

Richard A. Walker, *Pictures of a Gone City: Tech and the Dark Side of Prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area*, Oakland: PM Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-62963-510-1 (paper)

It is a timely moment to have a left geographic conversation about Richard Walker’s recent book, *Pictures of a Gone City: Tech and the Dark Side of Prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area*. The book hit shelves this past spring, amidst a wave of US political narratives pitting “the West Coast versus Trump”. That project is an animating concern of Walker’s big book, which synthesizes a career’s worth of grappling with the complex political economy of the San Francisco Bay Area, from its frequent internal upheavals – all too often inflicted from the top against everyone else – to evergreen hopes that the city and region might drag the United States back from right-wing political turns. The aftermath of the 2018 congressional election has seen a host of Democratic Party leaders scrambling to contain a rising grassroots left, while more or less openly yearning for a return to neoliberal business-as-usual. As I write this, such repressive and regressive politics have been recently evident in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s and California Senator Dianne Feinstein’s respective dismissals of left Democrats’ proposed Green New Deal. They are similarly clear in mainstream critiques scolding New York City activists for their defeat of Amazon’s mooted headquarters relocation to Queens. As Walker would say, it is no accident that these self-assured avatars of the US Democratic Party establishment hail from the San Francisco Bay Area. Nor should it surprise that those finger-wagging Amazon’s rejection channel familiar truisms of Bay Area-brand capitalist success: the supposedly self-evident benefits of a high-tech-led economy in well-paying jobs produced, urban vibrancy, and economic resilience.¹

The bulk of *Pictures of a Gone City*, and the core contribution of the book as I see it, is dedicated to a deconstruction of such power-imbued tech narratives, and a deep dive into the far more complicated – frequently, deeply exploitative and ugly – material geographies that undergird them. *Pictures* is not a perfect intervention, as I will discuss, within urban geography’s increasingly polycentric radical-progressive project or for the California and US national

movements that are its most natural political audience (though the book seems equally destined to become a staple in Bay Area and California studies curricula – at multiple levels, given its popular framing and readability). Yet this rich work powerfully argues for the value of ambitious geographical political economy and its indispensability within a left political toolkit: applied as it is here, the analytical lens continues to provide irreplaceable insights into urban transformations, the possible future/s of global capitalism, and what is to be done about all of the above.

Surveying *Pictures'* roadmap, Part I of the book introduces the political economy of Greater Silicon Valley – which for practical purposes now stretches beyond Palo Alto and San Jose to encompass the Bay Area writ large. It rehearses and critiques familiar narratives of visionary tech entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, “disruptive innovation” (Schumpeterian creative destruction for the 21st century), utopian techno-futurism, and legitimate/d billion-dollar “unicorn” corporate valuations and super-profits. Synthesizing his own long-term work and contributions from other critical scholars and activists, Walker exposes the myriad hidden geographies concealed within the Bay Area’s epochal neoliberal success story: Silicon Valley’s long history of government and defense industry support; sharply bifurcated employment geographies in and surrounding tech companies – which entangle class, race, and gendered difference in amplifying feedbacks of misrecognized exclusion and inequality; the vast geography of fundamental yet sidelined non-tech industries and laboring geographies that keep the Bay Area running. More deeply still, the section tracks the Bay Area’s constitutive entanglement within US uneven development. This is expressed both in the long decline of regions like the Rust Belt, as they fell in part *through* the rise of places like the Bay Area, and in the hidden costs of the Bay Area’s chronically volatile boom-bust economy. This steep bill for decades of leading edge techno-capitalist success (so far) has included the chronic production of mini-Rust Belts and shockingly deprived populations amidst the Bay Area’s (high-)rising neighborhoods and surficial regional success. Perhaps above all in this section, Walker unpacks the geographies of surplus value that Greater Silicon Valley mobilizes and richly profits from, indelibly relies upon, yet has through no form of tech alchemy produced. Tech corporations and

their financiers extract such surplus from workers both “at home” and in a global geography of manufacturing from Mexico to (especially) East Asia. They extract other rents from competitors and consumers via the monopolistic gatekeeping and capitalist state-sanctioned rents of intellectual property law. In still other ways, they glean such surplus from the public sector and its decades of subsidies, from a wealth of inherited urban infrastructures and institutions, and from exploited natures of all kinds.² Meanwhile, all of the above are enabled by sustained speculative buy-in globally, notably from a host of yield-starved institutional investors facing secular stagnation.

