Worshipping work in Silicon Valley

Christoffer Bagger

review of

'[S]ubtly but unmistakably, work is replacing religion' [4]. This is the assertion at the heart of Carolyn Chen's new book *Work pray code*. The book's choice of setting is striking: The heart of the American tech industry in Silicon Valley, California. Scholars of media, organization, or work are quick to point out both the potential value of accessing this field site, and often just as quick to point out that it is difficult if not impossible (e.g., Flyverbom, 2019: 2; Jarrett, 2022: 32; Peters, 2015: 337). However, Chen's claim is not that the tech sector is in any way exceptional in its emphasis on work as a central source of meaning for its workers, but rather that it is emblematic of many broader trends in American working life.

The book is based on a five-year field study in which the author interviewed over a hundred employees across various sites in the Valley. Chen's interviewees are a mixture of tech professionals and the 'service providers who make them "whole," including human resources professionals, executive coaches, meditation and mindfulness teachers, yoga instructors, dharma teachers, Buddhist priests, and masseuses' [195]. In contrast to other ethnographic studies of Silicon Valley or the tech sector (e.g., Meehan and

Turner, 2021; Turco, 2016), this author comes from a background in – and leverages her knowledge of – the sociology of religion (Chen, 2014). The book thus offers up an empirically informed description and critique of broader tendencies in working life from the novel vantage point of looking at religion, or rather, what religion has been supplanted by. In addition, Chen coins a handful of new phrases useful for describing the working culture of Silicon Valley and its entwinement with secularized religion, including 'Bottom-Line Buddhism', 'techtopia' and most strikingly 'corporate maternalism', which I will discuss in more detail below.

If the reader – like me – does not know their Theravāda Buddhism from their Mahāyāna Buddhism, or indeed the American social ranking of Christianity's increasingly 'less demanding [yet] higher prestige denominations' (apparently the ladder goes: Pentecostals to Baptists to Methodists to Episcopalians [16]), this is not any significant barrier to entry in reading. However, readers more familiar with the social and political sciences may rest assured that Chen cites liberally from researchers in these traditions as well. This includes Robert Putnam's (2000) work on the decline in community participation, Whyte's work on the ideal known as 'the Organization Man' (1956/2013) and thinkers like Kathi Weeks (2011) and Arlie Hochschild (1997) who discuss how work has become a primary source of meaning and belonging for many people, at the expense of other relations in life. Here, Chen's specific contribution lies in emphasizing how religion and religious communities specifically are deprioritized to make room for work.

Previous authors' descriptions of life in Silicon Valley will mainly invoke religion in a somewhat flippant way, by for instance claiming off-handedly that belief in the technological singularity is 'the closest thing Silicon Valley has to an official religion' (Pein, 2018: 201), or by noting of the way 'The Internet' is discussed in the tech sector that 'If it sounds like a religion, it's because it is' (Morozov, 2013: 23). In contrast, Chen spends little to no time discussing such off-handed applications of the term 'religion'. Instead, her approach appears much more methodical and conceptually well-founded. Chen readily admits that looking for godliness in the ostensibly secular setting of Silicon Valley might seem incongruous at first, not to mention quite difficult. In the book's appendix, she squares this circle by relying on Émile Durkheim's (1912/2008) idea of studying 'the sacred', that for which people

sacrifice other aspects of their lives. In Silicon Valley, the interviewees 'paid homage to [work] by chronically depriving their bodies of rest and exercise and their families of time and attention' [214]. Thus, work is an object of devotion, and hence sacred.

Through a series of chapters focusing on separate themes, the book presents a convincing argument that while fewer Americans (and tech workers) may be participating in organized religion, 'they are still engaging in religious practices, largely Asian ones, through secular sources' [16]. Here, Chen is referring mainly to mindfulness and meditation, practices which are seemingly ubiquitous in Silicon Valley. Despite their Asian origins, they are mostly performed by White instructors and participants [167]. Chen attributes this racial makeup to the fact that these practices have been detached from their religious institutions and commodified for the well-educated and affluent (White) Westerners 'who can afford the classes, workshops, and retreats' [17]. Rather than religious worship as such, these practices become unveiled as part of 'worshipped work' [214].

