

Chapter Seven

Cyborganic and Social Change: The Power and Limits of Community

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

Margaret Mead's maxim that small groups of committed citizens can change the world is probably the most well known statement an anthropologist has ever made. Though it does not appear in Mead's publications, and no primary source is ever cited,¹ it has become the motto for many organizations and movements in the U.S. The aphorism is also popular among Americans individually, appearing in high school term papers and yearbooks, and on plaques and bulletin boards in government, corporate, and other institutional offices (e.g. universities and non-governmental organizations). The small group of committed citizens who can change the world seems to be an image of social collectivity with which Americans want to

¹ "Despite copious searching, the origins of the quotation most associated with Margaret Mead, 'Never doubt...' remain a mystery. When a source is cited, ...it is always secondary" (Keyes 2006:xvi). The Institute for Intercultural Studies has the quotation as their motto, explaining on their website: "Although the Institute has received many inquiries about this famous admonition by Margaret Mead, we have been unable to locate when and where it was first cited, becoming a motto for many organizations and movements. We believe it probably came into circulation through a newspaper report of something said spontaneously and informally. We know, however, that it was firmly rooted in her professional work and that it reflected a conviction that she expressed often, in different contexts and phrasings." (The Institute for Intercultural Studies. "Frequently asked questions," <http://www.interculturalstudies.org/faq.html#quote>, accessed August 27, 2008)

identify. It is a popular social imaginary that I recall to introduce two topics central to the concluding arguments of this study. One is the characteristically American social imaginaries exemplified in Cyborganic. The other is the question of social change inherent in the Cyborganic project itself. Both pertain to my objective of advancing a cultural critique of the narrative of social revolution through technology. To approach these broad subjects, however, I begin with the more basic question of whether and how Cyborganic changed the world. That is, I start with an analysis of the power and limits of Cyborganic as a project for social action.

As I have argued throughout this work, Cyborganic's business and community, its online and onground dimensions, must be taken altogether as a whole. This applies as well to a consideration of outcomes. Many of my informants have made statements to the effect that the Cyborganic business failed, but the community was a success. They refer to the fact that, after being bootstrapped with personal resources, volunteer labor, and small investments for three years, the business failed to raise the capital needed to open a Cyborganic café, ran out of funds, and filed for bankruptcy. As a start-up aimed at producing market value for investors and stakeholders, it was ultimately unsuccessful. In practice, however, this was not the only goal of the company or its principals (all of whom had less risky options had business success been their sole motivation). The project to create an exemplary community demonstrating Cyborganic's online-offline vision was central to the business enterprise. As much or more effort went into actually realizing this

community as into launching a company with a viable revenue model, though as I have shown, the efforts were essentially inseparable. Therefore, in this assessment, I look holistically at Cyborganic's project to build a local community around the production and use of networked media.

As chapters 4 and 5 illustrate, Cyborganic joined place, technology, and community in productive relationships that contributed to the development of Web publishing through new firms, software, and process innovations. In its focus on community and promoting Web publishing among its members, Cyborganic prefigured many of the norms and forms of media production and consumption dominant on the Internet today. It created a milieu in which personal publishing and networked social media could be imagined, practiced, and commonly understood. At a time when popular audiences were just coming to the Internet, Cyborganic was innovative and representative of a new generation of Internet culture that has since become dominant on the Web. Moreover, as a cultural commune, Cyborganic provided its members support, meaning, and identity for almost a decade; and modeled practices they have since taken up in managing their social relations and daily lives. In these respects, one could say that Cyborganic served to change the world. In doing so, the project demonstrated that: (1) physical proximity and face-to-face communication create context for interaction online; (2) creating diverse media and channels for communication (mailing lists, chat, the website, TND) encourages broad participation; and (3) bringing a range of people with different skills ("artists

and techies”) together in informal, socializing around a common interest (new media)—and fostering a gradient of participation levels and types—is productive of innovation and collective action.

These contributions notwithstanding, Cyborganic was not entirely oppositional to mainstream U.S. society, but clearly embraced some of its dominant values and institutions—freedom, individualism, technophilia, the venture financed business start-up, advertising-supported media. As chapters 4 and 5 illustrated, sharing some dominant practices and imaginaries was extraordinarily productive and advanced Cyborganic’s project in a number of ways. However, as chapter 6 detailed, it also resulted in tensions and discord between the community’s entrepreneurial and communitarian orientations. In making a grounded (i.e., non-theoretical) analysis, I arrange the phenomena I have described variously as tensions, paradoxes, and gaps around four interconnected points.

