Homesteading on a Superhighway

How the Politics of No-Politics Aided
an Authoritarian Revival

Perhaps the feudal power structure of platforms for online communities could have stayed there, contained and cordoned off in virtual space. Democratic politics has long coexisted with nondemocratic workplaces and patriarchal families. The democracy of ancient Athens coincided with slavery. But virtual habits spread to other quarters of the social order. Online spaces became training grounds for other spaces. The politics of virtual life have poured over into the politics of almost everywhere else.

In the mid-1990s, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron published their warning about "the Californian ideology" poised to dominate the early internet: a faith that greater volumes of information and connection, fueled by capitalism, would produce a flourishing democracy. Technology could end the old partisanship of right and left through entrepreneurs "believing in both visions at the same time."[1] Silicon Valley CEOs continue to proclaim this gospel today, even as the parades of platform scandals make them do so a little more quietly. They preach that artificial intelligence will resolve the conflict of labor and capital by automating jobs. Cryptocurrency enthusiasts herald a new order in which markets can replace monetary policy. Yet the humans glaring intensely into Californian-designed devices have somehow become more polarized than we have been in recent memory. Resurgent autocracies ride Californian software into prominence and power, while democratic norms veer into precipitous decline.

The agenda of this chapter is to revisit the politics of no-politics that Barbrook and Cameron diagnosed—the culture that, according to Fred Turner, "turned away from political action and toward technology."[2] The original formulation of the Californian ideology outlined a certain kind of political economy, a social and

economic liberalism capable of assailing industrial policy while tacitly relying on it. Here I turn from political economy to the micropolitics of everyday online life: how implicit feudalism encoded certain imaginations of social order into software designs, which users far from California have decoded into a neo-feudal politics.[3] I argue that the Californian ideology inscribed the habits of homesteading—a legacy so familiar, nostalgic, and violent in the American West—into the practice of online communities. Everyday experience with Californian technologies has thereby contributed to hollowing out the rudiments of democratic culture, especially the skills and habits of accountable association. These systems have aided in generating new breeds of world-historical authoritarianism. To change course, therefore, instruments such as legislation and foreign policy may be inadequate; securing a more democratic future also requires fresh attention to how online spaces organize, constrain, and enable everyday politics.[4]

My argument emerges from divergent voices and fragmentary scenes. I build on earlier critical chronicles of Californian times and places, such as those of Adam Curtis, Joy Lisi Rankin, and Fred Turner, along with intrusions from worlds away.[5] This is a story of deep mediatization, in which media become inseparable from the practice of social life and the production of culture. Throughout, I pay particular notice to cases of emergent religiosity, following Kathryn Lofton's attention to "how religion manifests in efforts to mass-produce relations of value."[6] This is because the voices I turn to repeatedly articulate or elicit diverse religious sensibilities—not a uniform religion of any sort but a cluster of interrelated appeals to transcendent forces. These appeals appear to function as mediations between macro and micro scales of social life.

Even as I begin with the Californian ideology at the center of this discussion, I decenter it. Silicon Valley, or some hegemonic subset of it,[7] has encoded its values in technologies now used the world over, but adopters have decoded meanings very much their own, which become new encodings in turn. Part of what the ideology has excelled at is disowning its history and progeny alike, an amputation I hope to deny it.

HOMESTEAD AND HOMEPLACE

Founded in 1985, The WELL became a text-only gathering place for a mixture of intellectual seekers, technology enthusiasts, and Grateful Dead fans that had cultural influence far greater than its membership numbers, in part by giving free accounts to journalists. Among bulletin-board communities of the time, it was rare in both its aspiration of achieving a viable business and the extent of its visibility in the popular press. On both counts, it served as a decisive bridge from the era of hobbyist online spaces to the commercial internet that Silicon Valley would produce.[8]

FIGURE 5.

Howard Rheingold subtitled his 1993 book of reportage on The WELL *Home-steading on the Electronic Frontier*. He did not initially develop the meaning of *homesteading* beyond the subtitle's implication that it described his newfound virtual homeland. In the book's 2000 edition, Rheingold refers to the term as "obsolete and anachronistic," a relic of a "pioneer culture" since lost to the internet's mass adoption and commercialization.[9] Yet Patricia Nelson Limerick has shown that

the conquest of the western United States—the source of the "homesteading" and "frontier" metaphors on which Rheingold relies—is an "unbroken past" rather than a finite era that ended with a particular milestone of warfare or railroad construction. The frontier imaginary similarly persists online. As recently as the mid-2010s, the names of the first two major versions of the blockchain protocol Ethereum were Frontier and Homestead.[10] Rheingold's metaphors, then, have survived long after he and his fellow pioneers set out to explore, name, and demarcate the virgin territory of the "Net." Eventual commercialization was not the end of this process but its purpose all along—in digital space as much as on Indigenous lands.

