

A conversation on ‘Seeing Like A State’

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Imagine two smart curious friendly and basically truth-seeking people, but from very different intellectual traditions. Traditions with different tools, priorities, and ground rules. What would they discuss? Would they talk past each other? Make any progress? Would anyone want to hear them? Economist Robin Hanson and philosopher Agnes Callard decided to find out.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pkg2zxC3Upg>

Robin: Hello, Agnes

Agnes: Hi, Robin

Robin: Today we're gonna talk about Scott's book, *Seeing Like a State*, which is, came out in '98, so it's, I guess, um, 28 years old

Agnes: I guess so I'll trust you. I'll trust your math

Robin: Right. Um, but it's popular, and it's a nice jumping-off point for lots of people to talk about lots of different things. Uh, but it's closest in my mind to, uh, *Peasants into Frenchmen*-

Agnes: Mm-hmm

Robin: ... which we discussed a bit before. And so it's a-

Agnes: And he talks about *Peasants into Frenchmen*, uh-

Robin: But he has a, some, a very different take than *Peasants into Frenchmen*. *Peasants into Frenchmen* is basically about here's the modern world, and this is how it started, as if the modern world was a fine thing to have. And, uh, you know, you wanna understand where it came from. Scott instead is saying, uh, well, this whole modern thing you're doing has some real problems

Agnes: Right. So I think he wants to pull together a feature of the modern world that is going to be common to good and bad instances of it with a bunch of features that are gonna point bad, and then use that to critique the modern world. So the feature that's gonna be common to good and bad is something like legibility, um, or standardization, um, uh, where, um, there's more sort of similarity, unification, standardization. It's more, um, it's more intelligible from afar or by a stranger. Um, and an example that he likes to use is, you know, think of a wild forest versus a forest where the trees have been planted in such a way as to optimize for, um, getting wood. And so they're all planted in rows, and there's nothing but that kind of tree. And that second kind of forest is, like, easy to survey. It would be easy to map, for instance. Um, it would be easy to calculate how much wood you could get out of it, et cetera. So that's the legibility, um, uh, condition. And the modern world is just more legible in very, very many ways. And one of the things that's interesting about the book is just seeing all the different ways, um, you know, uh, the, um, uh, homogenization of languages. Like, we've just lost a ton of languages, and then more people speak a few

languages, and many, many people speak... He doesn't talk about this, but, like, a language, uh, that I've learned is, uh, like, uh, what English is referred to outside of, uh, uh, places where people speak it natively, namely Globish, a kind of degenerate version of English that has a small subset of the words of English but that many, many people can speak. Um, that's, uh, you know, that's a form of legibility. Um, uh, so yeah, that's just the legibility one. I'll say that much, and then I can bring in the other features, the bad, evil features

Robin: Right. So, um, *Peasants into Frenchmen* and even legibility as a concept seems like it's sort of, yes, obviously you'd have to do a fair bit of that. Uh, his critique seems to be more about overconfidence or neglect of local knowledge, local considerations, local practices. That is, he's emphasizing what you're losing when you impose these large-scale structures. So in the case of the farm, you might say, well, the, the land might not support these rows very well, or different places s- should have different trees, or the different other plants you might have had there would have helped make this ecosystem more robust. Uh, and he, he has many things about, say, traditional farming practices being, trying to be replaced by sort of modern farming practices and how the traditional farmers may have known in different places what different things to plant at d- different times, and maybe even have a bunch of different plants all in the same place that played off of each other at different times of the year and gave different interactions. And he's pointing us to the loss of all that sort of detailed knowledge and practice when you impose these larger legible systems

Agnes: Right. So, um, but I think that, uh, you know, any simplification is going to, there's going to be a loss because you're not getting everything, and there's going to be a gain from simplification. And the question is whether the trade-off is worth it, right? So, um, a map is a simplification. Um, you could just, you could have a one-to-one map. I think there's something like that in Borges

