"Polemic Becomes Canon":
An Interview with Richard Barbrook on the Californian Ideology

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In this interview, Richard Barbrook shares his perspective on the essay "The Californian Ideology," which he published in 1995 and 1996 with Andy Cameron, who died in 2012. Richard Barbrook lays out the essay's genesis, explores the inspiration offered by Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology*, discusses his ambivalent but not simply dismissive relationship to California and the United States, and provides insight into the thinking around the masters program in hypermedia at the University of Westminster, United Kingdom, that he and Cameron were setting up at the time of the essay's publication. In the essay they wanted to impart a different approach to digital technologies than was prevalent in the Californian computer industry at the time. Overall, the interview makes it apparent how "The Californian Ideology" should be seen in its temporal context—as well as how the basic questions the essay raises continue to shape the discussion about digital media and infrastructures today.

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Nathan Schneider: Are you sick of talking about "The Californian Ideology" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996), or are you okay with revisiting it again?

Richard Barbrook: I'm very happy since I always feel slightly smug that we wrote the article at the right time. It was a bit like putting the tail on the donkey, or pointing out that the emperor had no clothes. Somebody was going to do it, and we just happened to be lucky to do it first. Of course, we wrote it for ourselves because we were setting up the masters program (MA) in hypermedia studies at the University of Westminster, and "The Californian Ideology" was where we were trying to think about why we were doing something different rather than just copying whatever came from the West Coast.

NS: So it's a pedagogical piece.

RB: It's weird that it took off. Really bizarre. You can spend lots of effort writing things, and no one reads them or only a few people appreciate them. But this was different. It appeared on the Nettime mailing list, and it took off like a rocket. After that, I remember the first time I saw someone writing about the Californian Ideology without referencing our article. I was a bit miffed. And then I thought, no, no, that's actually what

success is, when people could say the words without actually having to reference where they came from. [Taking a book off the shelf] Look! Here's where we nicked the title from—this book.

NS: *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1846/1976).

RB: This is the *exact* book.

NS: Oh, that exact copy of that exact book.

RB: I thought, we'll just nick a title from Marx and Engels.

NS: It's a very red book.

RB: Well, it's also because the point of their book's title is not that all Germans in the 1840s were Young Hegelians. But that particular form of politics only could have appeared in Germany at that time. Similarly, there was something about the particular mashing together of hippiedom and neoliberalism that could only have happened in 1990's California. It wouldn't have happened in Boston. You can't imagine the Boston Brahmins inventing the Californian Ideology.

NS: They were making their computers in suits and ties.

RB: Or even if they weren't, they weren't smoking as much weed or hadn't dropped as much acid. Extremely right-wing people among the *Wired* editors had taken lots of acid. I once met John Perry Barlow, and he told me about how he'd been Dick Cheney's campaign manager for a United States Senate election. That's weird. A lyricist for the Grateful Dead *and* a neocon's campaign manager.

NS: I want to go back to what you said about the essay spreading in unexpected ways. One thing we noticed while editing this issue was how people were citing different versions of the article. It started in a magazine, right?

RB: Yes, that was *Mute*. They were friends of ours, an arts and politics magazine in London. Andy knew them. So we put it in there. Then, because I knew these people at Nettime—I'd met them at some event on the continent—they shared it, and then it became a manifesto for its subscribers. Even though Nettime had lots of Americans on it, it was very European. And then the article appeared in *Science as Culture* because we had to be published in an academic journal. Then it appeared in various compilation books. And, for the 20th anniversary of its publication, the Institute for Network Cultures in Amsterdam put our article out again in *The Internet Revolution: From Dot-Com Capitalism to Cybernetic Communism* (Barbrook & Cameron, 2015).

NS: Did you and Andy Cameron spend much time in California around the time you wrote the article? What were your empirical data, beyond *Wired*?

