book reviews

Perception and Misperception

Techno Stereotypes, Junk Science and Economic Riddles

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Cyberselfish
by Paulina Borsook
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The focus of *Cyberselfish* is Paulina Borsook's critique of techno-libertarianism, described as a set of political and philosophical beliefs that range 'from the classic eighteenth-century liberal philosophy of that-which-governs-best-governs-least love of laissez-faire free market economics to social Darwinism, anarcho-capitalism, and beyond' (3). Borsook draws on aspects of each of these positions to manufacture a stereotype techno-libertarian, a caricature built up from what is essentially the 'worst' (at least by Borsook's standards) of the many philosophical positions that make up techno-libertarianism.

Chapter one of *Cyberselfish* is devoted to Borsook's interpretation and rejection of 'bionomics'. According to Borsook, bionomics borrows from biology to 'explain economic behavior, describing the way the world works in terms of learning, adapting, intelligence, selection, and ecological niches. It favors decentralization and trial and error and local control and simple rules and letting things be' (32). Bionomics, Borsook argues, views the economy as being like a rainforest, a complex system best left untouched. It favours free markets and questions the role of government intervention.

With deliberate irony, Borsook invokes the language of bionomics to ask, 'where in this ecosystem is there room for other species?' besides the 'happily workaholic' (37). She questions the obsession of Silicon Valley firms with short-term opitmisation and asks whether a stable firm with 'good' performance may have better long term prospects. These questions, however, are purely rhetorical as no bionomists are given the opportunity to answer her challenge.

A common practice of Borsook's is to take the most controversial view from the libertarian spectrum and assign it to her stereotype techno-libertarian. In her chapter on bionomics and the free market, Borsook twice asks her readers to believe that at heart, the typical techno-libertarians is a naive anarcho-capitalist who prefers the regulation-free instability of post-communist Russia or the Balkans (20-21, 46-48) to the United States. By ignoring other libertarian perspectives which favour limited government, and using these exaggerated examples, Borsook constructs her stereotype of the typical techno-libertarian.

With bionomics debunked, Borsook moves on to discuss cypherpunks and cryptology. The chapter begins with an informative outline of the 'crypto wars' and questions the cypherpunk hostility towards government. As Borsook points out 'maintaining an unfortunate position on cryptology is hardly the sum of what government does, can do, or has done for the technology community' (83). Attacking this techno-libertarian 'culture of complaint' (59) is a recurring theme in *Cyberselfish*.

According to Borsook, government defence contracts laid the foundations for the prosperity of 1990's Silicon Valley and the rule of law ensures that 'graft and protection money aren't usual line items in most high-tech companies budgets' (83). Techno-libertarians, who are assumed to be wealthy beneficiaries of these positive interventions, therefore have no cause for complaint—at least according to Borsook.

Cypherpunks however, provide another opportunity for Borsook to reinforce the negative stereotype of techno-libertarianism. Cypherpunks are colourfully described as 'testosterone poisoned' boys who never really grew up and who view themselves as 'guerrilla archetypes', acting out in some form of 'Dungeons and Dragons wish fulfillment' (91-93). The 'pyschosexuality of cypherpunks' (100) leads them invariably to fringe sex. Cypherpunks, and by extension techno-libertarians generally, are nerds and geeks whose 'dating cluelessness' (105) stems from a lack of trust in others, and their inability to cope with the nuances of individuals.

The third chapter of *Cyberselfish* is primarily concerned with Borsook's time as an employee of the magazine *Wired*. Borsook's tale of her time at *Wired* is used as a springboard for highlighting the 'morbidly

hypermale' (138) nature of techno-libertarianism. The favourable coverage by *Wired* of George Gilder is presented as evidence that techno-libertarianism is sexist, if not overtly, then at least subconsciously. The long hours and arduous work practices common in Silicon Valley are, according to Borsook, yet further proof of the anti-female techno-libertarianism promoted by *Wired*.

'Cybergenerous' is the title of the chapter that deals with the alleged lack of high-tech, and by implication techno-libertarian, philanthropy. High tech firms are strongly criticised for their practice of 'dead-rat' (200) giving. That is, like cats, they give what they consider to be most valuable, not what people actually want. Typically their dead-rat is a gift in the form of technology. As Borsook quite rightly points out, giving technology without offering to support it, or where there are more pressing concerns, is a clear example of dead-rat giving.

