Beyond the Valley: How Innovators around the World Are Overcoming Inequality and Shaping the Technologies of Tomorrow, by Ramesh Srinivasan

Nathan Schneider would like more detail about how we can escape the embrace of the technological giants

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It wasn’t so long ago that an academic or journalist sounding the alarm about Silicon Valley was undertaking a quaint endeavour. “Yes, yes, we know,” muttered the minute public that bothered to read such works, “you’re probably right, but we still love our gizmos.” Plus, the wunderkinds behind the big start-up monopolies had such nice intentions. Mark Zuckerberg just wanted to connect the world; the Googlers promised not to be evil.

Times have changed. Ramesh Srinivasan’s *Beyond the Valley* comes at a moment when what was once called the Valley of Heart’s Delight faces regulatory crackdowns in Europe and across the US political spectrum, along with accusations of undermining the democratic process and aiding in genocide. The book bears a necessary agenda and promise: that the end-all and be-all of internet technology need not be the whims of venture capital-fuelled start-up bros, and that there is a much wider world of innovation, experimentation and resistance to which we can turn for answers.

Srinivasan takes us to Uganda, to Kenya, to southern Mexico, to Catalonia and to public housing in Red Hook, Brooklyn. He describes conversations with power brokers such as Elizabeth Warren and Vicente Fox, as well as with activists, labour leaders and renegade technologists. (I am among his less eminent informants, speaking on the new insurgency of co-op start-ups.) Through this vast range of reference, he calls on more of us to “recognize ourselves, the users, as potential designers” (italics in the original).

This kind of global, multipolar discourse is sorely needed. Too many consumers follow breathless reports from the latest Apple product announcements, but they see nothing of the hardware hackers in the markets of Shenzhen, whose creations are at least as inventive and far more affordable. Places where corporate broadband is widely available miss the solidarity of a community mesh network. Even the language of “the Internet”, singular, neglects the fact that increasingly this is a world of internets, cut off from each other by a blend of well-meaning regulation and draconian repression.

*Beyond the Valley* points to the need for more, whetting the appetite for what the book only begins to provide. Srinivasan devotes the first 16 of 25 chapters to a largely US-focused critique of the valley in question, covering a series of recent events and hot topics – useful reminders, but not likely to surprise readers of *The New York Times* opinion pages. Fewer than 100 of more than 300 pages dwell on international examples; the rest would be familiar territory for a moderately woke technologist in Palo Alto. Throughout, the book calls attention to urgent problems and opportunities, but it leaves to others the theoretical acuity, narrative depth and sophisticated proposals needed to counteract Silicon Valley’s unnecessary hold on our imaginations.
Were foreign tourists to visit the techie towns along the Caltrain corridor in search of a futuristic wonderland, they would be disappointed. The place is a drab, sprawling suburb inhabited largely by boy kings in hoodies alongside an underclass of underpaid subcontractors. Any interesting architecture is behind walls, and the interesting conversations are for those who know someone. They don’t even make much silicon any more – the physical stuff happens in Asia now. The sense of virtual community that made this place feel vibrant and real in the age of homegrown Bulletin Board Services is now the purview of alt-right trolls on Gab.

The future of technology is, or needs to be, beyond this valley; in his book’s strengths and shortcomings, Srinivasan can help us begin learning how to see it.

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