RB: As I said, the motivation for writing our article was to promote an MA in hypermedia studies at a London university. We were far too busy in 1995 securing validation, devising the syllabus, and raising money for this postgraduate course to carry out our own research in the Bay Area. We did have lots of suitable books and magazines on our shelves—and we, of course, could use the Net to find more sources that backed up our critique of *Wired*'s neoliberal obsessions. You also have to remember that my father taught U.S. politics at Kent University, so I'd grown up in a household where American culture and politics were very familiar. Long before *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (Bell, 1976) was a footnote in "The Californian Ideology," I already knew who Daniel Bell was—he was one of those dodgy American academics who came to dinner at the Barbrooks' on their visits to England. My father had first met him when they were both members of the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom in the 1950s! It was this experience that later inspired large sections of my 2007 *Imaginary Futures* book (Barbrook, 2007)—and was definitely a big help when we were writing our article back in 1995.

NS: It seems like the Internet was mad at you when "The Californian Ideology" came out.

RB: What worried me, and Andy too, is that we were seen as anti-American. But we didn't think of our article as anti-American. On the contrary we praised lots of things about California, especially its do-it-yourself culture. I was there researching for my PhD during the summer of 1981, and I had great fun. I didn't want to *live* there, which is different.

NS: Well, you were calling for something other than what was happening in California at the time.

RB: We were against the American empire. We weren't against Americans, though. I mean, I feel sorry for you for having to live in America.

NS: I'm not sure we feel sorry for ourselves the way we should.

RB: I like the way you said in your article about how America lacks high-speed rail. I can go from London to my mother's house on the coast by high-speed rail. It's fantastic.

NS: We have all the apps we could want and no trains. But now, anyway, we're trying to convince ourselves we can fix the world with electric cars.

RB: It is funny that the only article in this issue that slags off "The Californian Ideology" is the one about autonomous vehicles. That's as far away from the Californian Ideology as I think you can get.

NS: Why is that?

RB: Well, because the whole point of the Californian Ideology is what the article by Andreas Hepp and Anne Schmitz calls "pioneer communities." I mean, it's that moment when people are trying to make new things in new ways with new technologies, and you get a weird mixture of community activists and capitalist entrepreneurs. Like the makerspaces analyzed in this issue. It's not some big corporate project, which

autonomous vehicles have to be, in order to have the computing power required so that the car can drive around by itself.

NS: Isn't it central to the California Ideology to have a big corporate project that somehow manages to present itself as if it's not a corporate project?

RB: Well, that's the next step, isn't it? But there's always an ambiguity between the two. You've got to have that initial moment when it looks like it's just a group of techies and hippies in a room. Jeff Bezos deliberately started Amazon in a garage, didn't he? Even though he could have started it in an office block.

NS: He was a Wall Street guy with investors.

RB: Yes, exactly. But he had to have a garage because Apple started in a garage.

NS: So when everybody accuses you of being anti-American on Nettime or wherever, how does that end up shaping your thinking?

RB: Well, they were not accusing us. They were *praising* us for being anti-American. You know, it's that classic Roland Barthes argument about how people read what they want to read in texts. We made all these careful points praising what we liked about California, and people just ignored them. All they saw was that it's an anti-American diatribe.

NS: Sure, but a big part of its power is its polemic. It's not a dry analysis.

RB: Very true. We also wrote it for ourselves. It's different from the pieces in this issue because they're very much written for an academic journal—you can tell. They're all being very respectable. It was wonderful being at a conference in a Californian university, and this student comes up and says, "Oh, geez, so glad to meet you. I wrote an essay this semester on your article." And then I discovered me and Andy are on the reading list there. If you survive long enough, polemic becomes canon. We've become part of Californian culture now. Which I'm pleased about. I was also quite chuffed that I got to meet Kim Stanley Robinson at this conference, since he's actually a footnote in "The Californian Ideology." I take pride that we managed to, as I said, put the tail on the donkey before anyone else.

NS: So, then the next obvious question is: How you think the Californian Ideology has held on? How do you see it mapping onto the rise of tech in China, for instance? Is this one of the "alternatives" you allude to?

