

The American Entrepreneurial Spirit

A Primer

Allow us to begin the introduction to this special issue by way of a deliberately exceptionalist polemic: to think and act entrepreneurially is as American as the proverbial apple pie. There is certainly no shortage of examples that seem to corroborate such a sweeping assertion. Consequently, a seemingly banal, inconspicuous sliver of American everyday life shall serve as an inaugural touchstone: the lemonade stand. It is safe to say that the lemonade stand has been a fixture at different community events (e.g. little league sporting events, charity drives, and neighborhood beautification initiatives) and especially at yard and garage sales for decades. Most people can imagine the dynamics of a yard sale: while their parents, or legal guardians, are hawking their wares, answering questions from potential buyers, chatting with the neighbors, the children undertake the very basic enterprise of selling lemonade, or similar delights such as ice cream or cookies. Even though running a lemonade stand involves virtually no economic risk, it still instantiates a basic capitalist act that requires the marshaling of resources, initiative, and action with the view to reaping anticipated, albeit not guaranteed, financial gain. The practice of the lemonade stand has thus acculturated generations of young Americans to basic entrepreneurial thinking.

Despite—or perhaps “because of”—its innocuousness, the lemonade stand belies a kind of “superstructure” of entrepreneurism as a (narrative) discourse that permeates American history, culture, and society. When children run a lemonade stand, they perform a role that—as preposterous as it may sound—entangles them with the earliest European colonial incursions in the Americas, the constitutional founding of the nation, the titans of the Gilded Age (such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Ford), and the purportedly genius wizards of its late-stage capitalist sequel (that is, the likes of Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk—note that these are all white men). Entrepreneurism and entrepreneurial success are often clothed in the language of rationality—figures and data points that we might find in business studies books, balance sheets, and quarterly earnings reports but also at product launches and in the biographies of these captains of industry. However, “despite its formidable-looking mathematical notations and seemingly abstract matter-of-fact

presentation,” David Hamilton reminds us, “the part of economic theory concerning the entrepreneur appears to be a scholarly or sacred version of a popular folk myth.”¹ Indeed, it is important to remember that we do not experience our world as raw information, figures, and data points but rather through narrative forms and narrativizing structures that, in turn, acculturate, educate, and inform our experience of the world through representations thereof. After all, those balance sheets, quarterly earnings reports, and executive summaries are themselves narrative vehicles. Consequently, we will employ four narratives set between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1930s addressing entrepreneurialism to craft a primer based on which readers may then explore the various thematic trajectories that the contributors explore in their articles.

The first, *Moby-Dick* (1851), is, of course, a classic of American literature. Although *Moby-Dick* (and its titular whale, for that matter) seemingly reveals new ideas, topics, and meanings upon each re-reading, one of the issues that Herman Melville’s book touches on is the American whaling industry of the nineteenth century. While Ishmael may have signed up on the *Pequod* to cast out the “damp, drizzly November in [his] soul,”² and while Captain Ahab may pursue the White Whale to take revenge for losing his leg in a previous encounter with the majestic beast, the whaling ship and its multicultural crew represent an entire industry; it was an industry that then-U.S. senator William H. Seward, echoing the founding generation’s keen concerns over whaling,³ considered “a source of national wealth, and an element of national force and strength.”⁴ Starbuck, the first mate, is the only character to remind Captain Ahab that the *Pequod*’s goal is *not* chasing after a “dumb brute.”⁵ If Moby Dick, Starbuck reasons, “comes in the way of the business we follow,” they should kill the mighty whale. However, he stresses, “I came here to hunt whales, not my commander’s vengeance. How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? it will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market.”⁶ While generations of scholars have agreed that Starbuck’s rationality confronts Ahab’s megalomaniacal quest for revenge in this scene, the first mate, in fact, embodies *Homo economicus* here—“a being who inevitably does that by which he may obtain the greatest amount of necessities, conveniences, and luxuries.”⁷ And in order to generate revenue, the products and/or their source materials must be scarce. Although whale parts were used for producing a variety of products,⁸ arguably the most important one was whale oil. “Quite simply,” Richard Alley has concluded, “humans burned whales for energy. The ocean didn’t produce whales fast enough to meet our demands.”⁹ *Moby-Dick* reflects on these natural limits, wondering “whether Leviathan can long endure so wide a chase, and so remorseless a havoc; whether he must not at last be exterminated from the waters, and the last whale, like the last man, smoke his last pipe, and then himself evaporate in the final puff.”¹⁰ Even though *Moby-Dick* is a mul-

