Homesteading on a Superhighway:
The Californian Ideology and Everyday Politics

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When Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron diagnosed the "Californian Ideology" of Silicon Valley, they outlined a macro-level political and cultural economy. This article turns to the micropolitics of everyday online life. It argues that the Californian Ideology has inscribed into its products the habits of homesteading—a legacy so familiar, nostalgic, and violent in the American West—which have trained far-flung users in the practice of quotidian feudalism. Everyday experience with Californian systems has thereby contributed to hollowing out the rudiments of democratic culture, especially the skills and habits of accountable association. These systems have meanwhile aided in generating new breeds of world-historical authoritarianism. To change course, therefore, instruments such as legislation and foreign policy may be inadequate; securing a more democratic future also requires fresh attention to how online spaces organize, constrain, and enable everyday politics.

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In the quarter century since Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1996) warned about "the Californian Ideology," Silicon Valley has pressed on much as before, only more so. One continues to hear tech CEOs repeat the faith that greater volumes of information and connection are inherently liberating, even as world events have made them say so a little more quietly and with some embarrassment. Echoing the 1990s e-commerce upstarts, cryptocurrency enthusiasts today herald a new order in which technology aids in finally dispensing with politics, reconciling the old partisanship of right and left by "believing in both visions at the same time" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 52). And yet the world of humans glaring intensely into Californian-designed devices has somehow become more polarized and electrified by ideology than we have been in recent memory, with resurgent autocracies riding Californian software into prominence and power (Tufekci, 2017) while bellwethers of democratic norms veer into precipitous decline (Foa & Mounk, 2017).

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The agenda of this article is a contribution to the years of research and reflection on the politics of no politics that Barbrook and Cameron (1996) diagnosed—the culture that, according to Fred Turner (2010), "turned away from political action and toward technology" (p. 4). The original formulation of the Californian Ideology outlined a certain kind of political economy that claimed to be apolitical, a social and economic liberalism capable of assailing industrial policy while tacitly relying on it. But that formative Californian tech culture addressed itself to more than macro-scale business and policy. Here, I turn from political economy to the micropolitics of everyday online life—the user experiences and collective affects, encoded into software designs and decoded into imaginations of social order (Hall, 1980). I argue that the Californian Ideology inscribed into its products the habits of homesteading—a legacy so familiar, nostalgic, and violent in the American West—which have trained far-flung users in the practice of a quotidian feudalism. Homesteading became the practice of the Californian Ideology in online community. Everyday experience with Californian systems has thereby contributed to hollowing out the rudiments of democratic culture, especially the skills and habits of accountable association. These systems have aided in generating new breeds of world-historical authoritarianism. To change course, therefore, instruments such as legislation and foreign policy may be inadequate; securing a more democratic future also requires fresh attention to how online spaces organize, constrain, and enable everyday politics (Tria Kerkvliet, 2009).

My argument emerges from an assemblage of divergent voices and fragmentary scenes. In the spirit of Barbrook and Cameron (1996), this analysis is inseparable from anxious polemic. I build on earlier critical chronicles of Californian times and places, such as those of Adam Curtis (2011), Fred Turner (2010), and Joy Lisi Rankin (2018), along with intrusions from worlds away. This is a story of deep mediatization (Hepp, 2019), in which media become inseparable from the practice of social life and the production of culture. Throughout, I pay particular notice to cases of emergent religiosity, following Kathryn Lofton's (2017) attention to "how religion manifests in efforts to mass-produce relations of value" (p. 2). I do so because the voices I consider here articulate or elicit diverse religious sensibilities—not a uniform religion of any sort, to be sure, but a cluster of interrelated appeals to transcendent forces. These appeals appear to function as mediations between macro and micro scales of social life. In this, they follow Alexis de Tocqueville, the early theorist of the everyday in national politics who understood democracy as a project of "harmoniz[ing] earth and heaven" (Allen, 2005).

Even as I begin with the Californian Ideology at the center of this discussion, I decenter it. Silicon Valley, or some hegemonic subset of it (Meehan & Turner, 2021), has encoded its values in technologies now used the world over, but adopters have decoded meanings very much their own, which become new encodings in turn. Part of what the ideology has excelled at is disowning its history and progeny alike, an amputation I hope to deny it.

