

On Andreesen

“Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.” - Job 5:7

“We need more welders and less philosophers.” - Marco Rubio, 2012

(0) Welding is one way to build things. It uses high heat to melt parts of metal or thermoplastic together and fuse them through subsequent cooling. Often in this process, parts, clamps or the welding arc isn't aligned perfectly, or the applied current isn't optimal. When this happens, tiny bits of molten metal, stimulated by all the energy they're suddenly getting and unable to contain it and stay put, sometimes fly off as incandescent droplets. These are what we call welding sparks. Although these metal bits lose their heat quickly because of their small size, if they come in contact with an inflammable substance, they can start a fire. Indeed, among all types of hot work (which would also include soldering, heat treatment, etc.) welding [is responsible for](#) the most fires in the US, killing ten humans on average every year, injuring plenty more, and causing upward of \$100 million of property damage. While safety precautions can be taken to limit this risk, it's often impossible, even for robots, to weld with the perfection that prevents sparks, and no welder, welding arc or metal can know how a spark is going to form and what direction it's going to shoot in.

You rarely get to—or even want to—build things under perfect, theorized conditions. So, different components in your process of building often interact in ways that are beyond your knowledge or control. Sometimes when you build things, you set in motion other processes that take on a life apart from you, and sometimes, without foreseeing it, you start a fire. All this is unavoidable, and it can apply to more or less any process of building, whether that is the production of machines such as pipes and rails, or that of machines of thought, speculation and will.

Marc Andreesen's manifesto-essay [‘It's Time To Build’](#) was intended to talk about building more akin to the former kind, but it was itself an act of the latter kind of building. As such, sparks flew. Plenty in and associated with Silicon Valley, whose disposition is toward distilled problem-solving, have felt themselves roused by his call for America to build the technologies and infrastructures that undo and in the future preclude the sort of shambles that constituted the American coronavirus response. At the same time, many have found it unbecomingly grandiose that someone of the tech industry would think himself appropriate to make such a call, and have found his words to be simplistic or hollow. In the minds of these critics, the question of building ultimately pertains to tried and tired matters of Politics, and Tech, which so often considers itself

beyond Politics, cannot possibly swoop in and offer novel contributions regarding atoms and bits of the kind we need unless we slog through the Politics required to enable that.

This is indeed a critical opposition—whether the problem is primarily about technical problem-solving that has political aspects or about Politics with technical aspects. Andreesen couldn't help but engage with both components of technology and Politics in building his idea-machine, and existing imperfectly with the surrounding world, they were bound to lead to a stimulating tension that resulted in some of the sparks generated. But adjacent to these rather more explicit components was a pair of more implicit ones, which were also unavoidable given the nature of the vision Andreesen wanted to present. These created a more fundamental ambiguity, which is actually where the sparks flew from, that manifested as the former, more apparent opposition.

This ambiguity, rather than pertaining to *what* a societal process of building would look like, or the object of building, is about the subject: Who was the essay directed toward? Who is supposed to do all this building? While the former dichotomy has been talked about more easily, it's only in looking at both dichotomies together that we can build toward the most productive resolution and forward-looking picture of what society can and should do from here.

(1) At the face of it, it seems as if the subject of 'Let's Start Building Things' is America. Sure, the essay starts off referring to the West as a whole:

“Many of us would like to pin the cause on one political party or another, on one government or another. But the harsh reality is that it all failed — no Western country, or state, or city was prepared ...”

From there, though, the essay moves straight to looking at the US. Andreesen makes note of how the US was especially lacking in its response to the coronavirus—lacking in basic medical supplies, a vaccine (“despite, again, years of advance warning about bat-borne coronaviruses”), as well as efficacious means to transfer money from the government to humans.

He attributes this to the fact that America hasn't built “the mechanisms, the factories, the systems to make these things.” This, in turn, he attributes to “smug complacency, this satisfaction with the status quo and the unwillingness to build.” This is a general feature of the West, he says, and more specifically, of American life: from our cities (his choice example is that when HBO depicted a future American city in *Westworld*, it chose to shoot in Singapore), to our education (where our last innovation was Montessori schooling), to manufacturing (which happens in foreign countries, though we could have Elon Musk's “alien dreadnought” factories in the US), to transportation (where is all the futuristic sci-fi stuff?).