"Western American history," writes Limerick, "was an effort to draw lines dividing the West into manageable units of property and then to persuade people to treat those lines with respect."[11] Homesteading became enshrined in US law with the first Homestead Act in 1862. It was wartime legislation, seeking the expansion of "free labor" against Confederate slavery, inviting Northern White settlers to populate Western territories based on made-up allotments of land deemed the appropriate size for nuclear families. Whereas Iberian dominions in the Americas parceled out land in large chunks to aristocrats, leaving subsequent inhabitants to demand disruptive waves of land reform, the homestead doctrine was to be a parceling-out of democratic ownership—democratic in the sense of personal, private, and widely available, but with a feudalism inscribed inside. Within the homestead, the male citizen was sovereign over his family, and through his dominion he became a democratic subject on his visits to town. Democracy thereby depended on the dual subjugation of the household and of the people whose territories preexisted its property lines. Part of the price of those homesteaded plots was the armed settlers' participation in denying existence to the Native peoples, for whom landowning was a foreign logic and whose livelihoods were often incompatible with the imposition of fences.

The homestead turns land into a bounded political object, encoding participants as the citizens who could be the basis of new states for the Union—although the land was not by custom or morality the US government's to give. Homesteading extended the earlier "doctrine of discovery," a theological-political principle that Christian settlers could assert title over non-Christian lands they conquered. Motivating settlement to expand the new United States required the mobilization of Evangelical Christian concepts like conversion and mission.[12] The thrall of democracy became a political gospel, calling the land into service and a new ethno-state into being.

Early internet products such as GeoCities and eWorld relied on metaphors of terrestrial and spiritual conquest to introduce their brands to customers still skeptical about online services. Digging a well—as in The WELL—was often necessary for permanent settlement and agriculture. Californian tech "evangelists" have aided startups in overcoming their initial nonexistence, asserting their impending reality with such confidence as to summon the necessary multisided markets and

network effects. For these platform barkers, too, the promise of democratizing access to the wonders of software is at the heart of the product pitch.

Barbrook and Cameron devoted considerable exegesis to the Californian aspiration of "Jeffersonian democracy"—a utopia that they predicted would produce a dystopia of "cyborg masters and robot slaves."[13] Their prediction was that history would repeat itself. A condition of possibility for American homesteading was Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase, the acquisition of a French land claim that became roughly the middle third of the contiguous United States. This land, for Jefferson, would be the basis for a democracy of landowners—those feudal lords in microcosm—whose political rights derived from their local absolutism, just as his statesmanship depended on the labor of people he regarded as his slaves. Similarly, the design of social software exhibits that paradoxical politics: democracy is supposed to somehow emanate from the feudal. As in the homestead, the two tendencies are enmeshed and codependent, despite their contradictions. Democracy is the goal, even if it is not recognizable in the means.

According to the design pattern of implicit feudalism, nearly all social-media software nudges users toward autocratic or oligarchic forms of community governance, lacking the means for even the most typical structures of associational life offline. Punishment for wrongdoing is censorship of one's posts or exile from a given jurisdiction. The encoding of implicit feudalism into social software does not outright determine users' behavior, but it does bear a kind of politics, just as homesteading encoded the politics of property and patriarchy on its land claims. Whether the servers sit in an office closet in the Sausalito houseboat district, like the Rheingold-era WELL, or among corporate data centers around the world, the structures of power take cues from their technological substrates.

The shortest, least specific of The WELL's "design goals" stated, "It would be self-governing . . . ."[14] But the ellipsis never quite resolved. Rheingold later wrote, "Technically, the early WELL was governed as a benevolent dictatorship."[15] It obtained early members from the dissolution of The Farm, a famous counterculture commune in Tennessee that began under the rule of its spiritual leader, Stephen Gaskin.[16] Farm veterans became The WELL's admins. Beneath them was a mélange of group-level, micro-dictator "hosts" and seemingly endless, structureless discussions referred to as "meta." In 1994, the platform was sold to a new owner; users had no say in the matter. The buyer, the shoe magnate Bruce Katz, attempted to ingratiate himself to his newly acquired community with what could serve as a pithy summary of the Californian ideology: "I believe in the power of this new emerging media and believe that it is one of the bright hopes that we have in reinvigorating a civil dialogue that is the foundation of a free democratic society."[17]

In search of real self-governing, Rheingold and other WELL dwellers later formed The River, an online community owned by a cooperative of its users. But it never flourished. The WELL itself was acquired by a group of users in 2012, opening the door for self-governance only after the heyday of its influence.[18]

Compare the homesteading tradition to another sort of home, the "site of resistance" that bell hooks has celebrated as a *homeplace*. She explains: "Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts."[19]

Those who could not leave an oppressive society could find liberation together, transforming space and time, however constrained the homeplace might be by the world outside. The homeplace forms a counter-tradition to the homestead, a place of care and resistance, where power can be shared in contrast to the domination of the broader society in which it occurs and from which it can never fully depart.

