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On Cultures That Build

25-32 minutes

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Ending his decade of silence, the voice of Marc Andreessen rises from the dust, trumpeting forth a rousing *cri de coeur*: "It is time to build**."**

Andreessen's essay has got a lot of play in certain circles, and it generated many responses. The general rule for those galvanized by Andreessen's call to action is to raise it as a banner for their own cause; the most interesting entires in this category are probably the essays penned by Mark Lutter and Isaac Wilkes. The response written up by Ezra Klein and Jose Luis Ricon are probably the most thoughtful examples of the opposite reaction: long explanations for why Americans cannot build things, and will not build things, until requirements x, y, or z are met.

I was greatly inspired by the essay. But there are a few important ideas that need to be interjected into this conversation that are currently lacking from it.

First, the TLDR version: In the 21st century, the main question in American social life is not "how do we make that happen?" but "how do we get management to take our side?" This is a learned response, and a culture which has internalized it will not be a culture that "builds."

Now on to the long version:

1. **Andreessen is correct: our failure to build things is a problem of culture and will.** One of the common complaints about Andreessen's essay is that it does not take the obstacles to "building" seriously enough. I am not a terrible fan of "Green Lantern theories" of human accomplishment and would thus normally be sympathetic to this critique. My baseline assumption is that when intelligent people produce failure, a nest of entrenched interests and perverse incentives lie at the problem's heart.

The failures in America's coronavirus response suggests this is the wrong assumption to make. The scale of American errors simply range too wide. At *every single level of society* we have seen incredible, truly *incredible*, mistakes. None have done well: not the White House, not the federal government agencies, not the state governments and *their* agencies, nor even city authorities. Private enterprise was caught as unprepared as everyone else, and has subsequently struggled to produce a tenth of the innovative counter-virus workarounds their Chinese counterparts managed to dream up (and that under much greater time pressure). The media disgraced itself early on in the crisis and has no power to keep people's attention focused and efforts united now; much the same can be said for the largest voluntary associations of American civil society. Of course, each of these examples can be pulled out and explained away as the result of this or that unique set of conflicting interests, onerous regulations, partisan concerns, or terrible incentive trees, but as you zoom out towards the national view these micro-explanations grow less convincing. Before us lies a national catalogue of dysfunction and disaster. A national explanation is needed. Something must be found that holds together the staffers manning the Mayor of New Orleans response team and those doing the same thing in Washington DC. I am comfortable calling that thing "culture." America does not have a culture that builds.

2. **America was not always this way.** There are many who want to make this story a grand competition between liberalism and authoritarianism. In terms of virus response this is silly; Taiwan, South Korea, Australia, and many European nations have weathered this crisis as well as or better than authoritarian states like Vietnam and China, and even those who have done comparatively poorly in Europe have done a far better job of bringing infections down than the United States has managed. But there is more to the issue than the coronavirus, isn't there? Most of Andreeson's essay is not about the virus at all, but skyscrapers, education, healthcare and so forth. In so many areas of Western life (and American life specifically) there simply is *a failure to build new things*.

Yet this has not always been true. Patrick Collison has fun list of grand projects that went up "fast." As

Collison notes, most of those things went up before 1960. Collison's list is focused on the physical: skycrapers, tunnels, ships, moon landings, military planes, and so forth. But this was also true for *institutions.* Consider how America responded to the last great pandemic to wash over its shores:

