

A Contradictory Class in the Unmaking?

Book review: Robert Dorschel, *The Social Codes of Tech Workers: Class Identity in Digital Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2025, 246 p.)

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It was early January 2018 when I received an email from an MA student at Humboldt University. He said he had read my working paper on the spirit of digital capitalism, which had just come out, and wanted to tell me that he had liked it. I did not know the student, so I looked him up and found a version of his BA thesis, entitled “Typical Startup Founder! An Analysis of Capitalist Subjectivation Practice through a Discourse-Theoretical Extension of Bourdieu’s Field Theory.” Weber, Bourdieu, startup capitalism—it was close to my own concerns, and it lives in my Zotero library to this day.

The student, of course, was Robert Dorschel, and I have followed his work with great interest ever since. Through a series of papers, culminating in—but by no means ending with—his new book *The Social Codes of Tech Workers*, Dorschel has developed a unique perspective on digital capitalism by reconstructing the worldviews of its most understudied protagonists: tech workers. Much ink has been spilled, including my own, on the plight of the cyber proletariat and the posturing of tech elites. Yet we have long known relatively little about what those occupying the (air-conditioned and avocado-stocked) machine rooms of digital capitalism think and feel: the software engineers and interface designers, the system architects and data scientists.

Dorschel has done more than most to shed light on the politics and culture, the aesthetics and ethics of those digital workers who work *for* others but *in* comfort; who make few big decisions but many small ones; who want to be, in his own memorable phrasing, “middle-class wealthy and morally worthy.” *The Social Codes of Tech Workers* is an eminently readable and immensely rich resource for understanding what motivates tech workers, the hybrid subjectivities they exhibit and the contradictory class positions they inhabit, and not least their ambivalent role in problematizing but also perpetuating digital capitalism.

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The core argument of the book is this: tech workers form a “contradictory class in the making” [xix]; not just with regard to their economic position, but also in their “cultural, moral, and political orientations” [22]. On the one hand, they do not share the unreflective technosolutionism of their bosses, but neither do they discount the potential of technology to be a force for good in the world; they are, as it were, “critical solutionists” [47]. On the other hand, they do not share the market orientation and expressive individualism of the entrepreneurial self, but neither do they fully reject central elements of neoliberalism like autonomy, meritocratic self-legitimation, and “a tendency for individualism and [...] the latent pursuit of self-interest” [119]; instead, they display an emergent “post-entrepreneurial subjectivity” [57] that tries to marry material and moral comfort.

Dorschel highlights that the social codes of tech workers were shaped by the return of what Boltanski and Chiapello call “social critique”:¹ the critique of poverty, inequality, and exploitation, as opposed to the “artistic critique” of alienation, oppression, and disenchantment that has given rise to the entrepreneurial self. They were forged in a “crucible of criticism”—to adapt Dostoevsky’s phrase—fueled by three interlaced crises: the financial crisis and its aftermath, to which tech seemed like the answer; the political crisis of the post-Obama era, in which tech was uncomfortably implicated; and the looming ecological crisis, in which tech plays an ambivalent role and which has given rise to a new form of “ecological criticism.”²

Tech workers are disillusioned with capitalism, but also cannot imagine “other modes of economic organization” [125]. They are concerned about inequality, but also want to pay back their mortgage. They value diversity, but seem to mistake Sheryl Sandberg for a feminist. They are sympathetic to unions, but only two of Dorschel’s fifty-two interviewees had actually joined one. And this hybrid, half-baked subjectivity makes tech workers vulnerable to being co-opted by “yet another spirit of capitalism” [140].

Much as the solutionist spirit of capitalism described by Nachtwey and Seidl³ is a reaction to—and an attempt to co-opt—an ascending social critique of capitalism’s inability to solve humanity’s real problems, tech firms channel their workers’ moral energy into “moral initiatives” that do little but burnish tech firms’ brand of “corporate humanism” [141–145]; they capitalize on the “moral currency of diversity and inclusivity” [145] without doing much to address the underlying problems; and they appropriate their workers’ cultivation of ordinariness and mindfulness into the “compassionate design” (e.g., of office spaces) that papers over the power asymmetry between tech elites and everyone else.

In the time since Dorschel conducted his interviews, and even in the short time since the book was published, the contradictions he so carefully reconstructs have begun to make themselves felt. The three crises that shaped the post-entrepreneurial self have been overshadowed or transformed by a new set

¹Page 38, in Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, 2007. *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London, Verso).

²Ève Chiapello, 2013. “Capitalism and Its Criticisms,” in Paul Du Gay and Glenn Morgan, eds, *New Spirits of Capitalism? Crises, Justifications, and Dynamics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 60–81.

³Oliver Nachtwey and Timo Seidl, 2024. “The Solutionist Ethic and the Spirit of Digital Capitalism,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 41 (2): 91–112.

of crises, which both vindicate and challenge the book's central arguments. These are less criticisms of Dorschel's book—as he anticipates many of them himself—than attempts to carry his analysis into a changing future.

Perhaps the most profound challenge to the social code of tech workers comes from the spectacular rise of artificial intelligence, which may well undermine the economic leverage that gave tech workers their unique class position. For example, a recent analysis from *The Economist* found that full-time employment among graduates in computer science, computer engineering, and information science fell from nearly 70 to 55% in the three years following ChatGPT's release.⁴ A not unlikely consequence is that the very category of tech workers could be pulled apart at both ends: downward toward proletarianization, as tech workers see their skills devalued; and upward, as AI allows the best-positioned or most ambitious to close ranks with tech elites—either by becoming entrepreneurs themselves, as AI lowers the costs of starting a business, or by profiting from the AI boom itself, where the “expert developers and master deployers of AI technologies” Dorschel identifies [176] now command compensation packages that dwarf even traditional tech salaries.

