Raiding high-tech's libertarian culture

Paulina Borsook is a Santa Cruz, CA based writer, with a deep insider knowledge of the high-tech industry. This knowledge was gained through years of journalism for high-tech magazines, and from the daily experiencing the transformation of the San Francisco bay area into a Silicon Valley satellite. Like most of her previous writings *Cyberselfish: A critical romp through the terribly libertarian culture of high-tech* is not a neutral book, it is meant to provoke strong emotions be they of support or disapproval. *Cyberselfish* is a powerful and harsh critique of the technolibertarian culture. In it Borsook leads us through the language of high-tech (chapter 1), a social characterization of this culture's supporters, theorists and disseminators (chapters 2 and 3), its contempt for social causes (chapter 4), and a historical analysis of the libertarian movement (chapter 5). The concluding chapter is dedicated to asserting that the government has a role to play on the electronic frontier.

I read *Cyberselfish* twice, with a three-month period in between. My opinion changed considerably between the first and the second reading. My first time thorough I saw a book voicing the opinions of a large number of people against a high-tech culture obsessed with money and technology, a culture in which, as Arthur Kroker puts it, "what is technologically feasible becomes technologically necessary" [Kroker 2001], a culture more concerned with cyber and techno rights than human rights. I appreciated the strong opinions and the very direct tone. However, on a second reading, already knowing the "plot," the tone of the book became too harsh, its opinions left no space for divergence and its argument was too generalizing. I believe that readers who are not familiar with the ins and outs of high-tech culture will feel like I felt after reading it the first time. But, insiders of this high-tech culture will more likely identify with the second reading.

Borsook describes technolibertarianism as high-tech's default political culture, and correlates its two streams—political and philosophical—to the two forms of plague: bubonic and pneumonic. The bubonic plague, less contagious and lethal, corresponds

to political libertarianism, here defined as "tak[ing] the shape of a convenient obliviousness to the value of social contract and governance" (Borsook 2000, 10). Pneumonic plague—fiercely contagious and largely fatal—is compared to philosophical libertarianism which "bespeaks of a lack of human connection and a discomfort with the core of what many of us consider it means to be human" (15). This, writes Borsook, explains high-tech culture's preference for rule-based, controllable computers over human beings.

Philosophical technolibertarianism has two main subsets: ravers and guilders. "Ravers are neohippies whose antigovernment stance is more hedonic than moral, more lifestyle choice than policy position" (15-16). Its main 'icon' is John Perry Barlow and his "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace". Guilders are the followers of George Guilder, i.e., "social conservatives… [who are] in love with the spirit of enterprise and the spirituality of the microchip" (16).

What Borsook is objecting to is the lack of social consciousness and the total disconnection with the broader reality that abounds in the high-tech world. She describes its sadly comic side, the cypherpunk who does his good communitarian action by setting up a business that makes off-shore anonymous banking available to people of modest means. And its autistic and dangerous side, well captured in George Guilder's definition of the homeless as "the true economic parasites, because they occupy some of the most expensive real estate in the world (Union Square in San Francisco, all over Manhattan) for free" (58).

When it comes to corporate philanthropy the picture gets even darker, with statistics indicating that "the percentage of corporate philanthropy… *dropped* from 1.14 percent in 1993 to 0.92 percent in 1997" (174). When giving to others high-tech companies seem to prefer to give out their own products. This technique, known as leverage, allows companies to take advantage of the fact that the real cost of production is much lower than the market value, while simultaneously creating cheap advertising. Leverage fits the strictest parameters of efficiency.

Borsook attributes this disregard of philanthropy and this lack of awareness and arrogance to the prevalent feeling in high-tech culture that people will always be well, they will always be able to work and, most of all, they will always get where

they aspire as long as they have the personal will to do it. It follows, then, that there is no need to preserve the commons.

Borsook's ingenious analysis of technolibertarianism is somewhat impaired by the many, frequently irrelevant, personal attacks on the technolibertarians she is depicting, for example by dwelling on their sexual preferences. Dan Farmer, the author of a piece of software that sniffs for weak parts of Internet security, is described as a "long-haired androgynous bisexual security expert (and S-M top/dominant/sadist)" (107). Although Borsook's goal is to critique the almost exclusively male-dominated technolibertarian culture, the linking of sexual preferences and political ones will strike most readers as scornful and meaningless.

Cyberselfish struggles with two different issues: audience and timing. Its desire to address personally the technolibertarians it is describing—made obvious by the introduction of too many technolibertarians, geeks and others, the abundant use of Internet acronyms indecipherable for those who are not familiar with Usenet and chats, etc.—makes this a book aimed at techno-culture insiders. For those outside the techno-elite, this book will be too personal and too cryptic. By the same token, and due to their insider knowledge, it is to this audience that *Cyberselfish* will seem the weakest, and this is because of its timing. The reality depicted in *Cyberselfish* is that of the early and mid-nineties. The description of the "Computers, Freedom and Privacy" conference is a good example. Borsook describes a reality of people "locked into predictable positions…. [with] cypherpunks being cypherpunks; civil libertarians being civil libertarians, although some cops and government types… showed definite signs of modulation/mellowing" (109). However, the last year's edition of CFP (2000) showed a different reality, one in which the roles are definitely changing and with them, the focus of the conference. In CFP'2000 it was clear that the theme had shifted from "will the net be regulated?" to "who will regulate it?". Many personalities, such as Whitfield Diffie, one of the co-inventors of public key cryptography and an icon for cypherpunks, voiced the necessity for a regulation other than that of the free market and corporate world.

Some of the global nature of high-tech culture is perhaps lost in Borsook's strong identification with Silicon Valley. However, Silicon Valley is still the nerve center of high-tech in the United States and serves as a worldwide model of social and

economic success. Besides, by being a place of sharp discrepancies Silicon Valley and its surrounding area provide a good setting in which to watch the development of technolibertarian culture and its impact on the community at large—"Palo Alto cannot recruit teachers because they cannot afford to live in th[e] community" (193).

Cyberselfish is a comprehensive and witty history of the technolibertarian movement. It is meant to create awareness of the faith in technology that is very present nowadays. *Cyberselfish* is, thus, useful reading for anyone interested in the culture of high-tech. Borsook speaks loud and clear, offering a critical insider perspective, something very rare in this environment of self-admiration and mutual congratulation where people prefer to forget past errors as quickly as possible.

References:

Kroker, Arthur & Marilouise. (2001, January 11). The bio-tech eye. Lecture hosted by Trinity Square Video, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada.