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# Cyberselfishness Explained

By Geert Lovink interviewing Paulina Borsook

The media interest that surrounded dotcom mania was perhaps as short-lived and skin deep as the supposed economic miracle itself. Shortly after the bubble burst in March 2000 and the media interest had started to wane, American journalist Paulina Borsook brought out her book *Cyberselfish* which examines the deeper roots of libertarianism – the ideology that fuelled the boom – as well as the deep social and environmental impact it has had in California's Bay Area. Geert Lovink – co-founder of the media politics and culture mailing list Nettime – tracked Borsook down in San Francisco to talk about cyberselfishness past and present

[IMAGE]

During the memorable year 2000, with markets swinging from the euphoria of the AOL-TimeWarner merger to the NASDAQ dotcom crash, my personal bible was Paulina Borsook's critical anatomy of Silicon Valley high-tech culture, *Cyberselfish*. It is a classic must-read for all interested in the origins of internet culture. Unlike most academic cyberfeminism or Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's provocative *The Californian Ideology*, *Cyberselfish* is a hardcore account from inside the belly of the Beast, a razor sharp critique of US techno-libertarianism written by a female journalist who was very much part of this culture. Paulina Borsook's positioning amongst essayists of high-tech is a unique one, carrying both the credentials of having worked at *Wired* and the slur of being their token Luddite. But I don't buy that – unless by 'Luddite' people mean that Borsook belongs to a growing number of people in high-tech circles who are discontented with the infrastructure breakdown and a general lack of social and political awareness in the US. Curiously enough, *Cyberselfish* does not deal with the late '90s dotcom phenomenon. Instead Borsook looks into the emerging ideology of the Gingrich era (1993-97) in which George Gilder, Kevin Kelly, Esther Dyson and other *Wired* front page heroes were setting the cultural-political agenda on which the speculative internet boom was built.

*Cyberselfish* is advertised as a book about people and culture, not about computers and markets: 'It is about a set of beliefs well known inside high-tech, but little known outside it. It is not a get rich quick guide nor about the ways scary hackers are going to get your momma.' Written in Susan Sontag's essay tradition, *Cyberselfish* is a theory-lite analysis of an engineer culture teaming up with business. Within the history of this kind of ideas genre, the book is notably free of political dogmas or regional essentialism. Within the history of this kind of ideas genre, the book is notably free of political dogmas, postmodern academic must-references or regional essentialisms. Not touching the big philosophical issues of Freedom and Liberty *Cyberselfish* is rich source material for those who want to get an understanding of techno-libertarianism. Borsook, speaking in Toronto: "Libertarian" comes as close as I can think to describing a culture that is lunatic anti-government, that romanticises itself as outlaw, and, more than ever, is in bed with Wall Street and enamoured with those with elite establishment credentials. It is a culture that has been present in Silicon Valley since its beginning. It flourishes in Bay Area high-tech society to this day and differs significantly from other technology cultures, and distinguishes itself from other robber baron nouveau riche cultures in some meaningful ways.'

Back in 1996 there was a great need for such a book. *Cyberselfish* has been criticised for being outdated because it stops around 1996-97. But Borsook denies that her object of study has changed all that much over time. 'The culture that I am documenting existed long before the Netscape IPO and will exist long after folks will be embarrassed to admit that they bought shares in pets.com.' With techno-libertarianism facing one setback after another, this ideology has by no means lost its influence and appeal to the rising class of young male programmers and this is the main reason why *Cyberselfish*

will remain a first class reference work for understanding contemporary technoculture.

In May 2001, I spoke with Paulina in a back garden of a friend's house in San Francisco's Mission District, a once colourful Hispanic district which has been swiftly gentrified during the late '90s dotcom mania, driving out migrants and artists.

**GL:** Where would you start if you had to trace back the libertarian high-tech culture? Would you go back as far as 1950s cybernetics or hippy culture in the '60s?

