

VALLEY OF THE DOLTS

Silicon Valley's power brokers want you to think they're different. But they're just average robber barons.

Emmett Rensin

In February 2012, after Facebook announced what was in time to become the largest IPO in the history of internet firms, *The Economist* put a parody of Mark Zuckerberg's profile page on its cover. Next to an insipid, beaming profile picture of the young CEO, there was a status update: "VENI VIDI VICI!!! Am I richer than Bill yet? lol." They were not the first magazine to draw the

comparison. In October 2010, *Vanity Fair* beat them to it, declaring Zuckerberg the No. 1 most influential person in the United States and calling him “our new Caesar.”

Zuckerberg, of course, had not conquered Gaul. He had not scattered the German armies nor subjugated Britain, nor crossed the Rubicon and become first consul. He had not visited death and terror upon a continent, nor brought an end to an old republic, setting off a chain of intrigues that would birth the mightiest empire in the history of the world. No. Mark Zuckerberg had made a shit ton of money.

By April of this year, Facebook stock was worth more than \$116 a share, up from its initial offering of \$38. The social network had made its early investors even richer than they had ever anticipated. That same month, *The Economist* put Zuckerberg on its cover for the second time but now without detectable irony. His face appeared on a marble statue of Augustus, seated in cape and laurel crown beside a tiny globe. “IMPERIAL AMBITIONS” roared the headline. Mark’s outstretched arm gave the imperial thumbs-up. He liked it.

The press enjoys excitedly praising tech titans by comparing them to fantastical and mythical figures. Zuckerberg is Caesar. Elon Musk, a wizard. Peter Thiel, who believes that he lives in the moral universe of Lord of the Rings, is a vampire. I do not know if these men believe that they have the supernatural powers the media claims. Maybe they do. I do know that they do not mind the perception, or at least have done nothing to combat it, even among those critics who believe that they're cartoon villains.

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This might not be so bad if the phenomenon were limited to daft profiles by fawning magazine writers. But this Hegelian fan fiction is nowhere more potent than from the mouths of the Disruptors themselves. Mark Zuckerberg speaks in the voice of God. Shane Smith, by his own account, is the Stalin of *Vice*. Silicon Valley investor Carl Icahn was called “evil Captain

Kirk” by fellow billionaire Marc Andreessen, before he was himself dubbed Dr. Evil by Rod Dreher, who has evidently not absorbed a cultural reference since 1999. When Elon Musk worries that Larry Page is hurtling toward AI without a sufficient appreciation of the risks, he calls it “summoning the demon.” Seamless CEO Jonathan Zabusky, a typical case, says his food delivery application for depressed millennials is “disrupting the paradigm” by showing people that “the era of the paper menu” is over. AirBnB’s mission statement laments “the mechanization and Industrial Revolution of the last century,” which “displaced” “feelings of trust and belonging”; their mission is to turn the world back into the “village” of simpler eras by encouraging longstanding residents of gentrifying areas to rent out their homes to monied travelers. Some firms are more modest: HubSpot, a marketing and sales platform, is merely on a mission to make the whole world “more inbound,” which is to say, more reliant on their blogging tips for small businesses.

Even President Obama speaks of Silicon Valley as if it were an industry for madcap geniuses alone, a land of such earth-changing potential that it’s somewhere he might find

himself once he's left the Oval Office. When he chides citizens of the Valley, he chides them like a Dr. Frankenstein warning his monster about hubris: "Sometime we get, I think, in the scientific community, the tech community, the entrepreneurial community, the sense that we just have to blow up the system or create this parallel society," he told the Frontiers Conference last October. The president believes that sense is wrong, of course, but where did he get the idea that tech CEOs were capable of these feats in the first place?

Let us state the obvious: None of these men are Roman Emperors, and they haven't got the wherewithal to "blow up" anything but a stock market bubble. They are not Lex Luthors or Gandalfs or Stalins. Their products do not bring about revolutions. They are simply robber barons, JP Morgans and Andrew Mellons in mediocre T-shirts. I have no doubt that many are preternaturally intelligent, hardworking people, and it is a shame that they have dedicated these talents to the mundane accumulation of capital. But there is nothing remarkable about these men. The Pirates of Silicon Valley do not have imperial ambitions. They have financial ones.

The vast majority of Silicon Valley startups, the sort that project lofty missions and managed improbably lucrative IPOs despite never having graced the cover of *The Economist* or the frontal cortex of the president, work precisely like any other kind of mundane sales operation in search of a product: Underpaid cold-callers receive low wages and less job security in exchange for a foosball table and the burden of growing a company as quickly as possible so that it can reach a liquidation event. Owners and investors get rich. Managers stay comfortable. The employees get hosed. None of this is particularly original. At least the real robber barons built the railroads.

Like all slim ranks of oligarchy, the Silicon Valley billionaires hate and fear nothing more than ordinary people. This manifests itself in mundane ways, in their open, cartoonish class spite (why, they ask, must Innovators in San Francisco be burdened by the existence of homeless riff-raff?); it is revealed in their most contemplative moments too. Peter Thiel has said that when the history of the 21st century is written, René Girard will be remembered as one of its greatest intellectuals. Girard is best known for the contention that all human desire is mimetic, that not only aesthetic taste but even hunger and lust are

modeled on the desires of others. Perhaps this is why Thiel does not believe that capitalism and democracy are compatible. We know which side he's chosen. So long as he and his fellows can continue to exploit that same mimetic tendency to persuade people that they are superhuman and essential to their flourishing, his side will continue to win.