tifarious text, the book cautions against capitalism run amok, unbridled and reckless entrepreneurial ventures that ignore various contexts, including the scarcity of natural resources. Indeed, Ahab may reject the capitalist engine driving the *Pequod* (“Let the owners stand on Nantucket beach and outyell the Typhoons. What cares Ahab? Owners, owners? Thou art always prating to me, Starbuck, about these miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience”¹¹), but he somewhat listens to reason (or, rather, the economics of whaling) and allows his crew to hunt whales, after all. Only when the quest’s focus turns to the eradication of one particular whale (that is, the annihilation of the actual basis of their income) does this attempt result in the (self-) destruction of the capitalist enterprise represented by the *Pequod*, too.

Whereas whale oil was a key energy source in the mid-nineteenth century, petroleum had replaced it by the end of the century. The booming oil industry of that era has found ample representation in film and other media.¹² For example, the movie *Boom Town* (1940) features Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy as two oil prospectors, called John McMasters and John Sand, respectively. More specifically, the two characters are “wildcatters”—(usually) men who drilled for oil wells in areas not known to be oil fields. The opening text crawl defines these wildcatters as “a hard-driving breed of Americans . . . made of the bone and blood of pioneers.”¹³ The story begins in Burk Burnett, Texas, in 1918. Burk Burnett is a bustling oil town whose cityscape is dominated by pumpjacks (*Illustration 1*). The influx of prospectors and oil companies has attracted a number of other industries—diners and restaurants, hotels and boarding homes, transportation services, oil well supply stores, hardware stores, barber shops, and so on, highlighting that numerous small businesses depend on oil despite not trading in oil.

While these various ventures touch on the entrepreneurial impetus driving the expansion of the United States, the movie addresses a few characteristics of entrepreneurship in Big John and Square John’s story. First, business scholars have acknowledged the “systemic relationship between success and failure” in entrepreneurial ventures, which, ideally, leads to “falling forward”—that one learns from failures and turns them into success (what has since become the catchy mantra of “fail fast, fail often”).¹⁴ Despite their experience, the two wildcatters do not strike luck (or, rather, oil) right away, but need several attempts (and illegal and indecent measures) to find an oil well. McMasters builds an empire, while Sand comes to understand that money cannot buy the one thing he really desires (the love of the woman McMasters has married), turning his business ventures into distractions from the realities of life rather than something close to his heart. Second, when the two Johns lack funds and tell the owner of an oil-drilling supply store about how much money the (yet-to-be-found) well would yield, he gives them the tools and equipment required for drilling in exchange for a share in the well, speculating on a yet-to-materialize payout. Although



Illustration 1: Burk Burnett, Texas, is a bustling oil town.

Frame capture from *Boom Town*. *Boom Town* © MGM, 1940. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

the scene is played for laughs by ridiculing the store owner and his good faith spurred by his greed and emphasizes Big John and Square John's skills in manipulating people, it also demonstrates that for every business venture, as Frank Knight claimed as early as 1921, "the profit is in the future and uncertain when the decision is made and hence it is the prospect or estimated probability of profit" that provides the basis of entrepreneurial decision-making and stimulates entrepreneurial risk-taking.¹⁵ Finally, the two Johns never seem to become satisfied with their successes, moving through America and even foreign lands searching for oil.¹⁶ They are what Mike Wright, Ken Robbie, and Christine Ennew have called serial entrepreneurs—"entrepreneurs who exit one venture before entering into a subsequent one."¹⁷ In *Boom Town*, the concomitant constant changes to the two Johns' lives result from their fascination with searching for oil rather than enjoying the "good life" (that is, at least in McMasters' case) and reflect America's need for continual renewal, embodying Turnerian discourse. In his oft-quoted essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), Frederick Jackson Turner identified the nation's "perennial rebirth" as

concomitant with its territorial expansion and industrial progress.¹⁸ He singled out the industrial-style entrepreneur, “those preeminent captains of industry,” as playing a significant role in generating a “magnitude of social achievement.”¹⁹

