Cyberselfish

—Paulina Borsook, 1996

Silicon Valley, one of the country's biggest recipients of government largesse, would like to bite the hand that feeds it. Paulina Borsook, a Wired magazine contributing writer, reports on the growth of cyberlibertarianism.

I grew up in Pasadena, California, attending school with the sons and daughters of fathers (yup, in those days it was only dads) who worked at Caltech and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. These parents of my classmates were my first encounter with technologists, and they were, to a man, good liberals. These were the kind of folks who would have Pete Seeger do a benefit concert for our school. They voted New Deal Democratic; they were the grateful recipients of all the money the U.S. government had poured into science, post-Sputnik; they had a sense that the government could do and had done good things, from building Boulder Dam to pulling off the Manhattan Project to putting a man on the moon. And, as beneficiaries of government largesse in ways they were well aware of—from the GI Bill to interest deductions for home mortgages to the vast expansion of government funding for R&D—they felt society in general, as manifested in the actions of the government, had an obligation to help everyone in it.

They were also fully aware of the positive value of government regulation, from the reliability of the FDA-mandated purity of pharmaceutical-grade chemicals they used in their research to the enforcement of voting rights for African-Americans in the South. And what with the very visible air quality problems in the Los Angeles basin (their government-funded studies had recorded the smog death of trees in the encircling San Gabriel Mountains by the 1960s), they were able to see the benefits of regulation in the local ban on trash incineration, the regulation of refinery effluents in the L.A. area, and the implementation of federally stipulated smog devices on automobiles.

So it came as a shock, when, 20 years later, I stumbled into the culture of Silicon Valley (my first job at a software company, 1981; first job at a computer magazine, 1983; attendance at the first commercial conference devoted to the Internet, 1987; token feminist/humanist/skeptic on the masthead of *Wired* magazine, 1993). Although the technologists I encountered there were the liberals on social issues I would have expected (pro-choice, as far as abortion; pro-diversity, as far as domestic partner benefits; inclined to sanction the occasional use of recreational drugs), they were violently lacking in compassion, ravingly anti-government, and tremendously opposed to regulation.

These are the inheritors of the greatest government subsidy of technology and expansion in technical education the planet has ever seen; and, like the ungrateful adolescent offspring of immigrants who have made it in the new country, they take for granted the richness of the environment in which they have flourished, and resent the hell out of the constraints that bind them. And, like privileged, spoiled teenagers everywhere, they haven't a clue what their existence would be like without the bounty showered on them. These high-tech libertarians

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believe the private sector can do everything—but, of course, R&D is something that cannot by any short-term measurement meet the test of the marketplace, the libertarians' measure of all things. They decry regulation—except without it, there would be no mechanism to ensure profit from intellectual property, without which entrepreneurs would not get their payoffs, nor would there be equitable marketplaces in which to make their sales.

When I was asked to participate in a survey on the politics of the Net, the questions *presumed* respondents were libertarian, but charitably gave space for outdated contrarian views. When *Byte* magazine's former West Coast bureau chief wrote an editorial mildly advocating government subsidy for basic Net access for elementary schools and public libraries, the only response he got was outraged flames from libertarians.

And when *Self* magazine started an online gun control conference on The Well, an electronic bulletin board and Internet gateway smack in the middle of tree-hugging, bleeding-heart-liberal, secular-humanist Northern California, opinions ranged from mildly to rabidly anti-gun control. This passionate hatred of regulation, so out of whack with the opinions of the man and woman on the street in my own bioregion/demographic, showed me how different a place the online, high-tech world is from the terrestrial community to which it is nominally tethered—even an online world with countercultural roots as strong as those of The Well.

Mike Godwin, staff counsel for the online watchdog group Electronic Frontier Foundation, has written in *Wired* magazine, "Libertarianism (pro, con, and internal faction fights) is the primordial net.news discussion topic. Anytime the debate shifts somewhere else, it must eventually return to this fuel source." In a decentralized community where tolerance and diversity are the norm (no one questions online special-interest chat rooms devoted to consensual S&M or Wiccan nature mysticism or...), it is damned peculiar that there seems to be no place for political points of view other than the libertarian.

I think this all very strange, because, of course, I know that without the government, there would be no Internet (majorly funded by the government until recently).

Further, there would be no microprocessor industry, the fount of Silicon Valley's prosperity (early computers sprang out of government-funded electronics research). There would also be no major research universities cranking out qualified tech workers: Stanford, Berkeley, MIT, and Carnegie Mellon get access to incredibly cheap state-of-the-art equipment plus R&D, courtesy of tax-reduced academic-industrial consortia and taxpayer-funded grants and fellowships.

