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“It’s an ongoing bromance”: counterculture and cyberculture in Silicon Valley. An interview with Fred Turner

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Abstract:	Fred Turner is considered one of the most influential experts on, and critical observers of, cyberculture. He is Harry and Norman Chandler Professor of Communication at Stanford University in the Department of Communication. Through his work, he provided a thoughtful analysis of the politics and the culture of Silicon Valley. In his books, he explored the connections between the collaborative and interdisciplinary research culture of WWII, the protest movements of the 1960s and the managerial ethos permeating digital and new media industries. In this interview, we discuss about the consequences that the countercultural movements had on the organization of labor in modern tech giants, especially in relation to the substitution of hierarchies for flat and more entrepreneurial structures. We also talk about the consequences that a code of ethics might have in the democratization of technology and the responsibility that we have as citizens and academics.

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5 Fred Turner is considered one of the most influential experts on, and critical observers of,
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7 cyberculture. He is Harry and Norman Chandler Professor of Communication at Stanford
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9 University in the Department of Communication. Prior to joining Stanford, he taught at MIT
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11 (Sloan School of Management), Harvard (John F. Kennedy School of Government), Boston
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13 University, and Northeastern University. He has published three books: *The Democratic*
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15 *Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties*
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17 (2013), *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the*
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19 *Rise of Digital Utopianism* (2006), and *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American*
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21 *Memory* (1996).
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25 I had the chance to sit down with him for an interview on a rainy February evening in
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27 Vancouver, BC on the occasion of the Digital Democracies conference organized at Simon
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29 Fraser University. In the interview, we talked mostly about the ideas introduced in his landmark
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31 book, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*. The book is a thoughtful and illuminating analysis
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33 of the politics and the cultures of Silicon Valley. By combining a meticulous analysis of the
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35 archival records with vivid and vibrant accounts of historical facts, Turner explored the
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37 connections between the collaborative and interdisciplinary research culture of WWII, the
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39 countercultural protest movements of the 1960s, and the managerial culture permeating Silicon
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41 Valley.
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46 Turner's analysis revolved around the life of Stewart Brand, the eclectic intellectual and
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48 entrepreneur known as the founder of the *Whole Earth Catalogue* in the 1960s, The WELL
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50 (*Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link*), an online community at the dawn of the information age, and the
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52 Global Business Network, a series of events and conferences for top managers and academics in
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54 the 1990s. The book followed Brand from the psychedelic years he spent on board the Merry
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5 Pranksters' bus in the mid-1960s, to the apex of the new economy era in the late 1990s. Turner
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7 illustrated how, along this 30-year journey, Brand and his associates (including *Wired* magazine
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9 editors Kevin Kelly and Louis Rossetto, Electronic Frontier Foundation founder John Perry
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11 Barlow, writer and futurist Howard Rheingold) were instrumental in bringing cybernetics out of
12
13 the research laboratories of WWII and into the countercultural movements of the 1960s. In
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15 particular among the "New Communalists", the wing of the countercultural movement that
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17 retreated into communes in rural areas of California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Tennessee, and
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19 turned "toward technology and the transformation of consciousness as the primary sources of
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21 social change" (Turner, 2006, p. 4), instead of engaging in organized political action as the New
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23 Left did. Through the pages of *The Whole Earth Catalogue* first, and the digital online
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25 community The WELL later, Brand contributed to the popularization of the works on cybernetics
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27 of Norbert Wiener, and the technocentric visions of, among others, Marshall McLuhan and
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29 Buckminster Fuller, and helped constitute cybernetics as one of the "most influential intellectual
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31 movements of the twentieth century" (Turner, 2019, p. 28). This movement, in different forms
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33 and across decades, saw new digital technologies as offering the possibility to overcome the
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35 alienating and bureaucratic machine of cold war- and corporate-America. To the New
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37 Communalists, the computer became an instrument of individual liberation and personal
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39 freedom, rather than a symbol of bureaucratic oppression and control. The legacy of these
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41 countercultural experiences, Turner has argued, survived the ultimate failure of the communes
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43 and, today, constitutes the foundation of Silicon Valley techno libertarian culture. This is a
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45 culture that hinges, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) have also argued, on countercultural-
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47 inspired values such as independence, self-reliance, and authenticity, and has been fundamental
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5 in legitimizing “the dehierarchization and decentralization of businesses, and the flexibilization
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7 of production and the labor process” (Fisher, 2010, p. 23).