Maybe most interestingly from today’s perspective, when McMasters stands trial for forming a monopoly and thus breaking anti-trust laws at the end of the movie, Sand pleads that what McMasters did was in the best interest of America, for he was “trying to save the natural resources of the country” by planning for long-term rather than short-term profits. After all, “if we keep taking it out at the rate we’re going, before long, there won’t be any left in the good-old U.S.A. There won’t be any left for him or men like him to break up into lube and fuel and gasoline so that people can get their stuff moved around in trucks, so that you can light furnaces and homes and schoolhouses.”²⁰ Despite acknowledging the scarcity of oil, the movie concludes by celebrating oil—and the men who prospect and extract it—as the glue holding the nation together, highlighted by a closing shot of an army of oil rigs (*Illustration 2*).



Illustration 2: The oil rigs point toward the future of the United States.

Frame capture from *Boom Town*. *Boom Town* © MGM, 1940. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

Serena (2014) tells a story that revolves around the extraction of another natural resource: timber. The movie begins in the Smoky Mountains in the year 1929. Shots emphasizing the natural beauty and natural abundance, but also mystery, of the region open the film (**Illustration 3**). The seemingly infinite supply of timber has attracted George Pemberton (Bradley Cooper), and he has built a lumber empire. Filmed in 2012 and released in 2014, the movie's representation of an extractive industry cannot be disentangled from the environmental catastrophe that we have been witnessing unfold in our everyday lifeworlds. Jennifer Peterson has called this particular cinematic experience the "Anthropocene viewing condition," as "images of nature—particularly moving images of natures past—resonate with present and future environmental loss."²¹ While the trees that Pemberton's company removes from the region are today protected in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, it is to a large extent young forest that has replaced the old-growth forest that was lost to extensive logging in the early twentieth century—estimates suggest that between 1901 and 1939, lumber companies extracted 1.5 billion board feet of lumber (since these were mainly large, old trees, that would be between 1.5 and 3 million trees) from the Smoky Mountains.²²



Illustration 3: The Smoky Mountains are characterized by mystery and natural abundance.

Frame captures from *Serena*. *Serena* © Magnolia Pictures, 2015. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

This dimension of the movie becomes all the more apparent when Pemberton meets a banker and hears that "Congress is creating a national park in Carolina." Pemberton reacts in a snotty fashion: "Well, the park may come. By the time the government takes the land, there won't be a tree standing."²³ Indeed, historically, as Steve Cotham has explained, "over 60 percent of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park had been logged by 1940, when the park was dedicated."²⁴ Some time later in

the movie, officials present their arguments why the region should be transformed into a national park in a public hearing. Pemberton asks, “What about the jobs, Sheriff? These men need to work, don’t they? The logging camps bring in railroads, electric lines—the place has never had them before. We’re bringing progress to Carolina.” The Sheriff (Toby Jones) counters, “Progress? Progress for whom, Mr. Pemberton? All the profits are going north.” Pemberton responds, “Every logger . . . wants . . . freedom. The freedom to work hard and to better himself. That’s what this country is supposed to be.”²⁵ While Pemberton draws on the American myths of freedom, the land of opportunity, and self-reliance in this exchange, the scene also highlights the Smoky Mountains as what Macarena Gómez-Barris has called an “extractive zone.” In her eponymous book, Gómez-Barris focuses on the “successive march of colonial and neocolonial actors operating in relation to South America as if it were an extractible continent.”²⁶ In *Serena*, the Smoky Mountains become such an extractive zone, as northern money exploits the workforce and “cheap nature” of the region²⁷—something that monied interests were also doing in subsurface Appalachia.²⁸ Admittedly, equating South America with any region in the U.S. is problematic; however, the Anthropocene viewing condition transports these images of past exploitation to the present (and near future) and thus evokes “the rise of extreme extractive industries such [as] hydrofracturing, deep sea oil drilling, mountaintop coal removal, and tar sand oil extraction,” which “are bringing forms of environmental destruction heretofore confined to the Global South home to populations in the North.”²⁹ In so doing, the Anthropocene viewing condition draws viewers’ awareness to the global entanglements of capitalist practices. However, we do not mean to suggest that *Serena* was outright critical of the extractive industries and the carbon-based capitalist system that both fuels them and is fueled by them. After all, the story’s progress is often uncritically driven by automobiles moving through the Smoky Mountains, while the film’s production was happy to exploit tax incentives offered by the Czech Republic for filming there rather than in the U.S., highlighting how the film industry is not just a capitalist enterprise intent on maximizing profits (granted, the movie flopped) while not adequately contributing to the larger society (i.e., paying taxes to an extent that everybody else does).