Robin: Right

Agnes: Um, uh, and, and, you know, um, you would be gaining a lot with the one-to-one map. You'd be con- preserving a lot of information, but it would not be that useful for getting around a place, right? So we're okay with the fact that the map leaves out a lot of information. Um, and, um, what, what Scott wants to do is focus on the cases where the information left out is actually crucial or important. And the way that he focuses on that sim- systematically is, uh, I- I'll, I'll put it this way, by way of two simplifications. One is, um, the idea of high modernist ideology, which is something like just an overconfidence about the ability to do this thing of making everybody legible. So it's kinda like saying just doing that in a bad way. Um, uh, but he thinks that, you know, he associates high modernist ideology with Le Corbusier, um, with, um, uh, Lenin and Stalin Uh, top-down planners of every stripe. Um, he thinks they were overconfident in their ability to assess what kinds of information you could leave out. That's part one. Um, and then part two is the, um, authoritarian state. Um, so the idea that, um, uh, you know, there's, um, you know, the seizure of emergency powers or just, like, some kind of tyrannical power that allows these high modernist

ideology villains to sort of, um, uh, run rampant over this fine-grained reality and not do a good selection of what needs to be preserved, and that's connected to... He-maybe he puts this as a separate element, but I think it's connected to, um, the idea that the, the people, um, to whom this is done are in a position where they can't resist it. So he thinks the bad cases, the bad cases of legibility are going to be cases where the high modernist ideology and the authoritarian state are also present.

Robin: He also mixes in an aesthetic style.

Agnes: Mm-hmm.

Robin: Which is somewhat interesting. It's not just this, I would call it confidence in abstractions. That is-

Agnes: Mm-hmm

Robin: ... the leader has a set of, an abstract view of these worlds, and these, this view includes important abstractions that they've learned in the school from, you know, various consultants, et cetera. And then they're neglecting many concrete details via confidence in their abstractions, that they, they feel like these abstractions are close to reality. But a part of that confidence is in an aesthetic judgment that is just the nice, neat rows-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... in the forest, or even the nice, neat houses in the village plan or a farming plan. That neatness feels like a affirmation or, or support for your abstractions. If your abstractions can produce a elegant image that somehow makes them believable. Uh, so my, my main complaint about Scott is just he's highlighting this trade-off, but he isn't helping us very much know how to make the trade-off. That is, in where is the right point in the difference? But I think we can think about that with his, his examples. We might start to look into the details of what goes wrong to get some clues about when you might have gone too far.

Agnes: Right. Well, let me just say something about that aesthetic for a minute, too. Um, um, 'cause I think he's quite unfair about that. That is, I think that he uses the idea that, oh, somebody is making their city this way because they want it to look a certain way, as, like, a totally illegitimate consideration in terms of how to create the abstraction. That is, abstractions that have an aesthetic element, he thinks are, uh, he, he implies are therefore illegitimate, therefore they are, they are fated to ignore important details because the aesthetic ground can't possibly be the right ground. But I think that, in fact, um, often aesthetics serve as a heuristic for sim- for how to do simplification, like a mathematician.

Robin: Mm-hmm.

Agnes: Um, ma- mathematicians that I know say that they use aesthetic considerations, um, to-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... uh, orient themselves in, uh, their simplifications. And, um, it, it definitely can go wrong, but it doesn't seem crazy to me to, um, um, that that sort of modernism would come packaged in with, um, an aesthetics of simplicity that would

guide people, um, so that they could themselves do this modernist stuff more simply. Like, it's a way of making modernism itself more legible. Um-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... and, you know, on the other side, where you have the Jane Jacobs and the Rachel Carsons and, the, who are the heroes of this book, right? The people who insist on the messy complexity. That is an aesthetic, too. Um, and they also, like, like the delightful, you know, um, plaza, like, uh, uh, of a small European city where people, like, use the space in different ways over different times of day and, like, people es- are aesthetically attracted to that, and people like Jane Jacobs are, you know, her significance is partly leveraged off of that aesthetic response, and I don't think that's crazy or wrong either. So, uh, anyway, I wanted to defend-

