

The Silicon Valley Gulag

Jason Morgan writes in [Misus Wire](#):



[Review of Michael Rectenwald, [Google Archipelago: The Digital Gulag and the Simulation of Freedom](#) (Nashville, TN, and London: New English Review Press, 2019).]

The near-homogeneity of Silicon Valley political beliefs has gone from wry punchline to national crisis in the United States. The monoculture of virtue signaling and high- and heavy-handed woke corporate leftism at places like Google, Twitter, and Facebook was once a source of chagrin for those who found themselves shut out of various internet sites for deviating from the orthodoxies of the Palo Alto elites. After the 2016 presidential election, however, it became obvious that the digitalistas were doing a lot more than just making examples of a few handpicked “extremists.” From the shadow banning of non-leftist sites and views to full-complement political propagandizing, Bay Area leftists have been so aggressive in bending the national psyche to their will that there is talk in the papers and on the cable “news” channels

of “existential threats to our democracy.”

It is tempting to see this as a function of political correctness. Americans, and others around the world, who have found themselves on the “wrong side of history” (as determined by the cultural elite in an endless cycle of epistemological door closing) have long been shut out of conversations, their views deemed beyond the pale of acceptable discourse in enlightened modern societies. Google, Facebook, Twitter – are these corporations, and their uber-woke CEOs, just cranking the PC up to eleven and imposing their schoolmarmish proclivities on the billions of people who want to scrawl messages on their electronic chalkboards?

Not so, says reformed leftist – and current PC target – Michael Rectenwald. The truth of Stanford and Harvard alumni’s death grip on global discourse is much more complicated than just PC run amok. It is not that the Silicon Valley giants are agents of mass surveillance and censorship (although mass surveillance and censorship are precisely the business they’re in). It’s that the very system they have designed is, structurally, the same as the systems of oppression that blanketed and smothered free expression in so much of the world during the previous century. In his latest book, *Google Archipelago*, Rectenwald outlines how this system works, why leftism is synonymous with oppression, and how the Google Archipelago’s regime of “simulated reality” “must be countered, not only with real knowledge, but with a metaphysics of truth.”

Google Archipelago is divided into eight chapters and is rooted in both Rectenwald’s encyclopedic knowledge of the history of science and corporate control of culture, as well as in his own experiences. Before retiring, Rectenwald had been a professor at New York University, where he was thoroughly entrenched in the PC episteme that squelches real thought at universities across North America and beyond. Gradually, Rectenwald began to realize that PC was not a

philosophy, but the enemy of open inquiry. For this reason, and because Rectenwald is an expert in the so-called digital humanities and the long history of scientific (and pseudo-scientific) thinking that feeds into it, *Google Archipelago* is not just a dry monograph about a social issue. By turns memoir, Kafkaesque dream sequence, trenchant rebuke of leftist censorship, and intellectual history of woke corporate political correctness, *Google Archipelago* is a welcoming window into a mind working happily in overdrive.

There is much in *Google Archipelago* addressing the lie that Google, Facebook, and Twitter are neutral platforms for free-ranging debate. This is not so much, because, statistically and empirically, it is irrefutable that Silicon Valley is hostile to non-Beltway-leftist opinions, but because, much more damningly, their woke-capital corporate structures are themselves iterations of massification, propaganda, and deep social control. For Rectenwald, the “Google archipelago” is not PC version 2.0; it is Marxism, version 1,000 (and raised by several orders of magnitude to boot).

For example, in the first and second chapters of *Google Archipelago*, Rectenwald lays out how the various elements of woke-capitalist ideological repression work together in actual practice. Rectenwald’s chief example is the Gillette ad campaign of January 2019, in which a company whose products (razor blades and shaving cream) are purchased, of course, was said to insult the very essence of its customers by belittling manhood as “toxic.” Why would a razor blade company go out of its way to alienate the people who buy the majority of razorblades? The answer is surprising. Rectenwald tells us Gillette was not simply responding to a renewed PC craze by running the “toxic masculinity” ad. Gillette, from the beginning, has been a pioneer in designing systems to mold public opinion and shape individuals into easily pliable socialist masses. King Camp Gillette, the founder of what is now the Gillette company, hated competition and sought to

make, as he put it, a “world corporation.” Through this corporation, the ignorant plebs around the globe could be impelled to do what their social and intellectual superiors – the leaders of the “world corporation” – thought was in their best interest. This “singular monopoly,” as Rectenwald puts it, would control the material and mental makeup of the entire world. Quoting King Camp Gillette’s biographer, Rectenwald adds, “It was almost as if Karl Marx had paused between *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital* to develop a dissolving toothbrush or collapsible comb.”¹

Rectenwald outlines a direct line of descent from this earlier corporate socialism of razor blades and “collapsible comb[s]” to the “authoritarian leftism” of the present digital age, authoritarian leftism being “the operational ethos of the Google Archipelago.” The Google Archipelago’s “wokeforce” practices what Rectenwald calls “avant-garde identity politics extremism,” the organizing principle for deciding which parts of society are in revolt against PC and need to be excised from the archipelago of allowed opinion. The internet did create the “information superhighway,” as was endlessly exclaimed by politicians and nascent digitalistas during the late 1990s. But it also amplified the structures of woke corporate control that had been in place since the beginning of globalized leftism, Marxian “capitalist” finance, and elite-led collectivism – precisely the kind of inversion of free enterprise and perversion of the free market practiced by King Camp Gillette and his socialist comrades a hundred and more years before. The Google Archipelago is not a product of the personal computer, but of another kind of political correctness, the PC that is the manifestation of the same old human urge to control others and bring the world under the sway of one’s will.

Other contemporary philosophers, most notably Shoshana Zuboff in [*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*](#), have used Marxian categories and terminology to show how Google’s digital

collectivism is little more than a bastardization of old-fashioned Marxism-Leninism. Rectenwald, however, has done the truly creative work of exploring how the Google Archipelago re-upping of Marx is not only practically Marxist, but conceptually and structurally so.

Google Archipelago is the record of an individual who fought his way out of the groupthink hive (Rectenwald believes that groupthink now takes the form of a binary reduction of the human person to easily manipulable units rather than the dialectical materialism of the Marxism of yesteryear) and is now trying to piece together the mechanisms of his long season of unfreedom.

But the way out of the Google Archipelago is a narrow strait, and fraught with peril. As Rectenwald writes:

GULAG is an ideological state apparatus, if not the state itself, a state that penetrates deeper by the second, infiltrating the very recesses of cognition, of conscious thought and unconscious potentiality. The culture wars will soon be fought not merely on the college campus or social media networks but in cybernetic circuits that splice will, libidinal desire, perception, and identity into distributed cognitive networks that elide our bodies, while attempting to disguise themselves as our minds.

[1.](#) Rectenwald, p. 61, quoting Russell B. Adams, *King C. Gillette: The Man and His Wonderful Shaving Device* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), pp. 13-14.