RB: Having been sick with long COVID since 2020, I have not been able to read lots and lots of books like I usually do. I was forced instead to watch lots of YouTube documentaries, and in one about Shenzhen, they go to visit this startup and there is a quote from Mao Zedong's *On Protracted War* on the wall. A few words of wisdom like "Let's all get together and march forward to victory," or something similar. I thought at that moment, this is the Shenzhen ideology—where you mix startup capitalism with Maoism. In that view, the Communist Party of China is the most successful startup in human history. It starts with only a few activists on a boat in Shanghai and eventually becomes a multimillion-member organization in charge of over a fifth of humanity.

NS: That reminds me about when Anthony Scaramucci, Trump's communications director for all of five minutes, told a British journalist that the United States was a "disruptive startup"—a bunch of rich guys getting together and doing something new.

RB: Well, they already owned America in 1776. They just didn't want the British to have any say in it.

NS: That's the deception—the claim that we're just starting from scratch, when in fact we owned this thing already. We're just reconfiguring that ownership so we can get more out of it.

RB: The 1776 American revolution was a management buyout! When we wrote "The Californian Ideology," what really annoyed Louis Rossetto and Howard Rheingold was our mocking of Jeffersonian democracy— and pointing out that Jefferson himself was a slave owner. Nowadays that's not controversial at all. In fact, what's interesting is that none of these articles in the issue focus on class. They happily talk about sexism and racism, but they can't use the word *class*. We were using *class* throughout "The Californian Ideology."

NS: Class is harder to talk about because it risks effacing other kinds of difference.

RB: That's liberalism as capitalist ideology. Liberalism divides people into selfish individuals. "Divide and rule," isn't it? But you have all these other things that you can't talk about. In America, class politics is based on racial segregation. The Virginia slave code was the antidote to White and Black uniting in Nathanial Bacon's Rebellion, right? It shouldn't be *The 1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones & *The New York Times Magazine*, 2021). It should be the 1676 project.

NS: We're having enough trouble with 1619. Where do you see class lines right now in the current conjuncture, so to speak, of the digital economy? Where is class?

RB: If you think of Bernie Sanders' presidential campaigns, suddenly you had an emergence of class politics, very ephemerally. And then, of course, the ruling elite got rid of it as soon as they could. Now Bernie and the Squad are all voting for the imperialist war. Very sad. Isn't the fear that inspired the creation of your bourgeois republic that all these different groups will unite together against the ruling elite? Let's remember how America has been constructed. Henry Ford made sure on the production line that he got immigrants who all spoke different languages so they couldn't organize.

NS: Is the great achievement of the Californian Ideology a new way of obscuring class relations?

RB: Yes, I think that's really true. It has created an ideology for a new labor aristocracy. There is this definite group of people—who I know—people who are between being petty bourgeois and well-paid workers. Some of them are obviously in the ruling class, but most of them are from this intermediate class. I've analyzed their predecessors in my *Class of the New* book (Barbrook, 2006). These techies and designers are who the Californian Ideology is aimed at. It's not aimed at the general population. It's aimed at that particular group of people, to mobilize them behind big capital and corporations.

NS: The people who have to devote their lives and their nights and their weekends to producing software. How do you read the recent wave of tech-worker union organizing?

RB: It's like we've gone through the glamorous stage, and now people are just employed in routine jobs, aren't they? But then you notice the arrival of new technologies like crypto and AI [artificial intelligence]—there's a new area where the Californian Ideology reproduces itself again, back to the mish-mash of hippie anarchists and would-be entrepreneurs. A few years ago it was all apps, apps for everything. Now app development is just another job. It is like how Hepp and Schmitz talk about pioneer communities. California is particularly good at capturing that group, isn't it? Because they're doing the R&D [research and development] for the corporates.

NS: The ideology keeps them in right relationship with capital. So is the labor organizing a sham, or is it just occurring in a context that capital has already plowed over?

RB: You will opt for rebellion when you're being exploited as contract labor. Here, in England, we've had a lot of organizing around quite low-tech jobs—in the gig economy, people like delivery drivers and bicyclists. They're the ones who started the new unionism. And also the game workers in some of the big game studios. Those are just like a film studio or a TV station. And so they're being organized now, but that's because they became routine jobs. That's why they're starting to act more like the traditional working class. All forms of proletarian organization reappear.