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9 Turner’s book ends just before the dot-com bubble burst at the end of the millennium.
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11 Yet, through his work, Turner continues today to explore and analyze the entanglement between
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13 counterculture and the “cyberbolic” (Woolgar, 2002) thinking, a mix of determinism and
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15 exaggerated faith in the capacities of technologies, commonly found in the digital and new media
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17 industries. Alongside his third book, *The Democratic Surround*, which expanded on the
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19 connection between counterculture and WWII research efforts on media, art, and political
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21 communication, Turner conducted field research within the walls of the tech giants such as
22
23 Google and Facebook. Specifically, he examined the use of art at Facebook as a means of
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25 managerial surveillance and control (2018), and conducted an intriguing investigation into the
26
27 role of the Burning Man festival in representing and legitimizing peer to peer, project based
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29 communal modes of production, which form the basis of knowledge manufacturing processes as
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31 found at Google (2009).
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37 As someone involved in the study of technology, work, and organization, in this
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39 conversation with Fred Turner, I was eager to hear his ideas about the consequences that the
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41 countercultural spirit had on the organization of labor for modern tech giants, especially in
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43 relation to the substitution of hierarchies for flat and more entrepreneurial structures.
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45 Specifically, I wanted to understand his position on platforms such as Uber, Upwork, and
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47 Mechanical Turk, and their promises to renew, once again, the Communalist vision for a world
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49 free from the oppressive and alienating dynamics of bureaucratic production structures, and their
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51 substitution with algorithmically-mediated marketplaces where “users are configured as
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53 independent, interchangeable, and flexible ‘units’” (de Vaujany et al., 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, I
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5 wanted to hear his opinion on the possibility to adopt a code of ethics for democratizing the
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7 development of new technologies, and for the evaluation of their societal impact—a
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9 controversial issue indeed, advanced in the past by scholars such as Shaiken (1985) and Winner
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11 (1978).
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14 My attempt to focus on platforms and their impact on labor was welcomed with an
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16 invitation to look behind them and to consider the places where these technologies are being
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18 developed, the Bohemia-inspired offices of the Silicon Valley tech giants, and their cultures.
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20 From this perspective, Turner sees platforms as the latest technological reiteration of the
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22 Communalists' bankrupt dream of "working whenever and wherever you want and in a
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24 benevolent way." Such a dream was born out of New Communalists' inability to listen, in the
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26 1960s, to the needs of a working class from which it was increasingly drifting away. This dream,
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28 instead of generating non-alienated labor spaces, has become responsible for the establishment of
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30 a work culture that blurs the line separating the personal from the professional sphere, subsuming
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32 them both to the logics of production (on this issue, see also Gregg, 2011).
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37 In preparation for this *Meet the Person* article, I also reflected on Turner's suggestion to
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39 take a step back in respect to the object of inquiry in order to capture the "low and slow changes
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41 that really matter." Taking a step back means, according to Turner, historicizing technology
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43 rather than trying to follow the industry in their rush into the future. This approach should not,
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45 however, provide us an excuse for retreating into isolated, self-serving academic circles. Quite
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47 the contrary, Turner is vocal about the necessity to be proactive scholars and engaging with the
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49 increasingly disenfranchised class of workers today affected, in the case of platforms, by an
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51 organization of labor enforced through and by algorithms. In the 1960s, the countercultural
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53 movements of the New Communalist failed to engage and to join forces with the working class,
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5 thus paving the way for the establishment of cyberculture and the lifestyle politics responsible
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7 for the class polarization we are witnessing today. Failing to recognize the experiences of the
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9 people we seek to study and failing to acknowledge our own experiences, in many cases as
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11 workers ourselves subject to the same precarity and pressure to blur the personal and
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13 professional spheres within our institutions, can only further polarization and perpetuate a
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15 politics, and a research culture, unable to generate meaningful social change.
