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Cyberselfish: Ravers, Guilders, Cyberpunks, And Other Silicon Valley Life-Forms [†]

Paulina Borsook^{††}

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I. INTRODUCTION

^{¶1} Many of you here, I am sure, have ambitions to become policy wonks. Conversely, many of you, I am also sure, have come of age during a time when the stockholder theory of value and deregulation and free-markets have been held as the only and highest good, and government at best is seen as a semi-dangerous, semi-dunderheaded animal. You have instrumental intelligence, or you wouldn't be in law school. Law-making and law-appealing and law-fudging and law-working-around are, of course, on your agenda. In addition, many of you here may have ambitions to go work for "getrichkwik.com" or to find new ways to profit from the raging intellectual property wars. I am not going to help you with any of that. Instead, I am going to talk about and make fun of, to some degree, the culture of high-tech.

II. THE HIGH-TECH CULTURE

^{¶2} There are tidal and ambient reasons why dot-com companies and their champions maintain a posture of fragility when they decry the notion of taxation on the Net - we are delicate rebel blooms of skunk work goodness, so easily trampled by the big bad powers that be - when none of them could have come into existence without the blessings of Big Capital and the fanciest of intellectual property law firms. There are reasons having to do with tribal ways of knowledge that make the hypothetical default poster on Slashdot,¹ the geek Grand Central Station on the web, sound like a mixture of Milton Friedman and Simon Bolivar.

^{¶3} When I started writing for *Wired Magazine*,² back when it first got started, I shared its lack of comfort and fit with the East Coast media establishment and felt at home with its Bay Area boho sensibilities (ageing Berkeley hippy that I was - I had been a card-carrying member of the ACLU back when I was 14). I was too dim-witted to understand that while there was some sort of common ground between our world views -I don't care what other people do, as long as they don't do it in the streets and frighten the horses - there were also many points of departure, having to do with the magazine being a libertarian propaganda rag of a kind that both accurately reflected, and shaped, the values of Northern California's high-tech community.

^{¶4} I call these values 'technolibertarian', well aware that I am using the term "libertarian" in a weasel-word, screwy way. I am not so interested in the Libertarian party (capital 'L') nor in the squabbles between libertarians (small 'l') and the Randian Objectivists.³ People who are part of the high-tech way of life might be registered Republicans or Democrats or they might be totally apathetic in conventional political senses - what I am really talking about is mindset. Silicon Valley's peculiar social and political culture seems worth discussing as high-tech becomes ever more monetized, and for that reason, ever more valorized.

^{¶5} So, sadly, I am not going to advocate any policy positions. Nor am I going to scold anyone for not being properly Stakhanovite⁴ or come out for collectivizing farms and stamping out small business. Nor will I detail what a howlingly-bad prose stylist Ayn Rand⁵ is, or point out how she doesn't seem to have left Mother Russia behind in her love of brutalist architectural projects and her even greater love of brutal males, or in the humorlessness, intolerance of dissent, and grandiosity of her overall act. And she's the fave-rave philosopher-queen of Silicon Valley, so much so that people name their startups and first-borns after people and institutions in her books.

^{¶6} My interests lie with how people see themselves, the meta-narratives they use to interpret their lives, the stories they use to rationalize the choices they make and the gloss they put on the lives they live. In a word, I write about culture and character, as it relates to high-tech.

A. *The Paradox*

^{¶7} To this end, I spent the last four years writing a gonzo anthropology on Silicon Valley: *Cyberselfish: A Critical Romp Through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High-Tech*.⁶ The piece is a book-length essay that attempts to document the religion of high-tech, if you understand religion to be a set of mostly unconscious, commonly held, collective beliefs. That Damned Book (henceforth to be referred to as TDB) was a project I had been thinking about for many years before I actually sat down to write it. As I had been knocking around Northern California high-tech since the early 1980s, I had been puzzled by an attitude I perceived everywhere there but couldn't for years quite describe or pin down. Because I knew both as an old hippy how bad the government could be and also that no sector of society has benefited more and suffered less from the government than high-tech, I couldn't figure out why the guys I was running into held this very particular world view.

