Technofascism: the rightwing roots of Silicon Valley

The industry's liberal reputation is misleading. Its reactionary tendencies – celebrating wealth, power and traditional masculinity – have been clear since the dotcom mania of the 1990s

An influential Silicon Valley publication runs a cover story lamenting the "pussification" of tech. A major tech CEO lambasts a Black civil rights leader's calls for diversifying the tech workforce. Technologists rage against the "PC police".

No, this isn't Silicon Valley in the age of Maga. It's the tech industry of the 1990s, when observers first raised concerns about the rightwing bend of Silicon Valley and the potential for "technofascism". Despite the industry's (often undeserved) reputation for liberalism, its reactionary foundations were baked in almost from the beginning. As Silicon Valley enters a second Trump administration, the gendered roots of its original reactionary movement offer insight into today's rightward turn.

At the height of the dotcom mania in the 1990s, many critics warned of a creeping reactionary fervor. "Forget digital utopia," wrote the longtime technology journalist Michael Malone, "we could be headed for techno-fascism." Elsewhere, the writer Paulina Borsook called the valley's worship of male power "a little reminiscent of the early celebrants of Eurofascism from the 1930s".

Their voices were largely drowned out by the techno-enthusiasts of the time, but Malone and Borsook were pointing to a vision of Silicon Valley built around a reverence for unlimited male power – and a major pushback when that power was challenged. At the root of this reactionary thinking was a writer and public intellectual named George Gilder. Gilder was one of Silicon Valley's most vocal evangelists, as well as a popular "futurist" who forecasted coming technological trends. In 1996, he started an investment newsletter that became so popular that it generated rushes on stocks from his readers, in a process that became known as the "Gilder effect".

Gilder was also a longtime social conservative who brought his politics to Silicon Valley. He had first made his name in the 1970s as an anti-feminist provocateur and a mentee of the conservative stalwart William F Buckley. At a time when women were entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers, he wrote books that argued that traditional gender roles needed to be restored, and he blamed social issues such as poverty on the breakdown of the nuclear family. (He also blamed federal welfare programs, especially those that funded single mothers, claiming they turned men into "cuckolds of the state"). In 1974, the National Organization for Women named him "Male Chauvinist Pig of the Year"; Gilder wore it as a badge of pride.

At the turn of the 1980s, Gilder celebrated the links between capitalism, entrepreneurship and the nuclear family. He claimed that entrepreneurs were the most moral and benevolent people in society, because they put products into the world without a guarantee of return – and then reinvested the profit back into the economy.

George Gilder during a 1981 interview in Boston. Photograph: Santi Visalli/Getty Images

For Gilder, entrepreneurship was also a route to rejecting the welfare state and restoring the male breadwinner role in society. He insisted that men were biologically and socially more suited to entrepreneurship than women, and that a societal emphasis on entrepreneurship could thus help restore the traditional nuclear family structure with its rigid gender breakdown. Drawing on religious language (Gilder himself was a devout Christian), he wrote that entrepreneurs are the humans who "know the rules of the world and the laws of God".

Gilder was far from the first person to celebrate the cultural figure of the entrepreneur, nor was he the first to link it with masculinity. As the scholar Michael Kimmel has shown, the ideal of the “self-made man” has been central to American conceptions of masculinity for almost 200 years. The ideal has also always been linked to the “male breadwinner” role in the nuclear family. More recently, in the 20th century, the economist Joseph Schumpeter had developed a theory of capitalism based around entrepreneurs (although he also had a far more pessimistic vision of capitalism, believing it would collapse over time).

But at a time when American industrialism was in decline, Gilder helped revitalize a fervor for entrepreneurship and a belief in the moral power of entrepreneurs over industrial workers and company men. Increasingly, Gilder claimed that entrepreneurs were better suited to lead the country into the future than the “experts” found in academia or government.

Gilder’s 1981 book Wealth and Poverty became known as the Bible of the Reagan administration, and Reagan began incorporating praise of entrepreneurship into his own speeches. (“If I didn’t know better,” Reagan once stated, “I would be tempted to say that ‘entrepreneur’ is another word for ‘America’.”) Throughout the decade, Reagan used the mythology of entrepreneurship to justify trickle-down economics and cuts to federal welfare programs.

Santa Clara, California, in the heart of Silicon Valley, in 1978. Photograph: Mirrorpix/Getty Images

As Gilder became swept up in his own ideas about entrepreneurship, he turned his attention to Silicon Valley. The bourgeoning hi-tech industry, he began claiming, was the purest expression of entrepreneurship in the world. It’s not surprising that Gilder would be drawn to the tech industry in Santa Clara county, California. The state had its own powerful mythologies of masculinity and power. It was the end of the vast frontier, the end of manifest destiny. And it was the place of the former gold rush, where (white) men had struck it rich in the 19th century. It was also, counterintuitively, the birthplace of much of the modern conservative movement, including Reagan’s political career.