There are elements of the homeplace in many online spaces, in what people have made with the Californian ideology's products, constructing sites of resistance again and again, beyond the knowledge or comprehension of the technologists and executives. Homeplaces have become particularly important among marginalized groups, whose members can find each other online in ways unavailable before. Tech companies have celebrated when social movements arise on their platforms, but those movements are not theirs.[20] Solidarity forms through the affective affinities among participants, regardless of who is technically in charge of the platform or the forum. The intimacy, the care, the rebellion, the imagination—none are in the code, but homeplaces occur both because of and despite the designs of homesteading machines. The feudal power flows are never the whole story.

Homeplaces came and went on The WELL. But contra Rheingold, the homesteading didn't end when communities moved to corporate servers. Digital space is an ever-expanding sort of West; the land is as limitless as server capacity allows, and the enabling factories and rare-earth mines can remain far from view. Within each pocket of delineated social space, what virtual terrain a user claims becomes their castle. If you don't like it, you can always find another plot to call your own. On a group chat, leaving is only a button away. As the libertarian political philosopher Robert Nozick wrote, the only utopia is the ability to exit one utopia for another.[21]

Exit has assumed an exalted place in Californian thinking. The availability of exit became the implicit justification of implicit feudalism: if a community is exit-able, that is enough to call it democratic. At the level of business, exit is the goal investors expect their startups to aspire to, in the form of an acquisition or public stock offering.[22] At the level of culture, the annual Burning Man festival practices the art of temporary co-creation and departure. Elon Musk opposes unionization in his terrestrial factories, but once his companies make possible the exit of Mars colonization, he hopes to establish "direct democracy" there. Upon acquiring Twitter in 2022, faux-democratic performances became part of his dictatorial management style; he claimed he would abide by the outcomes of user polls on company policies, despite employees' warnings that Twitter polls were insecure and vulnerable to manipulation. From dreams of space travel to floating "seasteading" colonies in international waters, the Californian ideology longs for

homestead archipelagos, where feudal governance can finally flourish—justified by exit options, rebranded as democracy.[23]

Alongside the option to exit in the Californian imagination is the dream of scale.[24] Scale became an economic necessity. Silicon Valley's rise as a stronghold of consumer technology was a response to reductions in public investment through defense contracts. Early computer companies scrambled to develop an alternative source of money for expensive innovation, and they found one: venture capital, an investment strategy based on risky companies capable of dominating entire markets, so that the winners can pay for the far more plentiful losers. In 1979, VC investors got both a tax cut on their profits and a change to the federal "prudent man rule," enabling big pension funds to pour billions of dollars into these deals.[25] VC relies on business models seeking to achieve monopoly-level scale with near-zero-marginal-cost software. Implicit feudalism provided a social and technical blueprint to help founders and VCs maintain centralized control even across vast digital empires.

Politics can be slow, and its sensitivity to context interferes with limitless growth. Homesteading with implicitly feudal systems presented a way to bypass politics and keep scaling. If a particular entrepreneurial fiefdom doesn't work out, members can always exit, start another, and keep the network expanding. What Californian investors demand is clear: keep growing, consuming, colonizing, replacing—or cease to exist.

The Californian ideology's politics of no-politics encoded a social order into its tools and their surrounding institutions: the feudal permission-control logics of the technology at hand and the historical habits of homesteading. Barbrook and Cameron predicted the endgame as, rather than marvelous connection, "a deepening of social segregation."[26] Elite access to artificial intelligence and medical wonders would enable salvation by escape, a faithless religion of exit. From the comparatively minuscule WELL to Instagram, homesteading spread through the organizing patterns of daily life in digital spaces. Homeplaces may blip in and out of existence. But under the guise of an aspiration to "be self-governing," the more rigid powers of admins and CEOs alike are hard-coded to outlast the homeplaces. As Barbrook and Cameron suspected, this ideology would spread far beyond the platforms themselves, into mass politics.

A FEUDAL UNIVERSE

Soteriology is the branch of theology that deals with salvation, with whatever it is human beings should ultimately be striving for. A classic example is Anselm of Canterbury's eleventh-century treatise *Cur Deus Homo*, a feat of especially explicit feudalism. His account of a person's relationship to God extrapolates from the dominant political relationship of Anselm's eleventh-century world: subject and lord.[27] The relation is that of perfect hierarchy. God became human in Christ in

order to make the only sacrifice worthy of the ultimate Lord. Anselm wrote the book as archbishop of Canterbury, a position that would have put him in frequent contact with the top of the feudal power structure, and that made him responsible for justifying the structure to its massive underclass. His local politics translated into his cosmic order. To be saved is to inhabit that order fully. The spiritual and political orders co-create each other.