But libertarianism thrives in high-tech, nonetheless. I spent a week at the plushy Lake Tahoe getaway of a Silicon Valley guy who's made it. We argued and butted heads with great civility—but perhaps the most Found moment came when he complained about how the local Tahoe building code wouldn't let him alter the silhouette of his megachalet. I nodded sympathetically, yet pointed out that in Los Angeles, where there were no such planning guidelines until recently, plutocrats often tore down existing structures and rebuilt monstrosities that take up the entire lot, blocking their neighbors' views. He looked at me, puzzled; he hadn't considered that possibility. Obviously, he had never heard of the tragedy of the commons, where one sheep too many consuming more than its share of common resources destroys the whole; nor had he thought much about what participating in a community means.

Of course, I was also thinking about the fine system of interstate highways that made his trip from Silicon Valley to the Sierra a breeze; the sewage and water-treatment facilities that allowed his toddlers to drink safely out of the tap in his kitchen; the fabric contents-and-care labels on the sheets and towels freshly laundered for each new houseguest; and the environmental regulations that keep Tahoe the uniquely blue, gorgeous, and safe refuge it is—precisely the lateral, invisible, benign effects of the government he constantly railed against.

The nexus of libertarianism and high-tech in the Silicon Valley will come to matter more and more, because it involves lots and lots of money (companies with valuations rivaling General Motors'). And it's a wealth of tremendous self-insulation: I routinely attend parties peopled by digerati in their 20s and early 30s who, in addition to their desirable arrogance of youth, have a frightening invulnerability (their skills in demand, the likelihood of cashing out high).

One of these, a friend newly venture-funded to capitalize on Net advertising, commented that the economy was basically in good shape (after all, no one she knew was struggling)—and then wondered why, when she ran a help wanted ad for an office manager in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, she got so many applicants, so many of whom had advanced degrees and employment histories of authority and responsibility.

Never mind people like my sister, who, with her biology degree from Stanford and master's in public health, has rarely found a steady job with benefits in the last 10 years, and has at times resorted to desperation moves such as selling flowers at subway stations to prevent foreclosure on her house (wrong gender; wrong skill set: teaching, public health, environmental concerns—just the kind of "middle manager/government bureaucrat" so despised by technolibertarians).

Or my ex-boyfriend, the English professor (B.A. honors, University of Chicago; Ph.D., Cornell), who was *lucky* to find a job where he earned about what I made at my first technical writing gig 15 years ago (wrong skill set: all that subjective liberal-arts-flake crap no one cares about. After all, *anyone* can publish on the Web, and, as MIT Media Lab's Archduke Nicholas Negroponte points out, what's the future of books anyway?).

And what would the technolibertarians make of the *New York Times* front-page series on the chronic, structural unemployment of masses of skilled middle-class workers, folks theoretically immune to being rendered redundant in the '90s? Or the heartbreaking stories I read about blue-collar workers (haven't they had the good taste to become extinct by now?) in the house organ of the United Auto Workers (the National Writers Union is part of the UAW). I imagine the technolibertarians thinking, "Well, the blue-collar miscreants, it's their own damned inertial Second Wave thinking that's got them unemployed." But what would they say about the white-collar jobless, who, no doubt, *were* working with computers?

As surely as power follows wealth, those who make money decide that society, having rewarded their random combination of brains and luck in one sphere, should pay attention to them in another. And so, high-technocrats are beginning to try to influence the world beyond VDTs.

But what will result if the people who want to shape public policy know nothing about history or political science or, most importantly, how to interact with other humans? Programmers, and those who know how to make money off them, mostly find it easier to interact in e-mail than

IRL (in real life), and are often not good at picking up the cues, commonplaces, and patterns of being that civilians use to communicate, connect, and operate in groups.

The convergence between libertarianism and high-tech has created the *true* revenge of the nerds: Those whose greatest strengths have not been the comprehension of social systems, appreciation of the humanities, or acquaintance with history, politics, and economics have started shaping public policy. Armed with new money and new celebrity—juice—they can wreak vengeance on those by whom they have felt diminished.

Implicit is their assumption that those who excel by working with the tangible and not the virtual (e.g., manufacturing and servicing actual stuff) are to be considered societally superfluous. Technolibertarians *applaud* the massive industrial dislocations taking place in affluent North America, comparable to the miseries of the Scottish enclosures or the Industrial Revolution.

Compare my father's generation: My father succeeded through his era's version of the arriviste drive so celebrated by technolibertarian theorists such as George Gilder, Silicon Valley's John Knox. One of eight children in an immigrant family, second in his class in medical school when there were still quotas on Jews (the usual story), my father, like the majority of his age-cohorts, never had contempt for those who couldn't find a way to work the system as he had. He believed in social safety nets and as much government regulation (for consumer health and safety, for example) as possible to aid ordinary people. It would have made no sense to him to adopt the stance of today's technolibertarian nouveau riche (or even more scarily, wannabe nouveau riche). And in this he was not exceptional.

