The Californian Ideology

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In the Californian Ideology, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron describe a set of beliefs for the current information age that combines techno-utopianism and support for neoliberal economic policies with bohemian and anti-authoritarian attitudes from the counterculture movement of the 60s: The Californian Ideology. The authors describe it as a utopian vision that has emerged from Silicon Valley and the West Coast, which promotes the faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies. In this optimistic vision of the future a lot of inequalities will disappear through the use of new information technologies: 'In the digital utopia, everybody will be both hip and rich'. The authors claim that the Californian ideology is the ruling philosophy for the information society.

The article can be seen as an answer to the question that Esther Dyson poses in 'Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age' (1994) :"Who will shape the nature of cyberspace and its impact on our lives and institutions?" Within the Californian ideology the goal is to create a new 'Jeffersonian democracy'. Hereby they refer to Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776. In the new Jeffersonian democracy all individuals would be able to express themselves freely within cyberspace. One year after this article was originally published cyber-libertarian John Perry Barlow wrote 'The Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' for Wired, which is obviously aligned with Barbrook's and Cameron's ideas. Wired is also referred to as the bible of 'the virtual class', which Barbrook and Cameron describe as skilled hi-tech entrepreneurs that use new technologies to 'empower the individual, enhance personal freedom, and radically reduce the power of the nation-state'.

According to the authors the hybridization of radical, anti-corporate activism and entrepreneurial, free market spirit is made possible by the 'nearly universal' belief in technological determinism. There lies a hybrid faith within the 'Californian' future: both the New Left and the New Right will have economical liberating possibilities. The New Left's virtual community will be able create a hi-tech 'gift economy' the authors call 'electronic agora' without bureaucracy or corporatism and the New Right will turn cyberspace into a marketplace where competition is the rule. Barbrook and Cameron describe how this will inevitably lead to a mixed economy; 'a creative and antagonistic mix of state, corporate and d.i.y. initiatives'. The authors eventually call for a European strategy of conducting a cyberspace that is more inclusive and universal, unlike the elitism of the California ideology, where hi-tech artisans can be more productive in a mixed economy.

There also has been a lot of uproar with the raised problematics of Cali-

fornian Ideology. Several responses can be found on the Hypermedia Research Center website, amongst those is one of former publisher and founder of Wired, Louis Rossetto. One of the major disagreements Rossetto has, is against the new presupposed techno-social apartheid that the Californian Ideology would impose, according to Barbrook and Cameron. "Lack of money? Online is cheaper than cable television, and you can get a new computer for less than $1000, a used one less than $500", essentially this is a viable answer to the objections of the original authors. Then again, they never describe in detail if (and which) hardware or software is exactly what's causing this apartheid. Of course, everyone will be able to afford a computer, but still, this doesn't change anything for the power and information distribution, that the California market still reigns upon.

Also Rossetto highly disagrees with the praise towards the European net-strategies: "The true measure of the failure of European (..) direction of technology can be measured by the fact that in ten years, during the biggest technology boom the planet has ever witnessed, Europe has gone from a net exporter of technology, to a net importer." This surpassing would be described to "High European taxes which have restricted spending on technology and hence retarded its development". In his view, the technology-boom has been so succesful because it sprouted under a free capitalistic market, which isn't state influenced (in contrast to the European over-protectism). What shows from this critisism is that Rossetto clearly uses a different parameters for the technological succeses. He qualifies exactly the New Right liberalism values that Barbrook and Cameron describe and although he doesn't go in detail about the New Left 'ecotopia', he fits the picture about the contradictionary values and similarly ignores further socio-political implications it carries.

In another article, coming from Franco Berardi, there's again some response towards the European approaches to state telecommunication services (like MINITEL): "Stopping globalization, preserving identities: these are the ideas which are generating nationalism and fundamentalism", thus, he finds the American approach more suitable as a truely open and mainstream network. To look at the possibilities outside the current power-structures Berardi concludes: "The industrial world is fading, the industrial composition of labour is dissolving, and a new composition of social activity is emerging. But the capitalist code is still pervading it. And in its current virtual (dis)incarnation, capitalism seems to be a system without any alternative." And referencing to the Euro-protectionistic Net markets: "The alternative cannot be found in the past."

