

# The Politics of the Whole Circa 1968—and Now

—  
Fred Turner

“We are as gods and we might as well get good at it.” With those immodest words, multimedia artist and budding entrepreneur, Stewart Brand, introduced one of the defining publications of American counter-culture, the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Chockablock with pictures of everything from books on how to build a geodesic dome to descriptions of a top-of-the-line Hewlett Packard calculator, the *Catalog* presented a banquet of goods so rich and various that it was indeed fit for an emerging generation of god-like consumers. With its front-cover image of the Earth seen from outer space, the *Catalog* reminded readers that American technology had enabled the individual citizen to see the globe itself from a point of view once available only to divinities. And inside the book, Brand reminded readers that each of them was now the center of their own universe: “[A] realm of intimate, personal power is developing—power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested,” wrote Brand. “Tools that aid this process are sought and promoted by the WHOLE EARTH CATALOG.”<sup>1</sup>

Today the *Catalog* may look a bit archaic, even quaint, but its faith in the divine powers of the tool-enabled individual pervades our lives. If anything, the laptop-wielding citizens of industrialized nations have em-

braced the *Catalog*'s social vision to a degree its founders could have only dreamed. For that reason, we need to revisit the *Catalog* and with it, the politics of holistic consciousness circa 1968. In the pages of the *Catalog*, we can glimpse a series of techniques by which we organize public discourse today, online and off—techniques such as aggregation, curation, and peer production. We can also explore a world whose citizens have largely turned away from the traditional political mechanisms of law making and institution building toward the building of communities based on shared tastes and social networks.

In the late 1960s, this turn away from politics and toward peer-to-peer networking was meant to help expand human vision, to grant participants a glimpse of the whole systems of which they were a part, and so instill a sense of the divinity within each of them. Yet, they also had the effect of helping to bring the racism and sexism of mainstream America into the communes of the counterculture. Moreover, they did little to help the communes become stable, long-lasting communities—on the contrary, most communes in this period collapsed very rapidly. For decades now, the *Whole Earth Catalog* has been a beacon to information technologists seeking to build online communities and to ecologists seeking to promote awareness of global interconnections in the natural world. To the extent

<sup>1</sup> Stewart Brand, “Purpose,” in *Whole Earth Catalog*, ed. Stewart Brand (Menlo Park, CA.: Portola Institute, Fall, 1968), n.p.

that its politics and techniques grew out of communalism of the 1960s however, the *Catalog* should also be a warning.

### New Communalism and the Politics of Consciousness

To see why, we need to return to the moment just before the *Catalog* came into being. In the spring of 1968, Stewart Brand and his then-wife Lois found themselves living south of San Francisco and marveling as the long-haired denizens of its Haight-Ashbury neighborhood streamed out of the city toward the high plains of Colorado and New Mexico. The hippie scene had been bubbling in the Haight for several years—long enough that tour buses full of out-of-towners had begun to roam the neighborhood. Race riots gripped Newark and Detroit, but in San Francisco, the summer of 1967 became the “Summer of Love.” Tens of thousands of young people flocked to the city, sleeping in parks, and nearly overwhelming the city’s social services.

To many who had been living in the Haight for years, the chaos of that summer suggested it was time to move on. One after another, the Brands’ friends began heading out to rural areas to form or join alternative communities with names like Morning Star, Drop City, Libre, and New Buffalo. Some formed urban communes as well. Together, they represented the largest wave of commune building in American history.<sup>2</sup> They also carried with them a unique political vision. In popular memory, the American counterculture was a single movement, one in which young people marched against the Vietnam War in the morning and drove out to the commune in the afternoon. While this did sometimes happen, the counterculture actually included two very different groups. For the students and activists of the New Left, accomplishing social change in America meant engaging in politics. Marches, manifestos, and meetings were their tools. For the hippies of what I will call the New Communalism movement, the mechanisms of politics had already proven themselves

bankrupt. In their view, rule-making and bureaucratic procedure had helped empower psychologically fragmented bureaucrats, men who could not see that the wars they waged and the atomic weapons they built threatened the planet as a whole.

To challenge these bureaucrats and so perhaps to save the planet, the New Communalists turned toward what counterculture chronicler Theodore Roszak called at the time a “politics of consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> As Roszak put it, he and others believed that “building the good society is not primarily a social, but a psychic task.”<sup>4</sup> If mainstream America sought to transform the globe with massive military technologies, the New Communalists would seek to transform themselves, with smaller, more personal technologies, from the tools they used to build their gardens to the LSD they took to liberate their psyches. On the communes, they hoped they could become the kind of psychologically whole people who, in turn, could see the whole of the global system, natural and manmade alike. With their minds attuned to one another and to the invisible laws of the universe, they believed they could turn away from the hierarchies of the corporation and the cold, glass towers of the megalopolis and embrace collective decision-making within the warmth of their own hand-built homes. From there, spirits aglow, they could build a kind of polity that could by its example save the globe as a whole from military or industrial annihilation.