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19 **Interview**

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23 **Alberto Lusoli (henceforth AL):** Welcome to Silicon Valley North. I am saying Silicon Valley
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25 North because Vancouver is described as one of the emerging ecosystems for digital, software
26
27 and media ventures. Thanks to a permissive tax scheme, favorable immigration policies and its
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29 proximity to Silicon Valley, Vancouver has become the home for several tech giants like
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31 Amazon, Electronic Arts and Facebook. The expansion of the tech and creative working class
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33 has led the media to identify Vancouver as the Silicon Valley of the north. Whether the moniker
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35 is appropriate or not, I think that it signals how pervasive the Silicon Valley discourse, or the
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37 “Californian ideology”, as Barbrook (1996) would call it, is.
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42 As an attentive observer of the tech industry, can you talk about the long-term impact of
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44 the collaborative research culture of 40s and 50s, and of the countercultural values of the New
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46 Left and New Communalist movements on the organization and culture of labor in tech giants
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48 and start-ups?
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52 **Fred Turner (henceforth FT):** Sure, I’ll give it a try. When I wrote my book “From
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54 Counterculture to Cyberculture” (2006) , people told me that I had written a book showing how
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5 the counter-culture brought us the tech world. I think that's wrong. What I tried to do is show that
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7 the military and industrial collaborative research culture of World War II was actually incredibly
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9 flexible, loose and open, and that it helped to bring us the counter-culture. It helped us to imagine
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11 a world that could be built around shared technology, shared mind-sets, constant collaboration
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13 and constant innovation. A world in which technology and social change could be intertwined
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15 with one another.
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19 When I was in the library at MIT, I found a collection of oral histories written by the
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21 wives of scientists who had been involved in military research at MIT during World War II.
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23 Their stories were so fascinating. They talked about living, essentially, communally. There was
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25 no private space as there were no boundaries between professions. Everybody was just trying to
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27 figure out how to win the war.
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31 It was a proto-communal lifestyle. When we got to the 60s, and you have the commune
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33 movement being born in America, you can see the commune people, especially thanks to Stewart
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35 Brand, buying into the ideals of collaborative work and pushing the idea of scientific and
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37 technological advancement as the gateway to a better future. The New Communalists believed in
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39 the possibility of building an 'engineered environment' that was an alternative to, and immune
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41 from, politics. The New Left, instead, was busy doing politics. The communalists really thought:
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43 "Ah, we can get rid of politics. If we just get our technologies right and drop the right amount of
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45 LSD, then we can build these new societies around a shared consciousness." And as I've tried to
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47 show in my books, this was an idea coming straight out of World War II research laboratories.
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51 This has very pernicious consequences for us today. The laboratories of World War II
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53 were mostly people who were already culturally similar. They were mostly well-trained and
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55 well-educated male scientists. Likewise, the communes tended to be mostly white, and mostly
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5 middle or upper-middle class. In all of those places, organizing around a shared consciousness
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7 meant letting go of bureaucracy, letting go of the rules and starting to organize instead around a
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9 shared culture. Well, as soon as you start organizing around shared culture, you start including
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11 those who have that culture, and excluding those who don't.
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14 And so, the irony, a very pervasive irony in Silicon Valley today, is that as you open-up
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16 systems and as you de-bureaucratize, you make way for modes of prejudice that bureaucracy was
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18 meant to prevent. Therefore, the kind of collaborative open culture that we associate with the
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20 early internet comes from a counter-culture that brings with it a set of prejudices that still haunt
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22 us today.
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25 Here are a couple examples of communal prejudices that I think are still with us. The
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27 communes of the 1960s tended to be very male dominated. They tended to be hetero-normative.
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29 They also tended to be white and they were frequently placed in locations with large native
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31 populations or large Mexican-American populations. But they were imagined as having been
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33 built in the middle of nowhere. Communalists frequently saw themselves like Columbus, landing
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35 in an uninhabited place, which in fact wasn't uninhabited at all.
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39 We can see the same dynamic repeating itself now. We see a sort of "bro-culture"
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41 emerging in Silicon Valley. We see Silicon Valley tech workers landing and imagining that they
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43 are arriving in a Bay Area that is only built for them. As a consequence, the other kinds of folks
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45 who are in the Bay area already are being pushed away from what has become Silicon Valley out
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47 to the edges and out to the East Bay, out to the north. They are becoming long commuters. That's
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49 not quite the society that we hoped we were going to build.
