

Defining a Silicon Valley Worldview: A Retrospective on Tomorrow Land

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Introduction to the Session

Welcome to the session, FROM COMMUNITAS TO VALUE-ADDED: COMMUNITY AND WORK IN SILICON VALLEY. Silicon Valley is a distinctive region for a number of reasons. High technology from computers to biotechnology permeate its political economy. Once reflective of the ethnic diversity of agrarian California, the last thirty years have witnessed a new influx of cultures, ranging from Scandinavian Midwestern aeronautical engineers to Vietnamese and Afghani refugees. Locally, nationally and even internationally Silicon Valley has become mythic territory where bright young nerds in a garage can blend innovation and entrepreneurial savvy to create more democratic corporations. Silicon Valley is not just any California coastal town. For better or worse, it has become a metaphor for tomorrow land, a theme park of global corporate enthusiasm ranging from the small Ma and Pa Wang start-up to Hewlett Packard and Apple.

Beneath the hype, however, there does exist a region occupied by real people who struggle to survive the consequences of the myth and create a microecology of meaning in their own lives. The Silicon Valley region is composed of diverse fragments—towns, companies, ethnic communities, social networks—that shift and reform themselves. Individuals must negotiate this metamorphic social terrain by creating social networks that can sustain them and new metaphors to justify their strategies. Identities shift, and Work—with a capital “W,” is the dominant venue for this creativity. Silicon Valley elite use technological metaphors as they urge the local community to “reinvent” itself to support an “optimal” work environment. Less elite inhabitants alternately believe or quietly resist the attempts to invent the twenty-first century version of the company town. Community activity, justified by its value to work, reaches into education, communications, recreation and family. Community is transformed into an instrumental force for production. The papers in this session will explore aspects of this transformation. The papers in this session—based on participant-observation and intensive interview—will also look at Silicon Valley from a variety of disciplinary perspectives—sociological and anthropological, critical and practical.

Introduction to this paper

San Jose State's collaboration goes beyond a group of cultural anthropologists pooling their ideas and maximizing their precious research time. As will be further explored in the final paper of this session (Community and Collaboration in a "Value-Added" Community), faculty have collaborated with student researchers, collecting data in a distributed field school that spans at least seven classes.¹ The anthropologists also collaborate with various institutions in the Valley, particularly the Institute for the Future, the Tech Museum of Innovation and organizations such as Smart Valley. My paper today will briefly touch on the values revealed by the systematic collections of Ethnographic Futures Research interviews, 44 EFRs to date, that have elicited the best, worst and most probable visions of the Future of Silicon Valley from several distinct, yet astonishingly consistent, populations. These populations include:

1. Volunteers and staff of the Tech Museum of Innovation, a prototype museum that celebrates technological innovation in the Valley through education programs and interactive exhibits.
2. Teachers drawn from the community at large as well and those participating in the Tech Museum's outreach program.
3. Counselors and administrators in the region's community colleges and vocational programs, and
4. Staff and volunteers for Joint Venture Silicon Valley's Smart Valley initiative, an organization that, in the words of a Smart Valley Board member, exists to implement "a high-speed, fully capable, broad band infrastructure—so every home, every office will have access to high speed communications, different kinds of services."² Another engineer added "that the industry that was responsible for creating this technology felt they had a responsibility to getting our local society to use it more effectively." This group has transformed marketing into a mission and their worldview is particularly revealing.
5. Nine additional interviews are being collected as we speak with High Tech corporate partners of the Tech Museum of Innovation. This collection of people spoke to their concerns and dreams of regional education, prosperity, diversity and legacy of innovation, revealing a distinctive set of values.

From Heart's Delight to Silicon Valley

As our sample spoke of the probable future of the region, their scenarios reflected the realities of the 1990s. They noted the dramatic transformation of Valley from apricots to advanced technology, from orchards to tilt-ups. With mixed enthusiasm interviewees noted the post 1965 influx of new Asian and Hispanic immigrants into already an diverse community. The earliest interviews drawn in 1992-1993, spoke of the fears inherent in a boom town with virtual resources. As the communications technology they invent makes place less relevant, there is a lurking concern that Seattle, Austin and Singapore will steal the thunder of a Valley made cumbersome and expensive by its own successes. Case in point, the region now has the most expensive rental market in the United States. Fears of an increasing rich poor gap are repeatedly exposed in comments such as this one by a vocational instructor, "the quality of life here has gone down... when I first got married I was making less than 5 bucks and hour, I was probably making 2 or 3 bucks, and I thought that was really stylin'. When I got promoted to making about 5 bucks an hour in 68, I could live comfortably on that. My first apartment was 80 bucks a month, I mean, come on. You can't even come close to that anymore. It's just that everybody has to work, and you don't even have a good quality of life anymore. It's just so expensive." Yet, seen through the lens of this largely middle class sample, education and technology are the tools to rescue the working class from irrelevancy and therefore poverty.

Joint Venture, an government/business partnership explicitly designed to reinvent the region to be more favorable to business, a postmodern reincarnation of the company town, is echoed as teachers and CEO's alike hail the rescue and reformation of education by business. The only resource clearly identifiable to the region of Silicon Valley is expertise, a density of knowledge, that becomes the "value-added" that will keep Silicon Valley in a leading role in the ephemeral world of technological capitalism. Education, particularly a kind of education that provides vocational and technical skills, will provide the engineers, teachers, and burger flippers with the drive and capability to create the value-added that separates Silicon Valley from Lincoln, Nebraska. The key to that distinctive twist is technology, or more precisely a worldview in which technological metaphors predominate.