1. *The community*—as a demonstration that such communities could be a new source of market and other value—was in some sense what Cyborganic was marketing to venture investors and the press. Local community hosting was the service Cyborganic proposed to turn into a profitable business. Yet, conflicting incentives and tensions inherent in the relation of corporate goals and community interests were not recognized or addressed in an organized way. When the Ramona neighborhood and weekly potluck dinners (TND), created voluntarily in the name and spirit of community, were assimilated into the business project,

accounts were never reconciled. What I mean is, after a history as lived experiment and “labor of love,” the project was incorporated as the Cyborganic Corporation. But, neither at this juncture nor after, were measures taken to reconcile contributions made on the basis of reciprocity and volunteerism with the institutional systems that incorporation introduced alongside them—wage labor, contracts, job descriptions, corporate and employment law. One result of this disjuncture, or gap, is that compensation for (and control over) individual contributions became key sources of conflict within the Cyborganic project: “Feelings of exploitation and resentment about payment, and for what kind of effort” developed among the company’s principles as well as the wider community of volunteers. (IFTF 1997a:31)

2. *Feedback and Collaborative Social Orders*: After the initial open-call meetings of early 1994, community members were not directly involved in developing the Cyborganic vision, or shaping its plans, and core principles. The project gained only limited, informal community feedback, one of the primary benefits of peer-to-peer collaboration (Raymond 1999; Moody 2001; Weber 2004). This feedback gap sparked “dissent and frustration among members” and, while it “did not prevent them from working individually and collaboratively in developing artistic, community-oriented projects with new media,” this was “not...a sustainable position...[it] weaken[ed] loyalty and disrupt[ed] Cyborganic’s

strong community of gifts,” as the 1997 IFTF report on Cyborganic suggested.
(IFTF 1997a:31-33)

3. *Growth* and collaboration without establishing rules of social action in the community as a whole produced limited accountability. While there were intense discussions on the Cyborganic mailing list over expelling a subscriber and whether being a community justified any sort of constraint on individual freedom of speech, this did not lead to establishing mechanisms of social order for the community beyond such automated and individuated tactics as mail filters and subject lines. Limited accountability in all directions—*to* and *from* the community and project (leaders)—impeded sustained collaboration and contributed to waning participation as individuals lost a sense of how their participation fit within the project and community as a whole.
4. *Time*: In addition to the constraints that working time imposed on members individually, Cyborganic was defined through other temporal limitations. At the most basic level, economic cycles of boom and bust, the “gold rushes” and “ghost towns,”² and high mobility of U.S. society created conditions of turnover that made it difficult to sustain the community against them. Though Cyborganic’s community survived the business by several years, and no identifiable events precipitated its dissolution, it nevertheless petered out

² Both are terms that appeared several times in informant interviews, field notes, and writings (emic and etic) about the rise, and subsequent downturn, of the Web industry.

gradually as members “moved on” in various senses. A more complex temporal limitation lies in the fact that, as I have noted several times, Cyborganic was an age-cohort, most of its members were in their twenties, in transition from student to independent adult life. To the extent that this life-stage transition was the impetus for participation, Cyborganic would be structurally limited by its members aging out of their liminal status “betwixt and between” institutions of family, school, and marriage (Turner 1969:95). However, given the increased age of first marriages, decreased incidence and duration of marriage in the U.S. generally, and new practices of coupling, this model of life-stage transition does not fit in every case. For example, the trend of joint property ownership (“co-housing”) among the bandwidth collectives discussed, represents an extension of Cyborganic’s techno-social vision, not a transition to pre-existing institutions of adult life. A good number of Cyborganics have married, moved into single-family residences, and had children. Whether and to what extent they have imported norms and forms of sociality developed in Cyborganic remains a matter for further empirical investigation. In the absence of such intergenerational connections, however, Cyborganic’s age-homogeneity places another limitation on the capacity for social change: an imaginary of community that, in contrast to society at large, includes only a single generation and thus limits access to other generational cohorts and networks.

Reflecting at a higher level of abstraction, I identify in these tensions, gaps, and paradoxes of Cyborganic's project, certain limitations on the community's capacity for social change, not simply of the dominant values and institutions that were generally shared, but also those opposed and resisted through its cultural commune, its project for life. First, though extraordinarily productive, the social imaginary of community was unsupported by administrative and regulative social orders beyond those of the business project. As I have argued, the culture of freedom and "dominant trend" toward "networked individualism" (Castells 2001:128-129) in contemporary society made it difficult for my informants to see this gap as a problem, let alone address it as a constraint on the community project.

