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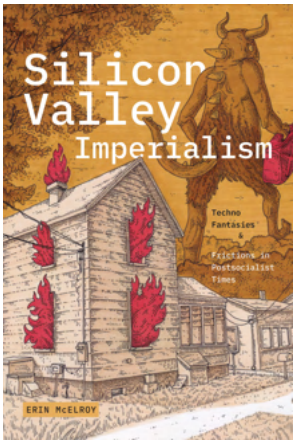
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Book Reviews

Erin McElroy 2024: *Silicon Valley Imperialism: Techno Fantasies and Frictions in Postsocialist Times.* Durham, NC, Duke University Press.



Silicon Valley, a region along the San Francisco Bay Area, has dominated the geographical imagination of the tech world for at least four decades. Nurtured by the expansion of the US microchip and computer industry, Silicon Valley has come to epitomize technocapitalism itself, as a successful story of regional advantage in every facet of the digital economy. For these reasons, Silicon Valley has also become a model for other places seeking to encourage thriving innovation economies. Since the financial crisis of the late 2000s in particular, the desire to transform regions into tech hubs has become a top priority for government authorities and business leaders in a wide range of contexts, guided by the idea that 'Siliconization' will propel corporations and countries forward in the global economy. Affected by financial strain and deindustrialization, cities too have turned to science parks and venture capital-fuelled investment pipelines to engineer their own 'innovation complexes', giving them the capacity to compete for a slice of the global tech economy.

Against this backdrop, Erin McElroy's *Silicon Valley Imperialism* shows how gentrification, racial displacement and economic exploitation have marked the development of Silicon Valley, not only within the San Francisco Bay Area itself, but also across geographies that have been inspired by it as a model of success—in this case, post-socialist Romania. Revealing how the region holds together a centre and a purported periphery of technocapitalism, the book exposes the racial dynamics and exploitative mechanisms through which Silicon Valley imperialism engulfs communities and territories, accelerating displacement and inequality far beyond its core. This is the key argument outlined in the author's introduction, which provides an overview of the theoretical pillars supporting their work. The main body is then organized into two main sections comprising three chapters each, namely: 'Silicon Valley Spatiotemporality' and 'Techno Frictions and Fantasies'.

The first section (pp. 37–129) delves into the diverse geographies of Siliconization and the ensuing racial displacement, examining both Romania and the San Francisco Bay Area. Chapter 1 explores the arrival of the 'digital nomad' as a symbol of Silicon Valley's dominance in Cluj, while 'the displacement of Roma residents makes way for the arrival of Western tech workers and firms' (p. 42).

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Chapter 2 transitions to the San Francisco Bay Area to analyse the influence of the Cold War on colonial spatial practices, tracing the evolution of Silicon Valley into a rich-only enclave fuelled by capitalist legacies. In chapter 3, McElroy challenges the idea of liberalism as a defence against authoritarianism, demonstrating how technofascism spreads via the corruption of emancipatory spaces by Silicon Valley's fantasies, aided by liberal property norms and protests.

The second section (pp. 131–208) turns to the temporalities of the technological imagination, exploring how socialism, the Cold War, and their legacies have shaped or are shaping current and future trajectories of Siliconization. Chapter 4 examines how Silicon Valley imperialism draws upon Cold War ideologies while distancing itself from its own technofascist history, this being most evident in the involvement of IBM in facilitating Romania's genocidal endeavours during the pre-socialist era. Chapter 5 focuses on deviant technological practices—what McElroy refers to as *șmecherie*—that have the potential to thwart the emergence of Silicon Valley imperialism. Finally, chapter 6 expands upon these speculations, blending socialist astrofuturism (as depicted in films and speculative fiction) with ethnographic narratives which detail the aftermath of capitalist decline.

In the book's *coda*, the author examines the challenges which are now emerging in both the United States and Romania due to the outsourcing practices of landlordism. This setup, according to McElroy, introduces several new dynamics of race, labour, tenancy and capital, as well as new forms of resistance and connections which 'scaffold the very possibilities of unbecoming Silicon Valley' (p. 216).

Silicon Valley Imperialism stands as an indispensable read for anyone interested in the disruptive unfolding of tech-driven urbanism. Rather than glorifying the Silicon Valley model as a one-size-fits-all solution for economic growth, McElroy's work shows that Silicon Valley imperialism, in its pursuit of continuous expansion, builds upon—and replicates—individuals' private consumption practices and local knowledge systems, while also influencing the global imagination. In criticizing the foundations upon which the Siliconization project is built, McElroy also presents a hopeful vision for the future. By excavating socialist astrofuturism and deviant technological practices, the book offers glimpses of a different trajectory—one that holds transnational potential as a blueprint to dismantle the Silicon Valley machine and transcend the prospect of technocapitalist hegemony.

Nonetheless, despite the book's relevance and contributions, certain 'mobilities' beholden to Silicon Valley's expansion deserve further attention. While the roles of firms, politicians and other stakeholders are thoroughly examined throughout the text (as well as within the existing literature and public discourse), the characterization of the digital nomad *persona* remains somewhat ambiguous and underdeveloped in all fields. For this reason, labelling digital nomads as 'avatars for Silicon Valley imperialism' (p. 33) may oversimplify a group that exhibits significant diversity. The landscape of those who fall into the digital nomad category shifted dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic, with opportunities for remote working becoming more accessible to a broader demographic, including families and traditional office workers. Hence, the extent to which all digital nomads are avatars of technocapitalism requires some unpacking, given that very different motivations, life stories, needs and ambitions drive these workers. Ultimately, even their class belonging is neither monolithic nor static. Perhaps, if more careful attention were

paid to the circulation of digital nomads, this would reveal the same kinds of precarity and exploitation that power Silicon Valley imperialism itself.

The above notwithstanding, what sets this book apart is its ability to unearth unforeseen connections between the San Francisco Bay Area and Romania, providing insights into distinct yet interconnected dynamics of racial technocapitalism across these diverse contexts. McElroy is able to do so by (re)tracing the personal biographies and enduring relationships that formed and evolved during different phases of technocapitalism—the cases of IKEA and IBM are instructive in this sense. Scholars should investigate this 'connected' approach further and explore the methodological possibilities and tactics that could be deployed in future research, particularly the ways in which these might relate to more established comparative approaches. *Silicon Valley Imperialism* offers an important stepping stone in that direction.

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