

Review: Ben Little & Allison Winch, *The New Patriarchs of Digital Capitalism. Celebrity Tech Founders and Networks of Power*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021, 294 pp.

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As the digital economy is becoming increasingly ubiquitous, the social-scientific scholarship on Silicon Valley -based technology companies is advancing. *The New Patriarchs* by media studies scholars Ben Little and Alison Winch participates in the theoretical discussion on Silicon Valley tech business by focusing on the celebrity founders of current technology giants, dissecting the founders' public personas and mutual networks. As the authors argue, digital capitalism has become a new economic paradigm since the financial crisis of 2008, signifying a global social, political and cultural change. Thus, not only are the celebrity founders of Silicon Valley -based tech companies epitomes of digital capitalism, they are also among the richest people on the planet.

The book offers a comprehensive analysis on the ways in which the founders build and maintain their celebrity position while also charting the discursive and ideological undercurrents which underpin the discourse of Silicon Valley more broadly.

The book focuses on prominent figures of Silicon Valley, namely Elon Musk of Tesla and SpaceX, Jeff Bezos of Amazon and BlueOrigin, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Peter Thiel of PayPal and Larry Page and Sergey Brin of Google. As these founders are exclusively male – hence the term *patriarch* the authors employ to describe them –, the authors elucidate the gendered structures of Silicon Valley by focusing on Sheryl Sandberg, who is known of her work in Google and Facebook as well as of her rather popular brand of corporate feminism. Each of these people and their specific strategies of celebrification are discussed in respective chapters. These are preceded by two introductory chapters that describe the authors' theoretical starting points and data.

Theoretically, the authors draw on a multitude of scholarships, such as recent accounts of digital capitalism and its tendencies of datafication; feminist theorizations of patriarchy; and theoretical discussions on conjuncture and assemblage. This forms a theoretical framework that locates the founders, their work and power in the broader continuums of capitalist production. Instead of applying Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) assemblage theory methodically, the authors engage in "assemblage thinking" (p. 11), by which they mean an attempt to "think through the complexity of our subject matter [by using] assemblage theory as a tool for processing it" (p. 13). The decision feels justified, as the empirical work is based on corpus linguistic analysis of 95 books (biographies, nonfiction, corporate how-to-books etc.) discussing the founders and Silicon Valley more broadly.

In each chapter of the book, the authors illustrate their points by providing in-depth analysis on single or several cultural products with regard to the patriarchs discussed in the chapter. For example, we follow a close reading of the rather notorious Joe Rogan podcast interview of Elon Musk in 2018 and of the Ice Bucket Challenge video by Jeff Bezos in 2014. The analysis in each chapter makes references to the text corpus but seems to be more occupied with its case study, and thus the text corpus is used to verify the observations made in each chapter. While this might raise questions on the dynamic between different elements of analysis, it is effective, and the analysis is engaging.

At the heart of book is arguably the exploration of the contradiction between the polished, liberal public personas of the studied founders and the realities that their actions produce under digital capitalism, whether it is the authoritarian and erratic management style of Elon Musk, the prevention of worker unionization at Amazon by Jeff Bezos or the connections to the Trump president campaign in the case of Peter Thiel. As the authors remark in the Conclusion (p. 218), “most of the founders we look at display a kind of social democratic liberalism as part of their public branding. However, the accelerated drive to global market domination means that in practice their corporations – and the systems of power they wield – entrench inequalities and systems of oppression.”

This contradiction, the authors argue, is explained by the fact that the patriarchs’ actions are legitimized through the imaginaries of the American frontier. A key part of the self-understanding in tech entrepreneurship is the idea of pioneer work, and the authors point out the gendered and racialized structures of this imaginary in their analysis and draw parallels to the actions of the founders. While tech founders are quite often conceptualized as colonizers in critical accounts, Little and Winch underline the specificity of American settler colonialism as the founders’ discursive undercurrent. American colonialism is readily associated with the notions of proactivity, grit, self-sufficiency and the obtainment of (seemingly) free, empty land. As the authors remark, the racialized and gendered realities latent in this discourse are aggressively downplayed or glossed over in the celebrification of the founders.

To me, the analysis of the founders’ networks remains somewhat vague. While the founders’ mutual networks are mapped in the Introduction, their analysis is rather descriptive and it does not seem to play a substantial role in the analyses presented in the chapters. The book’s empirical work on the founders in each chapter is much more rewarding, and the authors highlight the shared ideological background of the founders.

Analytically, however, it seems that the authors equate the founders and their companies to some extent – indeed, this is a methodological choice explained in the Introduction (p. 14), as the founders have an immense executive power in their respective companies. Thus, there is an occasional analytical overlap between the mutual personal relationships of the founders and the networked connections between their companies. Therefore, the analysis is at times in danger of perpetuating and renewing the mythologies and omnipresence of tech giants that it otherwise impressively deconstructs. These criticisms notwithstanding, the book is an important addition to the scholarship on the makings of Silicon Valley and digital capitalism more broadly.

## References

Deleuze G & Guattari F (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press.