Each of the tensions and limitations discussed bespeaks the central paradox of Cyborganic: it challenged certain effects of the dominant order, but not their premises. For example, the new user-generated media countered conventions of top-down publishing, but adopted the same mass-media model of advertising-supported "content." In Cyborganic, as in geek culture generally, even those practices and imaginaries that challenge mainstream norms are often justified in terms of dominant values. The renaming, or "re-branding,"³ of free software as "open source" that took place in the 1990s provides a very visible example of this pattern. Free software, a

³ Eric Raymond, who was present at the 1998 "strategy session" where the term "open source" was introduced, referred to the name change as "re-branding" in an interview with the author on December 16, 2000. Tim O'Reilly, who coined the term "Web 2.0," was an early recruit to the campaign to promote open source software to business. (Raymond 1999:205)

social movement started by Richard Stallman in 1983, opposes both the practices and principles of proprietary software. However, in an effort to make free software “palatable to Wall Street” a campaign to change the name was initiated in early 1998, just after Netscape announced it would release the source code for its Web browser as free software (Tiemann 2006). The goals of the name change were (a) to obscure, or disavow, free software’s principled opposition to dominant institutions of intellectual property; and (b) to emphasize instead the technical fact of openness⁴ and its practical benefits.

Some of the proponents of “open source” considered it a “marketing campaign for free software,” which would appeal to business executives by citing practical benefits, while avoiding ideas of right and wrong that they might not like to hear. Other proponents flatly rejected the free software movement’s ethical and social values. Whichever their views, when campaigning for “open source” they did not cite or advocate those values. The term “open source” quickly became associated with the practice of citing only practical values, such as making powerful, reliable software... Nearly all open source software is free software; the two terms describe almost the same category of software. But they stand for views based on fundamentally different values. *Open source is a development methodology; free software is a social movement.* For the free software movement, free software is an ethical imperative, because only free software respects the users’ freedom. By contrast, the philosophy of open source considers issues in terms of how to make software “better” — in a practical sense only. (Stallman 2007, emphasis added)

⁴ That is, to direct attention to the fact that the underlying code of free/open software is visible and manipulable by any user. “Free” in Stallman’s usage refers to freedom to access, change, and redistribute source code. It is not a prohibition on charging money for software, but on locking away ideas and techniques as proprietary.

The re-naming campaign was tremendously successful and, following Netscape, other large corporations (e.g., IBM, Oracle) subsequently embraced open source initiatives. More recently, the trend in academic literature has been to combine the names as F/OSS, which stands for “free/open source software.”

The re-branding of free software is but one example of a recurring pattern in which countercultural projects pursuing social transformation in everyday life come to contribute to the very systems of power and wealth they set out to resist. Turner observed this in arguing that the WELL’s success in realizing the New Communalist vision simultaneously “mark[ed] the failure of the...movement to escape the pull of America’s technological and economic centers of gravity” (2005:511). As I have argued in this chapter and the last, the case of Cyborganic suggests a similar paradox. Trying to understand the wider cultural context of this long-term pattern led me to a set of insightful essays by Langdon Winner that situate late twentieth century discourses of “the computer revolution” within a broader narrative of social revolution through technology that has been central in the American popular imagination for over 150 years.

Social Revolution Through Technology: Imaginary, Ideology, and Myth

A recurring fantasy of industrial society expects relief from...thoroughgoing estrangement in the coming of a new technological system...Dreams of instant liberation from centralized social control have accompanied virtually every important new technological system introduced during the past century and a half. The emancipation proposed by decentralist philosophers as a deliberate goal requiring long, arduous social struggle has been upheld by technological optimists as a condition to be realized simply by adopting a new gadget. This strange mania...is alive and well among those who celebrate the advent of the computer revolution.

Langdon Winner (1986:95-96)

Engaging my Cyborganic analysis in the context of Winner's essays in *The Whale and the Reactor* (1986) contributed to the third objective of this work: advancing a cultural critique of contemporary discourses that celebrate networked social media as revolutionary. First, Winner's argument that "dreams of instant liberation...have accompanied virtually every important new technological system introduced during the past century and a half" led me to recognize Cyborganic's place, or situatedness, in the history of utopian experiments and intentional communities in the United States. Second, Winner identifies in this history a dominant cultural narrative of social revolution through technology, which he critiques in the context of late twentieth century attitudes to technology. Together, Winner's analyses further my cultural critique of utopian discourses about the Internet, showing them to be neither as new nor as revolutionary as commonly conceived.

