

Forbes

Silicon Valley, Stop Playing Brigadoon And Make America Politically Good And Great Again

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America is having a long delayed political nervous breakdown. That derives from a breakdown in our underlying philosophy. Silicon Valley could fix that.

America was founded on, and has as its DNA, “classical liberalism.” America’s political structure was very intentionally patterned on the philosophy of such thinkers as John Locke.

Monticello.org observes:

Thomas Jefferson used no books or pamphlets to help him write the Declaration of Independence. But since his early days, he’d thought and read about government and the rights of mankind. He read British writer John Locke, who believed that people are born with natural rights. Governments should be for the benefit of everyone, not just the rulers. (These ideas were evident in Jefferson’s ideas for Virginia’s new state constitution.) Thomas Paine had also expressed a similar idea in *Common Sense*: “A government of our own is a natural right.”

Jefferson’s draft was also influenced by George Mason, a plantation owner in Virginia. Mason wrote a phrase similar to “pursuit of happiness” in his draft of “Virginia’s Declaration of Rights.” Jefferson was probably influenced by Dr. William Small of Scotland as well. Small had taught Jefferson for four years at the College of William and Mary. Jefferson described his professor as a man with “an enlarged and liberal mind.”

“I did not consider it a part of my charge to invent new ideas,” Thomas Jefferson later wrote about writing the Declaration, “but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject.”

“An enlarged and liberal mind” has a nice ring. Let’s grab it! But how?

Classical liberalism got bifurcated some time ago. Its increasing fragmentation is causing massive cognitive dissonance within, and between, the left and the right, Democrats and Republicans. Neither fragment of it by itself provides a blueprint for sustained political flourishing. Both aspects, together, do.

But where to find classical liberalism as a living and thriving culture instead of an academic artifact?

Do you know the way to San Jose?

Silicon Valley shows strong signs of holding, if not quite coherently, to the classical liberal ethos. Silicon Valley is full of geniuses. Let some of them turn their brainpower to clearly articulating, and systematically projecting, this governing political philosophy. Silicon Valley can set America to rights — and secure its position politically — by coming out of the closet as classical liberal.

Wikipedia nicely defines that as

a political ideology and a branch of liberalism which advocates civil liberties and political freedom with representative democracy under the rule of law and emphasizes economic freedoms found in economic liberalism which is also called free market capitalism.

Science Daily observes:

Both modern American conservatism and social liberalism split from Classical Liberalism in the early 20th century.

At that time conservatives adopted the Classic Liberal beliefs in protecting economic civil liberties.

Conversely social liberals adopted the Classical Liberal belief in defending social civil liberties.

Neither ideology adopted the pure Classical Liberal belief that government exists to protect both social & economic civil liberties.

Philosophy professors would find this a bit of an oversimplification. For practical purposes it frames our predicament nicely.

Key Silicon Valley thought leaders, some anyway, seem to get classical liberalism.

Peter Thiel wrote, for the Cato Institute in 2009, “By tracing out the development of my thinking, I hope to frame some of the challenges faced by all classical liberals today.” Thiel may be the most influential classical liberal public intellectual at work in the world today.

He is self-identified not just as a classical liberal but as both Christian and gay. Seems paradoxical.

Full classical liberalism is not paradoxical. There are no paradoxes in nature, something to which quantum physicist Niels Bohr alluded when he said, “How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.” An apparent paradox identifies a flaw in our perception. Full classical liberalism is syntonic.

Sam Altman, the young head of Y Combinator, sounds like another. Tad Friend’s *New Yorker* profile of Altman contains this very interesting Tell:

(Altman) 'd been reading James Madison's notes on the Constitutional Convention for guidance in managing the transition. "We're planning a way to allow wide swaths of the world to elect representatives to a new governance board," he said. "Because if I weren't in on this I'd be, like, Why do these f***rs get to decide what happens to me?"

Quintessential classical liberalism.

Another important classical liberal is a public intellectual with a strong association with Silicon Valley, George Gilder (a personal friend and sometimes professional colleague). Gilder was the living writer most often quoted by President Reagan, author of the "Bible of Reaganomics" *Wealth and Poverty*, and the high tech classics *Microcosm*, *Telecosm*, and *The Silicon Eye*. Gilder has been and likely soon will again become known as an important technology investor.