Homestead and Homeplace

Howard Rheingold subtitled his canonical tribute to The WELL, an early online community, *Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993/2000). Founded in 1985, The WELL was a text-only gathering place for a mixture of intellectual seekers, technology enthusiasts, and Grateful Dead fans that had cultural influence far greater than its membership numbers, in part by giving free accounts to journalists. Among bulletin-board communities of the time, it was rare in both its aspiration of achieving

a viable business and the extent of its visibility in the popular press. On both counts, it became a decisive bridge from the era of hobbyist online spaces to the commercial Internet that Silicon Valley would produce (Driscoll, 2022, Chapter 5).

Rheingold did not initially develop the meaning of *homesteading* beyond the subtitle's implication that it described his newfound virtual homeland. But in the book's second edition, Rheingold refers to the term as "obsolete and anachronistic," a relic of a "pioneer culture" since lost to the Internet's mass adoption and commercialization (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. 325). Yet Patricia Nelson Limerick (1988) has shown that the conquest of the western United States—the source of the "homesteading" and "frontier" metaphors on which Rheingold relies—is an "unbroken past" rather than a finite era that ended with a particular milestone of battle or railroad construction. As recently as the mid-2010s, the names of the first two major versions of the blockchain protocol Ethereum were Frontier and Homestead (Russo, 2020). Rheingold's metaphors, then, provide evidence of continuity as he and his fellow pioneers set out to explore, name, and demarcate the virgin territory of the "Net." Eventual commercialization was not the end of this process but its purpose all along. "Western American history," writes Limerick (1988), "was an effort to draw lines dividing the West into manageable units of property and then to persuade people to treat those lines with respect" (p. 55).

Homesteading became enshrined in U.S. law with the first of the Homestead Acts in 1862. It was wartime legislation, seeking the expansion of "free labor" against Confederate slavery, inviting Northern White settlers to populate Western territories based on made-up allotments of land deemed appropriately sized for nuclear families. Whereas Iberian dominions in the Americas parceled out land in large chunks to aristocrats, leaving subsequent inhabitants to demand disruptive waves of land reform, the homestead doctrine was to be a parceling out of democratic ownership (Blasi, Freeman, & Kruse, 2013)—democratic in the sense of personal, private, and widely available, but with a feudalism inscribed inside. Within the homestead, the male citizen was sovereign over his family, and through his dominion there, he became a democratic subject on his visits to town. Democracy thereby depended on the dual subjugation of the household and those who refused to respect his property lines.

This process produced the geometric property lines one still sees when flying over the western United States. While from above Europe presents villages around common pastures, with oblong fields surrounding them, the land subject to homesteading still features one-house, one-square plots. For some early settlers, heading West was a way to keep that land out of the slaver-state bloc. But homesteading was also a project of removal and genocide, because the land was not by custom or morality the U.S. government's to give. Part of the price of those plots was the armed settlers' participation in denying existence to the Native peoples, for whom land owning was a foreign logic and whose livelihoods were often incompatible with the imposition of fences.

The homestead turns land into a bounded political object, encoding participants as the landholding citizens who could be the basis of new states for the Union. Asserting political boundaries required the mobilization of the Manifest Destiny that Frederick Merk and Lois Bannister Merk (1963/1995) would equate with "mission" in the evangelical Christian sense. The thrall of democracy became a political gospel, calling the land into service and a new ethnostate into being. Early Internet products like the Geocities and eWorld likewise relied on metaphors of terrestrial space and virtual urbanism to introduce their brands to customers

still skeptical about online services. Californian tech "evangelists" aid start-ups in overcoming their initial nonexistence, asserting their impending reality with such confidence as to summon the necessary multisided markets and network effects (Parker, Alstyne, & Choudary, 2016). For these platform barkers, too, the promise of democratizing access to the wonders of software is at the heart of the product pitch.