The Californian ideology has a soteriology of its own. Barbrook and Cameron describe the Californian endgame as the parallel dreams of an "electronic marketplace" and an "electronic agora":[28] a frictionless economy and limitless speech that, if society accepts them, would wipe away the troubles of the analog world in a flood of true democracy. The flows of online life, that is, were to be vehicles for a kind of bloodless revolution, a salvation that investors could get richer by enabling.

A decade into the twenty-first century, the democratic prospects of social networks seemed real, especially as networked activists organized movements that unseated dictators in the Arab world and took on financial elites. But even then, the technical logic of implicit feudalism was shaping perceptions of the movements' politics.

One catalyst of the 2011 Arab Spring protests was the Facebook page "We Are All Khaled Said," created and controlled by Egyptian Google employee Wael Ghonim.[29] For Ghonim's role as the page's founder, the world press declared him the leader of the Egyptian uprising, although he lived outside the country and continually insisted that the movement was "leaderless." Later that year in the United States, the Occupy Wall Street protests exhibited similar contradictions. Veteran news anchor Dan Rather identified activist Priscilla Grim as "the real leader of this movement" because she happened to administer key social media accounts—a perplexing claim for a movement whose insiders, like those in Egypt, stressed their leaderlessness and used an offline, consensus-based assembly to make decisions.[30] Online activism was indeed instrumental for these movements, but the power structure of social media seemed to speak louder than the power structure articulated by activists themselves. In the streets and squares, activists were organizing through radically democratic processes, seeking to elevate direct participation over the representative systems that they denounced. But outsiders defaulted to the feudal logic of the protests' online spaces, assuming that technical workers were also movement leaders.

Before long, feudal systems gave rise to even more disruptive forms of feudal politics. The new religious movements are revealing. From the civil war following Syria's 2011 protests, combined with the failures of US-backed regime change in Iraq, came the Islamic State. It was not a Westphalian nation-state but a networked *umma*, a transnational community operating through the opt-in membership of hashtags and the imposition of absolutist order in its domains. As the Islamic State idea spread through brutal, viral videos and social-media groups, the Californian ideology's anything-goes social liberalism did not take hold. But the homesteading

did—in this case adapted to the frontier of a stateless war zone, an act of exit from the international order. The implicit feudalism of the networks decoded there into an archipelago of territorial feudalism.

Horrific spectacle has been only one side of the Islamic State's media output. Rather, as Marwan Kraidy points out, "a majority of official I.S. visual media releases focus on non-violent aspects of life in the Caliphate": "in terms of a socio-religious utopia, it articulated claims of a pure, authentic, and truly Islamic society unburdened by Western influence and local subversion, with images of the good life—premised on a puritanical vision of Sunni Islam—showcasing spectacular sunsets and Ferris wheels and showing contented-looking people—mostly men—shopping in markets, fishing in rivers, praying piously, conversing amicably."[31]

These were the images of inhabiting a salvific order, with a clerical sysadmin. The implicit feudalism of the network expressed itself in an organizational hierarchy. The founding caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, appeared publicly only in choreographed events designed for viral circulation, such as his 2014 proclamation of his alleged caliphate at the al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul, Iraq. The rest of the time, under his hegemonic absence, his ultimately fleeting regime portrayed itself with a virtual reality of ordinary life.

Meanwhile in the United States, the favored political party of Silicon Valley lost to Donald J. Trump, who turned Californian tools into his political home for movement building and then for governing. Alongside his presidency came the QAnon movement, a kind of digital gnosticism that blended Trumpism with Evangelical Christianity.[32] It produced devoted followers of a pseudonymous prophet, a government official named Q, who prophesied a salvific restoration of American society through a military coup and mass executions of the president's enemies. Trump's continued and unobstructed power would be assured. Before long, sympathizers won seats in Congress.

In the documentary *Q: Into the Storm*, director Cullen Hoback meanders to the conclusion that the author of Q's "drops" is Ron Watkins, the system administrator of 8chan, a website where Q posted. The same person rushing to get the servers back up during an outage, Hoback begins to suspect, also masterminded the apocalyptic movement. At critical instances, Q seems to have inside knowledge of the servers' workings. Watkins claimed to be in contact with the Trump White House surrounding the contested 2020 election; his powers as an admin brought him to the brink of participating in a political power grab. At the end of the film he seems to give up the disguise altogether, all but admitting to his dual role—a conjunction that further linguistic analysis has corroborated.[33]

Along with the CEOs of corporate social media who de-platformed Donald Trump in the last days of his presidency, Watkins represented a turning point. Earlier in the life of the Californian system, admins merely maintained the allegedly neutral platforms.[34] But now that story was giving way to regimes of platform diktat, handing all power to the admins. Trump soon created a social network of

his own. Starting with the feudal designs encoded into their systems, the minutiae of technical administration expanded to become coterminous with geopolitics.

