

Mistrust: Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them
Ethan Zuckerman. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021. 275pp. \$26.95 (hardcover)

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An old Jacobin quote, variously attributed to Robespierre or Saint-Just, claims that “*la méfiance est au sentiment intime de la liberté ce que la jalousie est à l’amour*”: this same appraisal of the decisive political importance of mistrust –if not the bellicose affect underlying it– drives the interesting new book by Ethan Zuckerman.

The author’s career is a good example of an interdisciplinary trajectory between academia, digital activism, and startup culture. Before his current position at the Institute for Digital Public Infrastructure at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Zuckerman was for many years associated with two key institutions in the ‘Cambridge School’ of US internet-and-society scholarship: the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard, and the Center for Civic Media at the MIT Media Lab (which he left in protest over its director’s financial entanglements with Jeffrey Epstein). He has also, through projects such as Global Voices and Geekcorps, been involved in nonprofit work in international development and media pluralism. As for digital innovation, while at tripod.com at the turn of the 21st century he is widely credited with the invention of the pop-up ad.

Mistrust begins with the contention that an inflection point has been reached in ordinary citizens’ perception of the trustworthiness of institutions, public and private. Zuckerman perceives the global nature of the crisis, but both the diagnosis and the therapy in the book refer mainly to the American case. This overwhelming systemic mistrust imperils the stability of current political arrangements, leading to a new cleavage, between those the author terms insurrectionists and traditional institutionalists. Such a cleavage is orthogonal to the customary Right-Left one, but it does not cover the entire polity: both insurrectionists and institutionalists share a proactive approach to political life, hence both seek to dispel the feeling of powerlessness and disengagement mistrust engenders. Thus, the book overall can be seen to chart the range of contributions that more or less institution-friendly modes of activism can offer in the fight against political apathy.

Structurally, the first three chapters of the volume are devoted to a description of the phenomenon of contemporary mistrust, its causes, and consequences. The remaining six chapters explore different political strategies to counter mistrust and ‘fix’ institutions.

Zuckerman remains somewhat agnostic as to the root cause of mistrust: sudden crises, race animosities, neoliberal assaults on government bureaucracy, growing wealth inequality, diffuse political awareness in the broader population are all mentioned as possibilities, but none is singled out as decisive, and ultimately the mere fact of institutional underperformance, as suggested by Pippa Norris, can prove sufficient. Rather more interesting is the discussion of consequences, most notably with regard to the subversion of the value of transparency, which in low-trust contexts merely adds grist to the mill of conspiracism and paranoia. Zuckerman furthermore explores the hypothesis that mistrust may create asymmetries in political mobilization, with fear-based recruitment becoming more prevalent. Another altogether characteristic development is the devaluing in public discourse of the importance of factual truth (following the analysis developed by contemporary Russia scholar Peter Pomerantsev).

The book's *pars construens* roughly follows Lawrence Lessig's four-part typology of social-change agents: law, norms, markets, and code. The first type of activist strategy the author considers is 'radical institutionalism', namely a series of proposals for political engineering (such as the increase in the number of members of the US House of Representatives) or cultural change (the shift in worldview and prosecutorial priorities of US District Attorneys). Zuckerman then moves to strategies of monitorial democracy (employing the categories developed by Pierre Rosanvallon) and addresses the relevance and limits of naming-and-shaming campaigns and other awareness-raising activism. In chapter 7, the focus turns to the possibility of replacing institutions with competitors that function more efficiently: this type of market disruption is considered in the context of the societal impact of tech start-ups and the gig economy. Finally, chapter 8 explores alternative social arrangements devised from the outset not to feature central institutional oversight: decentralized currency systems like Bitcoin, and even more radical libertarian projects such as seasteading.

In the final chapter, Zuckerman restates the importance of retaining the organizational creativity and participation of citizens at all points along the mistrust and antipolitics spectrum; in this perspective, the most efficacious movements appear to be those managing to pursue several different, coordinated strategies, binding together militants who seek 'thick' engagement with sympathizers who are content with 'thin' varieties.

Scholars of trust as a theoretical social-scientific problem will struggle to find bold new departures in this text. Indeed, Zuckerman relies on a fairly standard set of references in the literature, from Diego Gambetta to Timur Kuran, from Ron Inglehart to Francis Fukuyama, from Robert Putnam to Albert Hirschman. The main interest of the book, rather, is in the application of classical concepts and typologies to the complex and shifting panorama of contemporary technological politics. In a line of continuity with his earlier work, *Digital Cosmopolitans* (2013), the author mobilizes a wealth of anecdotes and representative cases to illustrate the spheres of impact of the technological phenomena he traces. While readers may quibble with certain interpretations, such as Wikipedia's immunity from entrust tactics or the true importance of Peter Thiel or Elon Musk's political ideas, the breadth of the cases and contexts explored is extremely stimulating.

It is an unfortunate historical irony that the publication of the book almost exactly coincided with the only event in US politics in living memory to be explicitly identified as an insurrection: the storming of Capitol Hill by an armed mob assembled and incited by President Trump. Such irony, however, is a symptom of a broader truth. Zuckerman, while titling his work *Mistrust*, in fact sets out to write about social movements. The radical epistemological implications of mistrust are thus not fully accounted for. In particular, a 'systems' approach to institutions fails to account for the specificity of the political realm, namely the link with legitimate violence. In thinking of activism as a coordination problem first and foremost, the author tends to accord insufficient pathos to political struggle as a deep, dangerous clash of competing visions of the good.