

Jobs, Bezos, Musk, and the Rest

by Marc Abélès

The hood-wearing entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley are workers subject to often fierce competition. Inequalities abound in the world of innovation.

About: Olivier Alexandre, *La Tech. Quand la Silicon Valley refait le monde*, Paris, Seuil, 2023, 560 p., 23 €.

Olivier Alexandre's latest book is the fruit of a sociological study conducted between 2015 and 2022 in Silicon Valley. Through observations and interviews, the author was able to gather large amounts of data on this small region of California, which has long attracted the attention of media and analysts of contemporary capitalism. His position as a foreigner, or "temporary migrant" (p. 32), enabled him to break away from the fascination one always senses in the innumerable stories about the place. Journalists, but also writers and social scientists, have seized upon this seemingly inexhaustible subject since the emergence of the first computer tycoons. Alexandre views Silicon Valley as a universe where entrepreneurs, whom he refers to as "players," are the main protagonists. However, these players do not conform to the values traditionally associated with capitalism (enterprise, commodification, property, profit); rather, they celebrate networks, free access [...] disinterested exchange" (p. 88).

A Constant Buzz of Activity

The title of the book, *La Tech*, encapsulates not only what is the core activity in this corner of California, but also a state of mind, a way of looking at the future of society. The presence of “angels” —*i.e.*, investors who support early-stage firms—and the ability to attract capital from other sources—whether big business or finance—are key factors in the rise of start-ups, the success of which whets the appetite of the new ideologists of progress. These processes are described in the first part of the book, as is the world of venture capital and its pioneers—for instance Georges Doriot, a Frenchman who invested in Digital Equipment Corporation, the creator of the first minicomputer. The great successes of Silicon Valley owe much to the support of investors, who show a great deal of flair and nerve and enjoy very high rates of return. The relationship between venture capitalists and entrepreneurs keeps the buzz going by confronting players with constant new challenges. Before entering into partnerships, venture capitalists receive countless daily requests. Suffice it to say that making deals is no simple matter.

As many observers have noted, success in the tech sector is not just the result of individual initiative. Entrepreneurs must develop networks, which allow them to build crucial social capital; hence the importance of communities (universities, firms, diasporas, socioeconomic affiliation), essential references for anyone wishing to make a place for himself or herself in this often cruel world. The “collaborative,” “flexible,” and “learning” firms that have flourished in Silicon Valley contrast with the types of organizations that long dominated the American economy. Innovation in the tech sector has given rise to new forms of work and management that have fueled the dynamic of creativity.

Developers and Burning Man

It is true that the book offers no comparison with other zones dedicated to new technologies, which would have helped us better understand what the author calls the “enigma” of Silicon Valley. Yet, what makes Alexandre’s immersion especially interesting is its focus on the recruitment and management of human capital—the key to success in a context of intense competition. As the author points out, “the difficulty of attracting highly sought-after professionals explains why designing, preparing, and

implementing recruitment procedures is an innovative task in its own right” (p. 250). Employers offer not only high wages, but also good working conditions, a pleasant environment, and training and learning opportunities. Given the demand for high-level engineers, one of the challenges for employers is to retain their teams: “The ability to retain employees is closely linked to the company’s financial capacity” (p. 259). Once they are recruited, developers must be constantly stimulated, and their work environment must provide them with the materials and ideas needed to boost their creativity. Hence the deployment of a corporate culture supported by a “vision” and “values,” which are articulated in statements and narratives often associated with famous personalities. The names Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk embody the success and uniqueness of firms that have achieved celebrity status.

This immersion into the daily lives of developers sheds light on the complexities of work, the difficulties encountered, the constant trial-and-error, and the need to garner support from colleagues—including through outsourcing tasks to consultants. The section of the book devoted to developers is clearly the most interesting, as it paints a nuanced picture of this essentially male, heterosexual group, who value the collaborative spirit and typically wear a T-shirt and hoodie: “Be cool, smoke weed, look younger than you are,” as one of the interviewees put it. Developers also face a lot of stress, and their work is both demanding and subject to the uncertainty of results. Many projects do indeed lead to dead ends. Certified training is important in the trajectories of developers because it helps them consolidate their position on the market, where they are constantly assessing their own worth. What emerges from the sociologist’s interviews and observations is the picture of a world of contrasts: In this world, geniuses are a minority, while most of their colleagues work their way through problems and resemble bricoleurs who continually fight the urge to throw in the towel.

By following Burning Man, the annual gathering of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, Alexandre was able to delve even deeper into the mysteries of this community. Nearly 80,000 people attended this major event in 2022. Burning Man is experienced as a great moment of enchantment and is described by festival-goers as “crazy” and “magical.” The festival is held in the Nevada desert, where conditions are harsh both because of the climate and because participants must endure physical discomfort in the ephemeral city built solely for this event. It is, however, an initiatory experience: The town is burnt down because to burn things down is to get rid of the superfluous. Festival-goers challenge habits and routines and push beyond their own limits. At the same time, there is no real break between the business logic of Silicon Valley and the euphoria of the festival. Participants take

advantage of interactions to enrich their networks and to present their technological projects, and the camps where they gather foster the creation of new communities. And yet, every year, Burning Man re-enchants the more prosaic world of Tech, which is grounded in an all-pervasive rationalism subordinated to digital technology and calculation.

The Fantasy of Success and its Limits

We used to talk about the “American dream,” and in a way Silicon Valley is a product of this imaginary that feeds the fantasy of success in the corporate world. Could it be, then, that the idea that new technologies will lead us to a better life—the eschatological perspective embraced by many proponents of biotechnologies (from transhumanism to artificial intelligence)—outlines a religion of the future? Here, Alexandre is referring to the discourse of tech personalities and to the many institutes and think tanks that have sprung up from Harvard to Berkeley and Stanford. This ideology, which is particularly manifest in transhumanist projects, has fueled controversy, and a more in-depth examination of this not insignificant issue would have been warranted. Silicon Valley is imbued with the quest for spirituality, itself an extension of the counter-culture movements that originated in Berkeley and Stanford. The rituals of Burning Man also resonate with forms of transcendence, and one wonders whether this imaginary has not paradoxically contributed to shaping practices that otherwise present themselves as rigorously rational.

In his conclusion, Alexandre writes that Silicon Valley “has succeeded tremendously and failed terribly” (p. 457). While tremendous changes have indeed taken place, innovation is offset locally by growing inequalities and new forms of alienation. The intensification and precarization of work, the worsening environmental crisis, and the overexploitation of rare lands are among the most negative consequences of Tech’s triumph.

How can this situation be remedied? Alexandre calls in particular for the supervision and control of venture capital. On reading the book, however, one gets the sense that the reality being described will continue to resist state control for a long time to come. On this point we are left wanting more, but this is likely due to the fact that this sociological study of Silicon Valley, with its emphasis on the notion of player, remains essentially anchored in the emic categories of local developers and investors.

What makes the description effective also traps it in a logic that the final appeal to “political and business leaders” (p. 456) and the call for the politicization of Tech—which would deserve a more rigorous discussion—do not suffice to challenge.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 17 May 2023. Translated by Arianne Dorval, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, 22 October 2024.