The problem isn't money, he goes on to say. Rather:

“The problem is desire. We need to *want* these things. The problem is inertia. We need to want these things more than we want to prevent these things. The problem is regulatory capture. We need to want new companies to build these things, even if incumbents don't like it, even if only to force the incumbents to build these things. And the problem is will. We need to build these things.”

Who is this “we?” Clearly, it seems, it is America. There is all the more reason to believe so as he goes on to propose that “building is how we reboot the American dream,” and at the end, writes that “our nation and our civilization were built on production, on building.”

But is it really America? It is, in the simple sense that it is likely that in his mind, he was thinking of the entire American workforce when he wrote

“If the work you're doing isn't either leading to something being built or taking care of people directly, we've failed you, and we need to get you into a position, an occupation, a career where you can contribute to building.”

But that sentence itself reveals the ambiguity in the subject of the essay, as it introduces another “we.” This “we” is the one many people semi-consciously registered as the true subject of the essay: Silicon Valley, or somewhat more broadly the tech industry, or most broadly, all those with a Promethean fire who can innovate and produce and for whom the tech industry has provided a relatively friendly hearth for the last few decades.

This is reinforced at the end, where he follows up his comment that our nation and civilization were built on building by writing:

“Our forefathers and foremothers built roads and trains, farms and factories, then the computer, the microchip, the smartphone, and uncounted thousands of other things that we now take for granted, that are all around us, that define our lives and provide for our well-being.”

Again there is that ambiguity of who the “we” and “us” here is. There is a “we” that experiences the riches of civilization. However, the “we” that is more primarily addressed in a document titled “It's Time To Build” is one that almost tautologically emerges as a subject from the action being called for: Even if not just in the realm of 0's and 1's, when Andreesen says we need to build, that “we” is defined in terms of a collective engaged in the activity of technological

production—building in the plane of atoms, augmented by means involving electrons and bits. He may want all of America to participate in this endeavor. But ‘It’s Time To Build’ is first and foremost addressed to those who have the disposition and capacity to build, which isn’t the same as America.

(2) What defines the gap between the two? If “those who have the disposition and capacity to build” isn’t America, but instead is a coalition of as-yet ill-consolidated “builders,” overlapping or extending perhaps with Silicon Valley today, what is “America?” When Americans think “America,” what do they mean? And what are the concerns that “America” as an entity takes up?

The gap was very clearly defined this spring. During the peak of the spring coronavirus crisis, it felt like a lot was happening *in* America and *to* America. But America itself wasn’t *happening*. As a society, it didn’t seem to be active in a way that it sometimes otherwise is. Things were happening to Americans, and Americans were talking about things that are happening in their own lives, but it wasn’t like “America” was itself doing something.

Contrast that to just a month or two later, when protests and riots occurred after the killing of George Floyd. Not only then was urban America literally on fire to an extent it usually isn’t. More significantly, America was “on fire” in the sense that it felt like America was active. It was itself the subject of this narrative, rather than just the object. During the spring coronavirus lockdown, there was a lot of practical discourse, lifestyle chatter and personal stories. But there the discourse was not nearly as purely political. However, discourse around George Floyd’s death, from all factions involved, was far more political—and with that, far more incensed—than that about the coronavirus. And, of course, people decided they didn’t care about coronavirus compared to what they understood as racism, and took to mass gatherings on the streets. It was as if the coronavirus had deactivated America, while George Floyd’s death reactivated it and brought it back to its normal existence.

What this contrast demonstrated is that “America,” this thing that got turned off and turned back on such, is fundamentally a sociopolitical thing. When “America” as a whole is “at it,” so to speak, it is up to something which involves defining itself as a *polity* and endeavoring to change what characterizes this polity.