> Already an important part of the public health agenda, organizing the state and local public health communities and their resources quickly became a vital component in the struggle against the epidemic. Again, the local populace often responded to these needs, creating new bodies or enhancing the authority of those already in existence in order to allow them to manage the epidemic crisis effectively. **One common mechanism was the establishment of an emergency committee— sometimes at the state level, other times at the level of the county or city— to deal with the overwhelming need for organization, communication, and cooperation among individuals, agencies, and organizations**.
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> In Illinois, for instance, the Council of National Defense organized the Illinois Influenza Commission, which included representatives from the state and city health departments, the USPHS, the Red Cross, the military, and others. They met regularly, indeed nearly every day, until the worst of the epidemic was over. In Pennsylvania the State Department of Health created nineteen Epidemic Emergency Districts in the state and mobilized and coordinated the actions of countless “Health, Patriotic, Civic, Religious, Business and Social organizations” as well as the State Guard.
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> In Washington, D.C., the USPHS Medical Officer in Charge was appointed to oversee the work of a Central Office and four Medical Districts, each with its own Medical Officer, Assistant Directing Nurse, Supervising Nurse, and nursing staff. Cooperating agencies included the District Health Department, the Board of Education, the Visiting Nurse Society, the Washington Diet Kitchen Association, the National Organization for Public Health Nursing, the Children’s Bureau, the Red Cross, other governmental departments, and local churches. [1]

Nancy Bristow's account of the emergency committees created to deal with the flu is much shorter than we would like it to be, as **her book** is not a history of institutions, but public attitudes and perceptions. She makes clear however that the effectiveness of the various committees at disease prevention varied widely (and all were hampered by poor understanding of the flu virus itself). But the effectiveness of the committees is besides the point. **When the America of the 1910s faced a national crisis, America responded by creating dozens and dozens of emergency response committees at the local level.** These committees included membership of both local governments, federal public health officials, and the leaders of local business, social and religious organizations. They did this **fast.** And finally, they set these committees up as temporary instruments to address a temporary problem. For the Americans of 1918, this was the obvious response demanded by crisis. **Crises demanded organizing at the local level to try and meet the problem head on.**

We do not have this impulse today.

But it should not be *that* surprising that the Americans of 1918 could set up mixed civic-business-government organizations on the fly; they had just done the *exact same thing* at *the exact same level of society* two years earlier in order to sell war-bonds and rally the home front against the Hun. [2] Both efforts should be seen against the backdrop of an incredible nation-wide craze for institution building. In 1918, America was not even a generation removed from its frontier past; the frontier was only officially closed in 1890, and the state of Arizona was only admitted to the Union in 1912. The Americans of 1918 had carved towns, cities, and states out of the wilderness, and had practical experience building the school boards, sheriff departments, and the county, city, and state governments needed to manage them. Also within the realm of lived experience was the expansion of small towns into (unprecedentedly large) metropolises and the invention of the America's first multi-national conglomerates. The progressive movement had spent the last three decades experimenting with new forms of government and administration at first the state and then the federal level, while American civic society saw a similar explosion in new social organizations. These include some famous names: the NRA, the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the American Bar Association, the Sierra Club, 4-H, the VFW, Big Brothers, the NAACP, the Boys Scouts, the PTA, the United Way, the American Legion, and the ACLU. [3] To a large extent we wander in the ruins of the world this generation built.

3. I mention the progressive era to highlight a fundamental contrast: in the America of the early 20th century, the default solution to any problem encountered was to assemble a coalition of Americans to defeat it. This was true regardless of the level of society in which the person operated. It was the default response in small towns and in large cities, at the federal center and at frontier's edge, in the world of

the businessman, the social reformer, the minister, and the politician. Americans had faith that building things worked. To be sure, politics and perverse incentives existed. They could and did lead to all sorts of disastrous outcomes. [4] **But the baseline assumption of the American people of that time was that free associations of Americans working towards a common goal could get hard things done—and that it was *their* responsibility to get those people associating.**

This impulse was not new to the progressive era. One foreigner described it a distinguishing American feature all the way back in the 1830s:

> Anyone living in the United States learns from birth that he must rely on himself to combat the ills and obstacles of life; he looks across at the authority of society with mistrust and anxiety, calling upon such authority only when he cannot do without it. This begins to become apparent when school starts and children, even in their games, submit to the rules they have established and punish offenses following their own definitions. The same spirit prevails in all the affairs of social life. **Should an obstacle appear on the public highway and the passage of traffic is halted, neighbors at once form a group to consider the matter;** from this improvised assembly an executive authority appears to remedy the inconvenience before anyone has though of the possibility of some other authority already in existence before the one they have just formed.... **[In America] there is nothing the human will despairs of attaining through the free action of the combined powers of individuals**. [5]