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5 **AL:** I think this is a great introduction that leads me to a follow-up question. In your
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7 essay "Machine Politics" (Turner, 2019), you mention the hospital as an example of the
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9 bureaucratic organization of labor which allows people to work together for the achievement of a
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11 common goal: saving lives.
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14 I think it is an interesting example because hospitals are unique bureaucracies in the way
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16 that their workforces, physicians, are subject to the Hippocratic oath, which imposes on them a
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18 common goal and sets the boundaries of the practice. Transposing the idea of the Hippocratic
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20 oath to technology, I am wondering about the possibility of adopting political, ethics, alongside
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22 the technical standards for evaluating the appropriateness of technology. Scholars have been
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24 thinking about it for some time now (e.g., Feenberg, 1992, 1999, 2002; Winner, 1978). Do you
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26 think that it might be possible and useful to enforce socio-ethical accountability systems
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28 disciplining technology and the labor that they subsume?
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33 **FT:** I think it's entirely possible. I think that the Hippocratic oath is a really a good
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35 example of how it might work. We imagine the Hippocratic oath as something that doctors might
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37 simply believe, but the Hippocratic oath is enforced by a series of practices and behind them, the
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39 rules and regulations inside the hospital.
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43 In the case of technology, it won't work if we simply try to get tech folks to believe
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45 differently. If we just tell people "Don't be evil"¹ then it won't work. It didn't work for Google
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47 and it is not going to work for the rest of us. What might work is if we develop a code of ethics
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49 associated with technology that starts with "Do no harm" and proceeds from there. A code
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51 backed by organizational standards for labor and practices inside companies and state-based
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53 regulations on top of that.
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5 In this respect, I think the state has to get involved. One of the myths that the tech world
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7 has hoisted on us is that the state is, itself, evil and that it doesn't represent the people. Instead,
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9 only the tech world represents the people because they are busy collating the people's voices
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11 with search engines and social media. I don't think that that is true at all. I believe that hospitals
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13 work because they have a clear mission to which the doctors are ethically aligned and they have
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15 the ethics drilled into them. The ethics are drilled into them by the institutions that, in turn,
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17 reward them for following the ethics and punish them for leaving the ethics behind. And so the
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19 question I think that we have in the tech world is, how can we build an ethical register, a set of
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21 principles and then enforce them? That's the real question. Those two things have to go together.
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23 You can't just believe differently. Google tried that and it didn't work. You have to believe
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25 differently and organize differently.
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30 As for labor, you know, I think that Mary Gray's work (2019) is very much on point here.
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32 I think that the challenge is to recognize the kind of labor that digital media has made possible,
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34 the kind of distribution that they make possible and the harm that can come from that. Consider,
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36 for instance, Uber drivers. They are not making much money. You look at the ghost workers
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38 who Mary profiles (ibid.) and they are people working around the world on local California
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40 projects but they labor on terms that are set by the place where they work. They can't move to
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42 Silicon Valley because they are unable to migrate to California. And so they suffer. Therefore,
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44 the question is, how do we build an ethics of labor that is transnational? That's not only a tech
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46 problem, that's a global labor problem.
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51 **AL:** I want to focus on the topic of labor in the age of digital platforms. In a previous
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53 interview (Khan, 2018), you mentioned your interest in the early American Puritan dreams of
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5 liberation and the re-enactment of those dreams in the modern hi-tech industry. I found your
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7 ideas to fit well with the Silicon Valley discourse and the dream to leave behind the known
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9 world of everyday employment, the 9 to 5 kind of job of industrial capitalism, for the pursuit of
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11 non-alienated existences in which everyone can design and build their own career.
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14 This brings me to platforms like Uber, AirBnB and Foodora. They have been framed,
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16 rhetorically, as means for remediating the alienating dynamics of industrial capitalism. By
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18 offering self-regulating market structures and allowing everyone to participate in them, they
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20 perfectly serve the desire to escape the 9 to 5, enabling everyone to pursue a career as an
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22 independent economic actor. In practice, they have become the means of systematic
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24 discrimination and exploitation. I believe that the recent strike of Uber and Lyft drivers is the
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26 most visible consequence of this new form of exploitation.
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30 I'd like to hear your opinion about it and whether you believe the platforms can be
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32 democratically reformed and, in any case, how can we counter, intellectually and materially, the
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34 values they embody.