Barbrook and Cameron (1996) devote considerable exegesis to the Californian aspiration to "Jeffersonian democracy"—a utopia that, on closer inspection, produces a dystopia of "cyborg masters and robot slaves" (pp. 58, 61). A condition of possibility for American homesteading was Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase, the acquisition of a French land claim that became roughly the middle third of the contiguous United States. This land, for Jefferson, would be the basis for a democracy of landowners—those feudal lords in microcosm—whose political rights derived from their local absolutism, just as his statesmanship depended on the labor of people he regarded as his slaves. Similarly, the design of social software proclaims that paradoxical politics: Democracy is supposed to somehow emanate from the feudal. As in the homestead, the two tendencies are enmeshed and codependent, despite their contradictions. Democracy is the goal, even if it is not recognizable in the means.

According to a design pattern of "implicit feudalism," nearly all social-media software nudges users toward autocratic or oligarchic forms of community governance, lacking the means for even the most typical structures of associational life offline, such as boards, elections, term limits, and other constraints on powerholders (Schneider, 2022). Punishment for wrongdoing is censorship of one's posts or exile from a given jurisdiction. The encoding of implicit feudalism into social software does not outright determine users' behavior, but it does bear a kind of politics (Winner, 1980), just as homesteading encoded the politics of property and patriarchy on its land claims. Implicit feudalism started among the first bulletin-board systems and persists into subreddits and WhatsApp group chats. That arrangement seemed appropriate at first, because many of the earliest bulletin-board communities ran on servers in their owners' homes; a user was akin to a houseguest, and the so-called sysadmin was the host, legally and technically responsible for the goings-on. The habit stuck. On more recent platforms, anyone can start a social space, and for their trouble, founders get near total control over the spaces they initiate.

The power of admins and hosts across the various discussion-spaces presaged the evolution of corporate ownership and control. The sysadmin of a bulletin-board system, or the moderator of a subreddit, serves as the model and cypher of the new monopolist—and remarkably enough, capital markets tolerate the arrangement. Mark Zuckerberg holds a controlling stake in his publicly traded company, just as the person who starts a Facebook group holds moderation powers over its members indefinitely. Whether the servers sit in an office closet in the Sausalito houseboat district, like the Rheingold-era WELL, or among corporate data centers around the world, the structures of power take cues from the cultivation of habit.

The shortest, least specified of The WELL's "design goals" stated, "It would be self-governing…" (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. 31). But the ellipses never quite resolved. Rheingold later wrote, "Technically, the early WELL was governed as a benevolent dictatorship" (Rheingold, 2021, "Governance on The WELL"). It obtained early members from the dissolution of The Farm, a famous counterculture commune in Tennessee with no rules except for the ultimately stifling rule of its spiritual leader, Stephen Gaskin (Hafner, 1997; Turner, 2010). Farm veterans became The WELL's admins. Beneath them was a melee of group-level, micro-dictator

"hosts" and seemingly endless, structureless discussions referred to as "meta." In 1994, the platform was sold to a new owner; the users were not consulted. The buyer, the shoe magnate Bruce Katz, attempted to ingratiate himself to his newly acquired community with what could serve as a pithy summary of the Californian Ideology:

> I believe in the power of this new emerging media and believe that it is one of the bright hopes that we have in reinvigorating a civil dialogue that is the foundation of a free democratic society. (Hafner, 1997)

In search of real self-governing, Rheingold and other WELL dwellers later formed The River, an online community owned by a cooperative of its users (Rheingold, 2021). But it strayed too far from Californian homesteading to become dominant. Conway's Law had taken hold: The technologies of communication had become structures of organization (Conway, 1968). The medium of chatter situated the enactment of structure. The WELL itself became user-owned in 2012, only after the heyday of its influence.

Compare the homesteading tradition to another sort of home, the "site of resistance" that bell hooks (1990) has celebrated as "homeplace" (p. 384). hooks (1990) explains: "Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts" (p. 384). Those who could not leave an oppressive society could find liberation together, transforming space and time, however constrained the homeplace might be by the world outside. The homeplace forms a countertradition to the homestead, a place of care and resistance, where power can be shared in contrast to the domination of the broader society in which it occurs, and from which it can never fully depart.