The sins of the prestige firms are no less mundane. While each at least can claim a real and viable product, their evil is nothing so spectacular as the demonic. As *The New York Times*, *Guardian*, and others have reported, even the well-compensated white-collar workers of companies like Amazon and Facebook face notoriously brutal labor conditions. For the warehouse workers and contract laborers required to keep those companies running, matters are even worse. "When you're in shipping and they double or triple their workforce over the winter holidays, you're working at times in below zero temps INSIDE the warehouse," one Amazon warehouse worker wrote to *Gawker's* Hamilton Nolan in 2013. Efforts to unionize employees have been met with duplicity beyond ordinary managerial resistance. *Quartz* reported in February on sinister attempts to thwart organization at Uber.

Not content to resist their own employees' efforts to unionize, Uber has also worked to undermine other labor guilds, including illegal operations in cities that have led to the destruction of local taxi businesses.

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AirBnb, despite its Keatsian mission, has mainly succeeded in ravaging the housing market for low-income families.

Seamless hasn't disrupted the "paper menu world" half so much as it has disrupted tipping standards and wage prospects for its delivery workers.

The racist hiring practices of Silicon Valley prestige firms are an open secret, with only 5 percent of technical roles held by black or Latino workers. ("We are not where we want to be," their diversity reports intone with all the sincerity of a Soviet bureaucrat adjusting potato projections down again). Their collusion with federal spy agencies, assisting in surveillance

efforts and voluntarily turning over FISA-court-approved user data in exchange for cash, was a secret, until it wasn't. Peter Thiel did not use magic to destroy Gawker; he used money. In 2010, the Department of Justice exposed what it called an "overarching conspiracy" to suppress wages among companies like Apple, Google, Intel, Adobe, Intuit, eBay, and Pixar. The Silicon Valley supermen were aware as far back as 2005 that what they were doing was illegal. "[Google's Eric] Schmidt instructed his Senior VP for Business Operation Shona Brown to keep the pact secret and only share information 'verbally, since I don't want to create a paper trail over which we can be sued later?'" reported Mark Ames. "At times," he said of the Disruptor's behavior, "it reads like something lifted straight out of the robber baron era that produced those [anti-trust] laws. Today's inequality crisis is America's worst on record since statistics were first recorded a hundred years ago — the only comparison would be to the era of railroad tycoons in the late 19th century." Although Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos takes only \$81,000 in salary every year - barely more than the average Facebook intern! - he has managed to accrue a net worth in excess of \$65 billion. Perhaps he really is a wizard.

The cultivation of power requires the projection of power in excess of its reality. When Julius Caesar – the real one – made up his mind to annihilate the German tribes who had once again invaded Gaul, he ordered his engineers to build a bridge over the Rhine as wide as a two-lane highway, big enough for 10 soldiers to march across side by side. He wanted the Germani “to experience fear... when they realized that the army of the Roman people was both capable of crossing the Rhine and brave enough to venture it.” It worked. When the bridge was finished, the Roman army marched across it as if on parade in the streets of Rome. They went slow with their horns blasting and their flags aloft, led by cavalry draped in ceremonial colors. They found no army on the other side. Terrified of the Roman engineering feat, the Germani had fled in terror, and for 18 days they cowered in the forest while Caesar pillaged every defenseless village he could find. When he was done he marched back to Gaul and ordered the bridge torn down.

If your enemies can convince you that they are an unprecedented species of madman, you will convince yourself

that you need unprecedented weapons to fight back or that you may be better off just hiding in the forest. But you are not.

The rigged contracts and wage suppression, the racism and surveillance collusion (soon to be playing voluntary footsie with Donald Trump's NSA, with further chicanery to follow), all these sins of Silicon Valley have come about and been overcome before in the short history of American capitalism. They require only the same weapons as before. Organization and agitation. Strikes and labor laws. The ordinary practice of radical politics. Some of these efforts have begun already, with militant organizing and unionization drives beginning to organize Silicon Valley laborers against their exploiters. But these movements require national and popular support, support that cannot begin until the pretense and terror of world-conquering wizards is abandoned and the truth is laid bare: These are only rich assholes, the same as they ever were. All that superman bullshit is just the cheap propaganda of the powerful, propaganda so thoroughly saturated in the American mind that its own inventors might believe it.

This fall, Silicon Valley Shakespeare ("Innovate • Illuminate • Inspire") staged *Julius Caesar* for the first time in the company's

16-year history. The press release promised that audiences would have a chance to “see this classic political thriller set in a modern world, showing the power and problem of the mob mentality, and how far people will go to rule a nation.”

This summary is instructive. To the entertainers of the Valley, Julius Caesar is a play about “mob mentality,” the dangers of unruly herds who upset the proper order of the world. This is an assessment that might surprise anyone who has read Shakespeare’s history and noticed that with the exception of a soothsayer and a single servant, every character in it is an aristocrat. But more than that, it is remarkable because as any high school student can tell you, Julius Caesar is not a play about the dangers of the mob; it is a play about the dangers of ambition and power. It is about hubris. You do not see the crowds that Brutus and Antony address because the crowds do not matter. They only exist to cheer the rivals as they sort out the pretense of the coming war. The fault that was not in their stars but in themselves has been corrected. They are underlings no more.

Julius Caesar is about a man believed to be a God, a man who cultivated divinity so well that he believed it himself. It is about a man who believed it until the mid-March afternoon when he discovered to his great surprise that even Caesar can be overthrown with old and ordinary weapons.

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