This truth is demonstrated by a recent cultural production, Childish Gambino’s song ‘This Is America’, and the extent to which it struck a chord in the consciousness of the polity. It struck such a chord because there was something about it that really hit the mark in terms of capturing, indeed, what America was about. One need not agree that the picture of gun violence and racial oppression that Donald Glover presented in the song actually is an accurate representation of

America, or whether one likes the juxtaposition with mainstream pop culture that Glover embodied so well. But whether or not police brutality, gun violence or racism are actually as big problems as they are believed to be, it is such themes that capture the essence of what currently constitutes “America.”

It is in the plane of Politics that America—not *Americans*, but *America*—resides. When one thinks “America,” one doesn’t think of government emergency stocks of medical masks and preemptive vaccine research. One thinks, more so, of debates about racism and , traditional gender roles and postindustrial or queered gender roles, unions and bosses, billionaires and democracy. One doesn’t think about the nuts and bolts of actual geoengineering projects, but whether it will be too late before climate change even finds wide acceptance in the polity as a societal matter; that too America cannot help but make anything but a matter of the polity. By America, one doesn’t think logistics and supply chains, one thinks the tension between the culture of faith, family and football on one hand, and the culture of metropolitan, liberal arts-educated hipsters on the other.

All this to say, Andreesen’s vision of building is misaligned with the very idea and being of America. Whether it is cause or effect, whether it is a matter of bad science education policy or the trough of a Kondratief cycle or postmodernity as such, this is what America is—a body politic that is only really alive when it’s talking about racism or some other kind of injustice or oppression (or talking about how there isn’t injustice or how the fight against the apparent injustice is the real injustice or such.

America, thus, cannot be built by *America*. America cannot say “It’s time to build,” as Andreesen is, and still be acting as America. America can only be roused to find passion about things to do with traditional political ideals, such as equality, liberty, diversity, tradition, etc. America still exists as a proper civil society, for these ideals do weave together a civic-mindedness. However, the interests and predilections of civic society *qua* civic society—which is, it seems, what liberal regimes reduce nations to—do not and cannot extend to hard, atoms-and-bits concerns regarding production, exchange and the governance thereof.

(3) There is thus an error to both Andreesen’s essay and the rejoinders from those of his critics who cannot bear to have “building things” as framed as anything but a matter of the state and national Politics. Andreesen erred in framing the project of building as an “American” project... at least, until the message of building could no longer be contained like that at the end, when his words betrayed the truth of the matter.

His critics err further, in believing that this could in essence be a political project. Politics, however, is a plane transversal to that of building, creating, producing—indeed, of desire as such.

Andreesen was correct in identifying desire and will as problems that prevent our society from building. There is a deep relation between building and desire, much more than there is between building and, say, wanting to be democratic, wanting to institutionalize, or seeking justice. [Desire is, in fact, fundamentally not for a lack. Rather, desire is productive.](#) Prior to considerations of democracy, diversity, bureaucracy or equality, the subject has—or rather, the subject *is*—the desire that animates it, the desire for some or the other kind of connection with other subjects or with the world. Just as a beaver is animated, even constituted, by the desire among others to build dams, so humans are animated and constituted by the desire to build our worlds. Thoughts, beliefs and valuations are phantasmagoria of the mind. Preeminent is our spirit, our species-being, the instinct and ineradicable joy in affecting the world beyond our individual selves.

But if this desire, this life-force, is told, “No, what building our worlds is *really about* is using the state or the market in a certain ideologically predefined way, for ensuring the end of justice or liberty,” it slowly withers up. Indeed, building only takes place when production-desire is allowed to inhere and flow through the world. Attempts to territorialize this otherwise-spontaneous, natural human desire to want to make things of the world into Politics will only stifle the kind of building Andreesen calls for. As Andreesen says, we need to want to build things, but he didn’t go to the full extent needed. To be asserted rather is the opposite of what some of his critics are saying: Our faculty of wanting to build has been diminished precisely because of the extent to which Politics is totalized as the prime collective concern of civilization by (and as) liberal civil society.

Which is to say, the main problem isn’t political or institutional failure. Rather, Politics itself is the problem.