There are elements of the homeplace in many online spaces, in what people have made with the Californian Ideology's products, constructing sites of resistance again and again, beyond the knowledge or comprehension of the technologists and executives. Homeplaces have become particularly important among people belonging to marginalized groups, who can find each other online in ways unavailable before (Gray, 2009). Tech companies have subsequently celebrated when social movements arise on their platforms (Turner, 2018), but those movements are not theirs. Solidarity forms through the affective affinities among participants (Papacharissi, 2015), regardless of who is technically in charge of the platform or the forum. The intimacy, the care, the rebellion, the imagination—these are not in the code, but such homeplaces occur both because of and despite the designs of homesteading machines. There is also a parallel legacy of homesteading alongside that of the settler land grants, based on voluntary departures from dominant society—a practice of spiritual and material resistance to commodification (Gould, 2005). The feudal power flows are never the whole story.

Homeplaces came and went on The WELL. But *contra* Rheingold, the homesteading did not end when the communities moved to corporate servers. Digital space is an ever-expanding sort of West; the land is as limitless as server capacity allows, and the enabling factories and rare-earth mines can remain far from view. Within each pocket of delineated social space, what virtual terrain a user claims becomes their castle. If you do not like it, you can always find another plot to call your own. On a group chat, the "leave" button is always there. As in the libertarian vision of Robert Nozick (1974), the only utopia is the ability to exit one utopia for another.

Exit has assumed an exalted place in Californian thinking. The availability of exit became the implicit justification of implicit feudalism: if a community is exit-able, it need not be accountable (Frey & Schneider, 2021). At the level of business, exit is the goal investors expect their startups to aspire to, in the form of an acquisition or public stock offering (Mannan & Schneider, 2021). At the level of culture, the annual Burning Man festival practices the art of temporary cocreation and departure (Turner, 2009). Elon Musk opposes unionization in his terrestrial factories, but once his companies make possible the exit of Mars colonization, he hopes to establish direct democracy there (Wójtowicz & Szocik, 2021). From dreams of space travel to floating "seasteading" colonies in international waters, the Californian Ideology longs for perpetual departure among homestead archipelagos (Rubenstein & Supp-Montgomerie, 2021).

The politics of no politics in the Californian Ideology encoded into its tools, and their surrounding institutions, a politics. The content of this politics came from ambient sources: the feudal permission-control logics of the technology at hand, and the historical habits of homesteading. Barbrook and Cameron (1996) predicted the endgame as, rather than marvelous connection, "a deepening of social segregation" (p. 62). Elite access to artificial intelligence and medical wonders would enable salvation by escape, a faithless religion of exit. From the comparatively minuscule WELL to Facebook, the organizing patterns of daily life in digital spaces crept into the politics of the platforms as a whole and the companies that own them. Nurturing homeplaces may blip in and out of existence. But under the guise of an aspiration to be self-governing, the more rigid powers of admins and CEOs are hard-coded to outlast the homeplaces. As Barbrook and Cameron (1996) suspected, these politics would spread far beyond the platforms themselves.

Feudal Salvation

The power flows of social-media software might have remained a curiosity confined to people's digital lives, a cordoned-off public-in-private. But as digital networks became ever more entangled in everyday life, the implicit politics of the network designs spread into mass politics. Among other kinds of flows, everyday social experience bounded the range of political imagination.

Soteriology is the branch of theology that deals with salvation, with whatever it is human beings should ultimately be striving for. A classic example is Anselm of Canterbury's 11th-century treatise *Cur Deus Homo*, a feat of especially explicit feudalism. His account of a person's relationship to God extrapolates from the dominant political relationship of Anselm's eleventh-century world: subject and lord (Nuth, 1992). The relation is that of perfect hierarchy. God becoming human in Christ is the exception that proves the rule, just as a medieval carnival reversed the roles of peasant and ruler only to reinforce them. Anselm's local politics translated into his cosmic order. To be saved is to inhabit that order fully.

The Californian Ideology has a soteriology of its own. Barbrook and Cameron (1996) describe it with the parallel dreams of an "electronic marketplace" and an "electronic agora" (p. 50): frictionless economy and limitless speech that, if society accepts them, would wipe away the troubles of the analog world. The flows of online life, that is, were to be vehicles for a kind of bloodless revolution.