The body of the book is divided into five chapters, which I will here discuss in overview before centering on the central contributions of chapters two and three. In the first chapter, Chen emphasizes descriptions of people travelling to Silicon Valley for work and losing their religious affiliations and communities in the process. In the second chapter, Chen discusses what she calls the 'corporate maternalism' intended to nurture the body and soul of Silicon Valley workers. In chapter three, Chen describes how the 'management of souls' has become a primary concern of Silicon Valley human resources, even if the word 'spirituality' is best avoided. In chapter four, 'The Dharma according to Google', we encounter a vivid typology of how Asian religious practices have been appropriated for productivity, rather than spirituality. Finally, chapter five lets Chen emphasize the perspectives of meditation instructors – or rather '*meditation entrepreneurs*' [154, emphasis in original] – in Silicon Valley, who have had to modify their practices to meet the needs of the tech sector. These meditation entrepreneurs are presented as just one subset of a larger group of long-time California residents who have had to rethink and rework their businesses to (sometimes just barely) keep a roof over their heads (see also: Meehan and Turner, 2021). Chen lays out the ways in which these entrepreneurs have had to commodify their religious

practice in a punchy five-fold taxonomy of different types of Silicon Valley Buddhism. These are (1) 'Hidden Buddhism' (denying the fact that meditation practices have anything to with Buddhism at all), (2) 'Whitened Buddhism' (an erasure of the 'ethnic' and religious connotations of Buddhism to service White Americans), (3) 'Scientific Buddhism' (trying to explain Buddhist practices in positivist scientific terms), (4) 'Bottom-Line Buddhism' (where Buddhism becomes equated with increased productivity), and (5) 'On-the-Go Buddhism' (the 'ultimate desacralization' [188] of Buddhism – reducing it to something accessible via a meditation app). The first two are means of making these practices appealing to White, elite, and ostensibly secular Silicon Valley workers, while the latter two are means of convincing corporate decision-makers to make these practices part of everyday business. The idea of 'Scientific Buddhism' straddles this line. While each of these five phenomena are clearly documented, the distinctions between the five types were not always clear-cut to me as a reader, and Chen does have to resort to calling some these types 'close cousin[s]' [188].

In my opinion, the most memorable and valuable theoretical and analytical contribution of the book is the notion of 'corporate maternalism', which, perhaps ironically, is the least overtly religious concept in the book. This term encompasses how Silicon Valley 'monetizes the nonproductive parts of life that the busy tech worker otherwise has no time for—eating, exercising, rest, hobbies, spirituality, and friendships—and makes them a part of work' [60]. It has been a standing joke for many years that many Silicon Valley inventions are merely technologically mediated answers to the question 'What things isn't my mom doing for me anymore [*sic!*]' (Daub, 2020: 34). Chen takes this insight seriously and brings it to bear in a reading of Silicon Valley companies themselves. Here she draws out how her interviewees themselves describe how human resources workers 'kind of become mom' to them [62]. Chen further argues that companies like Google and Facebook (not yet renamed Meta in the book) offer 'holistic provisions' [13] for their employees. Chen argues that this covers not only the material needs of the employees, but also *spiritual* needs. Humans do not live on bread (or unlimited cantina buffets) alone. However, gender roles structure and influence this process, and Chen is quick to remark that women, even though they are definite minority in tech work, do most of the work required for this corporate maternalism [60].

'Corporate maternalism' is consciously framed as a reply to the better-known concept of 'industrial paternalism' (Tone, 2018). This corporate strategy presents employees with 'lunchrooms, recreational facilities, theaters, and [even] housing' (62) just as corporate maternalism does. However, industrial paternalism also emphases racial assimilation and the promotion of 'clean living' habits, which the maternal counterpart does not. In Chens' account, industrial paternalism is 'coercive', whereas corporate maternalism is marked by 'the holistic therapeutic approach of California mind-body-spirit' (63). This also leads Chen to coin another term: the principle that 'the personal is professional', which is her description of how Silicon Valley companies view their employees as 'whole persons', and how it therefore pays to optimize the personal dimensions of workers' lives.

