

Technology Journal -- Books: Lessons in Techie Libertarianism

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

According to Ms. Borsook, all this libertarianism means the techies have little interest in their impact on communities, families and relationships, all of which can be pushed aside in the name of technological progress. But most of the early heroes of the Net that Ms. Borsook writes about have long passed from the scene, and it seems their libertarianism has faded, too. Nowadays, Amazon.com Inc. Chief Executive Jeff Bezos and other Internet moguls have quite a taste for regulation. Indeed Amazon is an aggressive filer of patents -- a system of intellectual property protection that relies on the government. Silicon Valley also pushed hard for bills limiting Y2K liability and shareholder lawsuits. When the antitrust verdict came in against Microsoft Corp., the cheering could be heard across northern California. Like any other industry, technology companies are perfectly happy to have the government intervene when it suits them. The libertarianism is mostly a pose, the political equivalent of driving a huge off-road vehicle to pick up groceries.

Even Ms. Borsook's indictment of Silicon Valley for its lack of generosity is a little dated. It is true that the Santa Clara Country United Way, a charities umbrella group, nearly went bust despite being in the middle of the richest part of the U.S., and that a lot of money goes into utterly worthless ventures like the San Jose Tech Museum, an institution with all the cultural depth of a corporate video. But tech-backed foundations are now among the largest in the U.S., and Bill Gates' donations for immunizations and minority education have bucked recent trends away from those areas. Peter Norton, of Norton Utilities fame, is a major supporter of African-American organizations and is a prominent patron of contemporary arts, all areas outside the usual remit of tech philanthropy. Ms. Borsook ignores all this, adding to the grinding polemical feel of this book.

FULL TEXT

CYBERSELFISH: A CRITICAL ROMP THROUGH THE TERRIBLY LIBERTARIAN CULTURE OF HIGH TECH

by Pauline Borsook

Public Affairs, \$24

Why is the U.S. high-tech industry so hostile to government when it has benefited so massively from state largesse? Silicon Valley is a product of subsidized colleges like Stanford and Berkeley, and of the billions of dollars pumped into defense research during the Cold War. Even the Internet was originally a government-funded operation. Technology companies, some of the biggest exporters in the U.S., have profited from a stable world trading system backed up by U.S. government clout. And yet the pampered whelps of all this Washington midwifery see themselves as rugged individualists, hindered by ignorant regulation, and determined to break free of the state's bonds.

According to Paulina Borsook, author of "Cyberselfish," the science geeks didn't get enough sex in high school, giving them a lifelong teenage outsiderish stance that has infused the high-tech business with a deep libertarianism. This has shown itself in a taste for social Darwinism, an aggressive stance against regulation and a tendency among

techies for unusual sexual proclivities. It also has manifested itself in a reluctance to be philanthropic, undermining the great American tradition that the wealthy eventually give away their money.

Like many reductive theories, this one has a certain amusing elegance, but Ms. Borsook's book, like most of her writing at Wired magazine, is more calculated to irritate than illuminate. The technology industry is starting to have a major impact on politics in the U.S., but this book barely explores this growing influence, instead concentrating on the rise of a libertarian movement in the tech world. This group opposes any regulation of the Internet, propagating the "information wants to be free" ideology prevalent in the mid-1990s before e-commerce and America Online Inc. took over the universe.

"Cyberselfish" breaks down into four parts: a look at the emergence of bionomics, the neo-Darwinian idea that economic systems act like biological environments; an examination of the battles with the government over encryption programs; a section on Wired magazine as the house journal of techie libertarianism (mostly filled with the noise and sparks of Ms. Borsook grinding her many axes -- Wired's book division was to publish "Cyberselfish" but dropped it after she sent one too many public pot shots in their direction); and an exploration of why Silicon Valley lacks generosity.

According to Ms. Borsook, all this libertarianism means the techies have little interest in their impact on communities, families and relationships, all of which can be pushed aside in the name of technological progress. But most of the early heroes of the Net that Ms. Borsook writes about have long passed from the scene, and it seems their libertarianism has faded, too. Nowadays, Amazon.com Inc. Chief Executive Jeff Bezos and other Internet moguls have quite a taste for regulation. Indeed Amazon is an aggressive filer of patents -- a system of intellectual property protection that relies on the government. Silicon Valley also pushed hard for bills limiting Y2K liability and shareholder lawsuits. When the antitrust verdict came in against Microsoft Corp., the cheering could be heard across northern California. Like any other industry, technology companies are perfectly happy to have the government intervene when it suits them. The libertarianism is mostly a pose, the political equivalent of driving a huge off-road vehicle to pick up groceries.

Even Ms. Borsook's indictment of Silicon Valley for its lack of generosity is a little dated. It is true that the Santa Clara County United Way, a charities umbrella group, nearly went bust despite being in the middle of the richest part of the U.S., and that a lot of money goes into utterly worthless ventures like the San Jose Tech Museum, an institution with all the cultural depth of a corporate video. But tech-backed foundations are now among the largest in the U.S., and Bill Gates' donations for immunizations and minority education have bucked recent trends away from those areas. Peter Norton, of Norton Utilities fame, is a major supporter of African-American organizations and is a prominent patron of contemporary arts, all areas outside the usual remit of tech philanthropy. Ms. Borsook ignores all this, adding to the grinding polemical feel of this book.

Unfortunately, Ms. Borsook also suffers from a literary version of Tourette's Syndrome. Her prose is so incessantly interrupted by yelps, barks and whoops that it becomes a strain to concentrate on the ideas. She might describe herself, indeedybob, as a cybersybil-hyperbabe/media poohbah/ideas goddess/e-meistress/digital Grand Vizier/free-range freelancer with a let's-use-a-lot-of-semi-ironic-Star-Trek-and-X-Files-references-all-hyphenated-together mentality and an e-zine/neo-pseudo-quasi-retro-hypoliterate grasp of grammar/sentence structure.

This style, which might have seemed fresh in the first edition of Wired, is just exhausting at this length. Eventually I found the writing so ugly and inept that I'd rather have put my eye out with a hot stick than endured any more sentences like this one: "Have you had a spousal equivalent, friend or daughter need to rely on the complexly regulated, directly and indirectly subsidized structures of the medical, legal and forensic professions involved in

dealing with a rape?" Ms. Borsook doesn't just need editing, she needs sedating.

"Cyberselfish" can be funny -- there is an amusing section comparing high-tech charitable donations with the dead rats that cats leave for their owners -- and it can be provocative, although not nearly as much as Ms. Borsook clearly thinks it is. Sadly, it is a lost opportunity and a warning to publishers of the dangers of technology books. Having bounced around several companies, it emerged not in Internet time but at the geological pace of the book world.

Ms. Borsook touches on so many important issues -- the blind worship of a high-testosterone entrepreneurial culture and the strangeness of its celebrities; the mindless acceptance of a sinister social Darwinism; the myth that good ideas root out bad ones, when in reality good marketing conquers all; the false notion that the industry is somehow removed from broader society; the political role of the tech industry, and the political consequences of the vast wealth now at its disposal. But she fails to addresses any of them in a satisfying manner in this magazine-weight book.

DETAILS

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