

A review of silicon valley imperialism by Erin McElroy

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Abstract

This review situates the book's contribution to work on the spatial divisions of digital labour, and interrogates its discussions of the fantasies and gendering of technofascism.

Keywords

Fantasy, spatial divisions of labour, techbro, masculinity, technofascism

This is a fascinating, provocative book, and one I'd place alongside a number of others for its mapping of the 'geography' of digital geographies beyond the locations of Google and Amazon and their servers – in Silicon Valley or Silicon Glen or Silicon roundabout – to locations in Eastern Europe, Africa and South America (see for example Anwar and Graham, 2022). Importantly, none of that work makes digital geographies global in the way that, say, Bratton's (2016) notion of planetary computation does by arguing that digital networks are encompassing the globe and turning it all into The Stack. Instead, they establish a complex, relational human geography of difference and connection (cf Gabrys, 2018). In the case of *Silicon Valley Imperialism*, this means developing a strong political-economic analysis of the extension of Silicon Valley tech companies into Romania, tracking for example spatial divisions of labour, outsourcing, property acquisition and company mergers. In the course of that discussion, what also emerges is a very clear account of the racialisation of all those processes and relations, in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. This is particularly evident in Erin's account of the spatial divisions of labour of US tech firms: they discuss the differentiation of English-speaking whiteness between the company headquarters in the US and its call centres in Romania, as well as those excluded pretty much entirely from the labour force – Roma in Romania, Black in California. And hence one of the book's persistent themes, that fascism arises from these forms of liberalism/capitalism, an argument that is materialising all too vividly in many parts of the Global North right now.

The book also pays careful attention to the fantasies which are integral to the various capitalist expropriations that the book traces, and Erin describes the specific combination of material extractive relations and discourses as 'technofascism'. For me, this emphasis on "meanings, dreams, and desires"

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(9) is absolutely critical to understanding the power of the capitalist digital tech industry now, whether megacompanies or startups. As much as technological innovation, they depend on seductive fantasies about what they can deliver, and often less explicitly and seductively, for whom.

I have to confess I wanted a little more from Erin's book about these kinds of human conduct on which this 'technofascist' dispositif depends (cf Bassett et al., 2023). Erin uses a rich vocabulary to describe them, noting desires, hauntings, dreams, myths, imaginaries, fantasies, ideologies, cruel optimisms, fictions and, following Hartman (2019), "critical fabulations" (156) which generate a sense of surplus or excess. Each of these has somewhat different kinds of grip on understanding the specific dynamics of classes and racialised subjectivities, and I would have learnt from hearing Erin's explore their role in their argument more explicitly.

My other, related 'more please' moment was in relation to gender, and gender relations. Gender is critical to understanding the differentiated forms of human that are configured by technofascism as both political economy and regime of desire (let's use that phrase for now). Fascist ideologies – techno or otherwise – have an explicit, cispatriarchal and heteronormative politics of gender, because controlling reproductive bodies – women's bodies, the two are conflated – is understood as the way to ensure racial purity (Theweleit, 1987). Certainly, it's not hard to trace the figure of the 'techbro' across Erin's argument, and feminist activist voices are very strong in the book: I especially enjoyed Mihaela Drăgan's account of "Roma futurism" (180) as a subversive glitch. But there are other hints in the book of the deep entanglement of certain kinds of patriarchy with the digital tech industry: Antonia, for example, the robot algorithm servant of the mayor of Cluj (214); and in the remark that there are perhaps a 100,000 women in Romania working on webcam porn sites (see also Vlase and Preoteasa, 2022) (which makes the book's characterisation of Andrew Tate as a "digital nomad" and a "internet personality" a little odd [66]). I would love to have heard more about gender as integral to Silicon Valley imperialism too, which is only to suggest again just how richly generative this book is, for many kinds of digital and other kinds of critical scholarship.

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