

Culture Version I.X

A Technological Community

Why It Matters

When California's Santa Clara County was labeled "Silicon Valley" in the 1970s the region was transformed in the public imagination. But much of the mythic characterization of the region as a brave new world is hyperbole. Although the Valley is home and showcase for the latest in high-technology innovation, its denizens do not live lives radically different from those of their urban American counterparts. There are distinct social and economic classes. The institutions of the community—schools, hospitals, mayoral offices—are not so different from those in Sacramento, or San Diego. People eat, sleep, work, and play in patterns familiar to many Americans.

Yet the region experiences forces that will significantly shape the future elsewhere in America, and the world. Technological devices from e-mail servers to telephones make it possible—even easy—for people to form dense interconnections in local networks, as well as in wider global affiliations. Technology suffuses daily life, the economy, and even the very language of Silicon Valley. Like the belled sheep at the fore of the flock, Silicon Valley is a bellwether beast, pursuing the newest technologies on the drawing board and in the hand. Its specialized economic history, once based on fruit agriculture and now built around high-technology production, has drawn people from around the world. The community's cultural complexity makes it an illustration of postmodern life. The heterogeneity of classes, ethnicities, national cultures, self-identified subcultures, and organizational cultures makes it difficult to assign individuals to any particular category or to assume that anyone shares your cultural premises. Artifacts and behaviors may derive from Midwestern homeliness, California counterculture, or from any number of sources from around the Pacific Rim and beyond. Europeans find the Valley European, while South Asians have reproduced bits of Indian life. Mid-

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western Americans find it both familiar and alien. Cultural interactions are inherently ambiguous; certainty in the cultural identification of oneself or others is illusory.

The things that make Silicon Valley distinctive—its technological saturation and complex range of identities—are not merely interesting cultural artifacts in themselves. They are significant because both the pervasiveness of technology and identity diversity are coming to define the emerging global culture. By studying the nature of the bellwether sheep, we may understand the consequences of technological saturation and cultural complexity for the rest of the flock. With this in mind, I have deliberately identified Silicon Valley as a natural experimental laboratory.

Silicon Valley is not the only place where either technological saturation or cultural complexity are dominant factors in defining culture. Indeed, if it were the unique repository of those features, it would be irrelevant to our understanding of any other culture. But “silicon places,” whose economies are increasingly dominated by high-technology industries, are replicating around the globe, from Austin to Bangalore, while Manhattan, Chicago, and London are home to wide-ranging cultural diversity. Beyond these dramatic examples, even smaller communities feel the exponential growth of consumer technologies and the increasing opportunity to encounter people different from themselves. These people are also subject to the forces that so obviously shape culture in Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley has enthusiastically embraced technology and cultural complexity, making it a prime location for the anthropological study of what happens in any technologically saturated community. We can learn from its experiences.

This book is an anthropological foray into an emerging global landscape. The production of technology dominates the region and is attracting people from around the world, reshaping cultural identities. Silicon Valley has been studied by economists, urban planners, sociologists, business theorists, and historians. They examine their own particular slice of social reality, be it the structure of networked global business practices or the struggle of the underclass in the showcase region of late capitalism. Journalists capture the story of the day, often highlighting the rich, the famous, and the exotica of Silicon Valley.¹

¹Annalee Saxenian, an urban planner, examines the region for its connections to organizations, particularly as it compares to Boston’s Route 128 and the role of Indian and

Anthropology is concerned with mundanity—the details of daily life, and what the small actions and interactions teach us about the human condition. The sites for that exploration and the tools for uncovering behavior differ widely. In the United States, anthropologists have been trained in a particularly broad disciplinary worldview, adding insights from biological anthropology and archaeology to direct observations of cultural life. This provides an interesting lens through which any time or place can be viewed. In addition to classical ethnographic inquiry—that is, observing and listening to living people in their own environments—we have additional conceptual tools. From biological anthropologists we learn to think about the processes leading to human variation and evolution that can be broadly defined as “change through time.” We are, in the end, animals—but animals who manipulate our own environments and organize ourselves to adapt to the world around us using the ideas and artifacts shaped by our cultures. Archaeologists have taught us that sweeping cultural changes show a pattern when viewed over time, and that the tiniest objects we use reveal much about our behavior. Our words and actions tell stories, but so do our artifacts. A fragment of porcelain fired in Asia can tell a tale of international migration and trade, and illuminate the daily routine of a person who might have lived and died in obscurity, under the historical radar screen that tends to register only the prominent. These perspectives force cultural anthropologists to ask questions about the smallest details of daily life and then link them to ever changing larger forces. Hence, this anthropological consideration of Silicon Valley focuses on ordinary people, living lives filled with the minutia of daily activity, surrounded by material objects and cultural ideas. Evidenced in those small objects and behavioral impulses are larger evolutionary forces, vast historic changes that drive us to re-create our cultures, often without even knowing it.

