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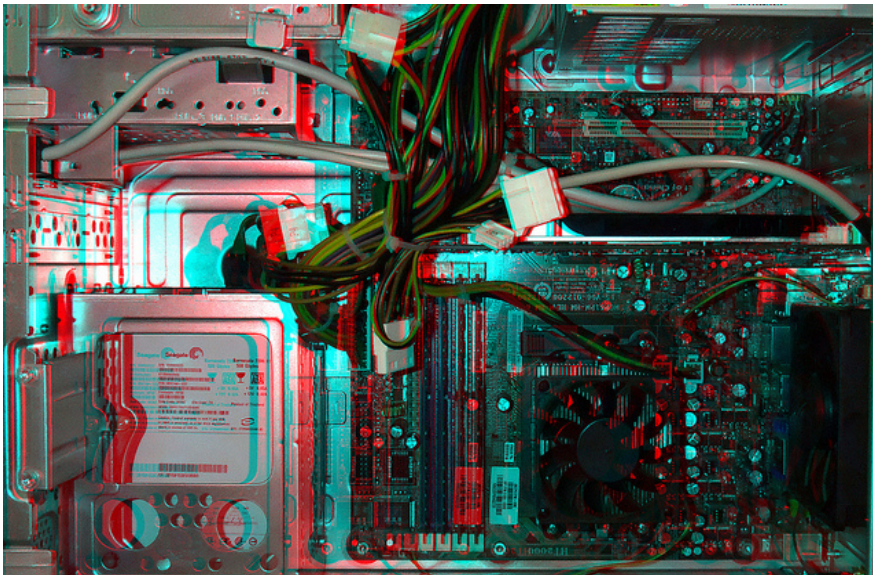
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Cyberlibertarians' Digital Deletion of the Left

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by David Columbia

Technological innovation does not inherently promote the Left's goals.



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The digital revolution, we are told everywhere today, produces democracy. It gives “power to the people” and dethrones authoritarians; it levels the playing field for distribution of information critical to political engagement; it destabilizes hierarchies, decentralizes what had been centralized, democratizes what was the domain of elites.

Most on the Left would endorse these ends. The widespread availability of tools whose uses are harmonious with leftist goals would, one might think, accompany broad advancement of those goals in some form. Yet the Left today is scattered, nearly toothless in most advanced democracies. If digital

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communication technology promotes leftist values, why has its spread coincided with such a stark decline in the Left's political fortunes?

Part of this disconnect between advancing technology and a retreating left can be explained by the advent of cyberlibertarianism, a view that widespread computerization naturally produces democracy and freedom.

In the 1990s, UK media theorists [Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron](#), US journalist [Paulina Borsook](#), and US philosopher of technology [Langdon Winner](#) introduced the term to describe a prominent worldview in Silicon Valley and digital culture generally; a related analysis can be found more recently in Stanford communication scholar [Fred Turner](#)'s work. While cyberlibertarianism can be defined as a general digital utopianism, summed up by a simple slogan like "computerization will set us free" or "computers provide the solution to any and all problems," these writers note a specific political formation — one [Winner describes](#) as "ecstatic enthusiasm for electronically mediated forms of living with radical, right-wing libertarian ideas about the proper definition of freedom, social life, economics, and politics."

There are overt libertarians who are also digital utopians — figures like Jimmy Wales, Eric Raymond, John Perry Barlow, Kevin Kelly, Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, Julian Assange, Dread Pirate Roberts, and Sergey Brin, and the members of the Technology Liberation Front who [explicitly describe themselves](#) as cyberlibertarians. But the term also describes a wider ideological formation in which people embrace digital utopianism as *compatible* or even *identical with* leftist politics opposed to neoliberalism.

In perhaps the most pointed form of cyberlibertarianism, computer expertise is seen as directly applicable to social questions. In *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, I argue that computational practices are intrinsically hierarchical and shaped by identification with power. To the extent that algorithmic forms of reason and social organization can be said to have an inherent politics, these have long been understood as compatible with political formations on the Right rather than the Left.

Yet today, "hacktivists" and other promoters of the liberatory nature of mass computerization are prominent political voices, despite their overall political commitments remaining quite unclear. They are championed by partisans of both the Right and the Left as if they obviously serve the political ends of each. One need only reflect on the leftist support for a project like Open Source software, founded by libertarian Eric Raymond and corporate sympathizer Tim O'Reilly and widely celebrated by libertarians and corporations, to notice the strange and under-examined convergence of the Right and Left around specifically digital practices whose underlying motivations are often explicitly libertarian.