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38 **FT:** That's such a tough question. There are actually two questions in there; the academic
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40 and the political.
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43 Speaking of platforms and politics, I think that there are a few challenges. You know,
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45 platforms go global but regulatory regimes still tend to be anchored in particular states. States
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47 tend to have geographically boundaries. So how do you regulate a global platform? I think that's
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49 an open question and I do think that the states themselves have to be involved.
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52 Speaking of platform democratization, I don't think that mere participation constitutes
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54 democratization. I don't think that the fact that a platform is open to many peoples' use renders it
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5 democratic in any way. Nor does it render its effects democratic. I don't know how to fix them, I
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7 truly don't. I think that my friend, Tarleton Gillespie, might have a better idea than I do (see
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9 Gillespie, 2018).

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11 Academic tactics are a little clearer to me. The first thing that we have to do is historicize.
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13 The industry is rushing, rushing, rushing into the future. When I joined academia, I remember
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15 being struck that many of the people around me were really focused on things that were going to
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17 matter for the next three to five years. Then I realized how those research studies followed the
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19 three-to-five-year industrial cycle. As academics, I believe that we should take a step back and
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21 ask ourselves the questions about the low and slow changes that really matter.
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25 In the case of platforms and platform labor for example, the dream of non-alienated and
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27 collaborative labor spaces, the dream of working whenever and wherever you want and in a
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29 benevolent way stems from the imagination of the 1960s. As Boltanski and Chiapello have
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31 shown (2007), the countercultural values of the 1960s flowed straight down through the
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33 management theory of the 1990s and helped us end up where we are today. Along the way, we
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35 forgot that the communes that tried living collaborative lives were miserable. They went
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37 bankrupt, they went broke, they suffered, and they had charismatic leaders who were often less
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39 than wholly benevolent.
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43 I think that the communal dream is bankrupt. Which brings me back to my solution. I feel
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45 like a curmudgeon when I say it, but I think that bureaucracy is underestimated. I think that rules
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47 are underestimated. I think that roles that effectively distinguish between home and work are
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49 underestimated. I've spent some time at Facebook lately and they talk to their workers a lot
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51 about the need to bring the whole self to work. I think that's a nightmare. There are parts of
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53 myself that I don't want at work. I like to go to work to escape some parts of my life. And a lot of
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5 the time, I want no work at home either. I want to be able to break those things apart. During the
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7 industrial era, people fought very hard to break those things apart -- to not have to do piecework
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9 or to have an office separate from their home. Some of those things, some of those distinctions,
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11 are very valuable. They keep us sane and I'd like to see us bring them back.
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15 **AL:** I'd like to explore more in-depth your thoughts about the role of academia in the
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17 platformization of labor. Throughout your work, you traced the lineage of countercultural values
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19 as starting from World War Two-era governmental and academic institutions, as in the case of
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21 the RAD Lab at MIT. You've shown how academia was fundamental in creating the conditions
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23 for the subsequent affirmation of the New Left and Communalist movements.
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27 I am interested in hearing your thoughts about the current state of academia and whether
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29 you believe that it has the potential to foster cultures and practices that are capable to respond to
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31 the platformization of labor and, to a larger extent, democracy.
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35 **FT:** I think that a lot of the protesters of the 1960s made a terrible mistake in protesting
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37 only with people like themselves. By the early 1970s, Richard Nixon was able to inspire
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39 thousands of hard hats to march through the streets of New York in support of his policies. They
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41 were representatives of the working class and they saw their interests as being opposed to those
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43 of the students who were marching from the universities.
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47 In the 1960s, especially on the commune side of the counter-culture, but also on the New
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49 Left, young Americans seemed to be protesting a kind of bureaucratic, Cold War world.
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51 However, through their protests, they actually cracked open the door to the kind of world that we
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53 inhabit now. A world in which we blur the professional and personal constantly. When they
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55 cracked the door open, people who could have told them where the problems were, members of
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5 the working class, were not part of their movements much. I think that the university today is in
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7 danger of making that same mistake. Students and the activists they work with need to reach out
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9 to members of the disenfranchised working class. If we do not work to address this class
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11 division, then we're going to have a lot of trouble in the tech world.