**PB:** I have been into high-tech since the early 1980s. A lot of what I have been writing in *Cyberselfish* has been based on what I have been observing for years and years. It took me a while to figure out what it was I was seeing. You can talk about the cuckooness of the dotcom world but that's a very particular bubble. The culture which I am describing goes back to Silicon Valley in the early '80s and even before which I do not really see changing. This is a technology culture that grew up post-Vietnam and post-Watergate and admits a deep disillusionment about government. There is wonderful book – *Regional Advantage* by Annalee Saxenian – about how Silicon Valley rose and route 128 outside Boston died. She talks about all the complex public-private partnerships and all the information sharing that went on. There was a real communitarian culture. But even they had the fantasy of being the lonesome cowboy. It is a fantasy that all their success in high-tech was unencumbered and didn't depend on a complex mesh of things.

**GL:** Could you describe the difference between *Wired* at the beginning and what the magazine eventually turned into?

**PB:** I had a love-hate relationship with the early *Wired* which I wrote for. It was wonderful because it was about technology as culture. I saw the early *Wired* in the American tradition of magazines such as *Hound and Horn* and *Horizon*. They were intelligent and smart, dealt with society and culture and had a definite point of view: gonzo, irreverent, hard charging, paradigm smashing! The later *Wired* turned into a business porn magazine. Nowadays there is little you can read anywhere which is not about business. I was looking into an in-flight magazine last week. American Airlines always had the best, a general interest magazine not just for sales people. They gutted it. It even had an excerpt from *Fast Company* in it (one of the post-*Wired* new economy propagators). All of American society has become corporatised. The business culture touches everything.

Business porn magazines are driven by the Ayn Rand idea of the entrepreneur as hero. It is like pornography because it's got a very predictable story line. You read it over and over again and get the same climax, like sex manuals: ten ways to do it. It's extremely formulaic, your readers are living vicariously through it. Nurse novels are emotion porn for women while Tom Clancy is action porn. You never want to deviate from the formula because otherwise people get upset. Business porn taps into the human need for glamour and importance, to be a hero and have other people regard you as a hero. *Business Week* and *Forbes* have been around for a long time but they didn't always have the self-glorifying glossy glam. They didn't have this philosopher-prince quality. *Wired* discovered how to turn unattractive geeks into celebrities.

**GL:** Could you tell us a bit more about the early 'bionomics' conferences? In your analysis they played a crucial role in establishing the '90s *Wired* culture of fancy IT business. What's the agenda behind the use of all these biological metaphors?

**PB:** *Bionomics* is the title of an influential book by Michael Rothschild who had been in and around the computer industry and the venture capital community for a long time. The book was distributed widely in those circles at the right time. We live in a totally mediated environment and we panic about nature vanishing. We do have wilderness here in the Western US and live with the myth of existing at the edge of the Empire, and these myths are at hand for us to borrow from. Most of the people

borrowing biological metaphors do not realise that they are in fact social Darwinists. A lot don't want to see themselves this way but they are. This thinking is aimed against those not meeting the test of the marketplace: 'We are thinning the herd', 'Good ideas survive, bad ideas don't.' They don't want to regulate anything because how can you regulate a rainforest? It doesn't matter that free market capitalism is destroying the actual rainforest. We don't want to touch that. Biological metaphors simplify. We shouldn't have to do anything and leave it all alone. Maybe it's that utopian strain in the American character. We all want to go back to Eden, to paradise before the goddamned government intervened. Bionomics built on intellectual fashions such as chaos and complexity theories which are saying that things are self organised, we don't have to do anything, just follow the genius of nature.

**GL:** Whatever happened to the New Economy? Do you believe that its goal was not so much to overthrow or destroy the Old Economy as to parasite off it? Dotcoms didn't seem to have time to make their money. All they did was burn other people's money.