Gilder may be the most essential classical liberal thought leader of our era.

But Silicon Valley, despite its influential and well-heeled DC business lobbyists, has so far made itself into something of a political Brigadoon. Silicon Valley appears prominently for a day every four years and then, mostly, disappears into bubbled obscurity as a kind of "Revenge of the Nerds" Valhalla. Its elusiveness represents the loss of a potential national political treasure. It may even pose a risk to Silicon Valley itself.

Asserting some coherent classical liberal thought leadership may be as vital to Silicon Valley's future as it is to America's. Silicon Valley titans recently experienced at least a superficial rapprochement with president-elect Donald Trump courtesy of the maverick Thiel. The fragility of the truce is properly scored by *Business Insider* as a risk factor. Silicon Valley plays with billions of dollars. Washington plays with trillions. The risk is real.

And Silicon Valley recently took some PR lumps. Tad Friend in the *New Yorker*, with pointed skepticism, asked, in the sub-headline of *Sam Altman's Manifest Destiny: Is the head of Y Combinator fixing the world, or trying to take over Silicon Valley?* Next came *The Outline's* Emmett Rensin's extremely critical *Valley of the Dolts: Silicon Valley's powerbrokers want you to think they're different. But they're just average robber barons.* Then *Fortune's* Erin Griffith revealed *The Ugly Unethical Underside of Silicon Valley.*

Until Silicon Valley projects a coherent, inherently American, philosophical message it is in default on its political and social responsibilities. That default also makes it vulnerable to caricature and even vilification. America needs Silicon Valley to lead it back to classical liberalism by word, deed, and sustained political engagement.

Restoring classical liberalism need not be daunting. There are many famous contemporary figures who exemplify classical liberalism. As the philosophy is in eclipse they are not often fully recognized as such. Two iconic figures who exemplify classical liberalism are rarely recognized as such.

One of these is George Orwell, the author of what may be the most culturally influential critique of totalitarianism ever: *1984*.

The other is Saul Alinsky, author of *Rules for Radicals*. Nicholas von Hoffman, one of Alinsky's most accomplished protégés, observed in a 2010 [interview on C-Span](#): "He descends philosophically from classic British liberalism."

I happen to be the president of the [Alinsky Center](#), chaired by Saul's son David. David's a progressive. I'm an archconservative. Our advisory board spans the ideological spectrum. There's room for left and right in the classical liberal tradition notwithstanding our passionate, yet not acrimonious, disagreements.

Alinsky's commitment to social justice defines him as a man of the left. Yet he also detested Big Government, publicly attacking LBJ's war on poverty as "political pornography." He actively fought both fascism and communism. Alinsky anticipated the ethos of Silicon Valley. He was committed to unleashing the imprisoned lightning of the people. From *Rules for Radicals*:

In the end [the organizer] has one conviction – a belief that if people have the power to act, in the long run they will, most of the time, reach the right decisions. The alternative to this would be rule by the elite – either a dictatorship or some form of a political aristocracy.

This is 200 proof classical liberalism. "Radical" has pejorative connotations but it means, and Alinsky meant it, as "root." Bohr again: "Every valuable human being must be a radical and a rebel, for what he must aim at is to make things better than they are." "Radical" is not a synonym for hooligan.

Alinsky's work had a significant influence on Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Donald Trump's 2016 disruptive campaign employed most of Alinsky's tactical rules. We have not yet reached peak Alinsky. Silicon Valley might begin there. If Alinsky's a little too radical give George Gilder a ring.

The key to solving our political predicament lies in restoring the philosophy that made America both good and great. That philosophy seems to be leaking out of Silicon Valley. The Valley should desist playing a political Brigadoon and radiate as the beacon of classical liberalism it deserves to be.

By coherently advocating its classical liberalism Silicon Valley can become a key political force to transform the government into one dedicated to the protection of both social and economic civil liberties. Restoring classical liberalism could produce a dynamic in which the humanitarian factions of the right and the left can find ways to unite.