Watkins does not appear to have had a specific policy agenda to promulgate; he performs the studied indifference of online trolling culture.[35] During Trump's reelection campaign, similarly, the Republican Party broke with past practice and did not issue a policy platform. The Californian politics of no-politics had taken hold, through a grasp on power—server power, executive power—that could operate on its own terms, not in service to any external commitments. The salvific promise of Q was to overcome democracy and install the order of a platform homestead in its place. As with the Islamic State, the movement born on decentralized networks adopted the organizational default that implicit feudalism promulgates.

Perhaps no one exemplifies the actual soteriology of the Californian ideology like Curtis Yarvin. A blogger and tech entrepreneur, Yarvin has had the audacity to apply the commonplace structure of startup companies to politics. The result is outright, explicit monarchism—along with racism only lightly disguised in dog whistles. Yarvin's benefactor has been the influential Silicon Valley investor Peter Thiel, who was also an outspoken supporter of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump advisor Steve Bannon has been a Yarvin reader, and Yarvin was reportedly in communication with the Trump White House.[36] But political trysts aside, the basic alignment was to be expected: a coup-inclined president who came to power by tweeting, a tech industry organized through monopoly power, and a technologist willing to dispense with the pious fiction that his industry's achievements somehow incline toward democracy.

Howard Rheingold had seen danger in online social media back in the early 1990s. "Whoever gains the political edge on this technology will be able to use the technology to consolidate power," he wrote.[37] Ephemeral bursts of protest continue to spread across networks, and some of these call for democracy still. But the most novel, persistent kinds of spiritual-political imaginaries that have arisen on Californian tools are teaching more feudal kinds of lessons, a salvation that comes from ceding all power to the sysadmin.

EVERYDAY FRACTALS

Writer and activist adrienne maree brown recalls posting, in March 2016, an invitation on Instagram: "I am inviting a small crew of women and gender nonconforming friends into an experiment with each other, to share daily portraits of ourselves in this private thread for a month as a liberation technology, and affirm each other's beauty. Interested?"[38]

Six people responded and joined her online homeplace. "What emerged," brown wrote a year later, "was a community, a safe space, that is still very active today." Her recollection, with glimpses of what ensued, comes in her guidebook for social-change movements, *Emergent Strategy*. Rather than offering grand
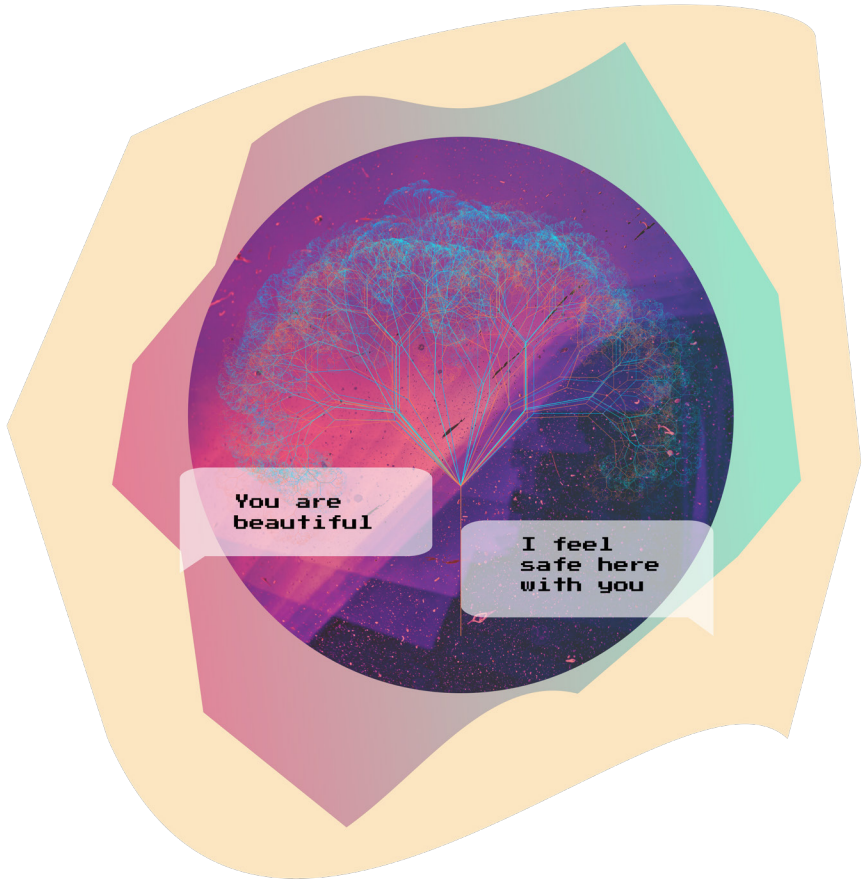
FIGURE 6.