This was the sense that Brand aimed his catalog at the “Whole Earth.” At one level, the *Catalog* was simply an index of goods. In its first, 1968 edition it featured a little more than 130 items arrayed over sixty-one pages and in seven sections:

- × Understanding Whole Systems
- × Shelter and Land Use
- × Industry and Craft
- × Communications
- × Community
- × Nomadics
- × Learning

2 In the 200 years before 1965, historians believe that Americans established between 500 and 700 communes. Between 1965 and 1972, Judson Jerome, one of the most reliable contemporary sources, suggested that perhaps as many as three quarters of a million Americans lived in a total of more than 10,000 communes. See Hugh Gardner, *The Children of Prosperity: Thirteen Modern American Communes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); William Hedgepeth, *The Alternative: Communal Life in New America* (New York: Macmillan, 1970); Judson Jerome, *Families of Eden:*

*Communes and the New Anarchism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974); Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1972); Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Communes: Creating and Managing the Collective Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); Foster Stockwell, *Encyclopedia of American Communes, 1663–1963* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1998).

3 Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), 51.

4 *Ibid.*, 49.

The *Catalog* did not actually sell the goods in its pages. Rather, it served as what Brand called an "evaluation and access device."<sup>5</sup> In each issue, Brand himself and the *Catalog's* readers recommended goods that fit the seven categories and told readers where to acquire them. Between twice-annual issues of the *Catalog*, Brand also released a Supplement filled with news of communal gatherings, interdisciplinary conferences, and yet more useful tools.

Both the tools on offer and the strategy of retailing access to information rather than goods reflected the New Communalist readership's politics of consciousness. When Brand started the *Catalog*, many of his imagined readers were heading out to set up rural communities—towns in which they hoped to farm, to build their own houses, to make their own clothes. You might think that they would need the most material of tools—hoes and axes, saws and tractors. The *Catalog* did indeed list such things, but by far the greatest numbers of items in its pages were books. The most prominent of these were books on cybernetics and the whole-systems thinking of Buckminster Fuller. For the New Communalists, social change began not with discussions of land rights or the mechanics of government, but with the collective tuning of citizens' senses toward the cybernetic understanding that the whole, individual person, the whole of human society, and the whole of nature nested inside one another like Russian dolls. Tractors and hoes simply helped a person farm; books on "Whole Systems" granted readers glimpses of their place on the planet and so, in theory at least, a rationale for making new political choices.

At the same time, by asking readers to recommend goods, Brand turned the *Catalog* itself into a model of peer-to-peer collaboration. Readers could not simply acquire what they saw; they could shape it, and they could build individual reputations while they did so. They could also see the shape of the movement of which they were a part. In the late 1960s, before the Internet was publicly available, the *Whole Earth Catalog* served as a map of tools for the transformation of consciousness,

but also of an emerging network of communes. By noticing who had recommended a product, a reader could also learn a bit about the countercultural possibilities in the recommender's part of the country. In other words, the *Catalog's* readers provided each other not only with access to tools, but with themselves, as tools, for turning themselves into networked individuals, aware of the social, technological, and natural systems within which they lived.

The appeal of this system was extraordinary: by 1971, the *Catalog* had ballooned to 438 pages, sold more than a million copies, and won a prestigious National Book Award. However, the seeming openness of the *Catalog's* cybernetic embrace of the whole, masked a series of exclusions within its pages and a deeply conservative strand within the politics of consciousness. Although published during the same years that the Black Panthers<sup>6</sup> could be seen rallying in Oakland, California just an hour north of the *Catalog's* offices, virtually no people of color appeared in its pages.<sup>7</sup> The *Catalog* listed Native American moccasins, and Brand himself sported a buckskin-fringe jacket and top-hat-with-feather in public events at the time. But apart from Brand's wife Lois, whose mother was a member of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians,<sup>8</sup> Native Americans themselves almost never appeared. Likewise, the few women who appeared in its pages tended to be depicted in the most conventional of roles: sitting in on meetings watching men speak, or as part of a male-female couple living on a commune, or giving birth. Moreover, although the Vietnam War was raging at the time, the *Catalog* paid it almost no heed. On the contrary, in one of the very few references to the war at all, the *Catalog* recommended a guide to military surplus gear. Clearly, even though Brand himself had served in the Army several years earlier, the editors of the *Catalog* did not imagine that their primary readership included the working-class men who were unable to escape the draft and who were fighting in Southeast Asia. For the New Communalists, Vietnam was very far away indeed.