Part II of the book expands the above story of hidden dependencies, brittleness, and consequences to a nuanced, sometimes exhaustive exploration of the Greater Bay Area’s urban form/s and their producers: major real estate developers, financiers, and investors past and present. In the process, it unpacks a long history of housing and land development struggles. The urban region now encompasses a vast geography from Napa in the North and Sacramento in the East to Watsonville in the South. These spaces are now bound up in a broader metropolitan economy, its boom and bust dynamics, and, notably, its long-unspooling crises of housing access and affordability, class-race displacement, urban sprawl, and new environmental destabilizations such as the regional effects of global climate change.

This picture of the Bay Area’s deep-seated, under-recognized troubles sets the scene for Part III’s speculations on the uncertain future of Bay Area politics. In this final section, Walker argues that such dark sides of the Bay Area’s capitalist success throw into question the region’s hoped-for role as a social and environmental leader, as they undermine hard-won political achievements of the past and threaten future organizing capacity. The section moves on to highlight broader contradictions of Bay Area politics within a state in flux. It narrates how the “left coast city” of bohemian and laborite San Francisco and the radical East Bay of the 1946 General Strike, Black Panthers, and Free Speech Movement³ were harnessed as a symbolic enemy by (especially) Southern California neo-conservatives, from Nixon and Reagan to the organizers of the tax revolt that swept in Proposition 13. It considers California’s long

subsequent struggle with such neoliberal fetters and austerity politics – including a resultant unhealthy appetite for real estate-tied fiscal financialization, and recurrent subjection to its speculative disasters.

A key takeaway from Part III, and *Pictures* as a whole, is Walker's exploration of how the Bay Area's left-progressive political tradition has been eroded by successive waves of high-tech in-migrants – technological entrepreneurs and their higher-wage salaried employees, exploited and self-exploiting – and the oppressive side of its concentrated wealth. He argues that one locus of this weakening lies in the region's ongoing gentrification and displacement of its workers and communities of color. Notwithstanding resistance struggles from Occupy Oakland and Black Lives Matter organizing to the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, this ongoing evacuation has attenuated the Bay Area's historically generative foment of class-racial mixing and radical-progressive activist alliances. Another locus lies in what remains, as the Bay Area becomes ever more a place of and for (very) wealthy white men.⁴ Walker argues that the region's capacity to resist – and interest in resisting – the US's right-wing slide is increasingly compromised by this re-segregation. Meanwhile, its tech leaders are increasingly complicit in unleashing a host of tools for popular misinformation and surveillance, including by the right. The region's social and political shift is perhaps most notable around intersectional questions of race, gender, and class, and in broader questions of economic justice and transformation raised within today's Green New Deal debates. Greater Silicon Valley's political representatives (a task tech titans increasingly take on themselves) chronically fall prey to the region's self-hype, propagating notions of their own technocratic genius (remarkably uncritical), libertarian skepticism of governmental effectiveness (deeply ahistorical), and a healthy sense of entitlement to their own super-profits (all-too-blind to the infrastructures and exploitations that undergird their good fortune). All raise cautions about the Bay Area's capacity for leadership and alliances in the radical-progressive struggles to come.

Pictures of a Gone City is not a perfect book. Walker owns upfront that the account is a treatise by a proud Bay Area native, one who is enduringly fascinated by the urban-region's

successes and “exports”, technological, sociocultural, and political – notwithstanding the deep caveats raised above. Disclaimers notwithstanding, that ambivalence can make for a sometimes-contradictory political read, while hometown partiality occasionally translates into a running list of Bay Area achievements and “firsts”. More substantively, perhaps Walker’s unique local knowledge and his decades of writing on the Bay Area occasionally encumbers the analysis: one gets the sense that Walker did not want to leave anything out of his long-awaited “Bay Area book”.⁵ This endeavor for comprehensiveness succeeds in holding impressively many strands in the analytical mix. Despite the book’s firm situation within geographical political economy and classical Marxian questions of labor exploitation, surplus value extraction, and uneven development,⁶ it clearly makes an effort to incorporate more polyvocal and intersectional political economic work on race and gender. Nonetheless, this would-be catholicism also introduces recurrent unevenness and inevitable silences, in subject matter and analytical lenses taken up.