The only way to build, then, is to chart a line of flight from Politics as such. This need not take place ignoring all of the criticisms that many more “political” people make of Silicon Valley and its ethos. It is indeed too reductive or simplistic to see society as a collection of “problems” to be “solved.” Human affairs are messy beyond description, and there aren’t objective answers in the way that a math problem does. It also does not mean that building doesn’t involve institution-building.

Rather, it means that institution-building should be seen as that—*building*, not as Politics. It should be experienced as an act of building, and it should be undertaken for the preeminent ideal of facilitating more building. Charting a line of flight from Politics isn’t to avoid matters of governance, say, but to illuminate an ethos whereby matters of governance are engaged with out of genuine production-desire—as *political innovation*, innovation that is about governance, rather than *innovative Politics*, sociality subordinated to transcendental ethico-political ideals. What the times need is not-Politics—subjects wanting to do things because that is simply what the life flowing through them wants, regardless of various ethico-political ideals seeking attention in their cognitive systems.

Let us be clear about what this means. This essay, published in *Palladium*, highlighted a civic-humanistic-aesthetic ethos that was felt to be missing from Andreesen's analysis. It granted that desire is needed, but it argued that such desire only comes about when society has a narrative that articulates *for what* and *for whom* it is building.

This is exactly what is *not* meant by the idea that not-Politics—and pure desire—are needed. The kind of desire and will that Andreesen speaks of, the kind that can actually lend itself to building at the scale and sophistication required, cannot proceed from an *a priori* consideration of who and what is benefitted by the building. It comes from within, not from without, and it is precisely the compulsion to channel desire to serve predetermined ideas of who and what that has led to the stagnation of our society.

To elucidate with a simple analogy, if you see a child drowning in a river, you don't stop and think, "Well, I should jump in the river to save the child, for the sake of the child and so that a life isn't lost." The human spirit has a spontaneous receptivity, an innate intelligence, that will simply jump in the river and save the child without such thoughts about "for whom" and "for what." If you think about the "for whom" and "for what" instead, you will get paralyzed, and the child may die.

The same applies for Andreesen's building. The same assemblage of compassion, care, and problem-solving intelligence that all life has will take care of what has to be done, if only subjects with this innate intelligence of life are free from being cudgeled with rules, ruminations and transcendental notions of should's and shouldn't's arising from Enlightenment or pre-Enlightenment theologies. The desire that constitutes the human spirit can act, will act, and will act in a way that will organically fulfill what we generally consider good if it is freed from the ethico-political, if it is simply allowed to inhere in the world, rather than forced to primarily be—and identify with being—subjects of civil society. The latter is what America does as "being America," as Politics. It is how to throttle a civilization, and render it too dumb to build.

(4) But what of the state in all this? The approach that suggests building should occur on the basis of preset beliefs and valuations is naturally related to a certain foregrounding of the nation state and state-driven action, which is then related back to the limitations of Politics explained above. It is not surprising that the *Palladium* essay ultimately argued that the kind of building Andreesen calls for should be left to the state, proffering trade schools and state-backed industrial coordination as its main programmatic ideas.

These may be good ideas. In general, increasing the strength, efficacy and capacity of the state may be a necessary component for the kind of building that Andreesen calls for. The mistake, rather, is in wanting this to be an American, and thereby civic-humanistic-political project. The

state *plans*, which is to say, it proceeds from beliefs and valuations and does things hoping for certain outcomes. It cannot and does not act out of desire, out of passion. Only subjects can truly *want to* build, and thus only subjects—human, nonhuman and posthuman, but not states in and of themselves—can truly build. Building as a political or civically minded project, rather than an unalloyed project driven by desire, asks *for what* and *for whom* we are building as necessary questions *in order to* build. Starting out like that, the ways it sees the overall project of building coming about—as building new companies, new industries, state capacity, mediating institutions for labor—are bound to be congruent with the institution that also prioritizes hollow schematizing to vitality, i.e., the state.