While Chen's book offers a satisfying and well-rounded study with plenty of new and convincing concepts, I found myself wondering about Chen's claim that the experiences of Silicon Valley's tech workers are non-exceptional. Specifically, I believe two aspects are ripe for further study, which are to an extent interrelated. The first is the fickleness or mobility which corporate maternalism is a response to. The second is the role of digital technology not merely as a product of labor, but as a fact of life for workers in- and outside the tech sector.

Firstly, Chen readily acknowledges both the alleged fickleness of American churchgoers (discussed above) and the well-documented tendency for frequent job shifts among tech workers (Saxenian, 2006) to which corporate maternalism is a deliberate response. However, I found myself wondering how this can be squared with the broader tendencies of looser employment in the labor market (Standing, 2011) and of how other companies and industries allegedly offer up senses of belonging and love, which may in turn mask the threat of *abandonment* (Fleming, 2015). Chen's tech workers are apparently caught up in a series of what they perceive to be 'flings' which are facilitated and made fun by corporate maternalism [127], but is this a metaphor recognizable to even other high-skilled knowledge workers? In contrast, recent writers have emphasized that work is nothing like a romantic relationship (Jaffee, 2021). If it were, 'it would be the kind that our mothers quite rightly warned us to avoid at all costs' (Fleming, 2015: 47). To be clear, the book's conclusion leaves little doubt of the accuracy of Chen's view that

work is edging out religion and religious communities. Chen's criticism is largely aimed at the tech sector's tendency to privatize what might otherwise be considered public goods. 'Tech companies', she says, 'have monopolized the services of meditation teachers, nurses, and ministers into making their tech workers "whole," but who is tending the bodies, minds, and souls of the rest of society?' [206], and indeed who tends to the spiritual needs of all the non-tech workers at Silicon Valley companies [205]? She ends with a normative call to 'energize non-workplaces' [209] to limit the totalizing power which the domain of work has seemingly achieved. While tech workers and Silicon Valley companies have been lauded both as an aspirational ideal and an ideal microcosm for study (e.g., Kunda, 2006), Chen's work reaffirms that we must look elsewhere for inklings of how the epidemic of overwork can be overcome.

This brings me to my second point. The book contains plenty of accounts of how whatever tech product is being worked upon is worth all the effort and hours put in by the hard-working tech employees. However, there is less focus on what role technology plays in the tech workers' *own* lives. Aside from the discussion of meditation apps under 'On-the-Go Buddhism', there is little consideration how such technologies may aid or hinder a sculpting of the boundaries between the personal and the professional, or the integration of the two. This is in stark contrast to the emphasis on communications technologies in recent studies of workers outside the tech sector (Beckmann and Mazmanian, 2020; Gregg, 2011). Here such tools are viewed as both means of self-betterment and efficiency, as well as something which troubles the distinction between the personal and the professional (Gregg, 2018; Lomborg, 2022). What other studies have discussed extensively is the role new media technologies play in exacerbating the reshaping of the job market as such – often through gig economy technologies which spring from Silicon Valley (Scholz, 2017; Srnicek, 2017), but also via more mundane technologies such as social media (Bagger, 2021; Bishop, 2022). In contrast, Silicon Valley meditation entrepreneurs and corporate mothers tend to the needs of select few workers via relatively traditional understandings of firms and organizations, at least as described by Chen. The reshapings of work *via* the technologies of Silicon Valley and other epicenters of tech – often by exchanging employment relations for app- and gig-based interactions under

the banner of 'automation' (Andrejevic, 2019; Kelly, 2022) - are not evident within Chen's material. As far as I can tell from reading Chen, it is seemingly *outside* Silicon Valley these relations of labor and care are increasingly mediated by Silicon Valley products, although I suspect further research might complicate this understanding.