Notably, fractures emerge between Walker’s own new research and updated/popularized past findings and his broad surveys of other academics’ and journalists’ accounts. The former remain startlingly original and powerful – hopefully, too-often-neglected past insights will find a new audience here. Particular conceptual standouts included Walker’s exemplary treatments of the geographies and temporalities of surplus value extraction, the ways in which such concentrated surplus frustrates “supply-side” affordable housing policies (e.g. “YIMBYism”), and the book’s incisive treatment of the oft-neglected question of building “cycles”.⁷ Surveys of others’ scholarship and praxis are frequently more descriptive and at-worst superficial. For example, readers with a reasonable working knowledge of contemporary debates on tech surveillance and data abuses may not learn much new here, while scholars in search of deeper engagements with, say, critical race theory would do better to look to the book’s (extensive) footnotes and bibliography. The book clearly attempts to make sure that key movements, regional actors, and achievements all receive a mention in the Bay Area’s broader story, but such listings do not always translate into a deeper understanding of how such struggles *work*, have

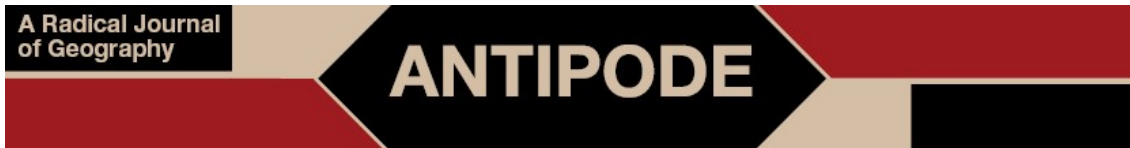
worked in the region's past, and might work today – political and political-geographic questions largely beyond the remit of this account. As such, those in search of tools for reversing the political declines that Walker chronicles will likely come away with a more comprehensive historical materialist understanding of the structures arrayed against them, but will need to go elsewhere for fuller insights into such depredations, tactics for resisting and overturning them, and possibilities for imagining-otherwise the place and its future.

Moreover, scholars working to advance a more polycentric urban geography may find frustrations in the book's project of interpreting contemporary capitalism in and through developments in a "commanding heights" urban-region. In this case, Walker's account is notably rich in particularistic regional detail and reasonably careful about the dangers of totalizing narratives when treating a sector like contemporary high-tech. Caution is particularly warranted given the sector's plethora of uncritical champions, including urban academics such as Richard Florida and Ed Glaeser. These far less conflicted boosters have actively set about disseminating universalist storylines about the benefits of tech creativity and the preconditions for tech leadership. Such prescriptions are highly dubious in a chronically uneven capitalist space economy, in which the vast majority of such tech competitors must inevitably lose. Nevertheless, the account here remains partial in the way of past analyses of cities-of-the-capitalist-moment/imagined future, from Los Angeles to New York to Chicago to London to Paris. Adding, say, a Shanghai to this evolving succession is only part of the ongoing decentering task facing urban geography: such constructions still leave us overly preoccupied with "special" cities and their role in producing innovations, narratives, and models for export elsewhere. A particularistic book about the Bay Area needs little self-justification, while researchers and activists must still work far harder to defend similarly rich accounts of many other places – again, the "ordinary" cities of both the Global South and the "flyover" North. Besides neglecting the host of places and experiences meriting urban geographers' attention, as discussed at length by other urban scholars, such lenses present a truncated sense of political possibility. Accounts like this one of successful places and the past successes that led them to

power risk missing windows for contingency and political surprise. For example, such accounts in the contemporary US political moment may overlook the left political possibilities of many “non-special” places in Rust Belt and Southern regions – despite their genuine achievements in movements such as today’s ongoing wave of teachers’ strikes.

The most powerful rejoinder to the critique leveled above is, of course, that power-laden narratives of Silicon Valley and the Bay Area remain so very influential in the contemporary moment. This is particularly so in the US national discussions surveyed above, including ongoing debates over the prospects for a Green New Deal. Problematically for that potential intervention, however, *Pictures of a Gone City* contains a curious gap in an account that does treat (and sympathetically critique) the Bay Area’s environmental record, including its growing engagements with climate change. Despite the book’s tech focus, Silicon Valley’s own failures as a self-professed green leader get surprisingly little play in the book. These flaws go beyond the spillovers and “externalities” like traffic congestion treated here to more constitutive deficiencies in the region’s model of innovation. Notably, Silicon Valley’s failed “cleantech” boom in the late 2000s/early 2010s warrants more attention.⁸ Such examinations are critical in growing a Green New Deal that avoids mistakes of the recent past, when the Obama-era version was in part mired in Silicon Valley techno-political breakdowns.