Can the state cut it, though? Even if there is a role for the state to play, what are the risks or follies of framing the project of building as something that is primarily a project of the state? There is obviously the issue of how the state ties to the nation, a polity of citizens, rather than the assemblage of subjects as is required, the way explained above. When the American state does something, that is by definition an affair of America, a political matter. As explained above, it can't for this reason commune with the desire for production *qua* production, for that is not what a polity of citizens is constituted by.

But believing in the nation state as the vehicle for the project of building is misled not only because its operation naturally takes the shape of Politics, with the limitations of Politics with respect to desire that we've already been through. There are also practical reasons why the civilizational project of building cannot be one of State Politics. Consider this: The essay referenced above says that America must be the first country to reindustrialize, which is a sentiment shared by many on the post-liberal right, which is very concerned with state capacity and an industrial policy for the United States.

The biggest problem with this idea may be that it is economically unfeasible. Fully arguing this is beyond the scope and distinct from the purpose of this essay. Still, most people who want to see America reindustrialize do admit the difficulty of doing so, given how much capital and knowledge we have offshored. But they still believe it is possible. However, even if it is possible, it would come at such a high cost that the growing pains likely wouldn't be worth it. This is especially so when a global infrastructure does still exist for trade, even considering the setbacks of the coronavirus. Building America cannot be done, for purely economic reasons, just *by* America; moreover, the building that Americans do cannot be done by them just *for* America. An industry—tech or otherwise—that tries to serve just American interest will fall flat on its rear side.

The only viable alternative is to think about building not just at the scale of America, but at the planetary scale altogether. So much for the better, for this will actually make the process of building in America better as well. Not only will it make the material, economic aspect of the

building better. But insofar as the nation (state) is the realm of the political, it is only a subnational or a transnational process that has the potential of being unpolitical. The subnational scale, however, is completely beset by Politics, at least in the West. Relationships, workplaces, sports leagues, there is no realm of society that isn't supposed to be politicized today.

This leaves the transnational scale at which genuine desire can most bloom. It is true that discussions about state capacity do revolve around building things. However, insofar as state capacity in turn necessarily occurs at the national scale and is thus framed as something involving *the American polity*, it will ultimately not be able to elicit the desire at the pitch and range required in this century. The national scale is where Politics happens, and so where building *can't* happen; the planetary scale is still where Politics most *doesn't* happen, and so, that is where building can happen.

Again, this does not mean that matters of *governance* are irrelevant. The task, rather, is to think of building "state capacity" of new orders and organs of planetary-scale governance itself as a sociotechnical, rather than political, project. It is to take governance to the planetary scale, to plan just the mechanisms and arrangements that can allow for desire everywhere to flow, with an eye toward material reality, relatively undiluted by the onerous frills and passing thrills of the political.

At this point, we are obviously not talking about "America." The task of building, in the sense Andreesen meant it, simply cannot be of such a form. It could be composed of all Americans, but it cannot be America. If what Andreesen wants is really a substantive and extensive project of building material resources and infrastructures for the common good in general and for preparedness against catastrophic risk in particular, proclaiming that it is time to build is effectively a proclamation for a new coalition of class. Perhaps he did not want this to be meant, but that is what the imperative of building entails and beacons, and for that reason, his document is a true manifesto.

(5) What to make of the fact that Marc Andreesen is a man of Silicon Valley, though? If we are not talking about America anymore, how is the Tech industry related to a coalition whose desire and disposition is to produce in response to challenges faced in common? Such a desire and disposition are most present in the Tech sector right now, from space tech to all possible data-driven implements to address the coronavirus pandemic. It's not that no one in Tech cares about traditional political ideals such as justice, liberty, etc. Far from it, for better or worse. Rather, at least for now, it is the most prominent sphere in the West where there is a temperament to want to do things for their own sake, because it is fun or meaningful to solve problems and affect reality regardless of the gravity of transcendental ideals. It is thus perhaps natural that such a call for building, for what it really entails as we have seen, came from a pioneering figure in Tech.