At first it seemed like Californian tools would indeed liberate and democratize. Protests spread on social networks like never before: 2009 in Iran, 2011 across the Middle East, and then to Europe and Wall

Street. In the belief that the new social media rendered foregoing social structures obsolete, movements proclaimed themselves leaderless and experimented with direct democracy at the scale of thousands (Papacharissi, 2015). But after the exhilarating viral moment passed, the social media that radically democratic protesters relied on failed to support persistent organizations or political capacity (Tufekci, 2017). These networks did begin to upend social imaginaries, as promised. Democracy, however, was what they nudged into obsolescence. Salvation looked like something else.

The new religious movements are revealing. From the civil war following Syria's 2011 protests came the Islamic State—not a Westphalian nation state but a networked *umma*, operating through the opt-in membership of hashtags and the imposition of absolutist order in its domains. As the Islamic State idea spread through brutal, viral videos and social media groups, the Californian Ideology's anything-goes social liberalism did not take hold. But the homesteading did—in this case adapted to the frontier of a stateless warzone, an act of exit from the international order. The implicit feudalism of the networks decoded there into a feudalism much more explicit.

As Marwan Kraidy (2018) points out, horrific spectacle has been only one side of the Islamic State's media output. Rather, "a majority of official I.S. visual media releases focus on non-violent aspects of life in the Caliphate" (p. 46):

> In terms of a socio-religious utopia, it articulated claims of a pure, authentic, and truly Islamic society unburdened by Western influence and local subversion, with images of the good life—premised on a puritanical vision of Sunni Islam—showcasing spectacular sunsets and Ferris wheels and showing contented-looking people—mostly men—shopping in markets, fishing in rivers, praying piously, conversing amicably. (p .46)

These were the images of inhabiting a salvific order, with a clerical sysadmin. The founding caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, appeared publicly only in choreographed events designed for viral circulation, such as his 2014 proclamation of his alleged caliphate at the al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul, Iraq. The rest of the time, under his hegemonic absence, his ultimately fleeting regime portrayed itself with a virtual reality of ordinary life.

Meanwhile in the United States, the favored political party of Silicon Valley lost to Donald J. Trump, who made Californian tools into his political home, for movement building and then for governing. Alongside his presidency came the QAnon movement, a kind of digital gnosticism that blended Trumpism with evangelical Christianity (Sharlet, 2020). It produced devoted followers of a pseudonymous prophet, a government official named Q, who prophesied a salvific restoration of American society through a military coup and mass executions of the president's enemies. Trump's continued and unobstructed power would be assured. Before long, sympathizers were elected to the U.S. Congress.

In the documentary *Q: Into the Storm*, director Cullen Hoback (2021) meanders to the conclusion that the author of Q's "drops" is Ron Watkins, the system administrator of 8chan, the website where Q posted. The same person rushing to get the servers back up during an outage, Hoback (2021) begins to suspect, also masterminded the apocalyptic movement—and indeed, at critical instances, Q seems to have

inside knowledge of the servers' workings. Watkins claimed to be in contact with the Trump White House; while presenting himself as operating a platform with no politics of his own, Watkins' powers as feudal admin brought him to the brink of a political power grab. At the end of the film, he seems to give up the disguise altogether, all but admitting to his dual role—a conjunction that further linguistic analysis has corroborated (Kirkpatrick, 2022).

Like the CEOs of corporate social media who deplatformed Donald Trump in the last days of his presidency, Watkins represented a turning point. Earlier in the life of the Californian system, admins merely maintained the allegedly neutral platforms (Gillespie, 2010). But now that story was giving way to regimes of platform diktat, with all power to the admins. Starting with the feudal designs encoded into their systems, the minutiae of technical administration expanded to become coterminous with geopolitics.

Watkins does not appear to have had a specific politics to promulgate; he performs the studied indifference of online trolling culture (Phillips & Milner, 2017). During Trump's 2020 reelection campaign, similarly, the Republican Party broke with past practice and did not issue a policy platform. The Californian politics of no politics had taken hold, through a grasp on power—server power, executive power—that could operate on its own terms, not in service to any external commitments. The salvific promise of Q was to overcome democracy and install the order of a platform homestead in its place.