Tocqueville contrasts this unfavorably to the subjects of European kings:

> There are European nations where the inhabitant sees himself as a kind of settler, indifferent to the fate of the place he inhabits. **Major changes happen there without his cooperation, he is even unaware of what precisely has happened; he is suspicious, he hears about events by chance**. Worse still, the condition of his village, the policing of his roads, the fate of the churches and the presbyteries scarcely bothers him; **he thinks that everything is outside his concern and belongs to a powerful stranger called government.** He enjoys what he has as a tenant, without any feeling of ownership or thought of possible improvement. **This detachment from his own fate becomes so extreme that, if his own safety or that of his children is threatened, instead of trying to ward off the danger he folds his arms and waits for the entire nation to come to his rescue.** [6]

Which of these two caricatures sounds more like the Americans of the modern day? [7]

4. I understand that the self-organizing neighborhood committee that removes a tree that blocks their street does not go on to build the Empire State Building. My argument is slightly different. To consistently create brilliant poets, you need a society awash in mediocre, even tawdry poetry. Brilliant minds will find their way towards poem writing when poem writing and poem reading is the thing that people *do*. **Likewise, the sense that "free action of the combined powers of individuals" is the solution to problems that plague you *personally* is a learned response. It is a response that America's governing elites have never had the chance to learn.**

Where would they have learned it? Tocqueville describes American children learning republicanism in their schoolyard games; today's children rarely leave the sight of adult authority figures, and have learned instead to solve conflicts by appeal to authority. No building tree-houses in the woods with a bunch of friends for these kids! Consider the 30 year old staffer in Congress, or her counterpart protesting out on the streets: her youth was a long slog of arbitrary tasks and awards accumulated to win the favor of admissions committees, and the politics of her university experience boils down to causing a ruckus until the administration decided to bequest to the ruckus-causers the object of their desires. **All she has learned from these experiences is that solving problems means petitioning the powers that be**. Most of the institutions that could have given her a different model of how the world works are dying—or dead:

> Problems once handled at lower levels of society by self-governing citizens were passed upwards to impersonal bureaucracies. The largest of these bureaucracies is the federal government. But the problem is not limited to the federal government—these bureaucracies dominate large swaths of American life, from the global conglomerates that dominate our economy to the universities that crown our education system. One of my favorite ways of tracking this has been to look at the ratio of students:school boards. School boards used to be as close and as responsive to the interested citizen as politics could get, but many school boards now manage the education of hundreds of thousands of students. At this scale, citizen voice is diminished.

> While this was happening, the civic and religious institutions that Americans traditionally relied on to manage their own affairs were quietly disappearing. Some organizations, like religious boards, unions, and bowling clubs, declined in number; others, like charities and NGOs, switched from a model of mass participation to a model of mass donations. Add it all together and you find that the percentage of Americans expected to be familiar with *Robert's Rules of Order* shrunk precipitously.[8]

It is striking to me how many of the old Silicon Valley builders—people of Andreeson's generation—were social outcasts in their youth. These people felt estranged from the established *corsus honorum* of American society. They might not have spent their summer days building tree houses, but they did spend them building things (computers, code, networked communities, etc) on their own initiative. One wonders if their building spirit can long persist now that San Fransisco is flooded with young men and women whose values and experience are more closely tied to the established *corsus honorum* of the American upper class.

5. To clarify: Tocqueville blamed the passivity of the 19th century Frenchmen to his government. **I am not sure the government *as such* is really the relevant variable here**. To update his words for modern times, I would make them read: "he thinks that everything is outside of his concern and belongs to a powerful stranger called **management**." A culture that does not build is a culture habituated to living under management. As I wrote in a previous post,

> **In the 21st century, the main question in American social life is not "how do we make that happen?" but "how do we get management to take our side?** [9]

You see this in the difference quite clearly between Black Lives Matters on the one hand and the Civil Rights Movement on the other, but if you reflect on this distinction you will quickly start to see it everywhere.