Turning entrepreneurs into stars

Gilder was publishing his ideas at a time when IPOs were creating instant wealth for startup founders at unprecedented speeds. The new riches added to Silicon Valley's allure and seemed to underscore the draw of entrepreneurship in the world of high tech. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, other media outlets took up Gilder's framing: tech entrepreneurs offered a hopeful way forward for the American economy, for masculinity, and for human progress writ large.

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Time magazine drew directly on Gilder's vision of entrepreneurship to promote the then up-and-coming businessman Steve Jobs. The 1982 cover story called Jobs one of "America's risk takers" who were not only striking it rich, but also "leading the US into the industries of the 21st century". The article quoted Gilder, citing his claim that "the potentialities of invention and enterprise are now greater than ever before in human history". Stories like this one did multiple duty for readers: they helped justify the rapidly growing wealth of a new class of tech businessmen; they inspired a new generation of readers to follow the same path; and they reinforced a cultural image of what entrepreneurs looked like (largely young, white men).

This type of coverage accelerated as Silicon Valley entrepreneurs began turning from hardware to software. As the tech journalist Dave Kaplan wrote at the time, software "needed neither factory to build nor natural resources to mine – just [the] brain matter" of the entrepreneur behind the company.

Tech culture increasingly gave the star treatment to young entrepreneurs whose success boiled down to a few thousand lines of computer code. Indeed, Gilder argued that software was the purest expression of entrepreneurial genius – an informational world of the mind, free from the material constraints of time and space.

In the mid-1990s, the media discovered a young, newly rich entrepreneur named Marc Andreessen, who had recently made millions in the IPO of his company Netscape. As an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, Andreessen was on a team that built a new,

user-friendly browser for the young world wide web. They called it Mosaic, and it consisted of merely 9,000 lines of code (compared to the approximately 8m lines required to run Windows computers at the time). In 1994, Andreessen moved to Silicon Valley and launched a commercial version of the browser called Netscape Navigator. In 1995, Netscape went public, earning the 24-year-old Andreessen $58m overnight.

Marc Andreessen in San Jose, California, in 1998. Photograph: Bromberger Hoover Photography/Getty Images

When he was just 24, the media embraced Andreessen as a fully formed genius, as someone genuinely deserving of his newfound wealth, and as a leader of America's future. Andreessen graced the cover of a 1996 Time magazine issue, declaring an era of "Golden Geeks". The article promised that the new era of Silicon Valley would "reward the people capitalism is supposed to reward – dynamic entrepreneurs, not rapacious monopolists or financial card-sharks". Dipping into the mythology of Hollywood to make its case, the article claimed that the newly wealthy entrepreneurs represented "a Frank Capra movie, not [the movie] Wall Street".

Entrepreneurs could often translate this coverage into direct financial gain. In an industry increasingly built around ideas, hype was everything. As the Oracle CEO, Larry Ellison, said at the time: "There's no place like Silicon Valley, where your talents can be magnified, and the projection of that magnification is cash." The worshipful treatment of entrepreneurs thus directly brought them more power, and it continued to inspire young men to follow the same path.

Fighting political correctness

The entrepreneurial hype of the 90s rarely mentioned gender or overt rightwing politics. But the reactionary elements of the entrepreneurial ideal became visible whenever the growing power of tech entrepreneurs was challenged.

In this way, Silicon Valley was part of a broader trend of fighting against "political correctness" – that is, a focus on inclusion and avoiding offense to people who had traditionally been marginalized. Throughout the decade, Silicon Valley not only became a leading space for a war on the "PC police", but entrepreneurs also came to represent

some of the biggest anti-PC culture warriors. It was often the most enthusiastically pro-entrepreneurial voices who were also the biggest anti-diversity fighters.

This dual impulse was evident in the magazine Upside, a tech business publication founded in 1989 by two young conservatives who were friends of Gilder's. They quickly gained a small but influential list of subscribers, including the legendary venture capitalist Arthur Rock, the Intel co-founder Robert Noyce, and the conservative luminary William F Buckley. From the beginning, the editorial team was both a champion for entrepreneurship and a set of "bullish contrarians" against anyone they felt threatened their specific vision of business.

In one infamous case, the magazine published a 1990 cover story that in bold letters asked: "Has Silicon Valley gone pussy?" The article itself, titled "The pussification of Silicon Valley", claimed that the hi-tech industry was falling victim to feminization and political correctness. The writers claimed they weren't opposed to women and minorities in business, but they *were* opposed to a kind of "new-age male" who was "sensitive and concerned, a whiner".

