# HIGH TECH & LOW LIFE

## Power and Communication in the Information Age

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## OVERVIEW:
## BEYOND THE END OF HISTORY

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT WE LIVE IN A TANGLE OF CROSS-PURPOSES, we begin to discover our focus, ourselves.

"Solutions" are hawked throughout our lives like hot dogs at a ballgame, but we don't suffer from a lack either of solutions, or of sufficient information to arrive at them. Rather, we're overloaded. In this raucous marketplace, glutted with information, finding each appropriate fragment of truth is like finding a needle in a haystack—and connecting and implementing the fragments is daunting at best.

Our ability to develop paradigms—to create organizing truths—is inexorably threatened, as each idea or input adds to the cacophonous mix.

At "the end of history," we race through a rush of days—with barely time to gobble a fast-food lunch, lunged at by the hungry and homeless. We drown in the very swamp of junk mail and synthetic MiniCrisis™ that we compulsively generate in our urgent labors. Consciousness is overwhelmed—too busy even to feel betrayed—by the demands of silicon-based entities that entered our lives under the pretext that symbiosis with them would bring freedom and abundance, and even creative power.

On the one hand, technology is part and parcel of the very problem through which it purports to help us make headway. Conversely, the problem may be seen as a product of obsolete and dysfunctional structures or paradigms yoking us to technology and holding it in harness along with us—keeping us hamstrung, failing to recognize technology's potential, impeding both its actualization and ours.

These views aren't mutually exclusive; in fact, they're complementary. Seen either way, we've become obsessed with managing a muddle, as information implodes upon us, disjointed, at unexpected intervals, in a turbulent, perilous whirlpool. The smarter we seem to get, the stupider we feel. Each new capability presents a profusion of choices, branching into ever-more-intricate labyrinths where all possibility for profound achievement is melded into a confusing, banal morass.

As we recoil, we confront the deadliest hazard of all—the temptation to strike out in any direction that beckons us with an offer of clarity and decisiveness, a way out of ambiguity—by denying the breadth and complexity of our experience.

Is there a way to make sense of our predicament—a way that honestly comprehends its complexity, but that at the same time liberates rather than enslaves and confuses us?

In attempting to understand present conditions, we'll try to understand how we got here.

We'll begin by considering the evolution of these conditions—surveying the range of past understandings of freedom and domination: those glimpses of political and economic possibility that, along with changing technologies, have guided our perception of reality over time.

This, in turn, will bring us into an encounter with our definitions of possession and property—and, thereby, with the changing roles of markets, of capital and of the State.

These questions will thus focus our attention increasingly on the shifting contours and boundaries of economic reality and of the self, and on the interplay of forces and components that impinge on them—on the very core of how our culture has increasingly defined identity.

We'll consider possibilities for further change in these definitions in a world subject to the constant, instantaneous flow of information—as well as some of the problems and resistances that might accompany this process. This brings us to a nexus of combined cause and effect, where material conditions are in raw, constant interplay with individual desire or will.

At such a point, representation and abstract thought are themselves subject to radical re-evaluation, as we consider how they they're part of the dynamic of survival and domination.

The result may surprise us. We'll discover that Marx's vision of humanity striving for equality and community, and Nietzsche's vision of radical individualism—while first appearing as unnerving responses from opposite extremes—are neither inherently antagonistic to each other, nor inevitably threats to equilibrium and freedom. Taken together and balanced—and seen in the resulting perspective—they're actually early attempts to represent opposite sides of the same human coin, as we strive to

find and to create meaning that can be shared. If society can have such a thing as higher purpose, that purpose leads through territory where such synthesis is possible, as a springboard to realizing what each of us truly values.

Such a survey could, of course, fill volumes. However, our purpose here is not—either exhaustively or superficially—to catalogue historical data, nor to analyze the effects and implications (or, for that matter, the workings) of specific technologies, past, present or future. In these regards, examples are given only to clarify or to provoke further investigation, or to ground the discussion in tangible imagery.

Our ambition is constrained by its very breadth and generality: to explore potential frameworks for discussion; to consider our condition as our lives are pervaded by technologies of information and communication, particularly with respect to how we identify ourselves and relate to each other—

—to begin to define, in the most general secular sense, who we are in these times, both for ourselves and with respect to each other—or, at least, to attempt to supply a context for asking.

## IT SMELLS LIKE UTOPIA, BUT DON'T INHALE!

ONCE UPON A TIME, we lived in a world of utopian possibilities. The arrival of the so-called Information Age—like previous "advances" in the character of technology—was once heralded as the fulfillment of our ever-receding dreams. The possibility of universal, instantaneous communication was even touted as our means to realize the highest human aspirations.

Aspirations? Ideals? What ideals?
We hardly know ourselves, let alone each other—our situations, pains and joys. Our perception of ourselves and our condition is shattered, dissolving into a profusion of postmodern posturing and mixed metaphor.

We're both disease and cure. Accompanied by products and creations, we cover the world like a filmy layer of bacteria—an ugly agglomeration viewed as a mass—though it's still possible to see the blue earth if we get far enough away. When we come, with close fascination, to gaze on the intricate latticework of interstices and interactions, the sharp pain of discovery brings us to realize that *its us* driving down those roads, that we're prisoners of our own minds and actions. All escape is merely a function of our participation, and participation is all that remains of escapes once longed for and those we still crave.