From John Winthrop’s Puritan “city upon a hill” (1630), to the many intentional communities of the 18th and 19th centuries—both religious (Shakers, Rappites, Moravians, Hutterites, the Oneida community) and secular (New Harmony, Brook Farm, Fruitlands, Skaneateles, Nashoba)—the U.S. has long been a “place where utopias of the most diverse kind could be realized” (Kumar 1991:82). The earliest utopian experiments entailed forming new settlements apart from an existing society regarded as corrupt. However, in the 19th century, positivism and scientific rationality brought evolutionary theory to understandings of society (Saint-Simon, Fourier, Comte, Spencer, Marx), which critically shifted utopian thinking away from idealist, often spiritually inspired, *separatism* toward “schemes for the total transformation of society” (Kateb 1972; Spann 1989). Whether rural or urban, such schemes generally took the form of exemplary communities intended to demonstrate the virtues of their vision to society as a whole (Hasbrouck 2001). As a secular (“for the here and now”) and prescriptive (“demanding to be integrally carried out”) project to build a model community⁵, Cyborganic can be located within this longer history of utopian social experiments in the U.S. Situating the project in this context enabled my analysis and cultural critique in two key ways. First, it elucidated the genealogy and character of Cyborganic’s utopian project. Second, it fixed attention on a particular vision of technology and social change that has been prominent in the American popular imagination since the mid-19th century.

⁵ Here I employ Taylor’s terms and schema of modern moral orders (2007:7).

In his examination of “the appropriate technology movement of the middle 1970s,”⁶ Winner draws on scholarly histories of “communitarian socialism in America” to point to a common cultural vision of “demonstration models” as “orthodox forms of technical and economic practice.” The pragmatic materialism of this vision, he argues, paradoxically subverts revolutionary transformations of society by framing social reform in terms of delivering “a superior product,” that is, “building a better mousetrap.” (Winner 1986:61-84)

As scholars Arthur Bestor and Dolores Hayden have observed, nineteenth-century American utopians...believed their technical inventions and social innovations would have a strong appeal to an age undergoing rapid change. *Communities such as those at New Harmony and Oneida saw themselves perfecting what Bestor calls “patent office models” of the good life.* In the same way that ordinary people would eagerly accept new improvements in farm machinery if a convincing demonstration were given them, so would they be willing to embrace the principles and devices of utopia if a successful working model could be built and maintained somewhere in the world.

Insofar as they had a coherent idea of how their labors would change the world, the appropriate technologists usually entertained the better mousetrap theory. A person would build a solar house or put up a windmill, not only because he or she found it personally agreeable, but because the thing was to serve as a beacon to the world, a demonstration model to inspire emulation...People would, in effect, vote on the shape of the future through their consumer/builder choices. This notion of social change provided the underlying rationale for the amazing emphasis on do-it-yourself manuals, catalogues, demonstration sites, information sharing, and “networking” that characterized appropriate technology during its heyday. (Winner 1986:79, emphasis added)

⁶ Winner cites *The Whole Earth Catalog* as exemplary of the vision of technology as “a realm of intimate, personal power” that informed the movement for appropriate technology (1986:65-66).

Winner highlights *The Whole Earth Catalog* (1968) as a prime example of the vision of social transformation through technology that informed the appropriate technology movement.

The Whole Earth Catalog assumed that throngs of people would be moving off into small, humanly nurturing, economically self-sustaining communities that fit into a new complex world system destined to save the earth from the destruction of overindustrialization. In this vision choices about the right technologies—both useful old gadgets and ingenious new tools—mattered greatly; choices about politics mattered little... The catalogue-browsing consciousness of the New Age was not one that wanted to be bothered by well-reasoned arguments. (Winner 1986:66)

His interpretation of the preference for demonstration models over “well-reasoned arguments” as not wanting “to be bothered,” does not engage emic understanding, and, thus, is not a cultural or immanent critique. Yet, Winner’s critical insights echo Turner’s arguments about the New Communalists of *The Whole Earth Catalog* and the WELL.

Winner’s critique identifies exactly the basis on which Turner distinguished the New Left from the countercultures exemplified in *The Whole Earth Catalog*—a vision of the relation between technology and social change. As Turner notes, both segments of the counterculture sought to “transform the technocratic bureaucracies that, in their view, had brought Americans the cold war and the conflict in Vietnam. Both also hoped to return Americans to a more emotionally authentic and community-based way of life” (2005:493). However, while the New Left pursued these goals by engaging the political structures of U.S. society, Turner explains:

Many members of the counterculture...stepped away from agonistic politics and sought instead to change the world by *establishing new, exemplary communities* from which a corrupt mainstream might draw inspiration. For this group, whom I will call the New Communalists, as for many others in the counterculture, the key to social transformation lay not in changing a political regime but in changing the consciousness of individuals. (Turner 2005:493, emphasis added)

In this way, both Winner and Turner serve to ground the Cyborganic vision in a broader narrative of social transformation through technology that they and others identify in the history of utopian communities in the U.S.