While I emphasize the exceptionality of Chen's field sites more than she herself does, this is mainly to underline the value of this exceptionality and hence of the book itself. Certainly, I find Chen's book to be readable, thorough, and insightful. I merely highlight these broader considerations to demonstrate some of the many valuable ongoing conversations about the shifting nature of work – and shifting world of workers – which Chen's work is poised to inform. While I cannot speak to its contributions to the sociology of religion, it would be a shame for scholars of creative industries, organizations, technology, and working life – or merely readers interested in descriptions on-the-ground life in Silicon Valley – to miss out on this book. The concept of 'corporate maternalism' alone should, in my opinion, be worth reading the book for, and will hopefully inform much future research (and popular) discussions.

references

Andrejevic, M. (2019). *Automated media*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bagger, C. (2021). Social media and work: A framework of eight intersections. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 2027-2046.

Bishop, S. (2022). Influencer creep: Self-documenting and self-branding are becoming basic to all forms of work. *RealLifeMag.Com*, 9 June [https://reallifemag.com/influencer-creep/]

Beckman, C. M., and M. Mazmanian (2020) *Dreams of the overworked: Living, working, and parenting in the digital age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Chen, C. (2014) *Getting saved in America: Taiwanese immigration and religious experience*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chen, C. (2022). *Work pray code: When work becomes religion in Silicon Valley*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Daub, A. (2020) *What tech calls thinking: An inquiry into the intellectual bedrock of Silicon Valley*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Durkheim, É. (2008) *The elementary forms of religious life*. Trans. Carol Cosman. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Fleming, P. (2015) *The mythology of work: How capitalism persists despite itself*. London, UK: Pluto Press.

Flyverbom, M. (2019). *The digital prism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Gregg, M. (2011). *Work's intimacy*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Gregg, M. (2018) *Counterproductive: Time management in the knowledge economy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hochschild, A. R. (1997) *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.

Jaffe, S. (2021) *Work won't love you back: How devotion to our jobs keeps us exploited, exhausted, and alone*. New York, NY: Bold Type Books.

Jarrett, K. (2022). *Digital labor*. Cambridge, UK: John Wiley and Sons.

Kelly, L. (2022). Re-politicising the future of work: Automation anxieties, universal basic income, and the end of techno-optimism. *Journal of Sociology*, 0(0) 1-16.

Kunda, G. (2006) *Engineering culture: Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Lomborg, S. (2022) 'On meaning and exploitation. Self-tracking at the work/life intersection', in L. Parks, J. Velkova and S. de Ridder (eds.) *Media backends: The politics of infrastructure, clouds, and artificial intelligence*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Meehan, M. B. and F. Turner (2021) *Seeing Silicon Valley: Life inside a fraying America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Morozov, E. (2013). *To save everything, click here: The folly of technological solutionism*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs.

Pein, C. (2018). *Live work work work die: A journey into the savage heart of Silicon Valley*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.

Peters, J. D. (2015). *The marvelous clouds*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Putnam, R. D. (2000) *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Saxenian, A. (2006) 'International mobility of engineers and the rise of entrepreneurship in the Periphery'. *WIDER Research Paper*, 2006(142). [https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/63430/1/521398223.pdf]

Scholz, T. (2017) *Uberworked and underpaid: How workers are disrupting the digital economy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Srnicek, N. (2017) *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Standing, G. (2011) *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Tone, A. (2018) *The business of benevolence: Industrial paternalism in progressive America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Turco, C. J. (2016). *The conversational firm: Rethinking bureaucracy in the age of social media*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Weeks, K. (2011) 'The problem with work: Feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries', in *The problem with work*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Whyte, W. H. (2013) *The organization man*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

the author

Christoffer Bagger holds a PhD in digital media and work from the Center for Tracking and Society, University of Copenhagen. His thesis work centers on enterprise social media at the boundary between work and non-work, and how media usage complicates this dichotomy. His research has been published in *International Journal of Communication*, *Nordicom Review*, and the edited volumes *Reckoning with social media* and *Queerbaiting and fandom*. His book reviews have been published in *The European Journal of Communication* and *ephemera: theory and politics in organization*. Email: cbagger@hum.ku.dk