^{¶8} As George Orwell outlined in his essay, "Why I Write",⁷ and as Joan Didion echoed in her own essay with that title,⁸ part of why I wrote TDB was to find out what I think. I was making the assumption that any time I don't understand something, when a phenomenon coheres in a way that's paradoxical, intriguing, and alien to my understanding, I figure it's worth writing about.

^{¶9} But because I am not into neologisms except where absolutely needed, "libertarian" came as close as I could think of to describe a culture I'd come to see as loonily anti-government. It is a culture that romanticizes itself as outlaw when more than ever it's in bed with Wall Street and enamored of those who have elite establishment credentials. It is a culture that celebrates individuality when *nothing* is more conformist than cube farm start-ups where if your idea of a good time isn't foosball then you are in serious trouble, and if you question the team-spirit-come-business-proposition you are bound for excommunication (isn't there an establishment clause in our Constitution?). It's a culture that embraces a crackpot para-biological thinking that's simple justification for laissez-faire.

^{¶10} It's a culture that, more or less, with somewhat different players and dynasties, has been present in Silicon Valley from the beginning, flourishes in Bay Area high-tech society to this day, differs significantly from other technology cultures, and distinguishes itself from other robber-baron/nouveau-riche cultures in some meaningful regards. For example, philanthropy is *not* a sign of having arrived and doesn't accord Veblenesque status to the giver.⁹ And it's a culture that has been present, verging on dominant, ever since the early days of the Net. To use my own crackpot biological metaphor, once you get genetic drift going in a population, it tends to reproduce certain traits along certain phenotypes and genotypes.

^{¶11} Culture is elusive and subject to perceptual biases on the part of the observer; culture is, by definition, subjective-think of the physics envy that the social sciences have to this day. But culture is real, and hardy, and enduring.

B. Technolibertarianism

¶¹² When I was researching TDB, I contacted Dr. J. A. English-Lueck, an anthropology professor at San Jose State who's been part of a team conducting a formal, years-long ethnography of Silicon Valley.¹⁰ When she returned my call, I could hear the polite hesitation in her voice, the unspoken, "Who is this strange woman I have never heard of and what is she babbling on about?" But as I went on about free-market fundamentalism, self-concepts of rugged individualism in spite of massive but mostly invisible communitarian meshes of private and public networks on top of government subsidy and regulation, coupled with a nice attitude of "I've got mine, so screw you," I could hear her nodding over the phone. "Oh *that!*" she said. "We see that all the time!"

¶¹³ What I was calling 'technolibertarianism' so saturated the hearts and minds of the subjects of the San Jose State fieldwork, although in a taken-for-granted-that's-how-the-cosmos-operates kind of way, that to these anthropologists, what I was describing was the religion of their native informants.

¶¹⁴ This cultural technolibertarianism is a bit hard to describe, and as with all human cultures, contains multitudes of individual variations within it. Imagine if you were an anthropologist from Mars (I've been using this trope long before Oliver Sacks¹¹ used it to describe the autistic) and observed both a married Eastern Orthodox priest and a lesbian Episcopalian lay community-worker. To each other, they might appear very different and would have many quarrels over doctrine and faith and observance. But to that observer from eight miles high, they would seem more alike than not, sharing a Judeo-Christian, Eurocentric orientation very different from people in other parts of the world and in other walks of life.

¶¹⁵ Libertarianism is the techie equivalent to the Judeo-Christian heritage of the West. And as with all the sects within the Judeo-Christian tradition, so it is with the libertarianism in high-tech: it comes in all different flavors and brands, fanatic and moderate, observant and unconscious. But most important, we all know regimes change, but culture perseveres. Many would argue that not only has Russia not changed much since the fall of the Soviets, it hasn't changed all that much since the assassination of the Czar. Erik Erikson is no doubt out of fashion.¹² His classic *Childhood and Society*¹³ addresses this idea that culture is superordinate to politics, as do Alan Furst's truly wonderful novels of politics and espionage,¹⁴ set in Europe between the wars.