strategies of conflict and policy demands, brown dwells in what Michel de Certeau called the "tactics" of everyday life.[39] She has been director of an important environmental justice organization, but readers looking for tips on institutional design and policy advocacy find instead the minutiae of intimate communities, along with a spirituality she draws from the novels of Octavia Butler and the pop-science of fungi and fractals.

Through this outlook, brown diagnoses the state of US democracy through the texture and practices of the everyday:

> We—Americans—don't know how to do democracy. We don't know how to make decisions together, how to create generative compromises, how to advance policies that center justice. Most of our movements are reduced to advancing false solutions, things we can get corporate or governmental agreement on, which don't actually get

us where we need to be. It was and is devastatingly clear to me that until we have some sense of how to live our solutions locally, we won't be successful at implementing a just governance system regionally, nationally, or globally.[40]

The everyday, then, becomes for brown the fundamental point of departure for social activists. "When we speak of systemic change, we need to be fractal," she writes. "Fractals—a way to speak of the patterns we see—move from the micro to macro level."

While Barbrook and Cameron placed the Californian ideology at the register of political economy, I have argued that Californian politics also reverberate in users' everyday experience with products. The everyday can be a site of enchantment, as for the Jesuit priest de Certeau, or of disenchantment, as when Henri Lefebvre details the deceptions in the life of a country church.[41] Ben Highmore summarizes de Certeau and his ilk like this: "What would a politics be like that emerged from the everyday, instead of one that was simply applied to the everyday?"[42]

Philip E. Agre was a precocious engineer and then a humanities professor before he abandoned academia for intentional obscurity in 2009. He is now credited with having predicted the looming regime of online surveillance—back when the Californian ideology feigned innocence about anything of the sort.[43] Like brown, he became fascinated by fractals and the relationship between the everyday and the world-historical, the minute and the immense.

Agre's dissertation at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory was called "The Dynamic Structure of Everyday Life." It includes an eighteen-page analysis of "walking to the subway," which serves to justify a shift in software design from the intentional to the improvisational. In the dissertation, as well as in a talk on the structures of everyday life while still a student,[44] Agre proposed the mathematical concept of the lattice as a gateway between the particular and the general, the local and the global, the routine and the complex. His lattice functions much like brown's fractals.

Almost two decades later, Agre returned to the lattice in an essay on political theory, alongside fractals and another long-standing keyword of his: *skills*.[45] Across his lattice structure, four dimensions of political skill form a network of intersections that cascade across society: vertical (from national to international), geographic (from local to global), institutional (from one institution to many), and ideological (from one commitment to networks of commitments). Along each dimension, skills that people develop in practice at small scales extend across larger scales of political life. A healthy society requires people exercising skills on all these dimensions. "The issue lattice is sufficiently complex," Agre writes, "that it will never emerge without high levels of political skill diffused throughout the society." While mass media and civics classes teach politics in terms of vaunted officeholders and halls of power, he held that lived politics depends much more on moving skillfully among the lattices.

Skills for Agre are both practical and mystical, a reorientation of all meaning-making as emanations from small acts of community. The epigraph of the book based on his dissertation is a medieval Zen dialogue. It begins:

> Joshu asked Nansen: "What is the path?"
> Nansen said: "Everyday life is the path."
> Joshu asked: "Can it be studied?"
> Nansen said: "If you try to study, you will be far from it."[46]

If there is a theory of salvation here, it comes through the friction of involvement, not electronic optimization. Technology must support the work of human politics, not replace it. Rather than flame wars, technologies might thereby encourage the art of consensus making, as brown teaches in *Emergent Strategy*. They might enable movements to persist and evolve, rather than disappearing into the next viral moment. If the dream of the Californian ideology is a world without politics, however, it stands to reason that the technology it generates would not teach political skills.

As the Californian ideology's anti-politics established itself on the West Coast, Agre was inverting it at MIT, calling for technology that invites people into developing skills through everyday politics. Agre concludes his essay "The Practical Republic"—the final essay listed on his faculty website before his sudden departure from public life—like this: "Technology is not central; what is central are the choices that we make, each of us, in laying claim to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in our own lives."[47]

The technology that we need is technology that does not take or demand credit. brown seems to forget about Instagram upon summoning her community there; the homeplace becomes the subject.