Howard Rheingold had seen the danger for online social media back in the early 1990s. "Whoever gains the political edge on this technology will be able to use the technology to consolidate power," wrote Rheingold (1993/2000, p. 298). And ephemeral bursts of protest do continue to spread across networks. Some of these call for democracy still. But the most novel, persistent kinds of spiritual-political imaginaries that have arisen on Californian tools are teaching other kinds of lessons, seeking other forms of salvation.

Everyday Fractals

The activist-writer adrienne maree brown (2017) recalls posting, in March 2016, an invitation on Instagram:

> I am inviting a small crew of women and gender nonconforming friends into an experiment
> with each other, to share daily portraits of ourselves in this private thread for a month as
> a liberation technology, and affirm each other's beauty. Interested? (brown, 2017, "spells
> and practices for emergent strategy")

Six people responded and joined her online homeplace. "What emerged," brown wrote a year later, "was a community, a safe space, that is still very active today" (brown, 2017, "spells and practices for emergent strategy"). Her recollection, with glimpses of what ensued, comes in her guidebook for social-change movements, *Emergent Strategy* (2017). Rather than in grand strategies of conflict and policy demands, brown dwells in what Michel de Certeau (1980/1988) called the "tactics" of everyday life. She has been director of an important environmental justice organization, but readers looking for tips on institutional design and protest optics find instead the minutiae of intimate communities, along with a spirituality she draws from the novels of Octavia Butler and the pop-science of fungi and fractals. "When we speak of

systemic change, we need to be fractal," she writes. "Fractals—a way to speak of the patterns we see—move from the micro to macro level" (brown, 2017, "fractals") Or: "Until we have some sense of how to live our solutions locally, we won't be successful at implementing a just governance system regionally, nationally, or globally" (brown, 2017, "fractals").

While Barbrook and Cameron (1996) place the Californian Ideology at the register of grand political economy, I have argued that its patterns reverberate in users' everyday experience with its products. The everyday can be a site of enchantment, as for the Jesuit priest de Certeau (Sheldrake, 2012), or of disenchantment, as when Henri Lefebvre (1991) details the deceptions in the life of a country church. Ben Highmore (2002) summarizes de Certeau like this: "What would a politics be like that emerged from the everyday, instead of one that was simply applied to the everyday?" (p. 150).

Another observer of the everyday, although not yet belonging to the canon of "everyday life" theory (Highmore, 2002), is Philip E. Agre, an erstwhile engineer and professor who has since abandoned academia for intentional obscurity. Agre is now credited with having predicted the looming regime of online surveillance—back when the Californian Ideology feigned innocence about anything of the sort (Albergotti, 2021). Others have since explored everyday life online in more detail (e.g., Bucher, 2017; Kember & Zylinska, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015; Phillips & Milner, 2017), but I turn to Agre as someone who came to the matter unusually early. Like brown, he became fascinated by fractals and the relationship between the everyday and the world-historical, the minute and the immense.

Before its evolution into a more buttoned-up monograph (Agre, 1997), Agre's dissertation at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory was called *The Dynamic Structure of Everyday Life* (Agre, 1988). It includes an eighteen-page analysis of "walking to the subway" (pp. 53–71), which serves to justify a shift in software design from the intentional to the improvisational. In the dissertation, as well as in a talk on "The Structures of Everyday Life" while still a student, Agre (1985) proposed the mathematical concept of the lattice as a gateway between the particular and the general, the routine and the complex. Hand-drawn lines connect specific components of a car to the concepts necessary to understand their use. His lattice functions much like brown's fractals.

Almost two decades later—by then less an engineer and more a humanist—Agre returned to the lattice in an essay of political theory, alongside fractals and another longstanding keyword of his: skills (Agre, 2004). Across his lattice structure, four dimensions of political skill—vertical, geographic, institutional, ideological—form a network structure of intersections that cascade across society. "The issue lattice is sufficiently complex," he writes, "that it will never emerge without high levels of political skill diffused throughout the society" (Agre, 2004, "Citizenship"). Whereas mass media and civics classes teach politics in terms of vaulted office-holders and halls of power, Agre held that lived politics depends much more on moving skillfully among the lattices.