Finally, however, in the broader sense Walker’s account speaks generatively to a central assertion of Green New Deal activism – that fundamental problems like climate change require not just technocratic uptake of technological “fixes” and policy instruments, but far more ambitious, holistic grappling with economic development and its embedded inequalities, raced, classed, and gendered, spatial and infrastructural.⁹ This holism echoes in many ways the core insights of *Pictures of a Gone City*, and the distinctiveness of its critique of tech. Its political economic treatment offers an un-enchanted, wide-ranging view of today’s high-tech capitalism and its bases/biases. Such ongoing challenge is imperative for left-political programs grappling not only with the complex legacy of the New Deal, but with a broader eco-modernism and futurism that are still unfamiliar terrain for much environmental and social justice activism.



While offering genuine promise for more just and survivable futures, these campaigns must keep a clear eye on the risks of techno-futurist and neoliberal capture, both material and imaginative.

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March 2019

¹ Occasionally, with somewhat more nuanced arguments for tech's "productive" capitalist contributions in contrast to Wall Street finance and real estate rentierism. And notwithstanding Amazon's current – now ongoing – headquarters location in Seattle, which Walker acknowledges as an exception to the Silicon Valley centrality of US high-tech. The two critiques above are entangled through critics' particular fixation upon Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, as a key figure in both campaigns. Both Pelosi's and Feinstein's neoliberal leanings come under critique in Walker's book.

² As part of the book's would-be accessibility to a popular audience, the Marxian analytics underpinning such explorations of surplus value extraction will be evident to the in-the-know but are understated.

³ Not to mention late 1960s Third World College strikes in San Francisco and Berkeley, amid a host of regional political developments that Walker curates with an insider view.

⁴ Notwithstanding the sector's inclusion of a subset of East and South Asian men. The book's comparison between Silicon Valley and Wall Street is particularly striking here, as the US's most powerful growth sectors remain appallingly gender- and race-exclusive.

⁵ Some of Walker's key California regional publications here include (but are not limited to), his books on Bay Area environmental politics (*The Country in the City: The Greening of the San Francisco Bay Area*; University of Washington Press, 2007) and California industrial agriculture (*The Conquest of Bread: 150 Years of Agribusiness in California*; The New Press, 2004), as well as his recent California atlas co-authored with Suresh Lodha (*The Atlas of California: Mapping the Challenge of a New Era*; University of California Press, 2013).

See also Walker's multidecadal array of individual and co-authored articles on the Bay Area and its broader regional entanglements. For example, on the Bay Area's complex metropolitan geographies (Walker R and Schafran A [2015] The strange case of the Bay Area. *Environment and Planning A* 47[1]:10-29), the region's significance in producing the subprime bubble and collapse (Bardhan A and Walker R [2011] California shrugged: Fountainhead of the Great Recession. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy, and Society* 4[3]:303-322), the original New Economy bubble (Walker R [2006] The boom and the bombshell: The New Economy bubble and the San Francisco Bay Area. In G Vertova [ed] *The Changing Economic Geography of Globalization* [pp121-147]. London: Routledge), the significance of resource-led growth in the Bay Area and California (Walker R [2001] California's golden road to riches: Natural resources and regional capitalism, 1848-1940. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91[1]:167-199), and more.

Even some of Walker's earliest co-authored work on Bay Area and California environmental and resource politics is recalled in *Pictures'* account – and remains no less relevant (see, for example, Walker R, Storper M and Gersh E [1979] The limits of environmental control: The saga of Dow in the delta. *Antipode* 11[2]:48-60; Walker R and Williams M [1982] Water from power: Water supply and regional growth in the Santa Clara Valley. *Economic Geography* 58[2]:95-119).

⁶ And Walker's more particular amalgam of Marxian, Keynesian, and Schumpeterian thought.

⁷ Moreover, the book likely now provides the best general-purposes overview of evolving historical construction and development practices in the Bay Area, which one must normally extract piecemeal from various historical accounts.

⁸ In the book's focus on urban sprawl and other tech externalities here, Walker expands upon points originally made in his *The Country in the City*. No doubt, I find this point particularly salient because it is one I engage in my own work. For a similar critique of US cleantech in the late 2000s, albeit from a more peripheral tech center in New York City, see Jesse Goldstein's recent book *Planetary Improvement: Cleantech Entrepreneurship and the Contradictions of Green Capitalism* (MIT Press, 2018).

⁹ Work that Walker has also taken on in recent years in his role as Director of the Living New Deal Project (<https://livingnewdeal.org>).