But Borsook doesn't leave it there, choosing to attack the lack of patronage of the arts by high-tech firms. These companies are criticised for giving too narrowly, in that they prefer to give to education in computer science and engineering, or to charities with easy to quantify output, rather than the arts. Techno-libertarian geeks are accused of being 'know-nothing philistines' (190) because of their alleged lack of artistic taste.

This last point brings into the open the underlying conflict in *Cyberselfish* between the numerically literate technologists/geeks and the humanist 'arty' crowd. At one point, Borsook recounts the story of a run in with a techno-libertarian who was attempting to court her via email. The encounter climaxes with Borsook emailing her suitor a criticism of libertarianism that draws the reply 'I bet your article will make you look good with your arty friends.' Borsook replies in her book with 'Voila! The ancient nerd-rage at being slighted by the (to him) attractive art student . . . subtly damned by the strangely impenetrable community of shared subjective values of humanities geeks' (62). Borsook's comments do not help her overall

argument in any way, but simply show that she is as prone as any techno-libertarian to acting like a 'spoiled teenager' (233) when the mood suits her.
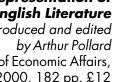
Ultimately it is this open hostility towards technologists, geeks, nerds, cypherpunks and other alleged representatives of techno-libertarianism which is the book's undoing. While there are a number of interesting issues raised in *Cyberselfish*, many of those who could benefit from the insights Borsook has to offer will never read beyond the introduction of this book. The reason? Right from the opening pages, Borsook makes her hatred of the techno-libertarian culture well known.

According to Borsook, techno-libertarianism is 'dangerously naïve and, at its worst, downright scary'. Beneath its shiny surface she has 'sensed nastiness, narcissism, and lack of human warmth, qualities that surely don't need to be hard wired into the fields of computing and communications' (5). She considers philosophical techno-libertarianism to be 'a kind of scary, physchologically brittle, prepolitical autism' (15). Throw in Borsook's foray into the pyschosexuality of cypherpunks and the overall impression of this book is that of a longer, but no more mature version of Borsook's, geek boy meets humanities girl encounter. Techno-libertarianism may be painted as cyberselfish, but Borsook's style makes her out to be a cybersook.

By making her personal hatred of all things libertarian so blatant from the start, Borsook potentially alienates readers who do not already share her position. From her introduction Borsook has not only been judge and jury of techno-libertarian culture, but has executed the prisoner as well. This is unfortunate as those who do venture past the introduction to *Cyberselfish* may have difficulty in accepting Borsook's analysis as an unbiased critique of techno-libertarianism. *Cyberselfish* will frustrate those whose concept of libertarianism and technology is not shared by Borsook, but the book may still be a worthwhile read as an insight into Silicon Valley life and the attitudes of its critics.

Reviewed by Heath Gibson

Literature and business, as we know them today, are both features of the same modern world, yet from the very beginning the relationship between them, at least in English literature, has frequently been strained. The art of writing has come to rely on publishing as its means of dissemination. Publishing is a commercial undertaking that is notorious for its ruthlessness and lack of sentiment. Writers themselves have often, though not always, tended to view business in general in a negative light, while at the same time finding it an essential source of inspiration. Whether positive or negative in outlook, this book testifies to the fact that there are indeed riches to be found in the literary treatment of business.

The essays collected in this book constitute a valuable survey of the way in which English writers have viewed business from the 18th century to the present day. Daniel Defoe, the author of what is usually credited as the first novel in English, *Robinson Crusoe*, himself dabbled in business to varying degrees of success. The story of Crusoe can be read as a cautionary tale about the dangers of imprudence in commerce. Crusoe ends up alone on his island as a result of overreaching himself in his business ventures. Ultimately, we are told, he 'triumphs over adversity by learning to be both pious and prudent'. The novel can thus 'be read as a paean of praise to business practice'.

The positive attitude expressed by Defoe is exceptional among the writers of his time. Others such as Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Oliver Goldsmith and Laurence Sterne viewed the rise of capitalism with disdain or even alarm. They were more inclined than Defoe was to criticise and satirise such issues as the corrupting power of materialism, rural depopulation and the slave trade. The conservatism and nostalgia that form part