C. The Early Years

¶¹⁶ When this technolibertarian culture got its start, it could lay some proper claim to the notion that it was truly mavericky and outside conventional notions of how to succeed in business. In the 1970s and 80s, people would have laughed at the idea that entrepreneurship was the thing third-graders most needed to be taught, or that starting a company of your own was more laudable than getting to work for a Fortune 500 corporation. "VC" was a reference to the Viet Cong, and becoming a venture capitalist was hardly on the radar of most graduates from prestigious MBA programs. When startups began to rise in Silicon Valley, they were localized institutions, and certainly not fawned over by the transnational media. There were no business-porn magazines such as *eCompany Now*¹⁵ and *Business 2.0*,¹⁶ with the dot-com CEO of the week on the cover.

¶¹⁷ In those days, being loyal to yourself as opposed to the company was frowned on. Lip-service was not paid as much to the glory of invention; if people thought about technology at all, it was probably more in terms of the wonders of civil engineering or the space program or certain marvels of modern medicine, such as antibiotics, and not about computers. Getting all googly-eyed about computers would have made as much sense as getting all slobbery over a washing machine—an attitude that might not have been a bad one to hold onto.

¶¹⁸ The Net was a playground for a small bunch of academics, military people, and spooks. And since post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-Reagan Revolt revulsions towards government, coupled

with post end-of-the-Cold-War triumph of global capitalism, consensus-reality hadn't yet totally triumphed in the land, the Net was a backwater safe-zone in which distinctly minority libertarians could commune with each other.

^{¶19} California, although long regarded as a bellwether state according to the futurists, was still considered something of a colonial backwater (and not the desired destination of MBAs). It was thought of perhaps along the lines of the New Hebrides. At best, it maintained its reputation as the fringe of empire where all the wackos are tolerated-excluding its doings in the entertainment industry, of course.

^{¶20} Back in the early 1980s, former Republican speechwriter George Gilder,¹⁷ now sort of a St. Thomas Aquinas of Silicon Valley theology, was concerning himself mostly with what those awful feminists were up to and hadn't gotten around to his apotheosis of entrepreneurs, nor had he yet found God in a microchip.

^{¶21} Tracy Kidder with *Soul of a New Machine*¹⁸ and Steven Levy with *Hackers*¹⁹ and Stewart Brand with *The Media Lab*²⁰ had written books which captured the popular imagination and which suggested the radical notion that technologists as people were worthy subjects. But these books were exceptions to what was considered to be of general interest. It's not like today where Michael Lewis can do a far more mediocre job on Silicon Valley with *The New New Thing*²¹ than he did with Wall Street in the 80s and *Liar's Poker*,²² but no one is surprised that Lewis' para-hagiography of Jim Clark remains on the *New York Times* bestseller list for months and months.

^{¶22} As recently as 1994 (and this is recent, in historic terms, if not in terms of Web weeks and revs to software), when I was first trotting my book proposal around New York, an editor said something to me like, "The automobile contributes more to the GNP than high-tech, but we still don't publish books on the culture of Detroit auto-workers, so why should anyone care about what goes on in Silicon Valley?"

^{¶23} Even today, Jon Katz,²³ the mensch of a writer who dotes on geeks, has gone to extreme lengths to document how in the year 2000, young geeks can often be reviled and bullied and ostracized until they can escape high-school to high-paying jobs.

^{¶24} So the culture of libertarianism *did* somewhat map onto the lived reality of people working in Northern California high-tech, for they were living in a world that was somewhat outside the values-and validation-of the mainstream.

^{¶25} Now what I am *not* saying is that there wasn't a disconnect/cognitive dissonance psychosis to their belief systems even then - that is, government had been for a long time, very, very good to Silicon Valley in all kinds of ways, including, up until the late 1970s when tax revolt Proposition 13²⁴ kicked in, California having the best system of public education in the world. My point is, instead, that what these guys were doing did not figure much in the popular imagination. It was not held up as a model of how the rest of society and the world ought to be; it was somewhat out of sync with the rest of getting-and-striving going down.

