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Families: Stories of Domestic
Uphaval in ~~2~~ Late Twentieth
Century America  1990 Basic Books

Land of Dreams and Disaster: Postindustrial Living in the Silicon Valley

When I moved here, there were orchards all around, and now there are integrated-circuit manufacturing plants all around. . . that's been the thrill, because I've been part of it, and it's the most exciting time in the history of the world, I think. And the center of it is here in Silicon Valley.

—Female engineer at Hewlett-Packard, quoted in *San Jose Mercury News*, 19 February 1985

You know what San Jose reminds me of? It's kind of a cow town in my estimation; it cracks me up that there's all this big stuff going on, this big industry, and Silicon Valley and everything. I mean, when I was a kid and my grandparents lived in Santa Cruz and we drove through San Jose, this was like a dust spot, you know, you got dust on your windshield when you drove through this valley. My uncle was an apricot and almond orchard man around here, and there wasn't anything in San Jose. San Jose was a town south of Oakland, south of the city; it was this little spot over there, and you passed it when you went to Santa Cruz or went down South.

—“Jan,” interviewed August 1984

As the seedbed and international headquarters of the electronics industry, the Silicon Valley has been in the vanguard of postindustrial social transformations. Few could have been more astonished by this development than working people who inhabited the region before its technological makeover. In the 1950s, those who occupied Santa Clara County, a

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sprawling, fertile plain along the southern shore line of San Francisco Bay, inhabited a sparsely populated agribusiness area, one of the world's major prune and apricot suppliers, then known locally with pride, as “the garden of heart's delight.” Most likely they worked on farms or in the canneries and food-processing plants that supplied the county's scant eight thousand manufacturing jobs. In 1955 they might have garnered a small share of benefits from the county's peak orchard production year without ever suspecting that local fruit groves were about to disappear even more precipitously than the modern families that tended or admired them.¹

Residents in the 1950s could not have known that the northern portion of their county was about to become the “Silicon Valley.” During the next three decades, the developing electronics industry would convert the garden of heart's delight into a world-renowned high-tech center, regarded alternatively as the solution to American economic malaise or as the prophecy of its decline, a “valley of toxic fright.”² With ample defense contract funding, Stanford University, located in Palo Alto along the northwest county border, spawned the prolific seeds of scientific industry in this hitherto bucolic valley. Between 1950 and 1980 silicon replaced noncitrus fruit as the region's principal product, the local population grew by more than 400 percent—from nearly 300,000 to more than 1.29 million people—and the region's economy, ecology, and social structure were unrecognizably transformed.³

During the 1960s and 1970s, while many urban industrial areas in the United States began to decline, Santa Clara County enjoyed spectacular economic growth. Between 1960 and 1975 county employment grew by 156 percent, three times the national rate, as local manufacturing jobs increased to 130,000 and auxiliary employment in construction and services expanded apace.⁴ The electronics industry provided jobs for almost one of every three county workers, and it generated most of the construction and service needs that employed the majority of the rest.⁵ In those heady days, the media and even some scholars portrayed the Silicon Valley as a true-life American fairy tale, and few were the voices raised, or heard, in dissent. The Mecca of the new technological entrepreneurs, its worshippers proclaimed, was a sunny land where factories resembled college campuses, where skilled, safe, and challenging work was replacing the monotonous, degrading, dangerous labors of the now-declining in-

industries, and where American technical know-how and entrepreneurial spirit once again would rescue the flagging U.S. economy and better the lives of all.⁶

An unusually high proportion (25 percent) of the electronics industry did consist of the most highly educated and highly paid salaried employees in any U.S. industry—engineers and professionals employed in research and design. Along with those heralded health clubs and fitness tracks, they were offered exceptional challenges and economic opportunities. As in “traditional” industries, however, the vast majority of these most privileged employees were white men (89 percent males, 89 percent non-Hispanic whites). During those start-up years in the 1950s and 1960s the industry also employed white men in most of its production jobs where they too enjoyed unusual opportunities. Even those with very limited schooling could advance into technical ranks, particularly those whom the military had first trained in mechanics before depositing them conveniently in nearby bases.⁷

