

Noah Smith writes: Back in September, Marc Andreessen tweeted: "Silicon Valley is nerd culture, and we are the bro's natural enemy."

Is that true? Anyone who grew up in the 1980s remembers how bros -- or jocks, as we called them then -- disdained and marginalized nerds in high school. In his book "My Life as a Quant," physicist-turned-financier Emanuel Derman recounted how the traders at Goldman Sachs viewed the quants as laughable and subservient gnomes confined to dark basements for meager pay.

But what are "bros" and "nerds" really? My theory is that "bros" are people whose special skill is human relationship-building. This is incredibly important for the economy, since transaction costs are one reason companies exist in the first place. Business doesn't take place in a frictionless competitive market -- it requires a lot of phone calls and e-mails, a lot of meetings and team-building and planning sessions. It requires businesspeople to know lots of other businesspeople and have a good idea of their skills, trustworthiness and other characteristics. It benefits enormously from long-standing human networks.

This is why society needs bros. We often ridicule the culture of backslapping good ol' boys, fraternities and male-bonding rituals. And human networks easily turn into cliques, which is why bros get a bad rap for being condescending and exclusionary. But this networking serves a vital economic purpose. Bros are often jocks because playing sports builds interpersonal skills. In Japan, the government even uses tax incentives to encourage companies to go on late-night drinking sessions (often to the detriment of family life).

Nerds, on the other hand, have technical skills in engineering, math and science. In recent decades, we've seen an enormous rise in the economic value of nerdhood, as the skill premium has risen. Many economists attribute this to the impact of information technology and the movement of the U.S. economy up the value chain. Wages for software engineers in Silicon Valley continue to soar. Meanwhile, the startup economy has thrust nerds into leadership roles previously occupied mostly by bros. And companies such as LinkedIn are beginning to automate the process of human networking.

This has put economic pressure on the bros. Back-slapping and bad jokes are no longer enough to sustain a modern business. The Wall Street boom of the 2000s placed a premium on relationship building, but now that the finance industry is getting squeezed, a lot of bros are teching up and moving out to Silicon Valley. Within the finance industry, too, the increasing importance of quant finance is forcing bros to nerd out, and elevating nerds to management and trading roles where they get a crash course in bro-ing.

In other words, the Internet caused the "Revenge of the Nerds," but it's also bringing about a merger of the nerd and the bro -- the end of the old rivalry. This is good, because the nerd-bro fight was always a little silly. Nerds and bros work best when they complement each other and share skills.

With that war ending, new social challenges are popping up. The most important of these is fully integrating women into U.S. business culture. Bro culture has a long history of excluding women, of course, and the down-and-out nerds long benefited from the stereotype of being nicer to women. But I'm starting to see a fear that some nerds, after winning social status, will act like the Jacobins in the French Revolution, taking collective revenge on women after years of feeling ignored. And Silicon Valley is a great place, but it does have a sexism problem.

Fortunately, many of the most high-profile nerds are actively fighting against this sexism. Google is making a big push to train female programmers. Andreessen and his wife, Lauren Arrillaga-Andreessen, give large amounts of money to nonprofits that promote gender diversity in the tech industry. Meanwhile, many venture capital firms are making a conscious effort to fund more female entrepreneurs. I think that the likeliest outcome is the best one -- organizations gradually shed their gender bias, and the would-be Robespierres remain confined to nerd-dom's lower recesses, in fetid slime-pits such as "GamerGate."

So the great nerd-bro war is ending. "Nerd" and "bro" will eventually stop being social classes, and start simply being two different hats that we wear. The more important social struggle will be whether we can expand "bro" to include Sis.