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14 You can see this in the United States so intensely right now. I am constantly, endlessly,
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16 perpetually frustrated by the emphasis in universities on issues that are important but that are
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18 distinctly upper class -- weirdly, even including identity, which of course is, by definition,
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20 something everyone wrestles with. The protest that I see most commonly in my local world are
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22 protests around pronouns. Are you using the proper pronoun? Do you recognize my distinct
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24 gender identity? Don't get me wrong, I think that these are important issues. I am not trying to
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26 denigrate them. But what I'm noticing is that the shift of politics into that private personal sphere
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28 keeps you in the upper class. It doesn't cause you to reach out to working class people, whose
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30 interests may or may not be focused on gender pronouns and bathrooms. They may actually be
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32 focused on, 'Oh my God, I can't feed my family. I have no social welfare, I have no health care'.
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37 Most of the students I meet with these days are focused on issues that come from, and are
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39 connected to, the life stage that they are at and the class that they are already a part of. If we're
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41 going to prevent the *uberization* of the American labor force, then what we need to do is get to
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43 know some people in the working class who are in those universities with us. That's a real
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45 challenge. I don't see that happening nearly enough.
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48 Now, there are some new things happening in Silicon Valley these days. For example, the
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50 work of the Tech Workers Coalition², which is a group of tech workers of all strata that is
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52 actively working to organize everybody, from security guards up through to coders. They have
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54 hosted meetings with students at Stanford and they have been terrific. They've asked people like
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5 me to speak to them and to be a part of their meetings. That's the first sign I've seen that things
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7 might go differently this time than they did in the 60s. But there are a lot of incentives for
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9 students not to go that way, especially in elite universities. There are a lot of incentives to pay lip
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11 service to the need to make change and then go and work for Google.
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14 I think that certainly the Communalist way of counter-culture has left us with a kind of
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16 lifestyle politics. However, if we keep doing lifestyle politics, it's going to be very hard to really
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18 change the organization of labor. We will still be upper class people and we will feel good about
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20 ourselves, plus we will be college graduates, but large portions of America that labor in other
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22 ways will be cut off from us and us from them. As a result, they will get more and more
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24 resentful. Our working conditions will deteriorate and we will end up polarized, even more
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26 polarized than we are right now. And that would be very bad, for everybody.
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31 **AL:** I think this resonates very well with the kind of polarization that we are witnessing
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33 in the US and European political landscapes.
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37 **FT:** Yes, it's really wild. Let me focus on the issue of polarization for a minute. The
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39 platform conversation is a conversation that is happening primarily among academics.
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41 I grew up in a very rural town. There was a university there, but the population was
42
43 mostly dairy farmers. I don't think my dairy farmer friends are wondering about the politics of
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45 platforms. I think they're wondering how they're going to get paid. I think they have their opinion
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47 about how people behave on Facebook. But at the end of the day, dairy prices matter a whole lot
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49 more.
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5 **AL:** I see. Although it might be argued that at some point, platforms will impact the lives
6
7 of those who are not currently concerned, or affected, by them.
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10 **FT:** Yes, you're absolutely right. And that's why the question you're asking is so
11
12 important. How do we raise the alarm?
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15 Take Uber for example. The taxi industry might be like a canary in the coal mine. It
16
17 might be the first industry to be disrupted by platforms and maybe we can all look at that and
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19 say, "Hey, wait a minute, these other industries can be affected by a labor platformization as
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21 well".
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24 The point is to become aware and alert. What should we be alert to? Who can we alert?
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26 How should leading organizations in various industries be alerted and respond to this?
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30 **AL:** You briefly touched on the issue of identity and I believe that this is a key point. I
31
32 am convinced that professional identities play a pivotal role in the constitution of new forms of
33
34 capital accumulation. In a previous interview (see Bick, 2014), when discussing the new
35
36 identities of the tech industry you used the musician as the archetype of modern tech workers. A
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38 creative, yet precarious, working subject. As if creativity and precariousness should necessarily
39
40 go hand-in-hand. To some extent, this reminds me of Boltanski and Chiapello's artistic critique
41
42 of capitalism (2007). At the onset of the digital revolution, the hacker, the artist and the nerd
43
44 became archetypes for a generation of workers that struggled to impersonate the professional
45
46 identities of industrial capitalism. Fast forward 30 years and production in tech companies is still
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48 very structured and fragmented, in ways not too dissimilar from what was happening during
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50 industrial capitalism. Can you talk about the tension between the Bohemian aspirations of the
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52 digital working class and the industrial reality of the tech industry?