NS: For the past few years we've been seeing a bunch of organizing in the big tech companies among the high-paid virtual class types. But now the crackdown is happening—maybe starting with Elon Musk's purge at Twitter. Then the second the Federal Reserve raises rates, all the workers who were organizing get laid off.

RB: We still have slightly more protective laws than you do. But I disagree with your article: It's not feudalism.

NS: I'm not talking about economics in that case. I have more respect for feudalism—the commons and so forth—than to compare our current economic situation to it.

RB: As Adam Smith points out about feudalism, you're powerful because of the number of people who are dependent on you. And then, as he says, the aristocrats gave away their power when they dismissed their retainers to be able to afford "silver buckled shoes." You don't understand what feudalism is. I mean, it sounds good as an insult, but the digital economy is not feudalism. The lord-serf relationship was really different. It's very, very different to what we're looking at now.

NS: The relation I'm describing there is just about the social relations in community spaces, not so much the economic side.

RB: I think capitalist ownership is what you're talking about.

NS: Capitalist ownership is in the background, but the feudalism I refer to here is something else.

RB: As you said, people set up community platforms, and like with The WELL it's a benevolent dictatorship. Real bourgeois ownership is there. It operates like a collective, but at the end of the day, someone owns the collective.

NS: Yes, that's right.

RB: It's always a contradiction. I had friends who worked on Linux, and they said that if it had been run as a pure co-op, it would have disintegrated. They said it actually works better to have somebody who couldn't be bothered to exercise dictatorial control but is nonetheless in the background if they need him.

NS: At least Jimmy Wales of Wikipedia has the decency to refer to himself as a constitutional monarch rather than a dictator.

RB: That's bourgeois monarchy—what the English Whigs created—isn't it?

NS: Speaking of which, where do you see points of intervention for radical politics today, particularly in relationship to the last few years of your involvement with the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn? Is that a source of alternatives to the Californian Ideology?

RB: The alternative was getting a socialist leader of the Labour Party. The entire British establishment went mad. The fact that we almost won the 2017 election—I think there's a trauma they still haven't recovered from yet. Because they suddenly realized what I've said. Why do they encourage identity politics? Because what they don't want is people to embrace class politics because it's the greatest threat to their wealth and power. If people are divided into little groups, all saying, "You've got privilege," "No, I am more oppressed than you are." That makes sure the workers are not uniting against the common enemy. I've known Jeremy for years, and you can criticize things about his politics. But the key point was that left-wing leaders like him and Bernie allowed lots of people to come together, start talking to one another and unite around mutual interests. The 2017 British election was just amazing. Imagine if Jeremy had been prime minister when the Biden regime was trying to start the war in Ukraine, because you'd have had one of the G7 countries with a prime minister asking, "Why aren't we holding peace negotiations?" Raytheon and Lockheed Martin would have been really horrified.

NS: Instead, the very idea of an antiwar movement seems unthinkable now. But did Corbyn succeed in mobilizing technology in a distinct way?

RB: Since 2007, I've been involved with Class Wargames, which plays and makes political games. When the 2017 election was called, John McDonnell—who was Jeremy's number two—asked me if we could help in the campaign. So we built this app game called CorbynRun. You have to understand that in the 2017 election, the bureaucracy of the Labour Party, a bit like the Democratic Party with Bernie, wanted the Tories to win because then the Blairites could oust Jeremy. We were part of the provisional wing of the election campaign. With that game we got over 1,600,000 impressions. That's my other viral experience. It just took off by

word of mouth. I remember after the election campaign at Notting Hill Carnival, I met this guy who was the teenage son of one of my friends. And he said, "Well, what you been doing?" And I said, "I helped to make an app game called CorbynRun." And he gets out his mobile and, pointing at the screen, says, "That one?" Result! But then again we tried to do other projects to take the idea further, like getting the Labour leadership to participate in role-playing exercises to prepare for government, and they wouldn't do it. They couldn't get their heads into gaming as planning. I wanted to push them. I wanted to do a game that forced them into sending British troops into combat, to force them to think about what we would do if, for instance, the Kurds in Rojava urgently required our military assistance.