As a conscious project to create an exemplary community online and onground, Cyborganic was itself utopian in aspiration. Turner's New Communalists and the virtual-communitarian lineage of Internet culture (Castells 2001), join my informants to the broader history, and techno-social legacy, that Winner and other scholars have surveyed. Their most direct and concrete links to this history lie in Cyborganic's many connections to the WELL. The WELL's first managers—Matthew McClure, John Coate, Cliff Figallo—were all long time members of The Farm, a commune in Tennessee founded in 1971 by former San Francisco State University professor Stephen Gaskin and several hundred Bay Area hippies (IFTF 1996; Fike 1998; Turner 2007:147). At the Farm, as Figallo explained in a 1997 *Wired* magazine article, “We were conditioned to respond to the Community Imperative—the need to build and maintain relationships between people and to preserve the structure that supported those relationships” (Hafner 1997). Most Cyborganics (myself included) were unaware of The Farm as they

embarked upon their own projects for the good life in the 1990s. Yet, the “Community Imperative” forged at The Farm and propagated through the WELL was a formative influence on Cyborganic. It has since become a dominant social imaginary in Internet geek culture. The sway it has exerted has led some to call the WELL “the world's most influential online community” (Hafner 1997).

The cultural history I presented in chapter 3 described the ways the vision of computing that shaped the Internet was taken up by segments of the counterculture within which personal computing was developed.⁷ Observing that these technological developments have been called, variously, the “information revolution,” “network revolution,” and “personal computer (PC) revolution,” Winner identifies in this pattern a narrative of social revolution through technology found in “patent office models of the good life”—a particular vision of the relation of technology to society—that has been prominent in the American popular imagination since the mid-19th century (1986:79, 98).

In his sharply critical essay, “Mythinformation,” Winner questions the widespread consensus that affirms “revolution” as the best metaphor for the sweeping changes associated with the “use of computers and advanced communications technologies.”

Those who employ it to talk about computers and society...appear to be making...serious claims. They offer a powerful metaphor, one that

⁷ That is, the vision shared by Vannevar Bush, J.C.R. Licklider, Douglas Engelbart, and others, of the computer as a communications tool for general, non-specialist use.

invites us to compare the kind of disruptions seen in political revolutions to the changes we see happening around computer information systems (Winner 1986:99).

Deciding to “take that invitation seriously,” Winner considers whether the revolution implied by the metaphor is political, and if so, what ends and ideals guide it; or whether it is, instead, like the Industrial Revolution. He finds writings on the computer revolution “conspicuously silent” about its ends and “consistently ahistorical” in viewpoint (1986:102). Yet, he observes that politics is nevertheless integral to the metaphor and narrative it bespeaks. “Of all the computer enthusiasts’ political ideas,” he writes, “there is none more poignant than the faith that the computer is destined to become a potent equalizer in modern society” (1986:112). “Taken as a whole,” Winner argues, “beliefs of this kind constitute what I would call mythinformation: the almost religious conviction that a widespread adoption of computers...along with easy access to electronic information will automatically produce a better world for human living” (1986:105).

Noting that, as myths generally do, this one “contains elements of truth,” Winner begins his critique by questioning the substance of “the faith” that information technologies are a “potent equalizer” in modern society. First, he argues that just because the shift from industrial to service economies depends on computerization does not mean computers will be a primary source of new high-skill, high-wage employment. On the contrary, he cites studies that suggest the “vast majority” of new jobs will come in menial, low-wage service occupations. Second,

he notes that, while “computer romantics are...correct in noting that computerization alters the relationships of social power and control,

they misrepresent the direction this development is likely to take. Those who stand to benefit most obviously are large transnational corporations. ...Other notable beneficiaries of the systematic use of vast amounts of digitized information are public bureaucracies...that would operate less effectively at their present scale were it not for the use of computer power. (Winner 1986:106-107)

Rather than automatically dissolving inequality and centralized power, the long-term consequences of computerization are far more complex. Winner contends that “empirical studies of computers and social change” suggest “an increase in power by those who already had a great deal of power.” Thus, while he acknowledges the possibility that “a society strongly rooted in computers and telecommunications systems could be one in which participatory democracy, decentralized political control, and social equality are fully realized,” he concludes that “if there is to be a computer revolution, the best guess is that it will have a distinctly conservative character” (1986:107).