As a final example, the Netflix miniseries *Self Made* (2020) tackles the entrepreneurial story of Madam C. J. Walker (Octavia Spencer). Named Sarah Breedlove upon her birth, Walker was the first child in her Louisiana family to be born into freedom. However, beyond a few references, the miniseries is not interested in the first forty years of Walker’s life, echoing the general perception that “for the first forty years of her life, Madam C. J. Walker lived, like most black women born and raised in the years after the end of slavery, as an anonymous figure . . . in the midst of a nation that restrained her freedom of movement, limited her educational opportunities

and wages, and denied her the full privileges of citizenship.”³⁰ The series addresses these shackles imposed upon Walker when she mentions early on that it “seems like I was born to struggle,” which provides the narrative impulse for the rest of the miniseries.³¹ Besides racism, Walker faces domestic abuse, toxic masculinity, and colorism, before starting to develop her hair care products. However, as her empire starts to grow, critical voices emerge from within the Black community, too. For example, Booker T. Washington (Roger Guenveur Smith)—though himself an accommodationist and coded in uncomfortably colorist terms in the series—calls her out for building a business on Black women’s attempts to conform to White ideals: “a trivial company that shames Negroes into Eurocentric standards of beauty.” However, she protests, “I have no interest in making colored women look white. I want us to feel beautiful, too.” When she stresses that her female employees earn much more than Black women in other jobs, Washington explains, “How is America going to take us seriously if we allow our women to surpass us?”³²

The miniseries thus highlights the intersectional forces of opposition Walker has to face: not only her skin color and her being a woman, but a Black woman coming from a poor background (“Even in your Sunday best, you look like you just stepped off the plantation,” says her much lighter-skinned competitor Addie Munroe—loosely based on the historical Annie Turnbo Malone—at one point³³). Despite acknowledging the various obstacles that Walker has to confront, the miniseries subscribes to the idea “that the opportunity for material attainment and spiritual fulfillment is every individual’s birthright and is within each person’s power,” as Julie Levinson describes the American myth of success.³⁴ After all, Walker’s material success is only part of the equation, as she becomes a “philanthropist and patron of the arts,” as the epilogue explains,³⁵ while her success—reflected in her move from the poor districts of St. Louis to her becoming John D. Rockefeller’s neighbor in upstate New York—is anchored in Black history, for, as she explains in the first episode, “hair is our heritage.”³⁶

All of these stories attest to the cultural valence and power of entrepreneurship, which is entangled with ideas surrounding the American Dream, America as the “land of opportunities,” and the American myth of success—as well as critical inquiries into these American myths. These cultural myths seek to establish and maintain the (purportedly) shared identity of the American nation. Through these cultural myths, Americans make sense of their cultural memories in order to tackle everyday life in the present, and possibly to shape their future(s).

Historically, European colonial ventures begot the system today known as “capitalism” (or early capitalism led to these ventures—whichever way one might want to look at this issue). Early entrepreneurship informed the Spanish conquest of South