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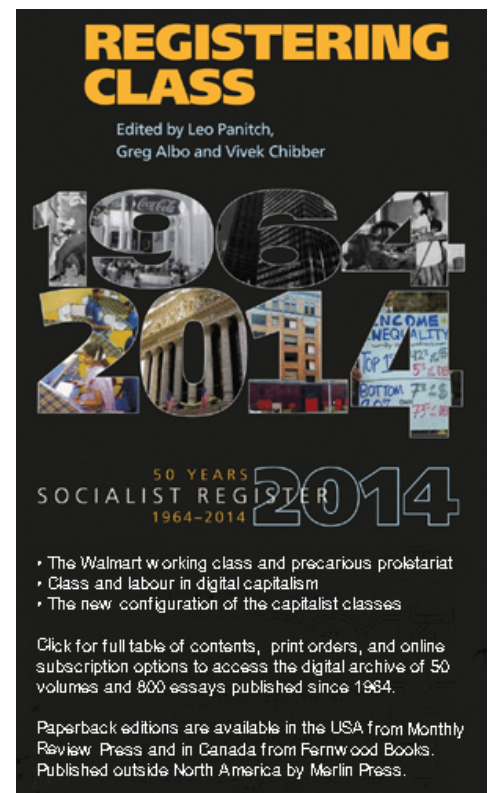
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When computers are involved, otherwise brilliant leftists who carefully examine the political commitments of most everyone they side with suddenly throw their lot in with libertarians — even when those libertarians explicitly disavow Left principles in their work.

This, much more than overt digital libertarianism, should concern the Left, and anyone who does not subscribe to libertarian politics. It is the acceptance by leftists of the largely rhetorical populist politics and explicitly pro-business thought of figures like Clay Shirky (who repeatedly argues that representative democratic and public bodies have no business administering public resources but must defer to “disruptive” forces like Napster) and Yochai Benkler (whose *Wealth of Networks* is roundly celebrated as heralding an anticapitalist “sharing economy,” yet remains firmly rooted in capitalist economics) that should concern us, especially when they are taken up as if they are obviously positions the Left should favor. It is the boastful self-confidence of engineers and hackers that their advanced computer skills inherently qualify them to say a great deal about any part of the social fabric to which we are lucky enough to have them contribute, regardless of their understanding of politics or society.

The inherent claim informing these politics of digital utopianism is that the political world has shifted so radically due to digital technology that the old rules do not apply; computers represent such a fundamental break in human history that they justify altogether new ethical and political standards.

Cyberlibertarianism is on display everywhere today, despite rarely referring to itself by that name. It is evident in the tech industry’s miserable track record regarding gender equality — where Jessica Roy, a rare female technology journalist, [on giving up her position as a tech blogger writes](#) of “narcissism masquerading as enlightened futurism” and of

all of the overeager startup hangers-on and fedora-wearing ‘bitch, make me a sandwich’ tools convinced code will save the world, whose willful blindness just helps perpetuate a sexist, racist, classist environment where white guys with computer science degrees can continue jerking off other white guys with computer science degrees until millions of dollars fall in their laps and they can shout, “MERITOCRACY.”

Few of those fedora-wearing “tools” probably see themselves as sexist or racist and fewer still follow Ayn Rand. Yet their practice makes these facts almost irrelevant. The view that “code will save the world” makes most forms of direct



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political engagement unnecessary or even unwelcome. These cultural politics are anathema to leftist concerns with social equality, yet such technological “solutionism” is still seen by many on the Left as emblematic of genuinely leftist political thinking — not the retrograde movement it actually is.

Philip Mirowski offers a useful analysis of these political formations in *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*. Tracing the history of the founding figures of contemporary libertarianism, especially Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Karl Popper and others, Mirowski notes that their writings were less about establishing a clear conceptual position than consolidating and managing political power. Over time, their thought came to function as a set of “shells” or “Russian Dolls” in which participants in outer shells need not, and often must not, understand their connection to members of shells closer to the center.

Neoliberals in the innermost shell (like the Koch brothers) use libertarians at farther removes (like the Tea Party) not always to realize their agenda directly, but to push political discourse to the hard right. The Tea Party attack on government has less to do with ending government per se than providing a political power base to support the drafting of regulatory programs (like “fiscal reform” programs organized at the state level by ALEC) and gutting regulatory enforcement mechanisms (like environmental oversight of energy industries) — even though most Tea Party members may not embrace much of this agenda.

Cyberlibertarian discourse functions very much as one of Mirowski’s Russian dolls. It appears to advocate total openness, absolute freedom, radical democracy, and the creation of new social benefits via technological innovation — as one advocate puts it in a suggestively paradoxical formulation, “we are at an inflection point where we have to use the technology at our disposal to further democratize our democracy and thus increase its very legitimacy.”

