

THE CHILDREN OF REAGAN'S HIPPIES

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article
abstract

IN THIS ARTICLE THE AUTHOR ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN THE EMERGENCE OF THE COGNITARIAT IN THE HISTORY OF COLD-WAR FUTURISM, TECHNOPHILIA AND THE NEW RIGHT OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY AND DETAIL THE RISKS OF CYBERTARIANISM IN ECOLOGICAL AND LABOR TERMS. HE ARGUES THAT THIS COULD BE CONSIDERED THE BACKGROUND FOR THE EMERGENCE OF THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT.

COGNITARIAT, NICL, CONSUMERISM, CYBERTARIANISM, PRECARIOUS LABOR, TECHNOTOPIA, REAGAN, MEDIA, COLD WAR

“In a First Wave economy, land and farm labor are the main *factors of production*. In a Second Wave economy, the land remains valuable while the “labor” becomes massified around machines and larger industries. In a Third Wave economy, the central resource—a single word broadly encompassing data, information, images, symbols, culture, ideology, and values—is actionable knowledge—A Magna Carta for the Information Age.”

The manifesto quoted above was promulgated in the mid-1990s and it is the dominant common sense of today. But the *Magna Carta for the Information Age* is in fact a *mestizo* child of the sixties. Its signatories (Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth, and Alvin Toffler) were cybertarian disciples of Ronald Reagan, the unpleasant progeny of an unlikely *liaison* between Republican Party politics and hippy fantasies.¹ This brief article will explore the backdrop to this bizarre history and examine its implications for contemporary cultural labor. For five decades, the New Right of the Republican Party has railed against the “Great Society” state-based liberalism. Its devastating defeat at the 1964 Presidential election seemed like a death rattle. But that was soon followed by Reagan’s successful 1966 campaign for the governorship of California, which he launched with the following words: “I propose... “A Creative Society” ... to discover, enlist and mobilize the incredibly rich human resources of California [through] innumerable people of creative talent.”² Over the succeeding decades, the legacy of those words has been a contradictory *mélange* of market anti-statism and the counter-culture, as Reagan and his kind gradually accreted a motley assortment of true believers, from opponents of the American War in Vietnam to critics of welfare programs. Despite what appeared to be his cultural antonym at the time, it is entirely appropriate that the summer of love was also his first summer in office.

Reagan’s principal domestic legacy was twofold: he reversed the state’s role in democratically redistributing wealth and wrought havoc on labor organizing. Subsequent fellow-disciples of inequality—the various Bushes, William Jefferson Clinton, and Barack Hussein Obama

¹ Turner 2006.

² Reagan was not original. In 1848, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that ‘[a] creative economy is the fuel of magnificence’, Waldo 1909-14.

keywords

II—carried on this work. They also subscribed to the utopic, alternative aspects of neoliberal ideology that Reagan’s proto-gubernatorial address heralded. Why? These have been crucial components of the Global North’s economic shift, from agriculture and manufacturing to services and culture. Blending New-Age ideology, consumerism, and technotopia helped spread routine exposure to precarious work beyond just the working class, who lacked cultural capital, towards those in the middle class with plenty of it. This discourse has managed to bind seemingly contradictory tendencies together through a nerveless faith in the myth that an unending flow of new technology can override socio-economic inequality.

Of course, such fantasies predate Reaganism. Consider George Orwell dissecting just this rhetoric seventy years ago. His critique resonates today:

Reading recently a batch of rather shallowly optimistic “progressive” books, I was struck by the automatic way in which people go on repeating certain phrases which were fashionable before 1914. Two great favourites are “the abolition of distance” and “the disappearance of frontiers”. I do not know how often I have met with the statements that “the aeroplane and the radio have abolished distance” and “all parts of the world are now interdependent.”³

Sound familiar? Of course it does. Technological determinists’ lack of originality and tendency to repeat exploded myths as if they were new and true refuses to lie down and die. “Peace on Facebook” claims that the social-media site can “decrease world conflict” through inter-cultural communication, and Twitter modestly announces itself as “a triumph of humanity.”⁴ Equally romantically, but with a franker commitment to capital accumulation, bourgeois economists argue that cell phones have streamlined hitherto inefficient markets in remote areas of the Global South, enriching people in zones where banking services and commercial information are scarce due to distance and terrain. Exaggerated claims for the magic of mobile telephony in places that lack electricity, plumbing, fresh water, hospital care and the like include “the complete elimination of waste” and massive reductions of poverty and corruption through the empowerment of individuals.⁵

This is one more *cliché* dalliance with new technology’s supposedly innate capacity to endow users with transcendence, but no less powerful for its banality because of the interests it serves and the cult of newness it subscribes

3 Orwell 1944.

4 The Economist 2010.

5 Jensen 2007.

to.⁶ Cell phones and the like are said to obliterate geography, sovereignty, and hierarchy, replacing them with truth and beauty. This deregulated, individuated, technologized world makes consumers into producers, frees the disabled from confinement, encourages new subjectivities, rewards intellect and competitiveness, links people across cultures and allows billions of flowers to bloom in a post-political cornucopia. People fish, film, fornicate, and finance from morning to midnight, from Marx to Godard (minus the struggle). Consumption is privileged and labor and the environment are forgotten. How very jolly.