It's not clear how all this evolved: a combination, no doubt, of the money to be made by developing technology in the private sector, the general worldwide resurgence of libertarianism, maybe some previously undocumented deleterious effect of the toxic byproducts of semiconductor manufacturing that have leached into the aquifers below Sunnyvale. But there are some worrisome consequences to consider as technology touches more and more people's lives—and those who rule are increasingly the ones who understand it, own it, create it, and profit by it.

- *Protecting privacy.* Technolibertarians rightfully worry about Big Bad Government, yet think commerce unfettered can create all things bright and beautiful—and so they disregard the real invader of privacy: Corporate America seeking ever-better ways to exploit the Net, to sell databases of consumer purchases and preferences, to track potential customers however it can.
- *Skimping on philanthropy.* In Silicon Valley and its regional outposts (Seattle, Austin), it's not even a joke, not even an embarrassment, that there's so little corporate philanthropy, except where enlightened self-interest can come to bear (donating computers to schools, contributing to a local computer museum). High-tech employees rank among the lowest of any industry sector for giving to charity—especially dismaying given their education, job security, lifetime earnings potential, and annual income.

  It's an issue of culture: Unlike other educated professionals, who see good works and support of the arts as symbols of having arrived or as payback to the society that has treated them well, the average geek espouses a world where the only art would be that which has withstood the test of the marketplace (Dong Kingman museums? Leroy Nieman traveling

exhibitions?), and where there is no value to be derived in experiencing a painting in person (that is, in a museum) as opposed to on CD-ROM.

And since these guys honestly can't perceive the difference between a Lichtenstein and some *soi-disant* computer art exercise in primary-colored fractals, courtesy of Kai's Power Tools—they don't see anything out there worth subsidizing. A total sweetheart of my acquaintance, the smart and aesthetically sensitive creative director of a hot hot hot Web design studio, not only hadn't read *The Magic Mountain*, he hadn't heard of it. Nor of its author, Thomas Mann, a Nobel laureate and one of the great novelists of the century, an early multivoiced postmodernist if ever there were one. And perish the thought that anyone should need the services of an AIDS hospice, without the benefit of a few thousand shares of founders' stock in Intel or Cisco to cash in.

- *Gutting the environment.* High-tech also has tremendously negative environmental impacts: Manufacturing its plastics and semiconductors is a remarkably toxic and resource-depleting affair. No surprise, then, that high-tech companies increasingly manufacture them in countries without environmental and worker safety regulations, or in U.S. locales where these regulations are more lax. This way, the guys in area codes 415 and 408 who like to go telemarking in the Shasta Trinity Alps or bouldering in the Desolation Wilderness don't have to confront the opportunity cost of their wealth: the poisoning of the world due to the ever-expanding reach of industrialization. And they never consider that one of the reasons the whole world (including the immigrant engineers working in Silicon Valley) wants to be here is that environmental regulation and a culture of government-mandated conservation (however imperfectly executed) have made the United States probably the safest, healthiest, and, in some ways, most pristine place on earth.
- *Ignoring cities.* The anti-communitarian outlook is an outcropping of how *suburban* an industry high-tech is. The quintessential edge-city business, high-tech celebrates people operating as monads, free agents who work in industrial parks and aspire, when they cash out in an initial public offering, to telecommute from horse country, puma country, or even from within the spare-bedroom-cum-home-office located in a half- million-dollar Eichler ranch house on a street close to El Camino Real. Never mind that most start-up/self-employed/telecommuting Internet entrepreneurs are concentrated in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, thriving on the grit/density/frisson/charge of urban areas.

All this matters desperately: With the libertarian agenda at work, the very things that fed the boom economy in intellectual property—the last great thing the United States has done—will disappear without more investment in infrastructure and health and safety and education and every other good legacy of the New Deal and the Great Society. In 20 or 30 years, the United States may well cease creating the one commodity that produces a trade surplus and new jobs.

And the sorrow for the bottom 90 percent of society—what Apple Computer once disingenuously called "the rest of us"—will be that once again we may deceive ourselves. We make goo-goo eyes over the megabucks high-tech generates, but we ignore the price. Just as 19th-century timber and cattle and mining robber barons made their fortunes from public resources, so are technolibertarians creaming the profits from public resources—from the orderly society that has resulted from the wise use of regulation and public spending. And they have neither the wisdom nor the manners nor the mindset to give anything that's not electronic back.