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5 FT: Like I said, I've spent some time inside Facebook lately and I've come to think about
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7 Facebook as a Bohemian factory. At Facebook's headquarters in Menlo Park, cafes and
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9 restaurants are everywhere. It looks like a little city once you are inside. It's like a Bohemian
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11 street where everything is free and you don't have to pay for anything. Interestingly, art is also
12
13 everywhere. Facebook has hired artists to sit out in the squares in between the buildings, make
14
15 art and talk to people. This is because Facebook wants their employees to imagine themselves as
16
17 creatives (Turner, 2018). This can also be seen in the workplace architecture. The offices are
18
19 huge open floors, so that you can see all the way down and see everyone. Zuckerberg himself has
20
21 a glass office, a glass box, sitting in the middle of this open floor.
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25 What is happening at Facebook is a Bohemian mode of surveillance. It was very common
26
27 in previous forms of Bohemia as well. You are put in a position where you can see everyone,
28
29 watch one another and figure out how to do things together. You can see it at Burning Man as
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31 well, you can see it among the Hippies, and you can see it in all of these other counter-cultural
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33 spaces.
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37 On the one hand, it looks really liberating and free. Facebook does not look like IBM in
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39 the 1955. It is not people in suits. It is not gender divided the way that it used to be. It is not men
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41 on one side of the room and women on the other. Men at the desks and women serving. On the
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43 other hand, I think that it carries with it problems that first emerged in the 1960s. We keep
44
45 thinking that Bohemia is a good alternative to bureaucracy. However, that's a language borrowed
46
47 from the 60s, and even then, Bohemia was not a good long-term alternative to anything for most
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49 people.
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53 Part of our confusion here is that we imagined Bohemia and that kind of free, unrestricted
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55 collaborative work as the alternative to hierarchy and to alienation. That's a mistake that a whole
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5 other generation made in 1965, '66, '67, '68 and '69. That's what sent New Communalists back
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7 to the land. However, those communes died very, very rapidly. Unless they had authoritarian or
8
9 religious leaders, they were mostly gone within a year or two. And I think there's a lesson there.
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11 The kind of struggles they had around organizing, around work, around charisma, around gender
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13 norms, those kinds of things are all coming back to us now.
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16 Take Tesla, the car company, for example. Tesla is not a unionized shop. It's a famously
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18 anti-union shop where people work incredibly hard and where the injury rates are much higher
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20 than they are supposed to be. They have a classically charismatic leader, Elon Musk, who exerts
21
22 his will in a classically charismatic style. At Tesla, the workers are intensely collaborative but
23
24 they're also intensely endangered, at least by comparison to other workers of their kind. So on
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26 the one hand, you could say that Tesla is a Bohemian factory, where the workforce is free,
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28 collaborative and flexible. But the cost of that Bohemian attitude is very high. And it is not just
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30 because it's gone wrong at Facebook or at Tesla. It is because the mechanics of Bohemia that
31
32 we've inherited from the 60s are themselves a problem. They do not produce stable, long-term,
33
34 sustainable environments. And that's what we need.
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40 **AL:** I was thinking of how the Bohemian discourse somehow percolated into managerial
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42 practices also thanks to the encounter with complexity and chaos theory in the 1990s. This
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44 encounter justified and legitimized the Bohemian spirit in scientific terms.
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48 **FT:** Yes, and that's a repetition of what happened in the 1960s. In the 1960s, Bohemia
49
50 and cybernetics justified one another. When you dropped LSD, you were supposed to be able to
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52 see these invisible systems of meaning that were otherwise impossible to see. And that was the
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54 same kind of systematic vision that cybernetics has suddenly offered in the scientific space.