Still, it would be wrong to say that 'It's Time to Build' is a manifesto for Silicon Valley to "take charge," or for things to happen according to Silicon Valley. Articulating and elevating building as a novel priority in its own right scrambles all the social terms. "Silicon Valley" is a meaningful collective entity only insofar as "America" is as well, and if it isn't Americans as "America" who can form a civilizational endeavor to build a society again, it also cannot be the people in Tech as "Silicon Valley" who can conduct this endeavor.

To draw an analogy, 'It's Time To Build' is as much a document for the hegemony of Tech as Plato's *Republic* was a document for the hegemony of Athens *per se*, rather than for an ethos that was somewhat unsurprisingly borne in Athens rather than anywhere else at that time. Right now, it is Tech that has the ethos to build. But the call coming from this prominent pulpit in it is less a vanguardist self-summoning than an appeal for a comprehensive revolution of ethos and priority that makes for a new version of society. This society would embody certain temperaments of Silicon Valley, but if it were to be actualized, "Silicon Valley" itself wouldn't matter; it may be rendered defunct or it may dissolve.

'It's Time To Build' thus augurs, most of all, a convergence between the existent and the imagined, between the ethos embodied by Silicon Valley and a coalition-not-yet-consolidated but one whose vestiges are at least discernible enough to make such a call. It is the Tech industry where there is still the most desire of the purest kind, of the purely building kind, but this is not a mode of existence that needs to be restricted to what currently exists as the Tech industry.

Still, there is a key role for Tech itself to play, and not just the social role of bearing, nurturing, vocalizing, embodying and radiating this ethos. There is also a practical purpose. Right now, legacy states and markets are very powerful; they can still affect much agency. However, if the agency they do affect is not toward building, not toward what civilization needs, other resources and brawn must be found. Tech, however, is not just where energy for the endeavor of building arises from. It is also not just a group of some big companies and numerous small startups. It is, perhaps most fundamentally, global information network architectures, planetary scale computation and a not inconsiderable amount of financial capital. These are the assets whose control will be contested by legacy institutions and liberal society, but insofar as they are *of* Tech, in that they are made by and answer to Tech first, they are leverage foremost for Tech, and with that, for the establishment of a society in which desire is at its rightful supreme place, fostering a civilization that builds.

(n) All of this, at some level, was apparent. Andreesen couldn't contain it, and even if people might not have articulated it in the terms here, they knew it: Andreesen has not put forward a vision that involved America as an active agent, even if he feigned to. He may well have believed that he was enlisting America for the task of building. But this very imperative, that civilization

must build, was in the end too powerful for his intentions, and the truth of the task came through: America must be eluded, which America found unsettling.

There are forces greater than Andreesen and beyond his knowledge that have worked through him. He is, like all of us, ultimately a conduit for an intelligence that he cannot wrap his mind around. Call it life, identify it with a deity, or simply think of it as computation occurring at levels from the cosmological to cellular that cannot be bracketed as being of an atomized ego. But when it uses us to build things, such as a manifesto, the process involves a friction between what we, like fools, think we are doing, and the truth of the deed. If the heat generated by that friction isn't itself enough, no utterance or building of ours manifests in conditions removed from the obstructions and obfuscations of the intentions of others. Sparks fly, and fires are sometimes started.

Hopefully not just a fire, but a hard-wearing one at that was started through Andreesen and the resistance from those who repudiated him. The signs so far are ever so slightly promising. The truth in Andreesen came through despite his words, so a receptivity toward that truth, even if it led to resistance for now, has been demonstrated. If the truth did not come through, if there were no resistance, if people simply took his call as a call for America or Politics to go about addressing our challenges, then there would have been no fire, and the political would continue to reign unchallenged, and there would be no question of a coalition of desire being able to build society. But a fire has been lit, because there was more to what Andreesen said than what he wrote, and because the moment actually is one in which society has reached the point of smallness and dryness that makes for productive kindling. This fire may even go on to raze the indurated junction we are at and light up the way for civilization to build civilization again. Andreesen may in the end get what he wanted, even though he did not see or say what was meant by what he really wanted, and despite ample aversion to what he saw and said. After all, true desire does not care for our wants and our whims, our cravings and our aversions; it lies beyond these, and it is at work.