Social anthropology, a once-British tradition now practiced around

Chinese entrepreneurs in the region (1985, 1994, 1999). Sociologist and urban planner Manuel Castells examines Silicon Valley as a global technopole, a twenty-first-century industrial complex (1996, 2000; Castells and Hall 1994). These works focus on the roll of the entrepreneur. In contrast, sociologists Dennis Hayes (1989) and Karen Hossfeld (1988) examine life among the less privileged workers in Silicon Valley. Jean Deitz Sexton’s *Silicon Valley Inventing the Future*, Po Bronson’s *Nudist on the Late Shift* (1999), and Paulina Barsook’s critical political commentary *Cyberselfish* (2000) are distinct examples of more journalistic examinations of life in the Valley.

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the English-speaking world, teaches us that how we organize ourselves into groups, and how we support those organizational forms with beliefs, is a vital clue in unraveling human behavior. Silicon Valley people organize their lives around networks, family, and work organizations. These organizing principles are part of the distinctive culture that defines the region. As an anthropologist, I must explore those aspects of social life.

I am primarily a cultural anthropologist, and so I focus my attention on the role of culture as I find it in its natural setting, in the “field” (Lindholm 2001: 12). The idea of culture is one of anthropology’s greatest gifts to social philosophy. It refers to “everything that human beings have created and transmitted socially across time and space” (van der Elst and Bohannan 1999: 32). Anthropologists are used to employing the term “culture” in its broadest sense, as in: “Human beings adapt to their environment using culture.” In the past, the term also referred to the social entities that were presumed to share the same “creations” and “socially transmitted” ideas. We continue to refer, rather imprecisely, to the “Navajo culture,” or the “American culture,” a practice that tends to make us ignore the important contextual differences between Navajos in Window Rock and Navajos in Los Angeles.

It is unfortunate that this concept was first conceptualized as *kultur*, a noun, rather than a verb, as that is misleading.² Culture is the operating system that shapes our cognitive and behavioral processes, the “conceptual structures” that create the central reality of a people” (D’Andrade 1984: 115). However, defining the scope of the “people” that create culture is problematic, since culture acts at many levels of social organization. “Creations” and “social transmissions” take place within the family, the network, the community, the region, and the nation. Culture “happens” across national boundaries at a global level in McDonald’s restaurants, airports, and cubicles around the world. Yet all the people in a single family, or a single nation, share behaviors only in the most gen-

²Arjun Appadurai makes a similar argument when he suggests that culture is best used as an adjective, “cultural,” in describing other aspects of life. He suggests that the “idea of culture as difference” best defines the use of the concept. Hence cultural differences can be detected ethnographically, even when cultures may be complex and fragmented (1996: 12-14). However, he restricts his definition of culture to only those aspects of social life linked to identity, a definition that excludes the material realm—“administrative arrangements, economic pressures, biological constraints, and so forth”—in explaining human behavior (Kuper 1999: 246).

eral way—demonstrating patterns, but not absolute uniformity. In studying culture it is important to look for the patterns—the footprints of commonality—while also documenting the variation within the patterns. Silicon Valley does not “have” a single uniform culture—although patterns do emerge—but it contains practices from many cultural variants in endless combinations, creating something altogether singular. This book lays out some of the cultural patterns that have been teased out of peoples’ words, artifacts, actions, and interactions.

By looking at cultural processes at the community level, this study joins the many case studies of complex communities, from Hong Kong (Evans and Tam 1997) to Pittsfield, Massachusetts (Nash 1989). Specifically, I use Silicon Valley as a case study to reveal the experiences and consequences of technological saturation. This information has a special relevance to people who are connected with such “silicon” communities, both ordinary citizens and policy makers. Silicon Valley is also a natural laboratory for cultural complexity, containing a diverse array of interacting identities. Thus, while this study focuses specifically on Silicon Valley, it has wider implications for understanding the more general processes of living with digital technology and intense cultural diversity.

Silicon Valley also provides us with a mirror in which we can look at ourselves and examine our own choices. Some communities actively seek to duplicate Silicon Valley’s apparent success, or at least those features that they believe will lead to prosperity, making political decisions that encourage industry, create private-public partnerships, and aggressively promote technical and infrastructural “progress.” Corporate and public organizations enact policies less visible than acts of Congress, but perhaps not less profound in their effect. Individuals also embrace technologies for many purposes and results, reinforcing existing values and shaping new ones. Understanding the social life of Silicon Valley people allows all of us to reflect on the choices we make—both inside and outside Silicon Valley.

Digging Up Stories

This book is based on material from the Silicon Valley Cultures Project, a fifteen-year exploration of work, family, technology, and identity that began in 1991, conducted by Charles Darrach, James M. Freeman, and myself (English-Lueck et al. 2000). Because the project has extended over a substantial amount of time, it has described life in Silicon Valley