But as the electronics industry matured, it feminized (and minoritized) its work force, turning increasingly to female, ethnic minority, and recent migrant workers to fill production positions that offered far fewer advancement opportunities. By the late 1970s the industry’s occupational structure was crudely stratified by gender as well as by race and ethnicity. White men were at the top, white women and ethnic minorities at the bottom. Almost half the employees were assembly workers and operatives; three-fourths of these were women, and 40 percent were minorities. Two groups of workers made up the middle: the moderately well-paid technicians and craft workers, also primarily Anglo males but into whose ranks women and Asians were making some inroads, and the clerical work force composed overwhelmingly of Anglo women. These middle-income jobs were declining, however; in Silicon Valley as elsewhere in postindustrial America, growth of new jobs is at the top and the bottom.⁸ The preferred labor pool for the bottom continued to grow here during the 1980s as the proportion of nonwhite county residents increased dramatically.⁹

The popular media image of egalitarian and innovative work relations symbolized by engineers in blue jeans working at computers in open cubicles masks the startlingly unequal, far-from-innovative working conditions with which the industry’s production workers contend. Electronics remains the only nonunionized major industry in the United States, and

its production workers earn lower wages and endure greater risks and hardships than do their counterparts in most “traditional” industries. In 1981, for example, electronics workers earned an average wage only 57 percent of that paid to auto and steel workers, despite the mandatory wage concessions extracted from the latter.¹⁰ Ironically, the “clean rooms” in which many electronics workers toil are filled with highly toxic solvents. Almost half of the occupational illness cases reported among semiconductor workers involve systemic poisoning from toxic materials, and the rate of occupational illness in electronics production in California is three times as great as in other manufacturing occupations.¹¹ Many electronics firms operate around the clock and require production workers to accept night and weekend shifts as well as long and highly irregular schedules. Yet they offer workers no job security and subject them to frequent, sudden layoffs and forced vacations.

In 1974 the first major slump in the electronics industry signaled its inherent volatility. Dependent on defense contracts and highly turbulent global market conditions, the industry’s boom-bust cycle and the high failure rate of firms promised recurrent unemployment. Corporate strategists began to ship many production jobs to cheaper labor areas in the United States and abroad and to replace “permanent” workers with a flexible fleet of what soon became the highest concentration of “temporary” workers in the nation—workers, that is, who lack all employee benefits.¹²

By the time I began this study in 1984, “Silicon Valley fever” had begun to subside as most county residents directly or indirectly suffered ill effects of the electronics industry’s previously concealed “downside.” Increasing numbers of residents were out of work, and the entry-level work available promised few prospects for a family wage. Local unemployment rates rose in the 1980s, escalating sharply during the industry’s severe prolonged slump in 1984 and 1985. Even after that recession had bottomed out, untrained, entry-level workers found that their best employment prospects were not in the electronics industry but as hotel housekeepers and security guards.¹³

Employed and unemployed alike suffered from the industry’s destruction of their once-bucolic environment. As cancer rates and birth defects in the county rose alarmingly, outraged residents discovered that their water supplies had been contaminated by more than one hundred industrial chemicals that were known or suspected to be carcinogens, mu-

tagens, or teratogens.¹⁴ Air pollution and nightmarish traffic, predictable products of the region's decades of untrammelled, unplanned development, destroyed the celebrated quality of life that had once enticed so many to the fabled region. And yet the cost of living rose as sharply as the quality of life declined. This was not an anomaly; rather, as urban analyst Annalee Saxenian has demonstrated, it is a case of chickens fed by the industry's stratified employment policies now come home to roost. The skewed salaries that the industry paid its sizable professional and managerial elite raised local housing costs to among the highest in the nation, beyond the reach of its underpaid, often underemployed production workers.¹⁵ The local media began to treat its audiences to the embarrassing spectacle of mounting homelessness in the land of affluence. Most of the new homeless, moreover, were family units.¹⁶

Local and national media became more consistently preoccupied with the escalating narcotics problems of the postindustrial era, and here too the Silicon Valley gave cause for grave alarm. Illegal drug use in the county seat cost its residents \$500 million annually, and the region gained an unenviable reputation as the state capital for the use of PCP, a potent animal tranquilizer that induces behavior so violent that local police identify it as "the single highest cause of officer injury in this department."¹⁷ The federal Drug Enforcement Agency identified Silicon Valley as "one of the biggest cocaine users in the United States."¹⁸ Drug dealing offered an irresistible occupational alternative to mounting legions of unemployed youth. Indeed the electronics industry offered many workers on-the-job training in drug dependency, as foremen and coworkers distributed drugs to sustain workers through the monotony and stress of lengthy shifts and speedups. More than 35 percent of the electronics employees surveyed by the *San Jose Mercury News* in 1985 acknowledged using illicit drugs on the job.¹⁹ In 1988 the county Board of Supervisors and the San Jose City Council approved higher bail and longer jail sentences for dealers as they passed a resolution introduced by a coalition of local church groups stating that "drugs represent a severe health epidemic which is destroying the lives of our families and the future of our community."²⁰