<sup>5</sup> Stewart Brand, "Function," in *Whole Earth Catalog*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Editor's note: Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party (originally the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense) on October 15, 1966 in Oakland, California. It achieved national and international notoriety through its involvement in the Black Power movement and American politics of the 1960s and 1970s. First circulation of the organization's official newspaper *The Black Panther* was in 1967. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Panther\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Panther_Party) [accessed February 24, 2013].

<sup>7</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of race in the *Whole Earth Catalog*, see Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

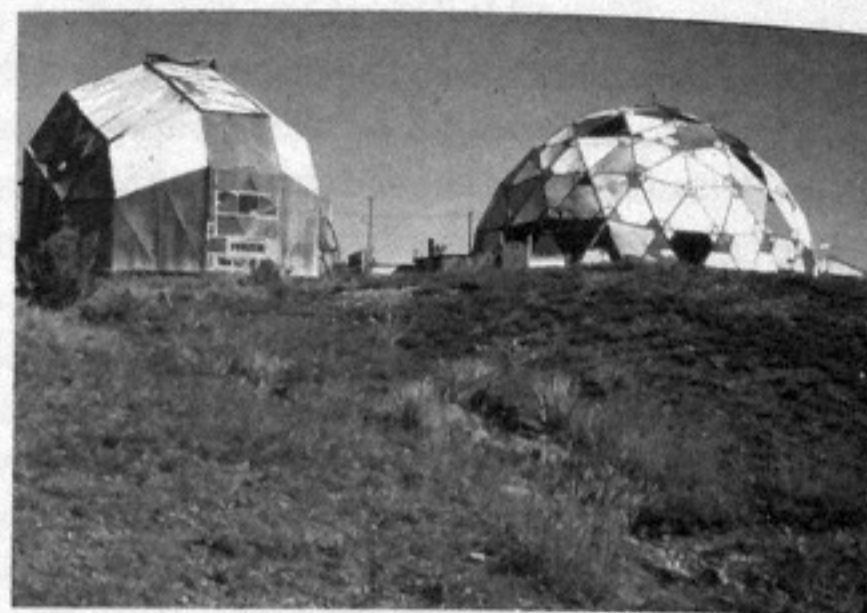
<sup>8</sup> Editor's note: The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians is a federally recognized Native American tribe in Michigan. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand\\_Traverse\\_Band\\_of\\_Ottawa\\_and\\_Chippewa\\_Indians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Traverse_Band_of_Ottawa_and_Chippewa_Indians) [accessed February 24, 2013].

In this respect, the *Catalog* mirrored the communities it served. The vast majority of New Communalists were young, white, and well educated. More than a few communes survived on the proceeds of trust funds. But the *Catalog* also reflected the politics of consciousness. That politics aimed to free its adherents from the psychological and social rigidity of bureaucracy. Peter Rabbit, the cofounder of the Drop City commune, put it this way: "There is no political structure in Drop City. Things work out; the cosmic forces mesh with people in a strange complex intuitive interaction [...] When things are done the slow intuitive way the tribe makes sense."<sup>9</sup> In the context of Cold War America, this shift from a politics of explicit negotiation over rights, responsibilities, and rules to one of intuition and "cosmic forces" represented a powerful attempt to reintegrate everyday life. At communes like Drop City, your home could be your workplace, your colleagues could be your friends and family, and you could live your life in full awareness of and respect for the natural systems of which it was a part—at least in theory. At the same time however, the turn to consciousness as a basis for social organization had the effect of stripping many communes of the tools they needed to negotiate the equitable distribution of money, labor, time, and other resources.

Without such tools, communes fell back on the charisma of individual leaders. They also turned to the unspoken structures of culture, of racial distinction and traditional gender roles, as sources of order. Rules became unspoken; racial others became invisible; women donned the long dresses of prairie wives and hauled water from wells for their men. Brand's former wife Lois recalls that when they visited communes with their *Catalog*, Stewart and the men would gather to make important decisions, while she and the other women tended to the children and "put the Clorox in the water to keep everyone from getting sick."<sup>10</sup> Gender relations on rural communes closely resembled those in the 1950s Maryland suburb where she had grown up, she explained.