6. So why then is China, et. al. able to build things? Am I seriously arguing that they are less managed and bureaucratized than we are?

Chinese bureaucracy is several millennia old, but until quite recent times its reach was very short. Villages were self governing all through the imperial era and civic society was extremely vibrant. The Chinese Communist Party's was the first bureaucracy to truly penetrate the countryside (in the '40s and '50s), and the official government organs of the People's Republic were the first to exercise fine-grained control of urban society. The Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution destroyed the Party's countryside bureaucracies entirely, and they had to be rebuilt in the years that followed. Even now both the Party and the state bureaucracies that canvas the Chinese hinterland are highly decentralized; these government and Party units are given a great deal of room for experimentation and in many realms are practically independent from outside control. This causes endless frustration to centralizers in Beijing, but the benefits are clear: it is not wrong to think of these units as "labs of communism." Various scholars have suggested that the decentralized nature of the CPC's regime explains both its longevity and its ability to foster strong economic growth.[10]

The disruption caused by the "leftist deviations" of the Maoist era were not as great in the cities as in the countryside, and there urban "work units" exercised a truly tyrannical level of control over people's lives even when various parts of the countryside began rolling back Party interference in ordinary life. "The Management" of that era controlled urban Chinese lives in a way few Americans have ever experienced. But that way of life was largely dismantled as China opened up. One Chinese businessman who lived through it used the word "anarchic" to describe to me the lived experience of the economic reforms. In using that word I do not think he meant "lacking government" so much as "lacking rules." The changes that China was going through were so vast that neither Chinese businesses nor government regulatory bodies could keep pace with what was happening. Rules had to be made up as one went. An astounding number of the financial, corporate, and political institutions that govern China today were not around 1990. Not only did individual organizations not exist, but in many cases even that *type* of organization did not exist before the boom began. The last time America experienced changes on that magnitude was in the Progressive Era and the Gilded Age.

The Baby Boomers were the first American generation to live entirely beneath the management. Perhaps the Chinese baby boomers have already been born. China's current batch of urban young are managed from birth in a way their parents born in the '70s and '80s never were. These kids are not self-reliant, and like Americans born today have no experience in getting things done.[11] But they are only one generation removed that world, and it took America several generations to move decisively away from the values and worldview of their ancestors. [12] Moreover, the middle class urban young are only one part of their generation. How the experience gap between the coddled city kids and the millions "left

behind" in the countryside will shape China's future is something I often wonder about, but which I will make no predictions (If you forced me to put down money, my bet is that China will have a building culture for several more decades to come).

7. The real question is whether *we* will be able to rebuild a building culture. I believe it is possible; Silicon Valley has shown that building sub-cultures can persist even in the face of general malaise. I am afraid this is a long term project. It may involve wrenching cultural authority out of the hands of existing arbiters and pulling it towards places like Silicon Valley, where men and women have not forgotten how to get things done. This may require building up the sort of cultural, media, and political infrastructure that exists along the Acela Corridor, just divorced from the patronage networks that currently keep things anchored in Washington and New York. Tech titans who care about these things should begin thinking seriously about what it would take to begin political and social experiments in the places closest to them: San Fransisco and its metro, other towns and cities in the state, perhaps California itself.

This post is already long; more thoughts on what it takes to build new cultures will be reserved for the future.

If this post on American institutions and culture caught your interest, you might consider some of my older posts on the problem:"A Tour Through Three Centuries of American Political Culture," "The Title IX-ifcation of American Childhood," "Pining for Democracy," "Awareness vs. Action: Two Modes of Protest in American History," and "Institutions, Instruments, and the Innovator's Dilemma." To get updates on new posts published at the Scholar's Stage, you can join the Scholar's Stage mailing list, follow my twitter feed, or support my writing through Patreon. Your support makes this blog possible.