Any understanding of of our current condition, and of power—especially amid universal, instantaneous communication—starts with an uncertainty principle. As observers, we're part of what we observe: as Wittgenstein noted of language (and McLuhan recognized with media), all the tools we use are parts of any mechanism on which we might seek to use them. Any talk of being free is only talk, bound by words, and any action to liberate ourselves risks defining, engaging—and thereby propelling—mechanisms of enslavement. The only recourse is to slink silently away, and we can't escape the ever-instant realization that we're always in imminent jeopardy of a tap on the shoulder—if by nothing else, then because we can't escape ourselves.

Beyond all this, even as we go on trying to fulfill our ideals—we face a sense that there's an unavoidable reality in which we live and die, in which we struggle for survival and try to snatch some shreds of understanding, all too often at each other's expense, not to mention our own.

How did we reach this predicament?
Starting at least as early as the Enlightenment, in Eighteenth Century Europe and among Europe's cultural descendants in North America—and spreading throughout the planet—successive generations of human beings have encountered the notion that, employing reason, we could build a world free of injustice and toil.

The currently-fading vision saw its beginnings in the possibility of universal automation: a Futurama where we'd all live like aristocrats, buoyed above the material world by underworkings of self-controlled and self-constructed machinery, bothered only by maintenance and, if we chose, renovation. Cars, music, climate control—a comfortable survival would take care of itself.

From such mass aristocracy, it's a short leap to the possibility of real-time, electronic direct democracy—a citizenry actively engaged in lucid debate, the repository of its own decision-making—supported and enabled by a slave class of machines, a Jeffersonian yeomanry living in a pastoral Eden, above the grubby business of survival but nonetheless connected.

With instantaneous communication finally possible among all people, the basis of all conflict might be removed. The system would, in fact, demand this, since its both its basis and its function fundamentally involve the unimpeded, free flow of information. In such a system, failures to communicate would be dysfunctional to the participants, and thus could only be attributed to ill-will—to lack of willingness to work things out—and would certainly not be for lack of the means to do so.

As information becomes paramount to survival, however, it becomes ever clearer that what's constant is that our dreams *are* ever-receding—that our efforts, and even our intentions, are

imperfect.

Can we define the distinction—and the connections—between dream and reality, or is the very act of defining part of the problem; does definition actually limit understanding? Instead of utopia, we're at an impasse. What are the possibilities? Is there still a way—some reinterpretation of our dreams, some new understanding of reality—that will make it possible for us to make our dreams come true?

## PAST FUTURES: REASON AS DREAM AND REALITY

How did we get here? Since the mid-Twentieth Century in the West, we've looked at political alignments in terms of a "left/right" axis—with the left predominantly viewing questions of power among people as members of a community ("social justice") and the right focusing on the individual ("personal freedom").

(Terms like "liberal," "conservative," and even "radical"—referring to people's attitudes toward the degree, quality and rate of change—have been more variable, as individual and prevailing perceptions of the status quo and of the nature and direction of change have shifted. Terms like "radical" or "hard-liner" are even less useful when change is the status quo. Let's stick with the left/right construct for now.)

In varying degrees, both left and right accede to the necessity of authority, the need for power structures. Both skew the dialectic of responsibility and the accretion of benefits. The left, for example, with its traditional concern for social justice, has tended to be more interested in alleviating oppression than in holding people responsible for their status—or, often, even their actions—which it views in the context of social realities and conditions. The right, voicing concern for the individual, has often been content to focus on protecting individual property rights. In both cases, however, some people are held more accountable, while others, comparatively, are let off the hook.

Structures to represent and to enforce these concerns and perspectives are established and maintained. Through such structures, power tends to accrue to some individuals rather than others. People may lean "left" or "right" because they benefit personally from such a tilt: their personal fortunes are pegged to one or anothe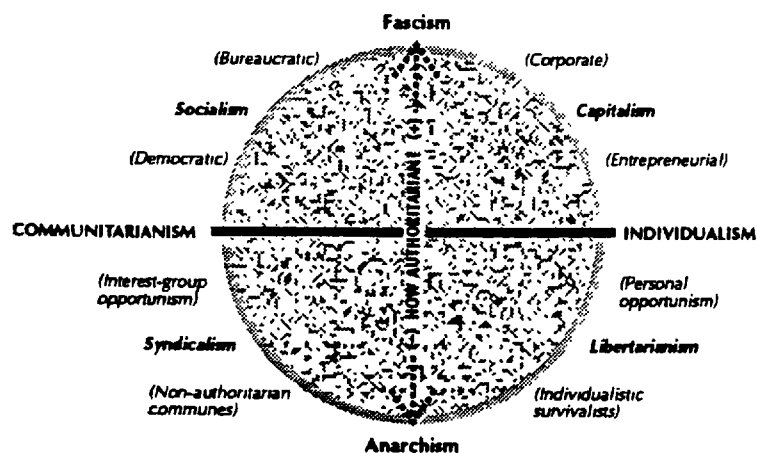r ideology. In the case of the right, this has usually meant the wealthy, or corporate bureaucrats (or those most willing and able to serve them); in the case of the left, it's usually whoever claims power to act in the name of social justice—most often the State or its beneficiaries (politicians and bureaucrats), and those with credentials issued in their name. (Some people, meanwhile, simply find one or the other position intellectually attractive or emotionally satisfying—particularly as social networks or political subcultures develop—and join avidly in creating structures that favor some at the expense of others. Others clamor to support those structures, or to labor within them, especially as economic realities become entrenched and, with the help of propaganda mills, mass support, or at least acquiescence, becomes the order of the day.) In any event, to the degree that they facilitate concentration of power, both left and right are susceptible to authoritarianism, and are comprised of those with varying degrees of vested interest in such authority.