The anti-government, neoliberal side of the "Californian Ideology" is its most transforming and destructive feature. It seems redundant that one has to bother with refuting the claims of neoliberal economics, given the latest economic collapse. There is also steady decline of the US economy relative to the more managed economies of Europe and, of course, China over the last decade to consider. Within the realm of ICT, the US' irrational adherence to neoliberal economics is the very reason why it ranks 14th worldwide in broadband quality scores as of August 2008. (http://internetinnovation.org/factbook/entry/top-20-broadband-leaders-penetration-households/). While not often discussed in such explicit terms, broadband adorption is the literal line of the digital divide between the 'information-rich' and the 'information-poor.' In 2008, 55% of adult Americans have broadband access to the Internet. However, "Poorer Americans saw no growth in broadband adoption in the past year while at the same

time nearly one-third of broadband users pay more to get faster connections." (http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/Home-Broadband-2008.aspx) The United States total focus on stale "free market" ideology in the face of effective duopolies in most markets has resulted in an ever-widening gap. Every year it slips further in broadband adoption rates, despite obvious measures that could be taken to immediately reverse this trend and push broadband into the reach of all.

In 2000, the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (then known as the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication) explicitly "limited the interconnection rates that NTT's operating companies (NTT East and NTT West) could charge independent DSL providers." (http://www.ictregulationtoolkit.org/en/PracticeNote.aspx`) The impact of this move cannot be overstated:

"The acceptance of these rules by the dominant incumbent carrier, NTT, led to rapid DSL deployment in Japan by NTT as well as new entrants, such as Yahoo!BB and eAccess. Yahoo!BB launched its DSL service in late 2001, charging about $20 for up to 1.5 Mbps links. Within a few years these access speeds grew to as fast as 50 Mbps for subscribers located near central offices. (In Japan over 90% of households are within 7 kilometres. of central offices.)"

In Japan the average price per megabit was $0.70. Compare this to the $4.90 average that Americans pay and it becomes immediately apparent just why Japan is at the top of broadband quality scores. By forcing NTT to share its lines for a reasonable price, Japan has successfully provided affordable internet access to its citizens. That forcing competition in this space would cause immediate benefits would seem like a natural argument to advocates of a "free market." This, however, is not the case. Mainstream discussion in the USA about Japan's forced line sharing is virtually nonexistent. When it does come up, it is mentioned so briefly as to seem like deliberate attempts to avoid discussing it, such as this from a 2009 techworld.com article: "Part of Japan's policy focuses on incumbent carriers sharing their networks with competitors, a policy NTT East has criticized." The article is about a government initiative, uJapan, that "provides money for cities to wire schools and community centers, provides zero-interest or low-interest loans for cities and businesses to deploy broadband, and provides tax breaks for the purchase of networking equipment"– a policy Barbrook and Cameron would surely love.

Japan's policy here is a clear statement of the government's considerations towards including all citizens in the online world. Finland has gone even further, mandating a broadband internet connection as a right of every citizen. While Japan's method does not entirely solve the digital divide, it does make access significantly more affordable. Finland's method is a direct opposition to the Californian Ideology. As the United States continues to fall behind in both broadband adoption and offerings, the contradiction at the center of this ideology becomes more and more apparent. It is a good sign that many countries are not following the Californian Ideology in lockstep. Even more important, however, is how they prove that ideology false as their infrastructure evolves so much more rapidly than the neoliberal United States.

Sources

- Louis Rossetto's response on the Hypermedia Research Center webstie: http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/hrc/theory/californianideo/response/t.4.2.6.html

- Franco Berardi's response on the Hypermedia Research Center website:

http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/hrc/theory/californianideo/response/t.4.2.6%5B1%5D.html