What else could developing political skills look like? Perhaps it is a classroom where students collectively decide how best to play the game SimCity—taking a master-of-the-universe interface design and adding to it an exercise in face-to-face democracy; perhaps it is thousands of people collectively deciding on actions in a live-streaming game.[48] It might look like those occupations of public spaces during the protests around the world in 2011, when activists learned and practiced consensus processes with masses of strangers at once, experimenting with a kind of democracy beyond the elected officials and corporate boards that they believed had failed them. People learned new hand signals and techniques of persuasion, how to facilitate an effective meeting and how to disrupt one if they needed to. Occupy Wall Street developed a website where participants could keep track of the schedule of assemblies and the text of proposals that would be discussed. Occupy activists in Wellington, New Zealand, encoded their governance practices into an app, Loomio, that has since been adopted by organizations and even governments far from their island.[49] Although Loomio began by mimicking Occupy-style processes, it has come to support a wide variety of techniques for coming to

agreement. Users can rank choices in order of preference, for instance, or invite volunteers to see who will actually implement a decision.

The platforms born in protest did not take their designs from a business model or technical convenience so much as from what their users were already doing offline. For Agre, likewise, cultivating political skills should precede the making of technology to support those skills. Recall Conway's Law, the notion that the designs of technical systems end up resembling the organizations that design them; to build anti-feudal systems, Agre would likewise stress the need to start by practicing anti-feudal interactions, wherever we find ourselves.

If a butterfly flapping its wings can cause a hurricane a world away, as the cliché goes, then anything could happen between a private thread on Instagram and a protest movement. When brown and Agre wield their fractals and lattices, they do so not with a comprehensive account of the causality. "Being a part of movements is complex work," brown writes. "It requires a faith."[50] With this kind of faith, and with everyday skills, brown and Agre reject the ultimate exit of Californian ambitions: the departure from bodily limits and social constraints. They refuse to regard technology as the angel of history, the divine agent, and instead insist that we are still just talking about how people relate to one another. Against feudal technology and the authoritarian revival it helped produce, the retort is not another technology, but the practice of political skills. If we honor those skills, perhaps designers will encode future technologies that nourish, rather than evade, everyday politics.

SUPERHIGHWAYS

In a bittersweet afterword to *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold recounts how the intimate homeplaces he experienced had become a matter of industrial policy. Al Gore, first as a US senator and then as vice president, had promoted the "information superhighway" as a market and geopolitical opportunity.[51] It was protocol infrastructure that government would build and set free into the world. Rheingold noted the derision that the "superhighway" moniker had attracted—hyperbole compared to the experience one had on dial-up modems in those days, although faint in comparison to the homesteads the internet would soon bring. Yet as democratic skills erode through the everyday politics of online life, confidence in the plausibility of democratic infrastructure has eroded too. This has opened an opportunity for everyday feudalism to deepen its influence on geopolitical imaginaries.

When I took a high-speed train between Hangzhou and Shanghai, I sent a video home to my kids. No train like that exists where we live in the western United States. The legacy of homesteads here developed into a politics that made the assertion of public transit over private property too costly. The mightiest feats of infrastructure we drive by—the dams, the rail bridges across valleys, the tunnels

through mountain passes—date to the 1930s or the early Cold War, the years when US president Franklin Roosevelt's "arsenal of democracy" was gaining strength.

Several years ago I had a long correspondence with a self-described Chinese student, who said she came to the United States to study and disagreed with something I had written in favor of democracy. She wrote: "China's achievements in human development are historically unprecedented. Under our system my generation has thrived, and is far more positive and forward-looking compared to our peers worldwide. There may be a 'perfect' model of democracy that you have in mind, but democracy as practised throughout most of history is best described as corrosive and sclerotic. One need only contrast the state of American and Chinese infrastructure to arrive at this conclusion." Two days later, she added: "Every inch of progress China had made resulted from an absolute, unequivocal rejection of democracy."[52]

Even those who claim the mantle of democracy appear to have come to similar conclusions. US platforms present themselves as the new arsenals of democracy; CEOs like Zuckerberg defend themselves against antitrust enforcement by arguing that their consolidated power is necessary to counter that of ascendant Chinese platforms.[53] This is a profound concession of democratic possibilities for the sake of expediency. But daily experiences with implicit feudalism in online life, as well as daily experience in countries whose democratic experiments have calcified, seem to insist on autocracy as an inevitability.