The degree to which people seek or tolerate power structures—and accept or reject the need for authority—is, then, a separate consideration that can be applied to both left and right. It constitutes a second axis along which to view political alignments.

For example, socialism and capitalism are respectively developments of left and right; and both acknowledge and require some degree of power structure to be implemented, though both socialists and capitalists differ among themselves over the extent of this need.

Authoritarianism also varies in the "mixed" area between socialism and capitalism. In fact, the "players" in established power structures are generally found somewhere in the area between bureaucratic socialism and corporate capitalism—assigning substantial importance to maintaining power structures, but with differing emphases on the individual or the community. As we ascend the ranks of those for whom preservation of stable power structures is increasingly a goal



The World of Ideology

Fascism

(Bureaucratic)        (Corporate)

Socialism        Capitalism

(Democratic)        (Entrepreneurial)

COMMUNITARIANISM        INDIVIDUALISM

(Interest-group        (Personal
opportunism)        opportunism)

Syndicalism        Libertarianism

(Non-authoritarian        (Individualistic
communes)        survivalists)

Anarchism

*Mitchell Halberstadt*

in itself, we find increasing tendencies, through various forms of administrative or corporate hegemony and bureaucratic collectivism, toward fascism—collusion between the authoritarian aspects of both left and right to maintain a power structure for its own sake.

On this plane of possibilities, looking in the opposite direction—away from authoritarianism—left and right maintain a dynamic tension between their distinct agendas—until rejection of authority becomes an overriding shared concern. Left and right then begin converging around that concern, taking on forms like syndicalism and libertarianism (respectively)—forms still as different from each other as are socialism and capitalism. (If, in fact, power begins to concentrate and authoritarian modes creep in, syndicalism can degenerate toward socialism and libertarianism toward capitalism.) When non-authoritarianism becomes the overriding or predominant consideration, syndicalism and libertarianism converge toward "pure" anti-authoritarianism, or full-blown anarchism.

To the degree, then, that left *or* right reject authoritarian modes of social organization, they converge toward anarchism—the rejection of all standing power structures. To the degree that they accept or promote the need for authoritarian solutions, they converge toward "pure" authoritarianism or fascism (social order based on the sheer idealization or promotion of authority itself).

Later, we will return to the current roles of property and community as parameters of autonomy and power. But first—

What do we mean by power? Responsibility? In what context do we define this class of terms? How, in fact, do we define the reality we live and interact in? How has this evolved, and what residue has this process left us with?

The entire political territory we've surveyed thus far—the entire left/right axis, and the varying degrees of authoritarianism that emerge in

approaching those issues—is a legacy of the Eighteenth Century, particularly of the Enlightenment. (The very terms "left" and "right" derive from parliamentary seating arrangements, based on political alignments, that date from that time.) With the feudal system of authority (and its mode of defining reality) in retreat, the Enlightenment saw humanity as responsible for itself. Meanwhile, as our concept and knowledge of nature were evolving, so, too, were our ideas about the politics, roles and activities appropriate to human beings interacting in or with nature.

Political thinkers, concerned with the place of humanity in nature, and with humanity's responsibility for shaping its world in accordance with the resulting perceptions, began addressing themselves to the varying possibilities for allocating that responsibility.

The Enlightenment's earliest model of reality was a highly linear and mechanical one, a Cartesian grid that elaborated itself into Newtonian physics. In this view, the universe consisted of tangible and measurable objects and forces that intersected and interacted in direct and consistent cause-and-effect relationships. These "Laws of Nature and Nature's God" could be discovered, and humanity could design political and social arrangements in harmony with them.
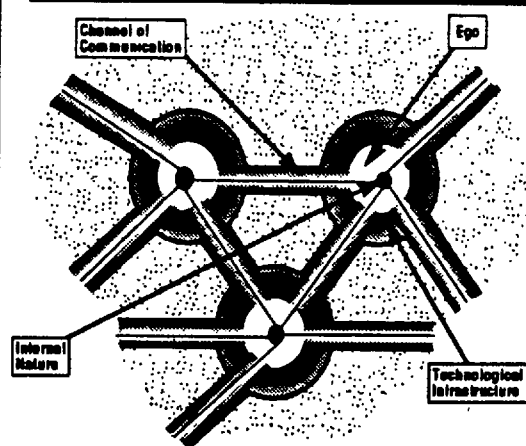
Soon, however, people realized that these interactions and the forces they generated could be manipu-
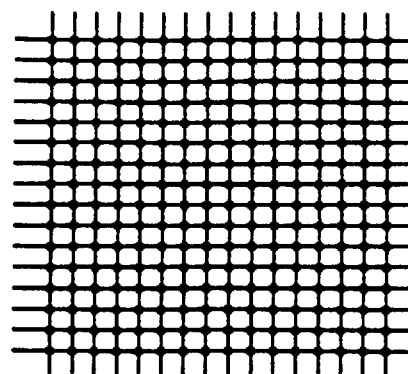