But such rhetoric actually works best at casting existing practices and institutions as “closed,” not “open”; certain forms of thinking as promoting freedom while others do not; and, most importantly, the circulation of corporate capital as the most direct realization of social change.

Cyberlibertarianism’s ideological positions are actively destructive to leftist politics by disparaging government in ways similar to Tea Party libertarianism and its regulatory program, offering no resistance to neoliberal incursion into a variety of political spheres, promoting individualism in political power and action, and distracting and defusing resistance to capitalist power.

It is remarkable how much cyberlibertarian practice conforms to these precepts. The most vocal and potent political activity of cyberlibertarians has been the defeat of certain governmental regulations (such as SOPA and PIPA, opposition to which was supported and even coordinated by Google), which

9.

With pretty pictures.

10.

This is an excellent way to launder money.

have turned out to be less anti-corporate than **in service to some corporate agendas while attacking others** (especially those of “content providers”). They argue that intellectual property does not deserve the protections given to “real” property while offering **no substantive challenges to the privileges associated with real property — a view that J.M. Pedersen calls “information exceptionalism.”**

Cyberlibertarians across the political spectrum focus a great deal on the promotion of tools, objects, software, and policies whose chief benefit is their ability to escape regulation and even law enforcement by the state (including surveillance-avoidant technologies and applications such as Tor, end-to-end encryption, PGP and Cryptocat). **They routinely portray government as the enemy of democracy rather than as its potential realization.** Generally, they refuse to construe corporate power on the same order as governmental power; in close alignment with libertarianism, they implicitly suggest companies like Google and Facebook should be entirely unconstrained by governmental oversight.

As Mirowski and others have noted, when libertarians talk about “freedom,” they are using the word in a different sense from the ones we usually presume in general political conversation. **They mean either “economic freedom” (the freedom for capital to do whatever it wants without oversight or regulation) or the related but slightly more general “negative freedom” (roughly, freedom from all governmental regulation).** The same is true of the signal cyberlibertarianism keywords: **terms like “free” and “open,” and terms drawn from business theory like “innovation” and “efficiency.”** Like “freedom,” **these words in their ordinary usage point at abstract values** which leftists are likely to endorse. And of course, many things that earn these names are worthy projects and causes.

But the way these words are used in contemporary discussions is highly specialized. **“Open” and “free” are used as marketing labels that, once attached to one way of looking at a problem, serve to shut down substantive debate:** once one side of the debate is labeled “open” or “free,” both corporatist and leftist thinkers tend to presume that that side must be the hospitable one. “Innovation” and “efficiency,” especially when used outside of directly economic contexts, function in a different way: leftist thinkers **appear to take them** to point vaguely to some form of political vanguardism, while rightist thinkers hear in them assurance that their main goals, the accumulation of wealth and power, can continue unabated.

Witness the use of these terms with regard to higher education by entrepreneurs and business leaders like **Sebastian Thrun** and **Clayton Christensen**: to educators they often sound like calls for **creative, paradigm-shifting work within the academic context**, but to venture capitalists and

corporations, they point directly at **product sales and access to the revenue streams** associated with higher education.

That the digital world forces us to restate fundamental definitions while offering no principled justification for doing so is evident in many of the organizations that defend the vague concept of “digital freedom.” Where the ACLU rests on clearly-stated principles of First Amendment jurisprudence, the Constitutional principles of its apparent digital equivalent, the **Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)**, remain opaque.

EFF often takes positions that are pro-corporate or unrelated to leftist principles. Despite this, many left-leaning digital insiders see the EFF as hospitable to their own politics, while the EFF is roundly embraced and even funded and in part staffed by overt digital libertarians. **(EFF was founded by core cyberlibertarian John Perry Barlow, former Lotus Corp President Mitch Kapor, and John Gilmore, an early employee of Sun Microsystems)** out of **the 11 members of its current Board of Directors**, 6 are either overt libertarians and/or self-described entrepreneurs or corporate executives.) In a 2011 case, the **Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC)** described EFF as one of several **“organizations that are currently paid by Google to lobby for or to consult for the company,”** a charge **which others have seen**, at least at times, as accurate. (EFF “reject[s] that characterization of their relationship to Google” and presumably to the tech industry as a whole.)

The phrase “internet freedom” sounds like it describes a value leftists should support. Yet as Community Informatics researcher (and, unusually among digerati, explicit defender of leftist principles) Michael Gurstein notes, that “freedom” is often not much like the kind of freedom typically advocated by leftists. **In a recent piece about the 2012 Internet Governance Forum in Baku**, Gurstein notes:

while so loudly advocating for freedom from (whatever...), the Internet Freedom (IF) coalition was, in fact, providing the diplomatic cover and lobbying campaign to ensure that no outcome of Internet governance would interfere with the overall US strategy of freedom “to” — surveil, subvert, suborn and overall embed and maintain (as the NSA so aptly put it) — “total information dominance” of the Internet.

