

In 'Brotopia,' Silicon Valley Disrupts Everything but the Boys' Sex Club

By Jennifer Szalai

Beware the callow misfit who becomes part of the ruling class; rather than disrupt the social order that excluded him, he might just reap its spoils for himself.

A number of the men depicted in Emily Chang's "Brotopia: Breaking Up the Boys' Club of Silicon Valley" seem to be making up for lost experience, using their newfound wealth and power to get whatever it is they had previously been denied — mainly stuff, status and sex. "From its earliest days," Chang writes, "the industry has self-selected for men: first, antisocial nerds, then, decades later, self-confident and risk-taking bros."

How nerds became bros is one of the central stories in this book. But the technology industry didn't always skew so male. As Chang explains, women played a formative role. The mathematician [Ada Lovelace](#) wrote the first computer program in 1842; the navy admiral and mathematician [Grace Hopper](#) helped create the Cobol programming language. Women received almost 40 percent of computer science degrees in 1984, but even though they continue to work in the field and make essential contributions, today that number is a measly 22 percent.

This is more than a work force issue, and "Brotopia" is more than a business book. Silicon Valley holds extraordinary power over our present lives as well as whatever utopia (or nightmare) might come next. "If robots are going to run the world, or at the very least play a hugely critical role in our future, men shouldn't be programming them

alone,” Chang writes. “The scarcity of women in an industry that is so forcefully reshaping our culture simply cannot be allowed to stand.”

Chang, the host and executive producer of the television show “Bloomberg Technology,” is on to something important, even if her book doesn’t quite do it justice. Some of the writing is blander than it needs to be, and she has a soft spot for worthy proclamations. But she is clearly engaged with and often incensed by her subject, and the best parts of “Brotopia” are those moments when she actively resists the “it’s all good” ethos of the Bay Area and cuts down chauvinism with the disdain it deserves.

The book includes a blistering chapter about the venture capitalist Peter Thiel and the self-styled PayPal Mafia — an all-male clique of company alumni who fund one another’s business ventures. Thiel and a group of mostly conservative classmates from Stanford later founded PayPal and boasted about their entrepreneurial success, casting it as a vindication of their hiring strategy. None of the company’s first engineers were women. As one founder admits, “We didn’t know any.”



Emily Chang Jim Wilson/The New York Times

In other words, they hired their buddies, and their buddies were all men. Yet they insist that such cronyism was just the meritocracy at work. Keith Rabois, another member of the PayPal Mafia, describes the company as a “perfect validation of merit”: “We went from complete misfits to the establishment in five years.” (*Complete* misfits? A Stanford degree apparently amounts to bubkes.) The absurdity of this logic is too much for Chang to bear. “The idea that these men just happened to be personally connected to the most

talented people available is simply ridiculous.” As she points out, “privilege accumulates.”

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Chang presents Google as a [bizarro](#) PayPal, flush with good intentions to hire diverse talent and give women some “real power.” She writes glowingly of Marissa Mayer, who was hired early on as Google’s first female engineer and later became chief executive of Yahoo, and Susan Wojcicki, Google’s first marketing manager and now the chief executive of YouTube. But it’s Sheryl Sandberg — formerly a Google vice president and currently Facebook’s chief operating officer — who is depicted here in especially heroic terms.

The adulation of Sandberg gets surprisingly personal. Chang describes being pregnant with her first child in 2012, doubting her “ability to succeed as a working mom,” and

emailing Sandberg out of gratitude for her willingness to step into the fray. “I gasped aloud when, 30 seconds later, Sandberg’s reply hit my inbox.”

One might have hoped that this intimacy would at least generate some pointed insights or candid quotes. But Sandberg gives Chang her well-worn lines about trickle-down feminism. “Women in leadership will help create the environment for more women in leadership,” Sandberg tells her, in a sentence that sounds about as spontaneous as a TED Talk. “Women will create the institutional change we need.”

“I believe this will happen,” Chang writes. This credulity is as disappointing as it is puzzling. As her own reporting shows, Google found it hard to scale its good intentions as it grew, and last year it reported numbers comparable to the rest of the industry, with women accounting for less than a third of its work force and only 25 percent of its leadership roles. Google had regressed to the mean — and the mean, as it stands, isn’t great for women.

But as much as these numbers matter, and as telling as they are, it’s the sex in this book that will probably get the most attention. Chang recounts cases of sexual harassment and vicious online trolling. She also includes a chapter on polyamory and sex parties that’s [heavy on salacious details](#) and [light on named sources](#). Participants tell Chang that they’re proudly disrupting tradition: “Their behavior at these high-end parties is an extension of the progressiveness and open-mindedness — the audacity, if you will — that makes founders think they can change the world.” They describe Molly tabs molded into the shape of the Snapchat logo, and food being served off the bodies of naked women.

That last detail gave me pause, if only for how trite it is. As Chang herself wonders, “If these sexual adventurers are so progressive, why do these parties seem to lean so heavily toward male heterosexual fantasies?” The party scenes she depicts are as poignant and depressing as “Revenge of the Nerds.” For all their talk of innovation, these entrepreneurs can’t throw an orgy without resorting to clichés.

“You may think you’re Steve Jobs, but really you’re Roger Ailes or Bill O’Reilly with a Bernie Sanders tattoo.” That’s one of the best quotes in “Brotopia,” and it’s from Elisabeth Sheff, a polyamory expert. Bold new world; same old patriarchy.