^{¶26} And so some credence could be put in the general feeling that "we do things differently here-you people from elsewhere just don't get it-you are old and tired and in the way and we are new and free and unencumbered." I mean, I do recall the pleasure I experienced at my first job at a software company back in 1981, when I could make my own hours (swing shift in my case) and I could wear jeans to work and the president of the company did do his own typing and I was being paid to ask questions, use my brain, and learn from my mistakes-how different from any job I'd had before!

D. *The Current Landscape*

^{¶27} But things (or as the Marxists would say, the objective conditions) have changed: while the post-1995 Internet boom in many ways has little to do with technology and a lot to do with speculation, and all the world wants to be what it thinks Silicon Valley is like, the ideology of freedom, revolution, and being outside the Establishment lingers on.

^{¶28} The rhetoric and belief-systems live on, even though high-tech isn't really individualistic, isn't outsider, isn't really that much more about technology than about liquidity events and branding. Take, for example, T.J. Rodgers. He is the CEO of Cypress Semiconductor and is perhaps the long-time holder of *the* Mr. Technolibertarian title. He has initiated petitions with the Cato Institute,²⁵ *the* inside-the-Beltway libertarian think-tank, to have titans of industry agree to abjure corporate welfare, and he is intimately involved with *Reason Magazine*,²⁶ the flagship libertarian publication, etcetera etcetera. When we were on a TV show together produced out of Stanford's Hoover Institute (let's see if we can make the lefty girl run away and cry!), he found himself agreeing, much to his shock and dismay, with my idea that the word "entrepreneur" has become debased to mean "someone who's found a way to make the VCs want to fund his high-tech Ponzi scheme," and has, these days, often little to do with creating anything. Most of the technology in play today was more or less developed 10 to 20 years ago, with minor engineering tweaks and upgrades as needed.

^{¶29} Generally those who call themselves entrepreneurs in the screaming '00s are those who come up with a *business* idea, and then, as an afterthought to support it, throw in a pint of Java, a quart of C++ programmers, and a soupçon of wireless to give it the je ne sais quoi institutional investors might go in for. Yet these people believe their own and everyone else's press releases that they are participating in something innovative, outside-the-box, unprecedented, novel, and bespeaking creative technological anarchy. Sadly, the era of the solo inventor really coming up with something *technological* on his own and making a living off of it is pretty much over. But these other people see themselves as convention-smashing heroes of invention.

^{¶30} A friend of mine who writes for *Business Week* tells me that on the monthly conference call with Cisco's CEO that he participates in, there are mutterings about the threat that government, a dark force always present just below the horizon, presents to high-tech. Of course, this is ridiculous, because both Bush and Gore and their parties have come-a- courtin' like mad to high-tech (Money! Status! Export dollars!). Their doing so is an interesting gesture, because the question could be asked, "Why should those in mainstream politics be pining after those in high-tech, when high-tech, for the most part, could care less?" Unrequited love affairs, one-sided crushes, are so much less interesting than meaningful relationships endowed with the capacity for some sort of mutual aid and assistance.

^{¶31} And what's really loopy about someone from Cisco carrying on like this is that when Cisco first got going back in the late 80s, its main customer was the federal government, because who else was funding the Internet back then, and buying internet-working equipment? Cisco and the U.S. government are long-time companions.

III. CONCLUSION

^{¶32} But the technolibertarian culture of crypto-individualism lives on, particularly in terms of entitlement, and continues to trade on the philosophical justifications of another era for their self-absorption and wretched excess. Next time you hear proposals that schools ought to be treated like startups (yeah, right, what do you do with the kids who aren't best of breed? what's the IPO here?), that philanthropy ought to be treated as a startup (what is the meaning of business discipline when funding the arts? what is the ROI on funding 2.3 ballets as opposed to 1.7?) - be aware that what you are hearing is religion, and not reality.