This absorption of leftist rhetoric by the Right leads, in the most extreme cases, to the existence of political action organizations like the **Internet Freedom Coalition** (not the same informal Baku coalition Gurstein refers to above), whose name may not lead many to anticipate its being a **right-wing membership organization devoted to opposing** “three basic threats to Internet Freedom: Taxes, Regulations, and any attempt by the United Nations to

manage the Internet.”

Cyberlibertarianism even surfaces in the projects of “civic hackers,” the most well-known of which is Code for America (CfA). On the surface the project appears laudable: skilled programmers choose to devote free time to contribute to community and government projects. Yet CfA is an independent nonprofit **funded by both corporate and nonprofit dollars.** Their “civics” are **incredibly ill-defined: civic hacking projects don’t encourage their participants to reflect on how government functions or what government is supposed to be.**

Instead, private citizens **are revising government outside of democratic structures** — and often in substantive ways. Rather than “civics” as the term has historically been understood in the US — disinterested, public-facing, not-for-profit contributions to the general welfare — this is actually its opposite: corporate-funded interests tweaking democratic institutions primarily for their own benefit.

Most who hear the phrase “civic hacking” would likely be surprised by the significant emphasis CfA places on not merely cooperating with but actively promoting business, generating private profit from governmental resources extracted without charge from citizens. It is no accident that, along with “free” and “open,” two of the words most frequently encountered in CfA’s promotional materials, are “efficiency” and “innovation.” CfA directly promotes the development of for-profit corporations that make money off of open government data via its **“Incubator” and “Accelerator” programs** for tech startups.

In the application of the typical hacker “we know better” philosophy to democratic government, civic hacking introduces an antidemocratic mechanism into democracy. That mechanism privileges not “civics,” but the extraction of public resources for use by concentrated capital.

One index of the subtle shift in politics occasioned by cyberlibertarianism can be found in the work of a central advocate of Open Government and civic hacking, **Carl Malamud**. Malamud is widely taken to be a figure friendly to the Left, and his staunch advocacy of open information and public governance is easy to understand in terms compatible with Left causes. Yet Malamud himself rarely writes about core principles that make this identification simple or direct, and his work is championed by libertarians. He actively promotes the view that intellectual property is valueless because it is non-scarce — a view that Mirowski convincingly aligns with economic libertarianism.

Tom Slee observes in **“FutureEverything: Notes Against Openness”** that “the

language of transparency, the language of non-commercial civic engagement, and the romantic language of rebellion are being used to provide an exciting and appealing facade for an agenda that has nothing to do with transparency, nothing to do with civic participation, and a lot to do with traditional power politics and profit making.” As Slee notes, CfA and the Open Government movement have done less for the public than for corporations, some of which have been built almost entirely on the availability of public data.

The most famous of these is Zillow, the real estate listing service that draws large amounts of data from public records. Malamud’s own project to “liberate” SEC Edgar filings has arguably served corporate interests — investors and securities traders have been the primary users of the liberated SEC data — much more clearly than it has served any comprehensible Left causes.

Computers can be useful for the Left, of course. But leftist ends cannot be served without clearly articulating what those goals are and how they are to be achieved — in most cases *prior to* discussions of the means by which those ends might be achieved. Movements that claim to escape politics never do, and they are far too easily assimilated to the status quo of power and capital than to resisting it.

We must not mistake the “computer revolution” for anything like a political revolution as various leftist traditions have understood it. The only way to achieve the political ends we pursue is to be absolutely clear about what those ends are. Putting the technological means for achieving them ahead of clear consideration of the ends is not merely putting the cart before the horse; it is trusting in a technological determinism that has never been and will never be conducive to the pursuit of true human freedom.

At bottom, cyberlibertarianism holds that society’s problems can be solved by simply construing them as engineering and software problems. Not only is this false, but in many ways, it can make the problems worse. Since much of the thought grounding it emerges from the Right, encouraging mass computerization as a political project typically encourages the spread of rightist principles, even if they are cloaked in leftist rhetoric.

When we assume that the goals of the Left are promoted just by digital innovation, we too easily forget to think carefully and deeply about how to articulate those goals, and to work with others who share them. We put faith in a technocratic progressivism that does not clearly emerge from leftist foundations and that, without close and careful work, is unlikely to support those foundations. Most worryingly, we put aside active efforts to solve social

problems and advance leftist perspectives by giving in to a **technological form of magical thinking** that is the opposite of engaged political action.



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