championed by the Californian New Right. Yet, at the same time, the development of hypermedia means innovation, creativity and invention. There are no precedents for all aspects of the digital future.

As pioneers of the new, the digital artisans need to reconnect themselves with the theory and practice of productive art. They are not just employees of others – or even would-be cybernetic entrepreneurs. They are also artist-engineers – designers of the next stage of modernity. Drawing on the experience of the Saint-Simonists and Constructivists, the digital artisans can create a new machine aesthetic for the information age.<sup>48</sup> For instance, musicians have used computers to develop purely digital forms of music, such as drum ‘n’ bass and techno.<sup>49</sup> Interactive artists have explored the potentiality of CD-rom technologies, as shown by the work of Anti-Rom.<sup>50</sup> The Hypermedia Research Centre has constructed an experimental virtual social space called *J’s Joint*. In each instance, artist-engineers are trying to push beyond the limitations of both the technologies and their own creativity. Above all, these new forms of expression and communications are connected with the wider culture. The developers of hypermedia must reassert the possibility of rational and conscious control over the shape of the digital future. Unlike the elitism of the Californian Ideology, the European artist-engineers must construct a cyberspace which is inclusive and universal. Now is the time for the rebirth of the Modern.

‘Present circumstances favour making luxury national. Luxury will become useful and moral when it is enjoyed by the whole nation. the honour and advantage of em-

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<sup>48</sup> See Keith Taylor (ed.), *Henri Saint-Simon 1760-1825*; and John E. Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*.

<sup>49</sup> As Goldie, a jungle music-maker, puts it: “We have to take it forwards and take the drums ‘n’ bass and push it and push it and push it. I remember when we were saying that it couldn’t be pushed anymore. It’s been pushed tenfold since then...”, see Tony Marcus, ‘The War is Over’, *Mixmag*, August 1995, page 46.

<sup>50</sup> For information on ANTI-rom, see their website.

ploying directly, in political arrangements, the progress of exact sciences and the fine arts...have been reserved for our century.’<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Henri Saint-Simon, ‘Sketch of the New Political System’ in Keith Taylor (ed.), *Henri Saint-Simon 1760- 1825*, page 203.

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### Responses

**Louis Rossetto:** editor-in-chief of *Wired*

**Franco 'Bifo' Berardi:** author of *Neuromagma*

**John Barker:** Londoner, novelist and activist

**Celia Pearce:** an insider's view of *The Californian Ideology*

**Jeffrey Kaplan:** the counter-culture writes back

**John Blower:** a response from FeNix

**Mark Dery:** *The Californian Demonology*

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron  
The Californian ideology  
January, 1996

Written in 1995 with Andy Cameron, this article was a pioneering critique of dotcom neo-liberalism. It was first published in the same year in Mute, Number 3 and subsequently in various versions and multiple languages. The definitive text appeared in Science as Culture, Number 26, Volume 6, part 1, 1996, pages 44-72. DOI: 10.1080/09505439609526455.

<[imaginaryfutures.net/2007/04/17/the-californian-ideology-2/](http://imaginaryfutures.net/2007/04/17/the-californian-ideology-2/)>

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