I: The Cartesian Model
(Enlightenment)
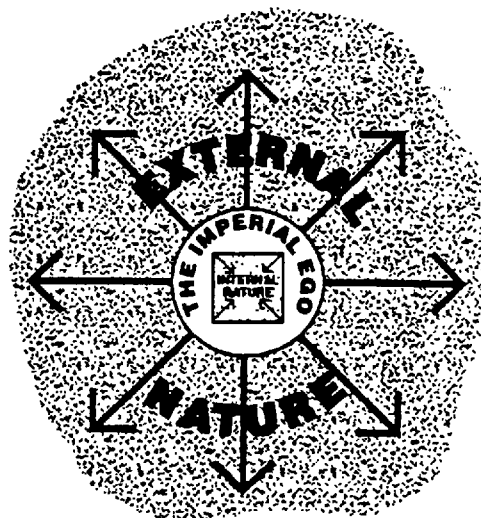


II: The Industrial Model
(Victorian/Leninist)



III: The Network Model
(Late Twentieth Century)

**Realities since the Enlightenment**

> **"Both left and right accede to the need for power structures, which are established and maintained. To the degree that left or right reject authoritarian modes, they converge toward anarchism. To the degree that they accept or promote authoritarian solutions, they converge toward 'pure' authoritarianism, or fascism."**

lated or harnessed. Aspirations were bifurcated. Rationalism and romanticism articulated themselves as opposing views, severing the Enlightenment's exhilaration at breaking free of old fetters from its infatuation with human reason. They reflected, as mirror-images, a vision that was already in the process of becoming fragmented or divided.

Nature came to be seen, not only as a model—as the ground on which human life was lived—but as the resource-base upon which humanity laid its grid, and therefore on which centers of power could be established. With this perception (or perversion), power and domination threatened to reassert themselves, replacing harmony and understanding as core values.

Buttressed by convenient interpretations of Darwin's new theory of evolution, concentration of power became the order of the day, and survival, along with power itself, came to be viewed as the prize won by those most adept. The industrial revolution went into full swing. Population began crowding into cities and rail lines radiated from them; centralized organizations were established to manage the new enterprises.

Paralleling the continued bifurcation, there was a countervailing "movement." With the growth of centers came the realization that there were margins; with production came consumption. With the notion that nature was an adversary from which power was to be wrested came the notion that nature was at the center of the entire project. At the centers of booming cities, central parks were planted, replicating an idyllic vision of nature. In the arts, romanticism replaced classicism as the expression of people's inner longings. "Natural" feelings themselves were repressed in

the name of protecting them, just as "innocent" children were to be "seen but not heard." As empires were built, as the ego looked out at nature and conquered it, so, too, was nature conquered within.

This was the scene surveyed by Karl Marx, who saw some people faring better than others. In the system he observed, Marx saw workers laboring in factories but virtually enslaved by their owners, kept from the fruits of their labors. He saw everybody alienated from a shared life in which the entire process could be apprehended and appreciated by all. Further, he saw the entire system ultimately breaking down because of these tensions and class separations. His solution—as implemented by Lenin—was to collectivize the entire structure, to make everybody a shareholder in it.

Marx jumped the gun.

Reality didn't remain static. Individual machines became integrated in a network of technology, and the ego itself soon found that it was operating, not in raw nature, but in a technological universe.

Egos themselves soon found that they were no longer separate centers.

We were brought together—or, more properly, *connected*—in a manner very different from what Marx predicted—or, for that matter, *could* have predicted. Within a technological matrix, ego became connected to ego by technologies of communication—and, as our controlling faculties, our egos, became connected, so, too, did the "nature within." We became connected, not just as producers, but also as consumers—and, indeed, not just as economic beings at all, but as participants in a collective consciousness. Technology surrounded us, not only as individuals, but also via the connections that bound us together.

As the logical outcome of this process, at the center of each channel of communication, we might be connected—not only by the technological interface with our natural habitat—not only, even, in terms of our capability of communicating the technical data needed to construct or modify that technology—but between our innermost selves.

Nonetheless, we'd have—we *still* have—much catching up to do.

# THE FUTURE OF THE PAST: HIERARCHY & ACCUMULATION

O BSERVING A PROCESS is one thing; living it is quite another. Flying over the American midwest, one can still see the Cartesian grid etched into the rectilinear landscape first plotted in the Northwest Ordinance, and it appears to be a "period piece," still resonant with the imagery of the trans-Appalachian trek, the open road. But that was not the case at the time that this territory was surveyed; in fact, those who surveyed it were grappling with the reality of their time, using the most advanced conceptual tools available. They weren't designing a set for a movie with a folk-music soundtrack; they were engaged in state-of-the art land use planning.

Similarly, capitalism and socialism developed, as perceptions and worldviews, in response to once-current realities. Soon, however, these ideologies ceased to be mere abstractions, and power structures and institutions developed—basing their claims to legitimacy on the residue of what were once, indeed, fresh and relevant responses to real-life experience—responses that had now ossified into response-patterns, and were in dis-

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junction with the current realities and desires of everyday human life.