[IMAGE]

**PB:** I never believed there was a New Economy. Now, when I read Fuckedcompany.com reporting about the latest dotcom bankruptcies and job losses, I feel I am reading the transcripts of the Nuremberg trials. All the people saying: 'I was never a party member, I was just a cook. I was just a driver and never bought into any of this stuff.' There have been trends in our society for twenty years which have accentuated the dotcom cuckooness. Capital has become global, there's been the rise of IT, there's been more speculation on the stock market. That didn't start with the Netscape IPO in 1995. It is silly to think that it did. There was a change in the SEC (Security and Exchange Commission) rulings in 1997 which really contributed to the boom because CEOs, VCs and founders could flip their stock much more quickly. It really became a culture of flip and flee. The point of these companies was not necessarily to make money in the long run. They were built for early investors to get money out of it quickly. There is no virtuality. We still live in world of matter. California has got an energy crisis. Sillicon Valley is not a clean industry. We got a huge breakdown of infrastructure here because people have to live some place and citizens of surrounding communities are getting sick of Sillicon Valley exporting its problems such as commuting over growing distances, housing and parking lots without contributing to possible solutions.

**GL:** Would you describe techno-libertarianism as an underlying long-term trend or rather as a mid-nineties fashion?

**PB:** There is much more libertarianism in the United States compared to 20 or 30 years ago. It sure helps that the FBI is so incompetent. Elections are more corrupt than ever. The libertarian religion is still more concentrated in the high-tech sector than elsewhere in society and I don't see that changing. It was only in the 2000 local elections that we saw people waking up. The quality of life in Silicon Valley is so bad, in particular schools. Everything they did not want to pay for over the last 20 years is coming home to roost. Maybe we've got to find ways, they thought, to make schools decent, make some mass transit around here and create affordable housing. Ten years ago ten percent of the Bay Area economy was high-tech. Now it's become twenty percent. If you include law firms and other support sectors it's probably much more. People who made it a more diverse place were all forced to move out. What's sad is that this now worsens the impact of the tech-slump. The region is suffering very badly. The slaves of the stock market don't have the money to buy band-aids to restore infrastructure so nothing is happening.

I see libertarianism as a religion, not as politics. Religion means it is mostly unconsciously held common set of beliefs. People do not give up their religion. If you grow up in Europe or North America you are influenced by the Judeo-Christian system. I don't care what you are, those values seep in. The same counts for libertarianism. It's there, no matter what you think you are doing. It's in

the air that you breath. Libertarianism is so appealing in its simplicity. Geeks are attracted by its simple rules and algorithmic formulas and can't deal with adult discourses that feature humanity in all its complexity and don't reduce to elevator pitches.

**GL:** Do you see a contradiction between 'Cyberselfishness' and the much propagated hacker values of sharing information and code, free software and decentralised systems?

**PB:** The title *Cyberselfish* was made up by editors at Mother Jones where the original essay was published. It was snappy so we stayed with it. I originally wanted to call the book 'My Visit to the Hall of the Mountain Kings,' a reference to the Norse mythologies where the trolls guard the gold, but nobody got the reference. There was the Homebrew Computer Club, and there was the old Arpanet culture which is all about information sharing. And there's a great part of civil libertarianism which fights for free speech and against banning algorithms. The problem is that these people often are rabid free marketeers. They may share code but do not have any communitarian feeling about anything else. Free software is all fine but what I get queasy about is its sloppy economic model. We use the same term intellectual property for software as we do for the arts and they are not the same thing. There is this old cultural leftover from the early internet that everything should be free. Authorship doesn't matter. We should all do it for the better good – which is fine when it's a small group of well-intentioned scientists talking to each other about network protocols. It's not so great when you are talking about a photograph, a graphic image, a piece of fiction endlessly reproduced for free all over the world. Doing that, you are basically saying that art is worthless. There are issues of livelihood here. It's too bad what AOL-TimeWarner is doing, not allowing satire and parody, but not paying artists for their work is something else. I don't like the big record companies either. But too often the Napster peer-to-peer evangelists don't think about what they are doing to the creator. The science fiction writer Harlan Ellison just started a campaign against kids uploading entire novels onto the Net. These writers deserve to get royalties from their work. Such actions are destroying the ability to make a living of your work as a creator. I am not against freedom, there is a degree problem.