The authors also reveled in the discomfort and outrage their use of the word "pussy" had generated among the women on their own staff, and they bragged that their female assistant editor threatened to lead a walkout of female employees over the story. The solution to the problem, they claimed, was the reassertion of an older, glorified "anti-pussy" approach to business – one that prioritized masculine traits like fighting, risk-taking, and being "blunt" and "tough". (One of the driving forces behind the cover story was Michael Malone, the journalist who later warned of rising "technofascism" in the Valley. By the turn of the century, Malone acknowledged his own previous role in fueling this "fascism" and expressed regret about the "pussy" piece.)

Technicians assemble electronic equipment at Cypress Semiconductor in California. Photograph: Jim Sugar/Getty Images

Entrepreneurs also directly took on the mantle of the culture wars. None more so than TJ Rodgers, the CEO of a firm called Cypress Semiconductor. Rodgers has largely been erased from Silicon Valley's memory, but in the 1980s and 1990s, he was one of its

biggest celebrities. His company was a highly successful microchip manufacturer, but its success was inseparable from his own rising star. As Upside described it, Cypress's "most famous product" was "the outspoken TJ himself". Rodgers had quickly learned the art of garnering business media attention. In 1988, he staged a press event in which he gave out about $300,000 in gold coins to his employees. In 1990, when the Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, visited northern California, Rodgers ran a full-page ad in a local news outlet inviting him to the Cypress campus to show him the wonders of capitalism.
Throughout the 1990s, the outspoken businessman generated highly visible media spectacles based around his rejection of political correctness and demands for increased diversity in Silicon Valley. In 1996, a nun named Sister Doris Gormley sent a form letter to the CEO of a Silicon Valley company. She informed the CEO that she was a shareholder and that she would withhold her vote for the company's board because it included no gender or racial diversity. Rodgers wrote a letter in response, which he broadcast to other shareholders and reprinted in media publications. In the letter, he told the nun she "ought to get down from your moral high horse" and claimed: "Your views seem more accurately described as 'politically correct' than 'Christian'."
He also stirred up controversy in 1999 when the civil rights activist and politician Jesse Jackson came to Silicon Valley, hoping to help increase Black and Hispanic participation in the hi-tech workforce. Jackson's non-profit organization planned to buy $100,000 worth of stock in 50 hi-tech corporations, which would give Jackson access to annual shareholder meetings. In response, Rodgers went on a local media tour calling Jackson an opportunist and rejecting the need for diversity in tech. On local TV, Rodgers described Jackson as "a seagull that flies in, craps on everything and flies out".

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Collectively, these efforts successfully generated controversy and attention. They showed that, in a world increasingly based on individual personalities and the ability to grab (mostly white, male) investors' attention, politically incorrect showmanship could be good for business. One of Upside's editors correctly predicted that the "pussy" article

was “the one that’s going to make us famous”. Intel’s Andy Grove called Rodgers a “master manipulator of the press”.

The efforts also helped stave off perceived threats to the growing power of male entrepreneurs. Upside readers lauded the magazine for its coverage of “pussification”, calling it one of the best articles they had read in years and thanking the editorial team for crossing the line of good taste. And in response to his stunts, Rodgers received hundreds of letters of support, including from the chairs of Hewlett-Packard and Advanced Micro Devices, two of Silicon Valley’s most powerful firms at the time. Dozens of investors likewise committed to increasing their holdings of Cypress stock as a direct result of his actions.

This rising “technofascism”, as critics of the time had called it, was temporarily staved off by the dotcom stock market crash of 2000. George Gilder’s reputation was badly damaged after he failed to predict the crash. And much of the hype around digital tech was temporarily tempered after hundreds of startups went bust. But a younger generation of aspiring tech hopefuls had already come to the valley, seeking fame, riches, and power. Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and others had absorbed the lessons of the 90s. At the start of the new millennium, they were ready to put their stamp on the future, guided by reactionary dreams of the past.

Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Sundar Pichai and Elon Musk were among attendees at Donald Trump’s second inauguration. Photograph: Abaca/Rex/Shutterstock

The Silicon Valley titans of 2025 are following the same blueprint. Last week, Mark Zuckerberg announced that Meta was ending its DEI programs and changing its platform policies to allow more discriminatory and harassing posts. On Joe Rogan’s podcast, Zuckerberg made his motivations clear: he claimed that corporate culture had moved away from “masculine energy” and needed to reinstate it after getting “neutered”. Elon Musk has reshaped Twitter into X, a platform in large part operating as a response to claims of a “woke mind virus”– the newest iteration of “political correctness”. And Marc Andreessen himself, the “boy genius” of the 1990s, has

increasingly drawn inspiration from the Italian futurists, a movement of fascist artists in the early 20th century who glorified technology while seeking to “demolish” feminism. But the history of the valley suggests this isn’t a blip or an anomaly. It’s a crescendo of forces central to the tech industry, and the current wave of rightwing tech titans are building on Silicon Valley’s foundations.

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