Many of the institutions remain, along with the ways of life that they've nurtured, and they've attracted to themselves the sorts of people especially drawn to roles in power structures. The world of Lincoln became the world of Theodore Roosevelt; Leninism became Stalinism—attempts to impose and maintain increasingly authoritarian notions of order, by whatever means necessary—regardless of other current realities.

As these institutions creak and crumble under the weight of those current realities, they generate oppositions, too, rooted in the vendettas of the past, seeking to advance their agendas "by any means necessary." We distract ourselves with flashbacks, rather than change. Thus, even the much-touted Fall of Communism—supposedly leaving the United States as the World's Last Great Superpower—has left a morass of problems.

We've already noted, and can see in the world, how collectivization in the form of a "planned economy" actually generates a *command* economy, as the resulting structures generate vested interests. Even if we elect those making the decisions, the interplay of participation is subject to supervision—albeit, perhaps, collective supervision through elected officials. That supervision, by definition, lags behind the reality of participation.

Given that reality of participation, the law of supply and demand seems a far more realistic—even elegant—solution: a sublime tension where all desires and capabilities are automatically quantified and matched among themselves. What's more participatory than a market, where all claims compete openly for everyone's time, attention, and resources—and where

authority is legitimately concerned only with securing participants against force and fraud?

Unfortunately, in the real world, markets don't work that way. For one thing, governments don't just hand out money equally to everyone at birth and then withdraw from the scene. They sanction specific inlets and channels for money's entry to the market, and from these inlets and channels—whatever they may be and however they are altered—the currency moves outward to permeate society.

Moreover, as tangible entities with observable flows, money, and property generally, are subject to deliberate manipulation and accumulation, and their uneven accretion among individuals and institutions creates vested interests—concentrations of power—that distort the no-longer-free market.

This isn't necessarily a result of some concerted or conscious conspiracy, but of the nature of capital itself, as an abstract entity.

Nonetheless, some people even claim that governments are themselves set up and maintained by those who control wealth—to protect and advance their own interests—especially the very interest in power that led them to accumulate wealth in the first place! As a monopoly of force, government, after all, is a perfect tool for the powerful to inflict their will—whether or not they specifically set out to align with government to enhance their dominance. Economic interests are sufficient to establish the pattern.

One offshoot of this, for a time, was imperialism, as Lenin observed in his day. (Unfortunately Lenin failed to recognize how the Soviet Union, itself a command-driven model, could itself easily become drawn into this dynamic.) Capital (or its analogue, state economic power) developed bases in spe-

cific nations, integrated with governments and other local institutions, looking outward for markets and pliant workforces. Thus, nations, as bases of specific capital formations, would jockey and vie—and, ultimately, go to war—for relative advantage in dominating these colonized or plundered regions—most recently lumped together as the "Third World."

Time revealed, however, that capital itself was jeopardized by such rivalry and geopolitical rootedness—especially with the real possibility of nuclear war, and later, terrorism. Thus, imperialism (and dependence upon wars between imperial superpowers) proved to be a temporary though brutal phase in capitalism's evolution as a planetary force.

Capital cut loose its moorings and became multinational. Even money—"hard currency"—would be subject to market forces, and if they wished to survive, governments would be obliged to enforce money's hegemony as the repository of all value. Thereby, entire nations' repositories of non-economic life could be held hostage to the casualties and caprices of self-aggrandizing wealth. Much as they might seek attention and distraction by fighting among themselves, nations became reduced to whores, forced to vie with each other to attract capital, offering it a playground or temporary safe haven—and at any time, sustenance could be withdrawn.

Thus, capital has actually imposed a very stringent New World Order, a hierarchy of values and priorities beholden to no nation and no higher power. The planet is (for now) the mother country, and we all live in the Third World.

We've reached an impasse—and our problems stem from shortcomings in our concept of "the market"—from our definition of property itself, and

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from its accretion as capital.

Again, the problem isn't "the anarchy of the market," and collectivization and planning aren't the antidote.

Quite the contrary: the real problem is that capitalist institutions are a form of collectivism, and embody rigidities, bottlenecks and blockages analogous—however less obviously—to those that have hamstrung such blatantly collectivist formations as socialism.

## THE OBSOLESCENCE OF EQUITY

THE NETWORK MODALITY challenges us with instantaneous-ness and connectedness. Each of us is constantly bombarded with a particular, changing array of images drawn from our common consciousness. As these images impact on us, each of us feeds resonances back into the network. Meanwhile, our egos—our "official" selves—also interact: billions of dollars (or yen) change hands in the flash of a digital array; billions of people go out into the world to fulfill everyday needs and desires; heads of state jockey on the telephone. Simultaneously, the entire technological infrastructure casts its web: trees are felled here and planted there, poisons are introduced and detected, foods are prepared and famines rage, costumes and climates change—strip-mined coal or a nuclear reactor provides power to a naturalist writer's laser printer.

But the entire system fails to cohere. Flows are impeded; agendas continue to conflict.

Although it's commonplace to observe that information is the new currency—or the arbiter of power in

the "information age"—that's at most a half-truth. Money is still currency, and property is still the arbiter of power. Informational transactions are still mediated by monetary exchange.

At the same time, the vast majority of conversations and other information transfers in the world continue to occur, as they always have, outside the monetary matrix.

The system of economic exchange continues as before, but there seems to be little rhyme or reason for the placement of the boundaries that define its contours and limits. Property interests have increasingly come to dictate the quantity and quality of time that people spend thinking, and what they spend their time thinking about—and money is increasingly directed to pay for information—*some of the time*—while at other times, information is shared freely.