‡ Edited transcript of remarks delivered to the Yale Law and Technology Society on September 19, 2000.

‡‡ Paulina Borsook is author of the book *Cyberselfish: A Critical Romp Through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High Tech*.

1 <http://slashdot.org> is a Linux/Open Source news and community website.

2 *Wired Magazine*, formerly owned by Wired Digital (owner of premier content providers like www.hotbot.com, www.hotwired.com, webmonkey, and the online technology news site www.wired.com) is a monthly magazine published by Condé Nast. It is available online at www.wired.com/wired/current.html.

3 Randian Objectivism holds that individual effort and ability are the driving forces of progress, and de-emphasizes the importance of altruistic motives.

4 Aleksey Stakhanov was a Russian coal miner at the center of a vast Russian publicity campaign in the early 1930s aimed at increasing industrial productivity.

5 Author-philosopher, born in Russia in 1905 and died in New York in 1982. Among her best-known works are *Atlas Shrugged* (published in 1957) and *The Fountainhead* (published in 1943).

6 PAULINA BORSOOK, *CYBERSELFISH: A CRITICAL ROMP THROUGH THE TERRIBLY LIBERTARIAN CULTURE OF HIGH TECH* (2000).

7 The full text of George Orwell's "Why I Write," originally published in 1947, can be found at <http://www.k-1.com/Orwell/write.htm>.

8 Joan Didion, *Why I Write*, NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE, Dec. 5, 1976.

9 Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) is best known for his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, first published in 1899, and in which he explored the application of Darwinist theories to an industrial economy.

10 More information about this can be found at <http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svepf/>.

11 Dr. Oliver Sacks is a neurologist who has published several books, including *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales* (1995), *Migraine; The Evolution of a Common Disorder* (1970), and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat; And Other Clinical Tales* (1985).

12 Erik Erikson (1902-1994) was the proponent of the psychosocial-stages theory of human development, as opposed to Sigmund Freud's theory of psychosexual stages.

13 ERIK ERIKSON, *CHILDHOOD AND SOCIETY* (1950).

14 Alan Furst's novels include *Night Soldiers* (1988), *Dark Star* (1991) and *The World at Night* (1996).

15 *eCompany Now* is a monthly Internet-focused business magazine published by the Fortune Group at Time Inc. Content from the magazine, as well as online-only daily columns and editorial features, are available online at <http://www.ecompany.com>.

16 *Business 2.0* is a biweekly Internet-focused business magazine. Content from the magazine, as well as additional online-only content, is available online at <http://www.business2.com>.

17 George Gilder is the author of the enormously popular monthly newsletter *The Gilder Technology Report*.

18 TRACY KIDDER, *SOUL OF A NEW MACHINE* (1981). This book, about the effort to build a new supercomputer, won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award.

19 STEVEN LEVY, *HACKERS: HEROES OF THE COMPUTER REVOLUTION* (1984).

20 STEWART BRAND, *THE MEDIA LAB: INVENTING THE FUTURE AT MIT* (1987).

21 MICHAEL LEWIS, *THE NEW NEW THING; A SILICON VALLEY STORY* (1999).

22 MICHAEL LEWIS, *LIAR'S POKER; RISING THROUGH THE WRECKAGE ON WALL STREET* (1989).

23 Jon Katz, a cyberspace commentator, is a former columnist for www.hotwired.com and a frequent poster on Slashdot (including several postings about the Columbine shootings).

[24](#) Proposition 13, reducing local property tax revenues by about 53%, was enacted on June 6, 1978 by 65% of California voters.

[25](#) The Cato Institute is a nonpartisan public policy research foundation that promotes the roles of individual liberty, limited government and free markets in public policy. The Cato Institute maintains a homepage at <http://www.cato.org>.

[26](#) *Reason* Magazine is a monthly magazine published by the Reason Foundation, a libertarian public policy research organization. The Reason Foundation maintains a website at <http://www.reason.org>. Content from the magazine can be viewed online at <http://www.reason.com>.

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