NS: For tech politics, is the left offering a real alternative? In the original article, for instance, you talk about Minitel, the network run by the French government—an alternative of a state-run platform. Is that still a direction that we should be looking toward?

RB: I first came across what we now call the Internet in the early 1980s on Minitel. I had this friend who was running a community radio station in Paris that he was funding through a Minitel online discussion forum. They had really amazing people like Oliver Tambo, head of the African National Congress, turning up. They got some really prestigious guests. It was quite extraordinary. And then in 1984, we booked online a high-speed rail ticket. The form of transport you don't have in America 40 years later! We couldn't pay online, but we could book seats near the buffet car—that was the key thing to do.

NS: Is a government network still the path? Should the BBC be running the Internet? That always seems to be the idea in places like *Jacobin*—just nationalize the platforms and the networks.

RB: If they'd scaled Minitel on a European level, we could have gone on a different path. But the trouble is that to get all those national telecommunications monopolies to work together would have been really difficult. In America, you've got over 300 million people in one federal republic. It makes perfect sense to have a national network. You don't need the rest of the world. You've got two big oceans—which is why so many people over here think that you should stop interfering and fucking up Eurasia. Go home and sort out your own problems!

NS: I hope not. I mean, I chatted on social media with people from three continents before breakfast. They're a lifeline. And I don't want to subject them to our network. One of them was telling me about all the trouble he was having getting a visa to come to this country. I don't want to know what our nationalized network would do to him.

RB: You desperately need state planning in the USA. Back in the 1960s, I went to junior school in Boston when my father was working for a year at the MIT political science department. My mother remembers going to America, and the refrigerators were twice as big and they had color television. It was the future. Now, in the USA, the infrastructure is rotting, and there are homeless encampments everywhere. This Chinese comrade of mine said, "We used to go to America to visit the future, and now we go there to visit the past." Look, how quaint! You have to pay with paper dollars! Why can't you pay with your phone like normal people?

NS: Yes, it is quaint, in a cruel sort of way.

RB: But *Jacobin* is right. There's another interesting magazine called *Palladium*, which is right-wing Hegelian. Have you come across this one? They also want the planned state. They're deeply jealous of the Chinese.

NS: Right-wing Hegelianism is on the rise. It's part of the response to the techlash—a need to see history and technological progress as a force that transcends all possible critique. Which reminds me—is there anything you were wrong about in "The Californian Ideology"?

RB: I don't think so. What it misses—I mean it's implicit rather than explicit—is how the collapse of the Soviet Union made it so there was no alternative. That's what seems parochial about Californian Ideology. It was the American ideology, the end of history. Now the end of history is ending on the Eastern Front— again.

NS: Were the alternatives you wrote about ever enough to compete with the end of history?

RB: You have to understand we were pitching for people to join our MA.

NS: You were trying to recruit the alternative builders?

RB: Yes, we were trying rather shamelessly to recruit for it. That's why there's all the inspiring stuff about digital artisans in its conclusion.

NS: How did that go? I'm trying to recruit for my MA program too.

RB: Our MA course went very well for a while. Then Andy Cameron got headhunted by Benetton's design college. Basically, he got offered lots of money to move to Italy. During the dot-com bubble, our students also kept being lured away by ludicrously large salaries.

NS: So the Californian Ideology had its tendrils in your MA program? It came for you.

RB: Yes, indeed. For many years, I had former students coming up and saying, "All the software you taught me is completely obsolete, but I'm still using words like *post-Fordism* and *gift economy* for job pitches." So that was successful.

NS: Or the virtual class is able to successfully co-opt the language games of the left.

RB: Well, they all voted Labour, so I guess all wasn't entirely lost. Andy pointed out that these techies and designers who we wanted to recruit were against privatizing the health service or public utilities. Almost all of the people in 1990's London who were pioneering the Internet were reading the *Guardian* when it was still a left-of-center newspaper. And then, as soon as it came to the Internet itself, they spouted all this neoliberal bullshit that they learned from *Wired*. Andy thought that was really weird, especially as it doesn't even conform to the real history of how the Internet was developed by the state. Or California, for that

matter—I mean, the place would be a desert if it weren't for state intervention. I thought about this while reading the articles for this issue. They keep talking about discourse all the time, as if ideology creates reality, and quoting Stuart Hall as if he is a serious intellectual—that I found quite amazing. Because that's not what we did. It's not ideology that creates reality. Ideology is the superstructure. It's an epiphenomenon.