**GL:** How were the responses to *Cyberselfish* in the United States?

**PB:** I was surprised how my audience skewed older. People of older generations are not too happy where society is going and remember when things were different. They feel vaguely uneasy and don't know why. The other surprise was how many from faith-based communities were responsive to the book. From Christian fundamentalists to observing Catholics, they loved my book. These people have values which matter deeply to them and are not to be tested on the marketplace. Then there is the responses of either rage or envy. Some said to me: 'Why don't you go back to China?' A lot of people didn't seem to have read what I said and instead fantasised about my position. I get adolescent libertarian raving via email and write back saying thank you, you proved my point, but they don't seem to get that.

**GL:** An irony of the dotcom craze was that so much money which was made disappeared not into virtuality but in real estate and high rents.

**PB:** When I wrote the article *How the Internet Ruined San Francisco* (Oct 27, 1999, *salon.com*) I got so many responses: 'Have you been to Boston, Austin, London lately?' What I described appeared to be a global phenomenon. Up until the Netscape IPO in 1995 (which we can now date as the beginning of the crazy time) high-tech was about technology. After 1995 it became about business play. Not much new technology was created. The late '90s were not a particularly innovative period. Think about Tokyo in the '80s. Speculative capital always dumps its money into real estate and won't invest in long-term research. It was financial speculation based on nothing much, just like the bubble in Manhattan in the '80s. The '90s boom had the rhetoric of technology and innovation to justify what was going on. A few years after the dotcom boom venture capitalists started complaining that they were not seeing anything new. There has been a whole new generation of kids going to computer science departments, thinking 'how can I get funding for a business idea as quickly as possible' as

opposed to ‘what is an interesting hard problem I can work on?’ Dotcoms were not about technology, they were about business. John Doerr, perhaps the most evil venture capitalist, talks about this period as the biggest legal wealth creation in history. No, it wasn’t. It’s was the greatest legal transfer of wealth, taking it from pension funds and middle class people to the VCs, executives and ad agencies. The money was not created. In response to the continuing gloomy business data, Doerr recently recanted like the Pope apologising for 2000 years of institutional anti-Semitism (Oops. Sorry about the pogroms and the crusades and the inquisition and all). In California, the dotcom money actually ended up in real estate which has eaten up agricultural land. California is the breadbasket of the world, most of America’s cotton is produced here, it’s not just oranges plus movie stars. I don’t want to defend the farmers here who depend on cheap government-subsidised water to basically make semi-desert arable but that’s what is going on. We socialise the risk and privatise the gain and the commons becomes the property of corporations whether it is mining, timber, farmland or gold – or the net.

**GL:** Europe has by and large been absent in the technology game of the last decade. It felt like it was behind and, in part, had to focus on other issues. Do you make fun of the old world’s tragic position?

**PB:** No. I understand that some values have more priority than others. Europe had other stuff it had to deal with. But be careful what you wish for, things are a mess here. Young people in particular are not equipped to deal with the current recession. They grew up in the full employment era where the most ridiculous jobs would get high pay. There is no next tech-wave about to break. Forget those who are preaching a quick recovery. People bought the idea that what they were doing was deeply creative. Now that there is no funny money anymore to finance all these nonsensical websites they are at a loss. Young people don’t have the intellectual framework at the moment to interpret what this was all about. I came of age when the first PhD graduates started driving cabs – and so I don’t have that attitude of ferocious entitlement that was so common amongst dotcommers. For good reasons young people rebelled against the Stalinist PC post-colonial gender crap they had to study – and bought into techno-libertarian free market fantasies instead.

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Paulina Borsook, *Cyberselfish, A Critical Romp Through the Terribly Libertarian World of High-Tech*, New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2001

Official and unofficial home pages:

[<http://www.cyberselfish.com>]

[<http://www.transaction.net/people/paulina>]