Some communards also echoed the racial insensitivity more commonly associated with mainstream, white America. Explicit racism was not welcome anywhere in the New Communalist world, but implicit racism

suffused it. The New Communalists rarely built their communities on plains empty of inhabitants. Rather, they often built their almost exclusively white settlements near comparatively impoverished communities of color. In Taos, New Mexico, for instance, a number of communes sprung up amid longstanding Chicano and Native American communities, setting off a culture-



Richard Kallweit  
Drop City  
circa 1966 | © Richard Kallweit | Courtesy Tom McCourt

clash of epic proportions. As one long-time Mexican American Taos resident told several white commune visitors at the time, "You see the scenery. We see a battleground."<sup>11</sup> To the citizens of Taos, communal preoccupation with achieving a global consciousness via drug use, dome-building, and extramarital sex smacked of an alien invasion, not liberation. Where did the New Communalists' blindness to the politics of race and gender, of class and geography come from? In part, certainly from personal lived experiences as largely middle- and upper-class white Americans, but also from the politics of consciousness and the cybernetic ideology of holism within it. By imagining each other as elements in a whole system, the New Communalists focused not on engaging and accommodating differences, but on *erasing* them. They sought a social order predicated on the principle that, as one community's slogan put it, "We Are All One."<sup>12</sup> In the process, they turned away from the need

<sup>9</sup> Peter Rabbit, quoted in Gardner, *The Children of Prosperity*, op. cit., 36.

<sup>10</sup> Lois Brand, Quoted in Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, op. cit., 76.



Richard Kallweit  
Drop City  
circa 1966 | © Richard Kallweit | Courtesy Tom McCourt

to build unity among individuals and groups with very different life experiences. What is more, as they turned toward tool use, and so, also, consumption, as the mechanisms by which they would pursue their mystical unity, the New Communalists leaned ever more on the privileges of their class. If achieving oneness meant buying and using the right tools, well, they could afford them.

### The Politics of Consciousness Today

In the pages of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, and in the New Communalist movement generally, the effort to see the world as a single system began as an attempt to find alternatives to Cold War social conservatism, American militarism, and the predations of heavy industry. Ironically, by making consciousness the basis of community, the New Communalists found themselves replicating the racism, the sexism, and even the class divisions of mainstream America. To the extent that they embraced consumer goods as tools for personal transformation, they re-embedded themselves in precisely the consumer society they claimed to be fleeing. Slowly but surely, the New Communalists came to a new and narcissistic understanding: the world was indeed a whole system, as was each individual within it. To the extent that the life of the individual mirrored the life of the planet, it was all too easy to believe that

making small changes in one's belief system, or dress, or patterns of consumption changed the planet as a whole. It was, in short, all too easy to believe that one's intimate personal surroundings were in fact the whole Earth.

This narcissism plagues us today. In part, this is so because the *Whole Earth Catalog* has had an outsized influence on our understandings of information technology, ecology, and the power of peer-to-peer networking. In the decades after Brand created the *Catalog*, he and members of his staff went on to help found one of the first and most influential virtual communities, the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (or WELL); an influential corporate consultancy, the Global Business Network; and even the self-proclaimed voice of the digital revolution, *Wired* magazine. Brand and members of his extensive network remain influential voices in debates on ecology, technology, and community around the globe.

However, it would hardly be fair to lay responsibility for the politics of consciousness or the attitudes toward technology that underlie it at the door of the *Whole Earth Catalog* alone. On the contrary, the tactics that Brand deployed in the *Catalog*—peer production, aggregation, and curation—became models for digitized processes that have dramatically enlarged and diversified the membership of the global public sphere. At the same time however, the *Catalog* and the communities it served should remind us of the hidden costs of putting our hopes for social change in the technology-empowered, expressive individual and the ideology of holism. We inhabit a time in which media technologies have made it remarkably easy to imagine that we can see and access a whole globe's worth of things, and ideas, and people from our armchairs. Marketers encourage us to see our digital devices as tools for personal transformation. With our cell phones in hand, we can wander the globe, seeking out companions for our individual adventures. Never mind the minerals mined to produce our phones, nor the social and ecological cost of that mining. Never mind the carbon we spew into the atmosphere as we board our jetliners, or for that matter, as the citizens of Third World nations dismantle our worn out computers and melt the casings from their wires. Equipped with the notion that we

11 Quoted in Hedgepeth, *The Alternative: Communal Life*, op. cit., 72

12 "We Are All One" was the mantra of The Us Company (or USCO), a performance art troupe with which Brand spent considerable time. See Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, op. cit., 48–51.

are the centers of our individual universes and that our portable information technologies make that fact visible, we are free to ignore the radically unequal distribution of material resources and the actual, material, non-mystical condition of the planet.

In the late 1960s, the New Communalists transformed their lives into performances, hopeful expressions of the possibility of living in the awareness that every gesture matters, that the politics of the everyday are the politics of the globe and vice versa. The communities they built tended to collapse within a year or two of their founding and often sooner. In our time, many have begun to imagine that by taking to the Internet, by making contact with another and expressing a holistic understanding of their own place in the world, we can change our lives and the planet too. Yet, even as we gather and converse, the engines of industry and militarization grind on. We are hardly gods as far as they are concerned. What control their motions are not individuals or even networks, but institutions. Contrary to what marketers tell us today and to the dreams of the New Communalists as well, our lives are not the centers of the global system. The personal may be political, but it is hardly the whole of politics.