It's become less and less clear what the objective criteria are for discerning economic from non-economic transactions, or if there indeed *are* any such objective criteria.

Though there have been adaptations—electronic money transfers, pay-per-view—the new technologies have acted merely to represent the old forms in new ways. As McLuhan would have it, the content of the new media is the imagery of the old. We're in a situation analogous to the early days of printing, when the press was used to replicate, as closely as possible, the hand-drawn illuminated manuscripts that preceded the printing press.

The network paradigm has been forced to adapt to old definitions of property and old formations of capital, as those old formations adapt to technological change. Old concepts like

"intellectual property"—originally intended to prescribe limitations on duplication, as in printing or manufacturing—or the construction of mechanisms, as in patents—have been stretched to the limits. We now talk about a "look and feel" as a patentable commodity, as property.

We labor under concepts of property handed down to us from the industrial era. Prompted by such definitions, the market drives toward maximizing production and distribution regardless of needs, and must instigate the deliberate creation of new needs to further drive production.

Thus, the economic system is led to arbitrarily value capabilities and consequences that can be quantified over those that can't—things that are accounted for over those that aren't. Sales activity is driven toward maximizing volume regardless of the feelings or state-of-mind of participants at the time of the sale. The system is led to an emphasis on getting *more people interested* rather than on getting *people more interested*. The best deal is one which one has done just enough to close, and nothing more, unless it is to seed more deals.

The market, as an institution itself, long ago took on a life of its own. The life of this arena—the hucksterism and cant that drive production and generate workloads—rather than the needs or abilities of participants—became the qualities most highly valued in market terms, and the strongest determinant of what people do with their lives. The qualities of products became a dwindling aspect of marketing them. Salability—easy identifiability, easy categorizability, easy describability—became the system's

> **"Property could remain inviolable if we define it as *that which one has the right to use, because one is actually using it*. The accretion of capital *as possession* would be impossible. We'd be forced to practice mutuality for our very survival."**

most valued attributes. In such a system, people talk—just like *apparatchiks*—not about the work they do, but about the "positions" they occupy.

Finally, even an ideal free market where capital itself is subject to market forces is only free insofar we concentrate our energies on trade—and ultimately seek to accumulate capital. We already know ahead of time that we'll be ever more subject to the demands of that capital as the market works its infernal "magic." After all, the market encourages deals and sales rather than freely shared innovation.

And none of this is conducive to the free flow of information, or to the optimum functioning of the system that's evolving.

Whatever happened to our vision of a world where life is lived, not for trade, but for free?

Handling information for its own sake requires a different psychological dynamic—a different conceptual framework—from a world whose lines of force are configured to "deliver so many units at such-and-such time for such and such a price."

In a society and economy based on information, we might expect questions of power to concern, not ownership of the means of production, but access to the means of acquiring and disseminating information. In this new context, how can we even distinguish personal property from means of production? Which of these notions describes a pen? A computer? A computer online, or accessing a network? An audio or video transmitter or receiver?

What constitutes valid self-expression or innovation, and what's parasitic use of time or resources?

We've already seen how and why previous notions of property can offer only a warped or skewed response.

All forms of collectivism—*including capitalism*—are riven by a divorce of planning from execution.

Unlike a bureaucrat in a planning ministry, the entrepreneurial capitalist must at least have a minimum working interest in, and understanding of, what it takes to deliver the goods. Many entrepreneurs are preoccupied—almost by definition—by tasks and processes specific to acquiring and protecting capital itself. And not every capitalist is even an entrepreneur. Ultimately, the capitalist's very identity is defined by a divorce from (and exercise of power over) the actual process of production—a problem remarkably similar to his or her overtly collectivist counterpart.

The entire function of capital is to withhold power from some individuals in order for others to organize and administer the efforts of those from whom power has been withheld. The idea of "borrowing from the future" as a means of circumventing this has proved to be an ineffective artifice—one that drives even harder the need for further accumulation and further concentration. The entire system drags us through time, like an ever-accelerating tow-line of debt, to greater and greater intensities of productive frenzy.

As a mode of concentrating power, capital defines itself by the selective withholding and release of information. In other words, to administer capital means, by definition, that one is never free to tell the whole truth.

To function optimally, however, an information-based system requires the removal of impediments to the free flow of information. It requires constant, instant access to the whole truth by all participants all the time. This requires new definitions and, in turn, presents us with new problems.

One of the oldest definitions of

property is "that which one has the right to use and dispose of as one sees fit." But another venerable concept—bisecting this definition—is the distinction between "use value" and "exchange value."

Information is the most fluid conceivable entity, often acquiring its value in the very act of transmission. As we come to possess the means to engage in that transmission—to communicate—universally and instantaneously, the notion of property as something taken out of circulation—as standing equity interest—begins to lose its viability. Acquiring and holding onto something one doesn't need—or more than one can use—begins to look like a pathology of denial.

The status of privacy and personal interest—and, in fact, the very integrity of the individual—are meanwhile threatened by the collapse of traditional barriers and definitions. We're left with whatever dysfunctional, false protection we're able to scrounge from the rubble and residue of old walls and old barriers, struggling simultaneously to reconfigure the barricades and to maintain our lines of communication and remain abreast of what's communicated. We need to let go, but we hold on for dear life.