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[1] Nancy Bristow, *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 104-105.

[2] To a get a sense of what this looked like in just one American city, see David Drury, *Hartford in World War I* (Charleston: The History Press, 2015), pp. 57-83.

[3] One of the best depictions of this era as a frenzy of institution building that ties together both the progressive movement *and* the huge expansion in American civic and religious organizations is found in Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 367-402. A book length treatment of this theme (perhaps one that includes the municipal and state level responses to the 1918 pandemic and the First World War!) is sorely needed.

[4] David Randall's *Black Death at the Golden Gate* is a page turning account of one example of this, an account that both emphasizes the slap-dash frontier-builder culture of America at the turn of the century, as well as what eventually needed to happen in order to "get things done" in the America of the time.

[5] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* trans. Gerald Bevan (New York: Penguin, 2003), 220.

[6] *bid,* 108.

[7] I appreciate humorist Dave Barry's take on this question:

> Every year approximately 17 million more Americans decide that they'd rather become lawyers and spend their days wearing and filing suits, instead of doing some form of work that anybody actually needs. Too many chiefs, not enough Native Americans, that's what's wrong with this country. We all want to manage. We all want to attend meetings and develop concepts. We look down on jobs that involve any physical activity more rigorous than faxing. Nobody in this country knows how to do anything anymore. There was a time when average Americans could get together and, in one afternoon, build an entire barn.
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> Yes! A barn! Can you imagine average Americans doing that today? Not a chance!
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> They'd spend weeks debating the membership and organizational structure of the Barn Architect Selection Committee, whose members would then get into a lengthy squabble over the design of the logo to appear on their letterhead. Ultimately this issue would become a bitter and drawn-out dispute, be taken to court, and the people involved would start complaining of depression and anxiety, and psychologists would announce that these

> people were victims of a new disease called Barn Committee Logo Dispute Distress Syndrome, or BCLDDS, which would become the subject of one-hour shows by Phil Donahue and Sally Jessy Raphael, after which millions of Americans would realize that they, too, were suffering from BCLDDS, and they'd form support groups with Hot Line numbers and twelve-step programs. That's what we modern Americans do.

From Dave Barry, *Dave Barry Does Japan* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1992), 53-54.

[8] Tanner Greer, "The Title IX-ification of American Childhood," *Scholar's Stage* (25 September 2019). Some key texts I draw on to create this picture include Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; Robert Putnam, Carl Frederick, and Kaisa Suelman."Growing Class Gaps in Social Connectedness Among American Youth", Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America (8 August 2012); Theda Skopal, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013); Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010); Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, "Micro-Agression and Moral Cultures," *Comparative Sociology* 13, iss 6 (2014).

[9] Greer, "The Title IX-ification of American Childhood,"

[10] On the short reach of traditional Chinese bureaucracy, see Peer Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence: Britain and Qing China, 1680-1820* (Bloomsbury Academic: 2015); Debin Ma, "State Capacity and the Great Divergence: The Case of Qing China," *Eurasian Geography and Economics,* vol 54, iss 5 (2013), 484-489; Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform*, 2nd ed (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 3-19. One of the best depictions of vibrancy of imperial China's society are the first four chapters of Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); on the decentralized, and even democratic nature of rural Chinese political arrangements, see Robert Garnett, "Village by Village Democracy," report for the American Enterprise Institute (15 April 2009); William Joseph, ed. *Politics in China: An Introduction,* 3rd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 317-341 (the next thirty chapters are a good primer on urban relations too); on the benefits of China's decentralized political structure generally, see Sebastian Heilman and Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations Adaptive Governance in China* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2011). See also Arthur Kroeber, *China's Economy: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), passim.

[11] I wrote up my take on these kids in the post "The Inner Life of Chinese Teenagers," *Scholar's Stage* (19 April 2019).

[12] See Campbell and Manning, "Micro-Agression and Moral Cultures" and my commentary on it in "Honor, Dignity, Victimhood: Three Centuries of American Political Culture," *Scholar's Stage* (16 September 2015).