Next, Winner examines the logic of “mythinformation,” that is, the “key assumptions” on which political ideas about the equalizing power of information technologies draw. He identifies these as: “(1) people are bereft of information; (2) information is knowledge; (3) knowledge is power; and (4) increasing access to information enhances democracy and equalizes social power.”⁸ Winner examines

⁸ In his analysis of “the cult of information,” Theodore Roszak (1987) echoes the arguments Winner sets forth in this essay.

each of these assertions critically. He points out that the first two share a premise that “mistakes sheer supply of information with an educated ability to gain knowledge and act effectively based on that knowledge;” and that the third assumes an “automatic, positive link between knowledge and power” that does not exist, particularly when power is meant “in a political or social sense.” “Of the many conditions that affect the phenomenon of power,” he notes, “knowledge is but one and by no means the most important.” Finally, Winner argues that the fourth assumption misconceives democracy as “first and foremost a matter of distributing information.” Having demonstrated the faulty logic and flimsy argumentation entailed in beliefs of mythinformation, Winner concludes that the formula “information = knowledge = power = democracy lacks any real substance.” (Winner 1986:108-113)

At this point, Winner acknowledges that while he has critiqued ideas about the power of information technology to bring positive social change as political theory, they are in fact beliefs of a different kind.

Despite its shortcomings as political theory, mythinformation is noteworthy as an expressive contemporary ideology. I use the term “ideology” here in a sense common in social science: a set of beliefs that expresses the needs and aspirations of a group, class, culture, or subculture. In this instance the needs and aspirations that matter most are those that stem from operational requirements of highly complex systems in an advanced technological society; the groups most directly involved are those who build, maintain, operate, improve, and market these systems. (Winner 1986:113)

Thus, Winner contends that the groups most closely connected with the imaginaries of the latest technological “revolution” are “consumer/builders,” or as I have called them, “producer/users” affiliated in communities of practice and use. Winner’s contention holds true in the case of the WELL, a primary hub through which the imaginary of online community and legacy of pragmatic materialism characteristic of American utopias (i.e., exemplary communities, demonstration models of the good life) propagated through Internet culture in the 1990s. Whether writers, programmers, freelance journalists, or Grateful Dead followers, people on the WELL were producer/users of the networked social media that were (a) their primary channels of association; and (b) central to their imagined collectivity. All this holds true for Cyborganic as well.

Winner’s critique of what I call “cultural narrative” and he calls ideology, or “mythinformation,” is more dismissive of the emic understandings and experiences of “computer romantics” and “enthusiasts” than cultural critique affords. He characterizes them as “idle fantasy,” “faulty,” “thoughtless,” “superficial,” facile, gullible, and ultimately self-interested ideology. As he clearly recognizes, the beliefs, imaginaries, and practices that inform daily life do not have the consistency of theory, and cannot be accurately understood as such. Without extending his emic judgments to my Cyborganic informants, I recognize that there were many members, myself included, whose self-understandings (“what am I up to”) partook of the “build a better mouse trap theory” of the good life. When crises of legitimacy leave

people disillusioned with political and civic institutions, they build the places and collectivities to which they aspire in everyday life. This is the gist of Castells' analysis of the defensive projects of cultural communes. Like the imaginaries that inform such projects, "build a better mouse trap" is not a theory. But neither, as I take up in the following section, can it be summarily distinguished as an "ideology" from the entrepreneurial and utopian social imaginaries discussed throughout this monograph. Before heading in that direction, however, I should conclude my third objective in light of Winner's insights and critique.

The vision of technology and social change Winner identifies as prominent, if not dominant, in the American popular imagination since the mid-19th century, has been invaluable to me in grounding contemporary discourses around new media genealogically. His critique of earlier celebratory discourses of "information revolution" is largely consistent with the one I have made of similar discourses celebrating "social networking" and "Web 2.0." It thus advances my third objective both empirically and theoretically, demonstrating that, however recent the technology, such discourses are nothing new nor are the transformations they celebrate necessarily social equalizers. The narrative of social transformation through technology Winner traces returns to the questions about social change with which I began. Specifically, it brings back the question inherent in the Cyborganic project about the power of small-scale communities to engage larger social institutions and structures. This is "the community question" addressed in chapter 1.

Whether it is asked in structural terms, or in terms of the social relations of everyday life, the concern and significance are the same—what effect can human-scale social forms, groups, and communities, have on the dominant social orders of their time? This is also the question raised by the popularity of social imaginaries such as *community* and Mead’s “small group of thoughtful, committed citizens.” Each is a different formulation of the same, very human question of how the small-scale constructions in which we house ourselves engage the larger structures and forces within which we have to make a living and make a life.