Skills for Agre (1997) are both practical and mystical, a reorientation of all meaning making as emanations from small acts of community. The epigraph of his monograph is a medieval Zen dialogue. It begins:

> Joshu asked Nansen: "What is the path?"
> Nansen said: "Everyday life is the path."
> Joshu asked: "Can it be studied?"
> Nansen said: "If you try to study, you will be far from it." (Agre, 1997)

If there is a theory of salvation here, it comes through the friction of involvement, not electronic optimization. Technology must support the work of human politics, not replace it. Rather than flame wars, technologies might thereby encourage the art of consensus making, as brown (2017) teaches in *Emergent Strategy*. They might help movements persist and evolve rather than disappear into the next viral moment.

If the dream of the Californian Ideology is a world without politics, however, it stands to reason that the technology it generates would not teach political skills.

As the Californian Ideology's anti-politics established itself on the West Coast, Agre was inverting it at MIT, calling for technology that invites people into developing skills through everyday politics. He concludes his essay "The Practical Republic"—the final essay listed on his faculty website before his sudden departure from public life—like this: "technology is not central; what is central are the choices that we make, each of us, in laying claim to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in our own lives" (Agre, 2004, "Citizenship"). The technology that we need is technology that does not take or demand credit. brown seems to forget about Instagram on summoning her community there; the homeplace becomes the subject.

Sociologists and political scientists continue to debate the importance of "spillover effects"—the consequences of small-scale activity to large-scale politics (Pateman, 1970; van der Does & Jacquet, 2021). It is hard, maybe conveniently impossible, to draw clean lines of causation. Societies are complex systems. If a butterfly flapping its wings can cause a hurricane a world away, as the saying goes, then anything could happen between a private thread on Instagram and a revolution of some sort. When brown and Agre wield their fractals and lattices, they do so not with a comprehensive account of the causality but with a kind of embodied faith, backed by Agre's walk to the subway and by brown's Instagram invitation.

"I have begun to wonder how it looks to practice complexity as a sacred path, as interdependence," brown writes. "Being a part of movements is complex work, it requires a faith" (brown, 2017, "interdependence and decentralization"). By this kind of faith, and by everyday skills, brown and Agre reject the ultimate exit of Californian ambitions: the departure from bodily limits and social constraints. They refuse to acknowledge technology as the angel of history, the divine agent, and instead insist that we are still just talking about how people relate to one another. Against feudal technology and the authoritarian revival it helped produce, the retort is not another technology but the practice of political skills. If we honor those skills, perhaps designers will encode future technologies that nourish, rather than evade, everyday politics.

Superhighways

In a bittersweet afterword to *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold (1993/2000) tells how the intimate homeplaces he experienced had become a matter of industrial policy: Al Gore, first as a U.S. senator

and then as vice president, had promoted the "information superhighway" as a market and geopolitical opportunity (p. 395). It was protocol infrastructure that government would build and set free into the world. Rheingold noted the derision that the "superhighway" moniker had attracted—hyperbole compared with the experience one had on dial-up modems in those days, yet faint in comparison to the homesteads the Internet would soon bring.

Producing mighty infrastructure requires coordination, or at least political will. As democratic skills erode in the everyday politics of online life, so has confidence in the plausibility of democratic infrastructure. Though I have only anecdote and hypothesis to go on, I suspect that everyday feudalism is deepening its influence on geopolitical imaginaries.

When I took a high-speed train between Hangzhou, a smart-city testing-ground, and Shanghai, I sent a video home to my kids. Nothing of the sort exists where we live in the Western United States. The legacy of homesteads here developed into a politics that made the assertion of public transit over private property too costly. The mightiest feats of infrastructure we drive by—the dams, the rail bridges across valleys, the tunnels through mountain passes—date to the 1930s or the Cold War, the years when Franklin Roosevelt's "arsenal of democracy" was gaining strength. In Hangzhou, there were facial-recognition machines at the entrance to the train station, in the place of ticket takers—a convenience we deny ourselves in the United States, to protect the illusion that we are not under similar surveillance by other means.