“

THE COLD-WAR FUTURISTS SAW THAT WHAT WE CAN NOW DISCERN AS PRECARIOUS MENTAL LABOR COULD DELIVER HUGE GAINS IN PRODUCTIVITY

Time magazine exemplified the utopic silliness of these tendencies in its choice of “You” as 2006 “Person of the Year,” declaring that “You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world.”⁷ The discourse incarnates reader, audience, consumer, and player autonomy—the neoliberal intellectual’s wet dream of music, movies, television, and everything else converging under the sign of omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent fans. The dream invests, with unparalleled gusto, in Schumpeterian entrepreneurs, evolutionary economics, and creative industries. Its true believers have never seen an “app” they didn’t like, or a socialist idea they did. Faith in devolved media-making amounts to a secular religion, offering transcendence in the here and now via a “literature of the eighth day, the day after Genesis.”⁸ Machinery, not political-economic activity, is the guiding light.

THE COGNITARIAT

Technophilic fantasies are profoundly connected to a significant trend in the Global North’s political economy of employment, where disorganized capitalism/post-Fordism exploits highly educated, occupationally insecure cultural workers both at home and abroad. Toffler named this group “the cognitariat” thirty years ago.⁹ Prior to signing the cybertarian *Magna Carta*, he had wandered the same Cold-War corridors of futurism as National Security

6 Ogan, Manaf et al. 2009.

7 Grossman 2006.

8 Carey 2005.

9 Toffler 1983.

Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski,¹⁰ American Academy of Arts and Sciences prelate Daniel Bell,¹¹ and professional anti-Marxist Ithiel de Sola Pool.¹² They predicted that information and communication technologies would remove grubby manufacturing from the Global North to the South and consolidate US cultural and technical power, provided that the blandishments of socialism and negative reactions to global business did not create national or international class struggle. The Cold-War futurists saw that what we can now discern as precarious mental labor could deliver huge gains in productivity.¹³ In the words of lapsed-leftist cultural theorist and inaugural President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Jacques Attali,¹⁴ a new “mercantile order forms wherever a creative class masters a key innovation from navigation to accounting or, in our own time, where services are most efficiently mass produced, thus generating enormous wealth.” Cold-War futurism wanted to nurture, indoctrinate, and direct the next formation of that class.

Many legatees of futurism appear to imagine that this is their own, new discourse. Urbanists, geographers, economists, planners, cultural studies folks, and policy wonks have all been central to its development and dispersal.¹⁵ Unconsciously following the playbook written decades before, they argue for an efflorescence of creativity, cultural difference, import substitution, and national and regional pride and influence thanks to new technologies and innovative firms.¹⁶ This allegedly gives rise to an “aristocracy of talent,” where mercurial meritocrats luxuriate in ever-changing techniques, technologies, and networks.¹⁷ Labor is acknowledged in this brave newness, provided that it is abstracted from physical, dirty work,¹⁸ as per Toffler, Bell, de Sola Pool, and Brzezinski’s prescriptions.

The high priest of today’s version of futurism, Richard Florida,¹⁹ speaks of a “creative class” that is revitalizing post-industrial towns in the Global North devastated by the relocation of manufacturing to places with cheaper labor pools. He argues that formerly wealthy cities can be revived through tolerance, technology and talent, which he measures by the number

10 Brzezinski 1969.

11 Bell 1977.

12 de Sola Pool 1983.

13 Bar, Simard 2006.

14 Attali 2008.

15 Brint, Turk-Bicacki et al. 2009.

16 Cunningham 2009.

17 Kotkin 2001.

18 Mattelart 2002.

19 Florida 2002.

and proportion of same-sex households, broadband connections, and higher degrees respectively. (*A propos*, Florida’s claim to own the “creative class” as a concept is asserted with the US Patent and Trademark Office via registration number 3298801 <http://tess2.uspto.gov>).²⁰

Remarkably few social scientists have had anything of worth to say on these topics, but there are some noted exceptions. Max Weber wisely insisted that technology should principally be regarded as a “mode of processing material goods,”²¹ thereby directing us away from the *Magna Carta* rhetoricians. Harvey Sacks emphasized the repeated “failures of technocratic dreams[:] that if only we introduced some fantastic new communication machine the world will be transformed.”²² Marcuse predicted that far from liberating all and sundry, innovations in communication technology would intensify managerial coordination.²³ And Herbert I. Schiller noted that information technology is an “infrastructure of socialization,” synchronizing “business cultures,” organizational models, “institutional networks,” and modes of communication and cultural production in the interests of capital.²⁴