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5 When Stewart Brand created the *Whole Earth Catalog*, who is in the first edition? Norbert
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7 Wiener. You don't need Norbert Wiener's cybernetics if you're heading back to the land. You
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9 need farming tools. This is unless what you're heading back to the land to do is see invisible
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11 systems using technology. So cybernetics and counter-cultural ambitions legitimated each other
12
13 in the 60s. Then they did it again in the 90s with *Wired* magazine and Kevin Kelly's work and
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15 then again with the idea of complexity and the theory of chaos that developed in places like the
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17 Santa Fe Institute. It's an ongoing bromance.
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22 **AL:** I want to try to close this interview on a positive note. As we have discussed, the
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24 research culture of World War II and the countercultural movements of the 60s have reshaped
25
26 our Western technological imagination. I'd like to hear your thoughts about non-Western cultural
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28 movements, maybe born as a reaction to the Western techno-utopianism, which might change,
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30 once again, our conception of technological development.
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34 I'll give you an example of what I mean. In the book "Between Reason and Experience",
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36 Andrew Feenberg (2010) talks about "layered development" as a way to illustrate how Western
37
38 technologies were adopted and reinterpreted through the lens of Japanese culture. This resulted
39
40 in the complete transformation of Western technological artifacts, with miniaturization being the
41
42 most visible example of this confluence.
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46 **FT:** Let me take the question in a different way. I think that, as academics, we're trained
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48 to think in terms of colonization. We were frequently raised on the critical theory that was
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50 created during the post-colonial or decolonizing moment after World War II. And so, when we
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52 see things like the spread of technology around the world or Silicon Valley having sudden power
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5 in Africa, China and Asia, we often think of it as a kind of active colonization led by a set of
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7 Californian companies working to extend the reach of the Californian ideology.
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9 We see Facebook almost as kind of a new British-India company sending its tentacles
10
11 out. I think that some part of that is fair. Facebook is in many ways a global mining engine for
12
13 the social world. It really is the British-East India company again, going out to suck tea from
14
15 India. But, that aside, the trouble with the colonial metaphor is that it tends to make us look for
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17 resistance. And then if we look for resistance, we only see colonizers and resisters. What we
18
19 miss are the collaborations. I think that is where the real action is. Consider for example,
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21 Shenzhen in China. Silvia Lindtner's work on this subject is really strong (2015). In Shenzhen,
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23 China, there's a Shenzhen way of doing things. It's very Chinese, but it's also very much built on
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25 having American markets collaborating with American technologists who fly in and out.
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30 For this reason, I really think that the occupier/resister frame leads us astray. I think that
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32 where we need to be looking is at these kinds of hybrid places where both cultures are shaping
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34 each other and where new things are emerging.
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38 **Concluding Comments**

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41 I believe Turner work provides an excellent example and inspiration for scholars
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43 attempting to re-humanize organization and management science (Petriglieri, 2020). This pursuit
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45 has become increasingly relevant at a time when work takes place within and through
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47 technologies whose instrumentality is hidden behind a layer of stone-cold algorithmic rationality.
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49 Turner relies on history as a way to peek behind the technological curtain and expose the cultural
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51 hinterland or, as Feenberg has called it, the “technical code” (1999), undergirding the design of
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53 modern technologies. Sociologists have advocated for an integrated approach to technology and
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5 society since the 1980s (Bijker et al., 2012; Hughes, 1983; Latour, 1987), especially in those
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7 disciplines traditionally focused on one factor of the equation. In the context of organization and
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9 management science, Turner's suggestion to historicize sounds like an invitation to conceive the
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11 organizational changes stemming from the diffusion of digital means of communication and
12
13 production as intertwined with the cultural and historical context in which these new
14
15 technologies are being developed. This is not enough, however, to avoid making that same
16
17 mistake the New Communalists committed in the 1960s. The challenge for us all, therefore, is to
18
19 practice a kind of research capable to overcome "the fragmentation and polarization that threaten
20
21 the body of societies, including academic ones" (Petriglieri, 2020, p. 13). How this might
22
23 translate into practice is still an open question. As an example, Turner offered the work of the
24
25 Tech Workers Coalition. Yet, answering this question is our responsibility and should constitute
26
27 an integral and essential part of our work.
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33 **Acknowledgments**

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36 A special thanks to Svitlana Matviyenko for making this interview possible.
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40 **Notes**

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43 ¹ 'Don't be evil' was Google's code of conduct motto from 1998 to 2015.

44 ² See <https://techworkerscoalition.org/>
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