Such regional maladies may have failed to shake the faith of some high-tech devotees, like the female engineer at Hewlett-Packard quoted at the beginning of this chapter, but in the 1980s more people declared themselves eager to leave than to enter the South Bay futureland. Population

growth in Santa Clara County slowed considerably after 1980, falling below California rates. As the decade neared its close, a Bay area poll found the once-glorified Silicon Valley to be the least popular county in the region. Almost half the county residents queried claimed they would prefer to live somewhere else.²¹ It was a twist of cruel irony, therefore, when in 1989 Hewlett-Packard—the area's preeminent high-tech firm, credited by many with creating the Silicon Valley—cited the region's spiraling cost of living as the basis for its decision to move 10 percent of its computer manufacturing operations to a less-populated California valley.²²

While the changing character of work in the Silicon Valley commanded global attention, most outside observers overlooked concurrent gender and family changes that preoccupied many residents. In earlier, self-congratulatory days, before the national political climate made feminism seem a derogatory term, local public officials liked to describe San Jose, the county seat, as a feminist capital. The city elected a feminist mayor and hosted the statewide National Organization of Women convention in 1974. Santa Clara soon became one of the few counties in the nation that could boast of having elected a female majority to its Board of Supervisors. In 1981 high levels of feminist activism made San Jose the site of the nation's first successful strike for a comparable worth standard of pay for city employees. And, according to sociologist Karen Hossfeld, young working-class women who vehemently rejected a feminist identity took for granted women's rights to political and economic equality and to control their own sexuality.²³

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that during these postindustrializing decades the Silicon Valley has also been the site of a significant degree of family turbulence. Much of the data on local family changes represent an exaggeration of the national trends described in the last chapter. For example, while the national divorce rate was doubling after 1960, in Santa Clara County it nearly tripled. By 1977 more county residents filed divorce papers than registered marriages. By 1980 the divorce rate in the county seat ranked ninth among U.S. metropolitan areas, higher than Los Angeles or San Francisco. Likewise the percentage of "nonfamily households" grew faster in the Silicon Valley than in the nation, and abortion rates were one and one-half times the national figures. And although the percentage of single-parent households was not quite as high as it was in the nation as a whole, the rate of increase was

INTRODUCTIONS

more rapid.²⁴ The high marriage casualty rate among workaholic engineers was dubbed "the silicon syndrome."²⁵ County social workers and residents with whom I spoke in the mid-1980s shared an alarmist view of the fate of family life in their locale summarized in the opening lines of a feature article in a local university magazine: "There is an endangered species in Silicon Valley, one so precious that when it disappears Silicon Valley will die with it. This endangered species is the family. And sometimes it seems as if every institution in this valley—political, corporate, and social—is hellbent on driving it into extinction."²⁶

These concurrent changes in occupational, gender, and family patterns make the Silicon Valley a propitious site for exploring the ways in which "ordinary" working people have been remaking their families in the wake of postindustrial and feminist challenges. The Silicon Valley is by no means a typical or "representative" U.S. location, but precisely because national postindustrial work and family transformations were more condensed, rapid, and exaggerated there than elsewhere, they should be easier to perceive. Yet most popular and scholarly literature about white working-class people portrays them as the most traditional, as the last bastion, that is, of the modern family. Relatively privileged members of the white working class are widely regarded as the bulwark of the Reagan revolution and the constituency least sympathetic to feminism and family reforms.²⁷ Those whose hold on the accoutrements of the American Dream is so recent and tenuous, it is thought, have the strongest incentives to defend it. Curiously, however, few scholars have published book-length, in-depth studies of such families in recent years.²⁸

Conventional images of progressive, middle-class families embracing egalitarian changes in gender and work patterns that "traditional"—that is to say, "modern"—working-class families resentfully resist fail to recognize the complexity, fluidity, and unresolved character of contemporary gender, class, and family arrangements. Only ethnographic research, I have come to believe, can capture this complexity sufficiently to dispel distortions in the popular clichés. Based on such research, *Brave New Families* narrates stories about working-class gender relations and kinship strategies that are as creative, flexible, and postmodern as those found among the most innovative strata of the middle classes. Indeed, working people, this book argues, have served as the unrecognized pioneers of the postmodern family revolution.