

Imperial Silicon Valley

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A theme which runs under and through most of my thinking about technology is one I borrow from Gray Brechin, who in 1999 published a fabulous book with the University of California press called “Imperial San Francisco.” In it he describes the *contado* that made San Francisco possible. His notion of the *contado* is that of the penumbra cast by an imperial city (such as Venice or Rome — or San Francisco) in its search for resources to exploit to support its existence. With Venice, the *contado* manifested itself, for example, through the stripping bare of the Dalmatian coast of its timber to construct Venice’s shipping. In the San Francisco of the 1840s to the 1890s, the *contado* consisted of Sierra Nevada hillsides destroyed, watersheds permanently damaged, and a system of property rights put into place in support of the silver and gold mining interests that created the San Francisco Establishment.

The language of the turn of the last century in San Francisco — of the railroad monopoly’s booster “Sunset” magazine, of the power-brokering Bohemian Club — is eerily like that of Silicon Valley today. The propaganda-emphasis on riches for all (which were actually riches only for a few) while denying the costs and displacements attendant on that wealth creation — is exactly the language of high-tech. Because “Silicon Valley” is an entity with interests that don’t map onto local or regional governing body — geek ventures at the turn of this century routinely extending 75 miles in all directions from San Francisco — it would be a useful exercise to examine the *contado* of Imperial Silicon Valley. The destruction of California farmland (which feeds the world, not just the nation) for tract-housing to support Silicon Valley workers; the effects on the ecosystems of this semi-desert state of the New New boom economy; the displaced *contado*, that is, the effects on Idaho, Malaysia, and Singapore, where microprocessor manufacture is increasingly shipped out to: the effects on energy consumption and policy as more and more electronics come into play in all aspects of work and life (thank you, Bruce Sterling, for your Viridian musings); the effects on copper mining and production as more -wire- is required; the question of what to do with all the unrecycled, obsoleted-so-quickly mess of plastic and toxics that are last year’s electronics; the reliance on H1B workers whose education is paid for in their native countries, thus exporting the cost of training: all are worth examining with a comprehensive sense of the high-tech *contado*. How does the protection and extension of this *contado* affect which regulations and policies and exemptions?

The notion of the *contado* — really just a fancy, professional geographer’s way of saying “who benefits” — is one that can be applied throughout high techh. Philanthropy, philistinism, the dissolution of any Net space that’s not corporatized: these subterranean currents can all be examined in light of “how does this extend the reach/support the operation of the high-tech *contado*?”