Their example encourages us to consider some examples of how the new freedoms associated with today’s innovations are double-sided. Take the cell phone, trumpeted above as a great tool for achieving market equilibrium. An equally compelling reality is the new nightmare it has created for public-health professionals, because prostitutes at risk of sexually-transmitted disease increasingly communicate with clients by phone and travel to a variety of places to ply their trade. This makes them less easy to educate and assist than when they work at conventional, singular sites.²⁵ And when old and obsolete cell phones, like other communication technologies, are junked, they become electronic waste (e-waste), the fastest-growing constituent of municipal cleanups around the Global North. E-waste generates serious threats to worker health and safety wherever plastics and wires are burnt, monitors smashed and dismantled and circuit boards grilled or leached with acid, while the toxic chemicals and heavy metals that flow from such practices have perilous implications for local and downstream residents, soil, and water. Much electronic salvage and recycling is undertaken in the Global South by pre-teen girls, who work with discarded television sets and computers to find precious metals and dump the remains in landfills.

20 Thanks to Bill Grantham for directing me to the Office’s Trademark Electronic Search System.

21 Weber 2005.

22 Sacks 1995.

23 Marcuse 1941.

24 Schiller 1976.

25 Mahapatra, Bidhubhusan et al. 2012.

The e-waste ends up there after export and import by “recyclers” who eschew landfills and labor in the Global North in order to avoid the cost and regulation of recycling in countries that prohibit such destruction to environment and workers. Businesses that forbid dumping in local landfills merrily mail it elsewhere.²⁶



THE GLOBAL NORTH RECOGNIZED FIFTY YEARS AGO THAT ITS ECONOMIC FUTURE LAY IN FINANCE CAPITAL AND IDEOLOGY RATHER THAN AGRICULTURE AND MANUFACTURING—SEEKING REVENUE FROM INNOVATION AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, NOT MINERALS OR MASSES

That said, the very tools of domination unleashed by utopianism can work in favor of social and environmental justice. Toffler’s concept of the cognitariat has been helpfully redisposed by Antonio Negri²⁷ to describe the casualized workers who boast significant educational qualifications but labor in the unpredictable vortices of capital, academia, and government. They are among those laboring in the sweat-shop conditions of Florida’s beloved “creative cities.” This cognitariat plays key roles in producing and distributing goods and services, creating and coordinating culture in precarious roles as musicians, directors, writers, journalists, sound engineers, technologists, editors, cinematographers, graphic designers, and so on. Perhaps even futurists.

Members of the cognitariat frequently collude with their own oppression and insecurity through dreams of autonomous identity formation that find them joining a gentry poor dedicated to the life of the mind that supposedly fulfills them and may one day—somewhere, somehow—deliver a labor market of plenty.²⁸ Cognitarians putatively transcend organizational power, thanks to the comparatively cheap and easy access to making and distributing meaning afforded by internet media and genres. This new openness is said to erode the one-way hold on culture that saw a small segment of the world as producers and the larger segment as consumers. Today we are apparently all cultural consumers and producers (prosumers), and we delightedly and easily challenge old patterns of expertise and institutional

26 Maxwell, Miller 2012.

27 Negri 2007.

28 Gorz 2004; Ross 2009; Neff, Wissinger, Zukin 2005.

authority.²⁹ But cognitarians also confront inevitable contradictions, for even as they obediently trot out the individualistic beliefs enunciated above, they operate within thoroughly institutional contexts: private bureaucracies, controlling investment, production and distribution across the media; public bureaucracies, offering what capitalism cannot while comporting themselves in an ever-more commercial manner; small businesses, run by charismatic individuals; non-government organizations, of whatever political stripe and contingent networks, fluid associations formed to undertake specific projects.

What goes on in this cybertarian world? A lot of it is about corporations blithely exploiting prosumers and cognitarians through market research and product placement. Fans write zines that become screenplays. Coca-Cola hires streetwise African Americans to drive through the inner city selling soda and playing hip-hop. AT&T pays San Francisco buskers to mention the company in their songs. Urban performance poets rhyme about Nissan cars for cash. Subway’s sandwich commercials are marketed as made by teenagers. Cultural-studies majors become designers. Graduate students in New York and Los Angeles read scripts for producers then pronounce on whether they tap into audience interests. Precariously employed part-timers spy on fellow-spectators in theaters to see how they respond to coming attractions. Interns at marketing firms orchestrate Astroturf campaigns on social media to simulate organic interest in corporate products. Opportunities to vote in the Eurovision Song Contest or a reality program disclose the profiles and practices of viewers, who can be monitored and wooed in the future. End-user licensing agreements ensure that players of corporate games on-line sign over their cultural moves and perspectives to the very companies they are paying in order to participate.³⁰ Even reactionary bodies like the US National Governors Association recognize the reality: “routine tasks that once characterized middle class work have either been eliminated by technological change or are now conducted by low-wage but highly skilled workers.”³¹