In China, autocratic order has a long history, always intertwined with social technology. For many centuries, emperors used technology to consolidate power—tracking the minutiae of production, exacting taxation—in ways European rulers could only dream of.[54] This order produced a discourse of "harmony," still a favorite word in Communist Party slogans.[55] Harmony is an article of Confucian faith, applied to assert cohesion against the lived experience of a society exploding into the overlapping complexities of markets, networks, and megacities. Autocrats aspire to produce the harmonious interplay of social roles among their subjects, though everyday harmony can eclipse even the autocracy. As Xiaobing Tang describes the outlook of writers in post-revolutionary China, "The emergent hegemony is no longer Ideology or Collectivity, but rather everyday life."[56] Ancient emperors ruled by their precision agronomy; now, implicitly feudal platforms and apps play that role. Under the fear of state crackdowns, the admins of Chinese social-media platforms and of their user communities act as subsidiary bureaucracies, protecting their right to exist by imposing their best guess of what harmony will allow.[57]

Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet introduced the concept of "everyday politics" in the context of research among Southeast Asian peasant farmers. What he observed is also salient across the global diaspora of Californian technology: "Everyday politics involves people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and

doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct."[58]

What might look like the opposite of politics, that is, may be upholding or unraveling the reigning regime, a "power of the powerless"[59] in which ordinary actions can bear world-historical freight. The everyday can thus become a site of resistance.

"THERE ARE ALTERNATIVES"

This chapter has offered a rereading of the Californian ideology's politics of no-politics beyond the earlier focus on political economy—from the logics of homesteading and feudalism in ordinary online spaces to their role in enabling the rise of national authoritarianism. I suggest that everyday online practices at least partly tell the story of broader political shifts underway. However, I share Barbrook and Cameron's conviction that "there are alternatives."[60] Just as they point to the French state's Minitel system as an alternative political economy for networks, I find that alternatives lie in the everyday politics of hooks's homeplace, of brown's deliberate interdependence, and of Agre's political skills. Producing more democratic and humane politics at large scales requires attention to the daily political practices on networks, as well as to what software designs might encourage or discourage.

Politics is no autonomous category in human minds and worlds; for that reason I have sustained attention on the diverse forms of religious imagination that have aided the global decoding and re-encoding of Californian tools. Frontier evangelizing, apocalyptic Islam, Confucian harmony, and the faith that fills a homeplace all inscribe their meanings on network spaces. These imaginaries are a reminder that, along with political skills, the production of alternatives must involve dimensions of ritual, devotional commitments, and structures of belief.

Anselm of Canterbury lived in a certain kind of feudal world, a world whose daily interactions of power and deference informed his view of the spiritual order. An online world composed of implicitly feudal systems has similarly informed its inhabitants. Through daily practice, they have learned political skills more oriented toward fixed authority than democratic accountability. The skills one has are the skills one can imagine using. To cultivate different skills, therefore, is a task of not only technological design but also of imagination and spirit.

FIGURE 7.

A People's History of Twitter

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When Elon Musk acquired the social-media platform Twitter for $44 billion in October 2022, it was a stark reminder to many people that our online civic spaces are commodities that can be bought and sold. Especially when Musk's early weeks came with scorched-earth layoffs and disorienting policy changes (including ones that targeted journalists), users began fleeing to other platforms.

Back in 2017, I was part of a team that created a shareholder proposal at Twitter, aiming to decommodify the company by establishing a framework for its users to become its owners. Five years later, after Musk's takeover, we began experimenting with a different strategy: imagining what it would be like if the platform had become a common good in service of the global public sphere. We teamed up with former Twitter workers to reflect on the kind of platform they had hoped to build at the company. We also learned from people who had led and studied citizen assemblies for governments. How might a representative assembly of Twitter users work? What kinds of proposals might it make? Who would have to agree to them if the users were in charge?

Before establishing some kind of shadow government to devise an alternative future of Twitter, which Musk has since renamed X, we decided to start by grounding ourselves in the past. We organized an online event in March 2023 called "A People's History of Twitter," which attracted nearly two hundred technologists, journalists, activists, and other users. We also released an online chatbot that people could use to share their experiences with Twitter over the years. This collective history provides a foundation for articulating expectations about what should come next—what people have loved about Twitter, and what they hated, what the company did right, and how it betrayed us. These questions matter, whether Twitter users decide to stay or go to another platform.

The People's History included accounts of people finding jobs, new friends, spouses, antiracist organizing, queer communities, fashion, and news about niche topics. They experienced Twitter as a place of self-expression, of finding a voice and an audience they didn't have before. Many also described having distanced themselves from it more recently. In that sense, the People's History served as a kind of wake, a joyful way of mourning something that, at least in some respects, had died.

Governance is not just about holding power and making decisions. Before a community can begin to self-govern, it needs to see itself as a community—through participants telling stories about themselves and having shared experiences. A People's History of Twitter was an attempt to begin that process, to initiate people's transition from being users of someone else's platform to being full citizens of the networks they live by.