Social Change, Social Imaginaries, Social Theory

By my reckoning the balance of work on which I have embarked, the questions of social change, all address very similar terrain, but each at a different tilt. So, I begin by taking up my earlier point about Winner’s use of the term “ideology” because it brings us directly to the heart and soul of the matter. Taken together (i.e., in narrative form), Winner calls beliefs about the inherently equalizing and liberating power of information technologies “an expressive contemporary ideology” (1986:113). The definition he provides for the term is not so different from Taylor’s characterization of the social imaginary as shared “images, stories, and legends... common understanding that makes possible common practices” (2002:106). By calling these beliefs and metaphors “ideology,” Winner challenges their revolutionary claims, casting them as basically conservative, representative of the particular “groups most directly involved” in building and maintaining the systems

and media they celebrate. His use of the term *ideology* recalls for me Paul Ricoeur's admonition to preserve a tension in social imaginaries between ideology and utopia.

For Ricoeur those social imaginaries that drive a culture or affiliation toward "integration" or traditionally shared identities are "ideology;" while those that work toward rupture, difference, and discontinuity are "utopian." While "ideology repeats what exists by justifying it, and so gives a picture of what is... Utopia has the fictional power of redescribing life" (Ricoeur 1986:xxviii). In Ricoeur's "paradigm of imaginaries, ideology reaffirms and recollects a culture or affiliation's 'foundational symbols,' while it is also inextricably tied to utopia, which offers both a critique of ideology and various projections of possible social worlds" (Hasbrouck 2001:13). The tension Ricoeur preserves between ideology and utopia has been instructive for my analysis of social change and social action. Most significantly, his paradigm was a reminder that integrative and discontinuous social imaginaries may counter one another but are inextricably linked. This has served me as a guardrail against falling into many venerable debates of the past around ideology: structure versus agency, resistance versus accommodation, and so forth. As I said at the start, this is an ethnographic study focused on a micro-level analysis of the Cyborganic case. Thus, I engage the questions of social change bound in the Cyborganic project in the spirit of Goethe's "delicate empiricism," which approaches theory only in intimate involvement with the object (Benjamin 1977).

The findings of my case study show that Cyborganic can be understood both as a cultural commune and in the context of urban social movements. In making this analysis I have drawn on Castells theorization of “three forms and origins of identity building” and their “outcome in constituting society.”

Legitimizing identity: introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination vis à vis, social actors... *Legitimizing identity generates civil society*

Resistance identity: generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society... *identity for resistance* leads to the formation of *communes*, or *communities*...

Project identity: when social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by doing so, seek the transformation of overall social structure... *project identity*, produces *subjects*. (Castells 1997:8-9)

In the second volume of his trilogy on network society, Castells argues “a crisis of legitimacy” is sapping the “meaning and function” of “the institutions of the industrial era” and that in this context communal resistance becomes more significant as the basis for identity, meaning, and social action (1997:354).

I propose the hypothesis that the constitution of subjects, at the heart of the process of social change, takes a different route to the one we knew during modernity, and late modernity: namely, subjects, if and when constructed, are not built any longer on the basis of civil societies, that are in the process of disintegration, but as prolongation of communal resistance. (Castells 1997:11)

From this overview, it is clear that my analysis of Cyborganic as a cultural commune focused on resistance as the basis for identity construction and meaning within the

community. Yet, I also spoke of Cyborganic as a “project for life,” part of an urban social movement (“back to the city”), and touched on the “geek” identity constructed in conjunction with the early Web and spread of free and open source software. Given that Castells specifies resistance identities “can also be built by, and around, proactive social movements,” and that project identities can grow from resistance, there is nothing problematic in associating Cyborganic with both resistance and project identities (1997:356). The problem lies in understanding how well the community fits either categorization and whether legitimizing identities play any role.

Let me address these questions by going through the three forms of building meaning and identity in society that Castells delineates and considering the Cyborganic case in light of each.

- (1) *Legitimizing identity*: As a California Corporation, Cyborganic’s business connected the project to dominant institutions, administrative, and regulative orders (legal, financial) that certainly extended their logic and domination to social actors in many ways. Cyborganic members were connected individually to the same dominant orders as workers in the Web industry. Universities were another source of legitimizing identity in the community overall, both in terms of qualification and alumni networks. Yet none of these can be seen as generative of civil society in the Cyborganic case. Thus, I leave this form of identity aside and focus on the other two.