Suppose, however, we redefine the very notion of possession—dispensing entirely with "exchange value"—regarding use value as the sole necessary and sufficient constituent of value itself. Property could remain inviolable if we define it as that which one simply has the right *to use—because one is using it*—and if we eliminate the notion of equity interest, the idea that one can accrue value by retaining things one isn't using, and enhance one's situation by the mere act of disposing of such "goods." Untrammeled transmission would be the norm.

Suddenly, the market is redefined,

> **"Does this fluid notion of possession run counter to human nature? It's hardly without precedent, and may be characteristic of 'primitive' societies, such as many American Indian tribes. Modern concepts of equity interest may actually be anomalies."**

not as a place of hoarding and commodification, but as the place where ideas and interactions are in constant, immediate and unfettered interplay among individuals. We are left with a system, and with modes of action, that reflect the reality of constant and total immediacy.

The accretion of capital *as a possession* becomes impossible, because under the new definition, one can't "own" what one can't use directly for oneself.

## WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

How, then, would anything get done? How would we survive? How would any but the most rudimentary projects be undertaken?

We'd be forced to practice mutuality for our very survival. Rather than being organized from "outside," projects would have to be undertaken directly by their participants in constant interplay with one another. This is very different from the old notion of collectivism, though, in a sense, it's where syndicalism and libertarianism meet.

A central flaw of all collective systems is that what is not "mine"—what is supposedly everybody's—becomes, in fact, nobody's. Mutual need reintroduces the concept of "ours"—not in the lifeless, vulnerable form of State Property or the contrived artifice of Corporate Identity, but as a vital and ongoing, shared self-interest in doing what needs to be done, of creating what begs for creation.

Thus, all work would be done—and would get done—on an *ad hoc* basis—that is, when it fills an immediate, perceived need.

There needn't, however, be a limit on the complexity or extent of such endeavors. In this new reality, everything that can be communicated

becomes immediately capable of expression, and accessible to perception—and all needs become potentially immediate. Anyone or any group undertaking a project would have access to whatever resources it needed to use, but would have to use those resources and maintain open channels of participation—of the input and output of information.

Capital, in fact, would complete and fulfill its own destiny by becoming infinitely fluid. There would be no value in institutionalizing anything,

This is not a panacea. Many of the problem areas in the current system would remain stubborn or enigmatic. Areas like agriculture and health care, for instance, address basic human needs and wants, appear to require constant and sustained or repeated effort, and rest upon a finite base of land or resources. They are heirs to entrenched practices or unusually strong hierarchies, and occupy niches in particularly crucial areas in our survival and support structures. Even with the possibility of bioengineering, we remain human, subject to our biology as human animals, and to the finite and mortal nature—and vulnerability—that this implies.

What would vanish are irrational impediments to the free flow of information. Old elites and their gatekeepers would find themselves irrelevant—though some would, of course, continue playing upon imperfections in the system, using old advantages and preying on old vulnerabilities, seeking control of "choke points" or flooding the system with spurious information. Because they represent blockages rather than enhancements, however, the tendency over time is for such distortions to be replaced by real-time consideration of all claims to consciousness.

How could this be implemented?

We can't presume to know the specifics, though we can recognize the need, and the vector driving us toward the capability to fulfill it.

Does this fluid notion of possession run counter to human nature? It's hardly without precedent in human affairs; it may, in fact, be characteristic of "primitive" societies, such as many American Indian tribes. "Modern" concepts of equity interest and trade may, in fact, prove to be anomalies rather than the norm in human societies.

Many of the remaining questions are technical—for instance, developing modes of universal cross-compatibility, or dealing with questions of traffic and overload. We will learn the answers as life evolves, just as we have thus far.

Intertwined with the technical problems, however, are fundamental questions that are far more than technical. Vast areas of the social or informational network remain wedded to or dependent on a resource base. We still live on Planet Earth. Moreover, much human activity, even in the information age, still involves industrial processes and the production of commodities. Is it really safe to assume that the manufacture of hardware will become a vestigial relic of the industrial age, subservient to the needs and dictates of those who use it, and who, in their "softer" concerns, begin to take it for granted?

Nevertheless, ways and means will surely emerge—some rudely, some smoothly—to facilitate what must occur. Even in dealing with hardware, the critical questions increasingly center on information.

These questions, too, are far more than technical. Redefining such concepts as "intellectual property" brings us to realize the complexity—and sometimes the profundity—of the sorts of situations we're likely to encounter.

## IS THE WHOLE TRUTH BEYOND TELLING?

AT FIRST GLANCE, any use value in an idea is shared (permanently) by mere virtue of its being communicated.

But can't one use an idea or a body of information without recognizing all its constituent components, or how they're put together? If one uses that information, does one have a right to know its entire structure? For instance, to use a program, does one need to know every line of its code? How about "reverse engineering"—using or studying a program in order to discover its construction and to replicate or modify it? Is that necessarily wrong or dysfunctional? How about the human interface, the "look and feel" of some aspect of the system to its users? How do we reward or recognize those who make such uses possible, while allowing or encouraging their innovations to be freely shared? How do we track down or recognize or reward all those whose ideas contributed to (or are synthesized in) such innovations?

