

Andres Lomena interviewed Richard Barbrook

Contributed by Richard Barbrook
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Richard Barbrook: Andres Lomena interviewed Richard Barbrook. (2007.) Published with the permission of the author.
Question 1 Andres Lomena: Franco Bifo Berardi criticises your *The Holy Fools*. In his opinion, you simplify the rhizomatic thought of Deleuze and Guattari, making equal it to technonomadism and *The Californian Ideology*. Berardi argues that the state cannot solve the self-organisational structure of the Net. My question is: what ethical and aesthetic paradigm should we take for Internet given that the May '68 Revolution was defeated? Richard Barbrook: Bifo is attacking me for the very crime which inspired my article! In late-1990s London, Hari Kunzru and others at *Wired UK* were arguing that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were proponents of the Californian ideology. Knowing these gurus' political history and theoretical writings, I was curious as to why it was so easy to confuse their particular brand of hippie leftism with its apparent opposite: dotcom neo-liberalism.

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Raymond's essays. You are the first one. It demonstrates that you study the phenomena of Internet from inside, without keeping your distance; we need to contaminate ourselves to talk about Net (the metaphor would be: 'we cannot talk about dirtiness if we do not get dirty'). In my opinion, there is a maladjustment between the generations. Are there more hopes with our generation, totally immersed in new medias? RB: 'm from the punk rock generation – my formative moment was seeing the Sex Pistols and discovering Situationism as a 20-year old student in 1976. When the Net took off in England two decades later, I thought that technology had finally caught up with what me and my mates had been doing for all of our adult lives. In 2007, instead of climbing tower blocks to install pirate transmitters like we did in the 1980s, my students run their radio stations from their bedrooms – and, most wonderfully, have many more listeners than we ever did. Respect! Of course, it is easy for people from my generation to say that the youth aren't as politically engaged as we were, but the historical moment is very different. If nothing else, today's 20-somethings have the advantage over us that Leninism is ancient history. In my *Imaginary Futures* book, I argue that they also possess the privilege of living within the information society. It is difficult to believe that the Net will liberate humanity when almost everyone you know has a broadband connection – and corporate capitalism is more in control of the global economy than it has ever been.

Question 3 AL: The New Left sought anarcho-communism, based on gift economy. However, the New Economy of the cyberspace is an advanced way of social democracy: anarcho-communism is sponsored by corporate capital. This seems paradoxical. Is it possible to have a collapse of the system? All of this is quite disconcerting. RB: The contemporary symbiosis of cybernetic communism and dotcom capitalism is only a paradox if – like Deleuze – you are anti-Hegelian! However, if you study history, this contradictory phenomenon is unexceptional. The feudal monarchy played a key role in the rise of capitalism and – against its own intentions – destroyed its own patriarchal power. Stalinist states industrialised their economies and – in the process – undermined the social foundations of totalitarian rule. We should not be surprised that corporate capitalism is similarly unaware of its own historical mission. Kevin Kelly in *New Rules for the New Economy* says that dotcom entrepreneurs should adopt the maxim of 'follow the free': commercialising the innovations of the hi-tech gift economy. But, as the music industry has found out to its cost, the opposite is also taking place: the decommmodification of proprietary information. Don't be disconcerted, enjoy the paradox!

Question 4 AL: I would like to read a critical evaluation of Google. What do you think? Do they symbolise a huge change in the recent history of the Net? RB: So would I. What is interesting is that Google makes its money out of searches not content. When most of the information on the Net is made by amateurs who work for nothing and pay for their own hosting, then the profit-making point is owning the large numbers of servers needed to catalogue and sort this data. Google is getting rich off what neo-classical economists call a 'natural monopoly': a privatised public utility. I wonder if Bifo disapproves of the French state's plans to launch a European competitor to this American hegemon?! Question 5 AL: Creative commons modified the map of Internet. Many people think that this licence is a

restrictive choice (with a libertarian make up). They would prefer the deregulated situation before Creative Commons. I do not have opinion here. What about you? RB: Tellingly, Tim Berners-Lee – the inventor of the web - didn't release html under a copyleft licence because its provisions were too restrictive. Despite its name, Creative Commons is also a form of private property. If you want to operate within the contemporary economy, this licence does offer some protection against your work being ripped off or being used inappropriately. If you were a cynic, copyleft could also be seen as the last stand of intellectual property lawyers against the decommodification of information on the Net. Imprisoning teenagers for sharing music or movie files with each other is absurd in the 2000s. According to its promoters, Creative Commons is the only way that commercial organisations can sue each other for making money out of what private individuals are doing on a daily basis… Question 6 AL: What do you think about the Technorealism Manifesto? I sort of agree with it. It is very symptomatic of lot of manifestos that I've read on the Internet. RB: Sweet. We should encourage all signs of resistance in America against the neo-liberal hegemony which dominates that long suffering country. Question 7 AL: Is it possible to have a new Luddite movement in our society (I still remember a Thomas Pynchon's article where he was really ironic about the Luddites)? RB: I'm all in favour of celebrating Luddism as long as we're talking about the Luddites in early-19th century England. These heroic rebels were founders of the Labour movement in this country. Unfortunately, many on the Left believe the smears of the liberal bourgeoisie against them. Contrary to the dictionary definition, the Luddites were NOT against all new technologies – only those which deskilled and displaced artisanal workers. Spinning Jennies deserved to be smashed - and Jacquard Looms were rightly cherished. If we want to learn from the Luddites, we should welcome technologies which make our work more interesting and our lives more pleasurable… Question 8 AL: We must to extend the political history of Internet into all areas of life. However, the thing is that if we begin transforming cyberspace and then we want to change our society… it seems to me that we are adopting a naive reformism. The Internet is a good battlefield, but it's not the only field where we can fight, right? RB: The Net is a tool not a talisman. When Debord published The Society of the Spectacle in 1967, only the privileged few could make radio and television programmes. Four decades later, anyone with the time and money in the North can broadcast their efforts to a global audience over the Net. Contrary to Debord's expectations, the smashing of the spectacle didn't require a proletarian revolution. Does this make us backsliding reformists? Or does it mean that we realise that we live within a historical process which capital and labour – consciously or unconsciously – compete to mould society in their own interest? If we're lefties, our ambition is to ensure our side is more conscious about what we're doing than our opponents. Question 9 AL: How do you value the role of John Perry Barlow in the history of the Internet? Everyone can laugh at his neo-liberal utopianism, but he founded the EFF, among other things. Maybe we should consider his Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace like poetry, not like a political programme. RB: John Perry Barlow was also Dick Cheney's campaign manager when he stood for the US Senate in 1978! Conclusion: you can smoke good weed and still be on the wrong side of the barricades. Question 10 AL: Is there anything else that you want to add? RB: Check out the website of my new book: <http://www.imaginaryfutures.net> [Last checked 05.02.2010.]