Efficiency über alles

Technology is universally seen as the driver of all social changes, for good or ill. This assumption is rarely questioned in the EFR visions of tomorrow land. In the words of one Smart Valley staffer "if the technology falls through then we just become a bunch of blue collar workers, not so innovative, I don't know how to describe it, just, well, more like the rest of the world . . ." In the best future, technology would relieve overcrowded schools, erase cultural differences in the classroom and even remove the managerial class from the necessity of experiencing other cultures by replacing disorienting and time-consuming travel with orderly telecommunications. Technology would bond fragmented families using polymers of pagers. Technology defines value-added performance. As one director of a Center for Employment Training opined, "In terms of the custodial, you're looking at some incredible equipment that is now available. It's not the mop and broom anymore, of course, and it's not just the simple buffer. This is equipment that is really, really specialized, that also can be computerized, and we're looking at hopefully writing some grants because we are non-profit, to make that equipment accessible to those custodial students. So it's not, you know, a simple class anymore. You're talking about chemical usage and the mixing of chemicals and knowing exactly what each of those chemical are. And I think you're going to see, because of consumer awareness and environmental protection, you're going to see changes in the future in terms of cleaning solvents and solutions and that we also want to prepare student for as well." Technology gives their people an edge on the future of cleaning.

While our sample overwhelmingly saw technology as the savior of American institutional life, the framing of technological solutions pointed to deeper social structural assumptions. Just as Smart Valley and the Tech Museum staff saw the best future as one in which a single computer/communications platform would prevail—no more messy Apple/PC differences or multiple communications protocols. To quote a Smart Valley Board member "the nightmare is that everybody develops independent technologies—there's no coordination, no standards. . . So we can end up with a lot of interesting and innovative technologies that won't work together, and create a nightmare." Industry luminaries and teachers alike hoped for a Valley in which cultural division would be subsumed under a single, technologically informed and enthusiastic citizenry. With the notable exception of the Center for Employment Training staff who viewed diversity as a inherent resource in an increasingly global marketplace, other interviewees expressed that a good scenario would contain high stimulation ethnic entertainments, but no significant structural differences. Future Silicon Valley people would speak English—although a few minority voices suggested it would be good to have universal multilingualism. All would share the same accelerated work ethic and respect for capitalism. In the worst future there would be a hodgepodge of technologies all competing and complexifying the market and myriad separate cultures each with their own conflicting agendas. In the best future you would have a single unified technology and a single unified culture, although the specifics would reflect the cultural background of the interviewee. Harkening back to the melting pot analogy, the new unified techno-being would be a cold fusion of formerly distinct cultures.

Control and efficiency were core values that permeated the scenarios. Silicon Valley people must become, in the words of one interviewee, “masters of the universe.” In the best future, parents could monitor children’s homework using telecommunications with the schools. You could reduce traffic by increasing telecommuting. Yet the comfort, convenience and access offered is clearly hierarchical and egocentric—allowing parents, teachers and industry more control over children and workers. In the best future you could access leading scientific experts to answer your child’s inquiries in a flash. The invasion of time and privacy of the soon-to-be-accessible “leading expert,” however, is never considered. The productivity and convenience of the speaker defines the parameters of “efficiency.” A High Tech CEO states, “This comes back to efficiency. Workers will much more productive because they’ll be more efficient. Let’s say that you’re at your work and you have to go to the DMV to renew your license. Instead of leaving the office for two hours you can perform the same task in minutes which means you can spend more time on the job, which again means more productivity and efficiency. I see things in terms of productivity and efficiency. There is even play productivity. Let’s say that I want to go to the beach and if it takes me two hours to get there, and it sometimes does, well . . . I’m not satisfied with the time I have left. If the highways were less crowded because there were less people on the road because they’re using their time more efficiently, then maybe I could get to the beach much faster.” This highly instrumental individualism extends to the discourse on community.

Service providers—educators, restaurateurs, janitors—are envisioned to serve the needs of those technoelite that really “matter” in the Valley. Any quality that enhances quality of life—clean air, good educations, reasonable transportation—becomes part of the value-added that can be used by companies to recruit and retain the expertise that is valorized as the true Silicon Valley resource. Just as Silicon Valley regained control of the global semiconductor market by producing small numbers of specialized, disposable chips, the Valley must now reshape its workforce. Outsourcing—giving work to temporary employees outside the company—minimizes the need for overhead and commitment and brings work into residential “offices.” Home is the new frontier for work expansion as communications technology makes the boundaries between work and home ever thinner. Again, a Smart Valley spokesman reflects, “we’ll get up, shower, brush our teeth, have breakfast. There would be a lot of information sources available. There is a very, one could say compelling scenario to develop that work could become a 24 experience which, I think, would be horrible. But the information technology will allow you to do that. So, I think it will be dependent on you and your own self-discipline to separate the church and the state. You have to separate what I’m going to spend on work and what I’m going to spend on my personal life because lines will blur.” The work system will expand and individuals must define their own sphere of convenience and control or be consumed.

This brief introduction to Silicon Valley’s worldviews suggests other questions: How do these attitudes play out in people’s daily lives? What strategies do people create to manage, reform and resist this top down vision of the Valley? How can anthropologists and social scientists contribute to this growing body of knowledge, while simultaneously struggling in a beleaguered academic environment? These questions and others are the focus of the papers you will hear next.

Notes

1. Ethnographic Research Interviews were collected in the Fall 1993, Fall 1994, Fall 1995 and Fall 1996 Ethnographic Methods class, as well as the Spring 1993 course, Culture and Conflict.
2. Interview quotations were drawn from interviews conducted by student researchers: Katherine Richards-Agnew, Lauralee Brown, Lori Burgman, Mary Cashion, Rachel Caso, Brendon Clark, Sharon Covarrubias, Elan Finch, Helen Hernandez, Mara McCrystal, Eric Metz, Beverley Pevarnick, Eman Saad, Jason Scatena, Neil Smith.