Several years ago, I had a long correspondence with a self-described Chinese student who said she came to the United States to study and was perplexed by something I had written in favor of democracy. She wrote:

> China's achievements in human development are historically unprecedented. Under our system my generation has thrived, and is far more positive and forward-looking compared to our peers worldwide. There may be a "perfect" model of democracy that you have in mind, but democracy as practiced throughout most of history is best described as corrosive and sclerotic. One need only contrast the state of American and Chinese infrastructure to arrive at this conclusion. (personal communication, February 16, 2019)

Two days later, she added, "Every inch of progress China had made resulted from an absolute, unequivocal rejection of democracy" (personal communication, February 18, 2019).

Even those who speak the language of democracy appear to have come to similar conclusions in their everyday online lives. Unchecked authority is the expectation and norm. In their study of 638 wikis, Shaw and Hill (2014) found that as participation grew, the early admins held ever tighter to their authority and shared it less. At a larger scale, corporate platforms present themselves as the new arsenals of democracy; CEOs like Zuckerberg defend themselves against antitrust enforcement by arguing that their consolidated power is necessary to counter that of ascendant Chinese platforms (Sherman, 2020).

In China, the habit of autocratic order is old. For many centuries, emperors used technology to consolidate power—tracking the minutiae of production, exacting taxation—in ways European rulers could

only dream of (Stasavage, 2020). This order produced a discourse of "harmony," still a favorite word in Communist Party slogans (Tomba, 2009; Wang, Juffermans, & Du, 2016). Harmony is an article of Confucian faith, applied to assert cohesion against the lived experience of a society exploding into the overlapping complexities of markets, networks, and megacities. As Xiaobing Tang (2000) describes postrevolutionary China, "The emergent hegemony is no longer Ideology or Collectivity, but rather the everyday life" (p. 290). Harmony unites the everyday mayhem with the party and its plans. It is another fractal and a story of salvation. Officials promulgate this faith, online memes ridicule it, and yet it persists—as a faith does, if nothing else. The emperors ruled by their precision agronomy; now the implicitly feudal clients and servers play that role. The target of Chinese Internet policy is less free speech or free thought than collective action that undermines political harmony (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Under the shadow of state crackdowns, the admins of Chinese social-media platforms act as subsidiary bureaucracies, protecting their right to exist by imposing their best guess of what harmony will allow (Ng, 2013).

The design of everyday systems, once again, becomes the blueprint for a spiritual and social order. The crafting of everyday life is the crafting of global politics. Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet (2009) introduced the concept of "everyday politics" in the context of research among Southeast Asian peasant farmers; what he observed is also salient across the global diaspora of Californian technology:

> Everyday politics involves people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct. (p. 232)

That is, what might look like the opposite of politics may be upholding or unraveling the reigning regime, a "power of the powerless" (Havel, 1978) in which ordinary actions can bear world-historical freight. The everyday can thus become a site of resistance.

Conclusion

This article has offered a rereading of the Californian Ideology's politics of no politics beyond the original focus on political economy—from the logics of homesteading and feudalism in ordinary online spaces to their role in enabling the rise of national authoritarianism. I suggest that everyday online practices tell at least part of the story for these political shifts underway. However, I share Barbrook and Cameron's (1996) conviction that "there are alternatives" (p. 63). Just as they point to the French state's Minitel system as an alternative political economy for networks, I find that alternatives also lie in the everyday politics of hooks' homeplace, of brown's deliberate interdependence, and of Agre's political skills. Producing more democratic and humane politics at large scales requires attention to the daily political practices of networks, as well as to how software designs might encourage or discourage them.

Politics is no autonomous category in human minds and worlds; for that reason, I have sustained attention on the diverse forms of religious imagination that have aided the global decoding and reencoding of Californian tools. These forces are a reminder that, along with political skills, the production of alternatives must involve dimensions of ritual, devotional commitments, and structures of belief.

A tenet of the Californian Ideology is that in the acceleration of machine-enabled daily tasks, politics will no longer be needed. Instead, Californian tools absorbed the ghosts of Californian politics, which have haunted people attempting to reconstitute their societies on networks. Understanding the resulting political tremors requires noticing the everyday politics of online life.

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