Business leeches want flexibility in the people they employ, the technologies they use, the places where they produce and the amounts they pay—and inflexibility of ownership and control. The neoclassical *doxa* preached by neoliberal chorines favor an economy where competition and opportunity cost are in the litany and dissent is unforgiveable, as crazed as collective industrial organization. In short, decent and meaningful work opportunities are reducing at a phenomenal pace in the sense that, for a high proportion of low- and middle-skilled workers, full-time, lifelong

29 Graham 2008, Ritzer, Jurgenson 2010.

30 Miller 2007.

31 Sparks, Watts 2011.

employment is unlikely.³²

Hence the success of firms such as Mindworks Global Media, a company based outside New Delhi that provides Indian-based journalists and copyeditors who work long-distance for newspapers whose reporters are supposedly in the US and Europe. This deception delivers 35-40% cost savings to employers.³³ Or consider Poptent, which undercuts big competitors in sales to major advertisers by exploiting prosumers' labor in the name of 'empowerment.' That empowerment takes the following form: the creators of homemade commercials make US\$7,500; Poptent receives a management fee of US\$40,000; and the buyer saves about US\$300,000 on the usual price.³⁴ In other words, the principal beneficiaries of innovations by the "talented amateurs" of the cognitariat—interns, volunteers, contestants and so on—are corporations.³⁵ The culture industries largely remain under the control of media and communications conglomerates. They gobble up smaller companies that invent products and services, "recycling audio-visual cultural material created by the grassroots genius, exploiting their intellectual property and generating a standardized business sector that excludes and even distorts, its very source of business," to quote *The Hindu*.³⁶ In other words, the cognitariat creates "cool stuff" that others exploit.

Here's the reality. The Global North recognized fifty years ago that its economic future lay in finance capital and ideology rather than agriculture and manufacturing—seeking revenue from innovation and intellectual property, not minerals or masses. By the 1970s, developing markets for labor and products, and the shift from the spatial *sensitivities* of electrics to the spatial *insensitivities* of electronics, pushed businesses in the Global North beyond treating countries in the Global South as suppliers of raw materials, viewing them instead as shadow-setters of the price of work, competing amongst themselves and with the Global North for employment. That process broke up the prior division of the world into a small number of industrialized nations and a majority of underdeveloped ones, as production was split across continents. Folker Fröbel, Jürgen Heinrichs, and Otto Kreye³⁷ christened this phenomenon the New International Division of Labor. They sought to comprehend what Andrew Herod calls "the economic geography of capitalism[,] through the eyes of labor"³⁸ and went on to generate a New International Division of Cultural Labor (NICL).

32 Orsi 2009.

33 Lakshman 2008.

34 Chmielewski 2012.

35 Ross 2006-07; Marcus 2005.

36 Ramanathan 2006.

37 Fröbel, Heinrichs, Kreye 1980.

38 Herod 2001.

Here is my short story about encountering the NICL. I arrived in Brisbane in 1988, during Hollywood's protracted writers' strike and was billeted with a prominent film scholar I had just met who went on to become a key advocate of creative-industries discourse. That first night, we sat in front of his ample television set. A local politician was being interviewed on the news about plans for a "Cairns International Film Festival." The idea was that tourists would book travel to this North Queensland city on the mistaken assumption that "Cairns" was "Cannes." (The distance between these places is 14,498 kilometers.) I looked across at my new colleague, the hermeneut within me ablaze. What would local knowledge make of this madness? His face was cast in a half-smile. No words were needed. The oddity of that press interview and the fact that it occurred just as Hollywood was looking to Queensland as a site for making drama series offshore to counter California unions, made it clear that Hollywood was exploiting Australia's reserve army of cultural labor in order to undercut the writers' strike. And that made me think about culture as changing in the same way as manufacturing.

Labor-market expansion and developments in global transportation and communications technology have diminished the need for co-location of cultural management, labor and consumption. Popular and high-cultural texts, computer-aided design and manufacture, sales, marketing and information can now be created and exchanged globally, based on the division of labor. The NICL has been most dramatically applied to film and television production and sport.³⁹ It is part of the system that keeps cognitarians in their place, along with the prevailing ideology under which they labor. Alerting them to these realities is an urgent task. Cognitarians ignore them at their peril, as do those of us who learn from them and seek an exchange informed by history and ecology rather than amnesia and delusion.

39 Miller, Nitin et al. 2005; Miller, Geoffrey et al. 2001.

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