America and the Caribbean decades before the British started their colonial forays in the New World, most of which were business ventures; they were prototypical forms of what nowadays is called venture capitalism. One need only take a look at some key documents of colonial times and how they advertise the New World. For example, while John Smith's *General History* (1624) sketches the trials and tribulations of living on the other side of the Atlantic, it also includes catalogs of the "many excellent vegetables, and living Creatures" found in Virginia, which were meant to attract workers and investors alike. After all, "no place is more convenient for pleasure, profit, and mans sustenance" than Virginia. Although "all the Countrey is overgrown with trees," Smith believed that it "would soone be amended by good husbandry."³⁷ Connecting this American narrative of "civilizing" the "wilderness" more explicitly to entrepreneurship, John Frederick Martin has convincingly shown that "to develop the wilderness" meant "to rely on entrepreneurs."³⁸ Establishing towns and other types of settlements in the New World were, as Martin demonstrates in *Profits in the Wilderness* (1991), profit-oriented projects. On a more general level, scholars such as Edwin Perkins have suggested that "colonial society reflects a culture permeated with market values and capitalist principles." More importantly, maybe, "most occupational categories in colonial societies qualify as legitimate antecedents of the nineteenth-century entrepreneur."³⁹ A characteristically bombastic History Channel docuseries that celebrates American exceptionalism has dubbed these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century entrepreneurs "the men who built America." The series suggests that entrepreneurs such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie created modern-day America between the Civil War and World War I, as their "insight, innovation, and ingenuity . . . change[d] history, propelling the United States of America to greatness." In a spiffy and characteristically hyperbolic soundbite, future "dealmaker-in-chief" Donald Trump takes this idea even a step further, claiming that "in that fifty-year period . . . we built the world."⁴⁰

But this entrepreneurial mindset is also reflected in the foundational framework of the United States. After all, the Declaration of Independence pronounces "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" three of the "unalienable Rights" that "all men" have. The connection between liberty and the pursuit of happiness is reflected in statements such as President Calvin Coolidge's famous (yet often misquoted) assertion that "the chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing, and prospering in the world."⁴¹

Consequently, the four essays collected in this issue speak to different dimensions of the American entrepreneurial spirit, both embodied by historical figures and depicted in fictional representations. Heinz Tschachler's article explores the sources of George Washington's wealth, delineating three income streams that were partic-

ularly important. First, his career as a land surveyor and his experience on the Virginia frontier prepared him for becoming a successful land speculator. Second, being part of an emerging New World aristocracy allowed Washington to inherit money and generate income through a variety of upper-class connections and enslaved labor. Third, in his later years, Washington became an intrepid investor and entrepreneur who nevertheless had to contend with one of the many specters that haunt speculative ventures: debt.

In the second article, Stefan Rabitsch continues the discussion of the value of landed property. Zooming in on the hit television series *Yellowstone* (Paramount, 2018–), Rabitsch examines how settler colonialism’s imprint on land ownership, land development, and land use in the Trans-Mississippi West has usually favored big capital and conspicuous consumption. A postwestern text, Rabitsch argues, the series is an entrepreneurial drama that confronts the necrotic logic undergirding capitalism’s workings in the West as a “entrepreneurial habitat.” Concluding on a reading of Joseph Schumpeter’s definition of entrepreneurialism as pathogenic, this settler-colonialist heritage can only ever produce formations of violence, be they physical, psychological, epistemic, symbolic, and/or ecological.

Kelly Payne and Janel Simons return to a historical figure, progressive reformer Frances Willard. Using the bicycle as a symbol of reform and rooted in Christian values, Willard, they argue, embodies the coalescence of social innovation and female entrepreneurialism in the late nineteenth century. Deploying both the bicycle and entrepreneurialism as icons of (proto-)feminist activism, Willard paved the path for later developments in social entrepreneurship.

Michael Fuchs, finally, examines the serial cycle of extinction, de-extinction, re-extinction, and de-extinction as a tool for continually generating income and seemingly limitless growth. Focusing on the videogame *Jurassic Park Evolution* (Frontier Developments, 2018), Fuchs demonstrates that de-extinction may promise a (partial) solution to the extinction crisis by allowing humankind to control both life and death but cautions against the potential capitalist exploitation of such a (bio)technology, as de-extinction may lead to the increase of extinction, as resurrected species can be patented and sold.

Max Lerner asserted that “every tribe needs its totem and its fetish,” which are central elements to forge cultural identities.⁴² While Lerner went on to declare the Constitution the totem and fetish of the American people, it is but one American icon that forms “part of the ongoing effort to maintain a unified imagined community.”⁴³ As both the examples discussed earlier in this editorial and the articles included in this issue illustrate, in the pantheon of American icons, the entrepreneur is an important cultural archetype that reflects the zeitgeist. Accordingly, fears,

anxieties, desires, and wishes may be projected onto the entrepreneur; the figure of the entrepreneur—and interpretations of the entrepreneur as a hero or villain—is thus a cultural barometer that provides insight into the American psyche.

Stefan Rabitsch & Michael Fuchs

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Notes

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