Is privacy a bottleneck? Or is it the nexus at which all use is defined and all synthesis generated? In safeguarding privacy, must we protect a self that is more than the part us that uses, synthesizes, and transmits information? In what sense does each of us have integrity as an individual?

Force and fraud—the enemies of a free market—become subtle yet critical considerations when we confront them in a milieu of immediacy. Full disclosure—even of motives—becomes imperative, but again, without threatening the core value of privacy.

Telling the whole truth turns out not to be such a simple matter. It becomes a matter of knowing—and sharing—what's in our hearts as well as our minds. Integrity—understanding and communicating intentions—is paramount.

Precisely because all of this remains hypothetical and abstract, we're finally led to question the very nature of abstraction itself.

To the extent that we have the time and energy—and the inclination—to reflect, have we not, in fact, abstracted ourselves from real life? Isn't this ability itself—this tendency to reflect—a creature of surplus, which in turn has been extracted or wrested from other people or from some other aspect of reality?

The nature or flavor of the abstractions doesn't really matter, either: one finds "progressive" radio stations and radical weeklies in centers of surplus, of finance, like New York or San Francisco—as modes of human activity and interaction that don't so easily exist where people don't have time to think.

What matters is not what's said, but the very nature and mode of survival. As the song goes, say a word out-of-line and all of your friends are gone forever. Reality is replaced by manufactured reality, by the Spectacle.

At the very moment—in the very process—when capital seems ready to dissolve, we realize that we're finally, firmly in its total grasp. We've allowed our devices to define us, until we're finally unable to think without the support and contextual framework of the mechanisms that put us where we are.

This is an old story, as old as storytelling itself—as old as language and symbols and representation. What is left to be re-presented? Have we created a monstrous Babel of symbols and concepts and ideas that cut us off from the reality we intended for them to depict? Or have *they* created *us*, in the only way we've come to know ourselves?

Still, we have an edge, an identity to define, and in every moment that we live and breathe, we define ourselves, both through our devices and artifices, and over and against them.

There's danger in such a notion of self-transcendence—a danger that we will become, in Vico's words, creatures who, "no matter how great the throng and press of their bodies, live in a deep solitude of spirit and will, scarcely any two being able to agree since each follows his own pleasure or caprice," ultimately "sensible no longer of comforts, delicacies, pleasures and pomp, but only of the sheer necessities of life."

Vico was talking about the decadence and decline of ancient Rome, but we, too, could be headed for a period of seemingly interminable confusion—living in a world emptied of all meaning, transfixed and wired to separate realities—either embroiled in mindless conflict or mired in a paralysis of will.

If, in frustration, we bring Will center-stage in the Spectacle, we don't find ourselves. We find Hitler, or something very like him. We've still failed.

Each of us, after all, has his or her own frame of reference, derived from the past, even past generations. Do we share any common reality, or do we live only in a tangle of cross-purposes, a struggle of wills? Is there a resultant vector?

Is there *any* bedrock reality, for that matter?—any world or universe in which we can acknowledge we live together, even as we act individually? Should we let it matter? Should we care?

We might as well. Either way, we bear responsibility for where we're going.

## CONCLUSION

WE'RE BACK WHERE WE STARTED, but with a new understanding.

Einstein is said to have commented that, while we might not know what weapons would be used in the Third World War, we know that the Fourth

will be fought with sticks and stones.

We now know more than Einstein.

The principal weapon of the Third World War may prove to be information. If we choose to fight that war, our descent to sticks and stones may resemble a long and nasty peace, in which every freedom afflicts us as a new slavery.

In 1970, when, for all its obvious perils, the future looked brighter, I wrote of such conflict:

> Be prepared for a long fight, for when all the revolutions have come to pass, the great civil war will be between those who are technologues, and those who consider themselves natural men. Yes, for the open road always comes to a dead end, not in the lush paradise we thought we saw when we couldn't stop for a look, but in a lonely desert, not unlike the place where it began.

We've come farther. We've turned the desert into a high-tech slum, but underneath, it's still a desert; we can't escape our desperate thirst. It's a place of hope and terror, where all power might be an instrument of love, but where all love might just be an instrument of power.

Learning to live in the naked glare of this dilemma—a confusing, sometimes harrowing stalemate between willful desire and true compassion—might, however, finally be the way to discover ourselves, each other, our identity as a species.

Whither is our utopia, our Jeffersonian Eden? We can boot the program, but the first message is still "Welcome to the Machine."

Beyond the Spectacle, then, we're left to tend together to the world we live in, even as each of us retains our own will—in fact, *because* it's our own will.

When dreams die—however many and however hard, however harsh the awakening—we leave behind the land where nightmares brew, and proceed with open eyes. The question—as always in life—is whether we can find the wisdom to keep the process both humane and fulfilling.

Finding enduring peace with each other, as we consider our real needs, must proceed from peace within ourselves.

Impersonal mechanisms may prove to be either tools or obstacles—but in any event, our first loyalty must always be to ourselves and to each other. We owe ourselves nothing less.

SAN FRANCISCO
OCTOBER 1993

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Portions of this essay, including diagrams, appeared in altered form in a pamphlet entitled "Anarchy and Civilization" (self-published, Jersey City, NJ, 1990). The "lonely desert" quote near the conclusion is by this author, from "The End of the Open Road," winner of a Hopwood Award in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1970.*

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