It is here that tech workers' inability to translate critical attitudes into collective action comes back to bite. And it is here that one starts to wonder whether these critical attitudes were ever really more than a fair-weather phenomenon, a set of luxury beliefs affording sought-after moral comfort. Sincerely held, but quickly discarded as conditions harden. Dorschel himself writes that “it is security, rather than precarity, that fuels [tech workers'] critique” [126]. So what should we expect from tech workers as their security dwindles and precarity looms? If recent events are any indication, not much.

This brings me to a second crisis that is reshaping the social codes of tech workers, namely the political realignment of Silicon Valley in the run-up to, and then even more so in the wake of, Donald Trump's re-election. Crucially, while partly opportunistic, this realignment was also fueled by the resentment of tech elites, who saw themselves losing control over their own companies to what they perceived as increasingly radicalized tech workers. While not everyone would have put it that starkly, many tech elites shared Marc Andreessen's counterrevolutionary sentiment when he described activist tech workers as “America-hating communists” intent on destroying tech companies “from the inside.”⁵

This Restoration-era dynamic—a ruling class reasserting control, not after a revolution but after the mere suggestion of one—raises the question of how we should think about the relative importance of, and interaction between, the beliefs of tech workers and tech elites. Why were tech workers unable to articulate, from the fragments of their social critique, a vision for an alternative technological future that carried a broader “promissory legitimacy”⁶ and rivaled what Margaret O'Mara calls the “future-tense

⁴“Is AI Putting Graduates Out of Work Already?,” *The Economist*, 13 May 2026 [<https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2026/05/13/is-ai-putting-graduates-out-of-work-already>].

⁵Marc Andreessen, interviewed by Ross Douthat, “How Democrats Drove Silicon Valley into Trump's Arms,” *The New York Times*, 17 January 2025 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/17/opinion/marc-andreessen-trump-silicon-valley.html>].

⁶Jens Beckert, 2020. “The Exhausted Futures of Neoliberalism: From Promissory Legitimacy to Social Anomy,” *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 13 (3): 318–330.

allure” of the Valley’s elites?⁷ Why was the counterrevolution of tech elites met with so little resistance, despite running counter to many of the lofty ideals tech workers had so vocally subscribed to? Is this a story of scarcity and opportunism, or is there a deeper pathology written in the social source code of tech workers? Today’s digital capitalism may not be the one that tech workers wanted, but is it the one they deserve?

The third crisis is geopolitical, and the tech industry is right at the heart of it. In today’s “geo-tech world,”⁸ tech companies both benefit from and are assets in geopolitical conflicts. Rolf and Schindler call this “state platform capitalism.”⁹ The success of Muskism, for example, is tied up with the promise “that, in an increasingly unstable world, both states and individuals can fortify their self-reliance by plugging into [Musk’s] infrastructures,” from electric cars and batteries to rockets and satellites.¹⁰ Not long ago, protests against involvement in defense projects like Maven became emblematic of tech workers’ social activism. Today, defense contracts are not only widely sought after but defense tech itself has become central to an increasingly patriotic moral discourse, championed by companies like Palantir and Anduril in the United States but also by companies like Helsing in Germany.¹¹

Are we then witnessing the demotion of a once-ascending digital bourgeoisie to feudal subjects—precarized by the very AI they helped build, put back in their place by technokings (Elon Musk’s official title at Tesla), and conscripted, to the extent they are still needed, into a neo-sovereignist project that is post-entrepreneurial mainly in its blending of the commercial and the geopolitical? Or is an alternative path possible—one in which tech workers organize and ally themselves to build a different digital future that more radically breaks with the proclivities and presumptions of tech elites and with the logic of a venture capitalism that grinds down any attempt to build for public value?¹²

Interestingly, and paradoxically, AI, of all things, could make this vision more realistic: not only because it makes it possible to build a digital future with fewer resources, but also because it is like gasoline on the smoldering fire of all three varieties of critique: the social critique of AI’s impact on the labor market specifically, and political and economic inequality more broadly; the artistic critique of its alienating effects on culture and social relationships; and the ecological critique of its local and global environmental consequences. In the end, then, Dorschel’s book provides insight into how—but also hope that—the crises and contradictions of contemporary digital capitalism could be a moral crucible for the emergence of a more fully fledged tech worker subjectivity—one that recognizes that acquiescence may no longer make one middle-class wealthy or morally worthy.

⁷Margaret O’Mara, 2019. *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (New York, Penguin Press).

⁸Timo Seidl, 2024. “Charting the Contours of the Geo-Tech World,” *Geopolitics*, 29 (5): 2033–2045.

⁹Steve Rolf and Seth Schindler, 2026. *State Platform Capitalism: The United States, China, and the Global Battle for Digital Supremacy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

¹⁰Quinn Slobodian and Ben Tarnoff, 2026. *Muskism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, Allen Lane).

¹¹Katrina Manson, 2026. *Project Maven: A Marine Colonel, His Team, and the Dawn of AI Warfare* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company).

¹²Catherine Bracy, 2025. *World Eaters: How Venture Capital Is Cannibalizing the Economy* (New York, Dutton).