

POLITICS AND THE DIGITAL

DIGITAL CAPITALISM IN THE AGE OF THE NEW PATRIARCHS

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How useful is it to think about politics and power in terms of a patriarchy? What if we think about the US celebrity founders who own monopoly tech companies as a racialized patriarchal network? Patriarchy can be a blunt instrument if we don't investigate what is particular about a patriarchal system. But if we try to understand who the patriarchs might be, what is specific about their formation, and how they legitimate and wield dominance, then this could be part of forging a resistance.

In our book *The New Patriarchs of Digital Capitalism: Celebrity Tech Founders and Networks of Power* we look at the powerful celebrity men that founded US monopoly tech companies: Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Larry Page, Sergey Brin, among others. How this network of founders rose to prominence shares enough similarities to speak of a pattern, and, indeed, the members of this network support each other in this pattern's development: sharing ideas, techniques and financial resources. The rough pathway (on an ideological level but also on a practical level as this is what these men actually did) to becoming a tech patriarch then goes something like this:

- Start “lean” – in a garage preferably or small office.
- Develop a celebrated public persona drawing on “Boy Genius” and founder myths and rooted in the idea of changing the world.

- Keep overheads very low by paying staff as little as possible and using small amounts of equity to keep them loyal.
- Ignore or avoid regulations: from having safe furniture, to hate speech, to copyright. These regulations add expense, that can be ill afforded at the start.
- Suppress any sort of challenge to authority from trade unions, shareholders or state oversight. Rather than acquiesce to any legitimate challenge, lobby hard against state interference whether it's around workplace rights or immigration or monopoly.
- If a competitor company emerges, crush it by copying its technology or buy it and scrap it or incorporate it.
- When forced to face lawmakers, obfuscate and confuse.
- Be connected to others who have done, or are doing, the same thing.

This network is the product of a specific context at a specific moment in history. This network has been and continues to be supported and nourished by neoliberalism which has centred speculative markets, deregulation, and the rise of a necessarily small group of billionaires. These ideologies are profoundly gendered (e.g. the boy genius), raced (e.g. identifying a post-racial discourse where racism is of the past, while presiding over profoundly racialised hierarchies), and classed (e.g. through the privileging of meritocracy). But these ideologies are also specifically American. They harness the language and affect of the colonial frontier in legitimating the will to dominate the “terrain” of digital capitalism, including owning other people’s data. American exceptionalism and the imperial drive to identify and then solve problems on a global scale is also evident.

How the categories of race, class and gender intersect in the men’s celebrity biographies helps us to locate how the legitimation of this patriarchal network is rooted in the imaginary of the American frontier, and a long history of liberalism. This liberalism is rooted in America’s white settler colonial period and its imaginary of the household headed by a white patriarch (see the work of [Imani Perry](#)). We can see the founders as reproducing this structure: a man who accrues power through his ability to lay claim to territory (cyberspace and personal data) and then to control that space through property relations. Historically, this would have been through the indigenous people that he has dominated, as well as the servants, slaves, labourers, children and his wife – all of whose claims to personhood were constituted as a property relation to the head of the household, but with different qualities, freedoms and responsibilities. In the digital era, [Ruha Benjamin](#) has argued there are parallels to be made between the patriarchs and their workforces, users, customers, shareholders and government in the metaphor of the household. Most of the founders we look at display a kind of social democratic liberalism as part of their public branding. However, the accelerated drive to global market domination means that in practice their corporations – and the systems of power they wield – entrench inequalities and systems of oppression.

The tech founders hold a unique form of power through their businesses (often buttressed through majority voting arrangements on shares, as well as the mythic status invested in the idea of the founder in tech culture). The control of these patriarchs over workforces and users is through monopolistic dominance of a key area of the digital economy. We have become 'data subjects' in this new world, but we are still organised on familiar raced, classed and gendered lines by the cudgel of dataism, which means inequalities are reproduced as natural through the belief that data sets are neutral (and not, for example, informed by the hyper-surveillance of people of colour, the poor and working class). We can identify the founder's control, not only over the workforce (who have limited organising rights) and product design in their corporation, but also over the data that is extracted and aggregated from the users of their products. This puts these patriarchs in a unique position when it comes to extracting value from internet users: our data subjectivity is not ours. Only a very few men hold the position of proper or full personhood under digital capitalism. And this is why patriarchy is such an important concept; it helps explain this property relation and its outcomes.

The challenge we must make to these new patriarchs is on all the levels – in workforces and union organising, to combat harassment, racism and sexism in the companies and online, at the level of markets and competition as consumers and through legislation – but there is another deeper task at hand. And that is to fundamentally rethink the property relations inherited through liberalism for a digital age. We need to find a way to think about owning things in common which make the potential of contemporary economic transformations work for all of us not just a few men on the Pacific Coast. What about property relations that do not have to correct for the subordinate positions of women, people of colour, queer people, children or those without wealth, but that starts with them having equal stakes in the legal and philosophical foundations of how we can all prosper?

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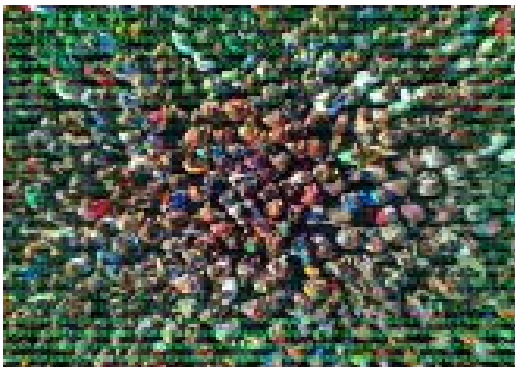
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