(2) *Resistance identity*: As an intentional community, a cultural commune, Cyborganic originated in and took the form of a resistance identity. Though it differs markedly from the fundamentalist and nationalist communes Castells examines, and, if anything, opposed, or re-imagined “traditional values of God, nation, and the family,” Cyborganic nonetheless drew on traditional values and imaginaries of local community, neighborhood, and the City, that is, “territorial identities” (1997:60-64, 356). However, Cyborganic members do not seem to have occupied positions or conditions of devaluation or stigma, unless their youth and recent entry into the job market and professions be counted as such. Castells has named the separatist tendencies of cultural communes “the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded,” but Cyborganics maintained a high degree of “reciprocal communicability” with the dominant orders (1997:9). They were not excluded, and did not entirely exclude, dominant institutions and ideologies. They did not reject dominant narratives of technology, “garage start-ups,” and “IPOs.” They did not establish their community at a remove, but congregated instead in SOMA, San Francisco’s revitalized urban zone. Nothing in Castells’ theory requires exclusion: resistance identities may be voluntary, but Cyborganic shows an interesting variance suggesting that in contemporary society even the “included” require havens from the large-scale, global forces of flow.

- (3) *Project identity*: Considering whether Cyborganic also built a project identity focuses most directly on my final question of social change. During the 1990s, in conjunction with the rise of the Internet industry and open source movement, a new geek identity came together on the Web: it descended from the four-layer, pre-Web, Internet culture, but was influenced, as well, by popular culture, the rave scene, and other “Generation X” subcultural lifestyle phenomena (e.g., in terms of sexuality, recreational drug use, body decoration, music consumption and production, and such). In contrast to the hacker identity most associated with pre-Web Internet culture, geeks are not all programmers (“coders”) but enthusiasm for, and knowledge and mastery of, computing technologies remains the basis of this identity. In this way, geeks represent the extension of the Internet and forms of techno-sociality developed there in the 1970s and 80s into all arenas of life. Networked social media, which other than telephone-based networks (BBSes), had been largely confined to institutional and occupational settings, came out into the world at large, into homes and lives in new ways, on new bases (i.e., social, recreational, personal). As the Internet moved beyond the community of technical scholars within which it originally developed, its producer/users, too, became more diverse, less focused on the underlying protocols, and more on the production and consumption of media. Like “hacker,” “geek” is a status identity associated with technical prowess and connection to “old sk00l” (old school), Internet culture. The open source movement did much to promote the

geek identity. With many wider initiatives applying open source practices and imaginaries to creative work other than computer software (e.g., Creative Commons, MedCommons), it represents the mostly likely avenue through which geeks might effect transformations of overall social structure. While Cyborganic was intimately bound in the creation and extension of geek identity on the Web, and members individually sought social change, “transformation of overall social structure” was not a common goal of the Cyborganic project. One indication of this conclusion is the fact that many informants have indicated in the last few years that “Web 2.0” represents the realization of what they were working to create. There has been little organized resistance to the advertising-supported model derived from broadcast media, which instead has been generally embraced as a source of legitimacy and revenue. Assessing project identity clearly depends on identifying what the project was. In the case of Cyborganic’s project to build an exemplary community, my conclusion is that resistance, rather than the project, formed the basis of identity and collective action.

Cyborganic’s basis in resistance was one clear limitation on the power of the community to effect overall social change: in terms of tensions and paradoxes expressed in the project for life; and of reciprocal communication and coordination with larger social forms outside the commune. Resistance identity was the limit of the community, quite literally, a limit none of Cyborganic’s many proactive social

projects came up against—except through their connection to the larger Internet culture, for example in the organized challenge mounted against the Communications Decency Act of 1996 that was led by the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Even the dramatic reach of the Tibet online initiatives took place through channels of resistance, people organized primarily as volunteers, rather than subjects and citizens.

As I said in preface to this ethnography, the story of Cyborganic is a story about the productive power of community, in particular, of intentional communities mobilized in conscious projects of self-creation. But it is also a story of constraints and limitations on this power vis-à-vis the larger social structures, cultural forces, and “real issues of our time.” In the Cyborganic project the issue, the *contested terrain* was everyday life itself. The practices, discourses, imaginaries, and values of the community worked, in Castells’ terms, to reassert “the space of places”—and its attendant experiences, meanings, and logic—within the “space of flows” (1996:378). In the terms of Habermas (1987), the project aimed to integrate lifeworld and system so that making a living and making a life were mutually re-enforcing practices connected in a meaningful frame—a social imaginary. Cyborganic’s project for life was innovative in imaging and building new forms of techno-sociality that its members carry on to this day in dozens of spore communities and projects. Yet, in terms of constituting society or subjects, this is politics by other means, argument by example, by technology. It is also supremely bourgeois and bohemian in the sense of

creating a new style of life, rooted in a creative calling and countercultural status identity. As a project for life in a social order dominated by work, Cyborganic did not turn away or close itself off from the mainstream altogether. Rather, through a symbiotic set of entrepreneurial and utopian practices and social imaginaries, its members sought in the countercultural, New Communalist mode to build and harness the power of networked social media in a pragmatic and highly creative, communitarian experiment—a project for life.