NS: Where does that place the point of intervention? The intervention must be made at the level of the economic system? Not at the level of discourse?

RB: I think we wrote a brilliant critique of ideology. We should have completely blown the Californian Ideology out the water, but it of course just carried on. As you said, the MA in hypermedia studies itself was under the sway of this ideology because material reality is more important if it offers to triple your wages. Co-option is easy. As academics, because we work with symbols and ideas, we tend to give them much more importance than they actually have. Wherever you are in the division of labor, you always think you're the crucial person. As academics, we can make grand theories to show how important we are, when we're actually pretty small in the scheme of things. Like what Andreas Hepp calls *mediatization*—what does that mean? That the subject of history is the self-expansion of capital as fixed capital in the forms of media, telecommunication, and computers. But if you think about it, the key technologies since the Second World War are probably the contraceptive pill, which allows women to control their own fertility, or antibiotics, which led to a massive fall in deaths in childbirth and from otherwise fatal diseases. We should also recognize the social impact of shipping containers and jumbo jets. But you would never have academics promoting a grand theory of shipping containers!

NS: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) have a pretty good one. But it's true, we're obsessed with the things that produce discourse.

RB: Because that's what our job is. As my nine-year-old son says, "Grown-ups go blah, blah. Blah, blah, blah, blah." And that's why Marx and Engels wrote *The German Ideology*. They're slagging off their mates from the university in Berlin. Anyone who claims that discourse shapes the world is—in their own words—talking *horseshit*. Critique is important. I'm not dissing it. We should do it. But we shouldn't have any illusions that it will make any difference without our words being turned into action. If it helps people to organize, if you elected Eugene Debs as your president, or had a general strike—yes, it would matter. Academics should do their little bit to help. But the ideology of critiquing ideology in itself doesn't help, because it's easily recuperated. That's what happened to the poor old New Left, you know?

NS: It fell for California.

RB: I met this guy in 1981 in San Francisco who had done acid with Steve Jobs when they were both young hippies. And he was telling me how there were some members of this peer group who went off to Silicon Valley and became very rich. And others of them became school teachers or community workers. And they were basically okay. They weren't poor, but they weren't rich. He said there was this complete political and cultural divide between them and their peers who had made money in Silicon Valley. That's what Fred Turner was really good about in his *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* book (Turner, 2010). We just told the story in this broad brush, but he picks up on how the editors of *Wired* came from the New Communalism group

that was never on the left, even though they talked a lot of hippie rhetoric. What they were carefully *not* talking about in the 1960s and 1970s was class and imperialism. *The Whole Earth Catalog* was completely silent about the American invasion of Vietnam. There's very little about feminism and nothing about trade unions in it. I'm pleased that Fred went into much more granular detail than what we were able to cover in our polemical article.

NS: But you started this line of critique. How are we going to end it?

RB: The critique of the Californian Ideology ends when the social and economic conditions that spawned this high-tech creed are over. Those articles praising state planning in *Jacobin* and *Palladium* are signs that neoliberal globalization is on its way out as the grand strategy of the American empire, but we're not there yet. The recent bailout of Silicon Valley Bank revealed how state intervention in the USA is still focused on protecting the digital marketplace from its own malfunctions instead of building a Chinese or European-style mixed economy. The Californian Ideology can't be discarded when venture capitalists who avoid taxes and flout regulations urgently require massive government subsidies to stay in business during a banking crisis. We can mock this hypocrisy and publish detailed exposés of its cynical reasoning, but our clever words are not subversive deeds. Let's conclude this interview with a 2023 remix of Karl Marx's 11th Thesis on Feurbach: Academics have only *critiqued* the Californian Ideology in various ways; the point for the left is to *change* dot-com capitalism into cybernetic communism!

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