Robin: I think you're absolutely right about that. The cases he shows of aesthetics did seem to be heuristically appropriate to those c- cases, like the lines of trees in the forest, that, you know, if you didn't have other obstacles, that would... He points out specifically why those simplest things made sense. That is, you had the same spacing between trees. You could go down the rows to cut them down and monitor them and, and take out the woods. There were lots of practical advantages. A, a, a grid shape of a city, as we know, living in cities with grids has many advantages in helping people get around and find themselves in the city. Uh, you know, whatever disadvantage they may have, there are definitely clear advantages from these various aesthetically dr- you know, m- no- mo- you know, uh, identifiable designs that have many advantages that you can tie to those particular simple choices.

Agnes: Right. But I wasn't just claiming the things that we're attracted to, um, like, that, that there are these, um, you know, conceptual justifications. My thought is that the aesthetic appeal of them may allow you to be attracted to them without having to think through-

Robin: Sure

Agnes: ... all of the reasons, right? So that the-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... aesthetic is a heuristic, um-

Robin: And a valid one

Agnes: ... uh, for, a- a- right, and, and it does track the things that you care about. Not perfectly. Um, but, um, uh- But, right, but, like, that is the ideology itself has to be legible, and one way that it can be legible is aesthetically. Um-

Robin: So he doesn't talk much about timing here, but I'd like to. So his book was published in '98, but few of his examples go close to '98. They are from much earlier in the 20th century, and they're all from post, um, *Peasants into Frenchmen*. So there was this particular era where the nation state arose, and then many modernist projects happened, and then there was a decline. I think by the time he writes this book, this thing isn't happening very much anymore. At least he doesn't, he isn't able to draw from examples close to his time. So I think it's worth noting that there was this peak of modernism, peak of confidence and abstraction. That was an important

thing that happened in our world over the last few centuries. And plausibly, you know, the harm from overconfidence and abstraction peaked with the peak of confidence and abstraction, but I wanna lament the loss of that peak because our modern world is built on so many abstractions developed during that period where we experimented with a great many structures that hadn't existed in the ancient world before, and we are now benefiting from all the experimentation that happened in all these abstractions that we have, in many ways, worked out and made work for us.

Agnes: I'm not confident that, um, we are less confident in abstraction now than they were in this period. I think, um-

Robin: We're ex- we're thus ex- taking abstractions that we've recently developed and then trying them out in ways we haven't had much experience with. That's, that was a peak of, say, Stalin and how many of these era-

Agnes: I don't know. It's, like, um, I, I, I think that large language models are a kind of triumph of abstraction, and we are trying them out in a lot of ways that we haven't had prior experience with. I think the internet and-

Robin: He, he would have a really hard time telling the stories he told about the internet or AI in terms of-

Agnes: I, I agree. So what-

Robin: ... like vast harms caused by-

Agnes: Right. Well, well, what there isn't is the authoritarian state. So I think that's what has gone down, um, is the, um, state implementation of, um, these ide- these, these, uh, forms of modernism. And even in the, you know, the examples that he gives, I mean, Le Corbusier is somebody who, it's his... Mostly it didn't get realized. He came up with these plans for a city that didn't happen. And then we have Brasilia, which is not designed by Le Corbusier, so it's kind of, um, like-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... some of these figures are just people who were into this but didn't actually achieve it, right? Um-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... so I think what, um, what the period that he's looking at, what's sort of characteristic is that there's a kind of top-down enforcement of the abstraction. And I think that what we have seen since then is, um, no, it, um, uh, things work better if the legibility, if people run themselves into the arms of legibility and standardization, which is just what we do when we go on Facebook and give them all our data, right? Um, now all of a sudden Facebook, uh, we're legible, right, to Facebook because of what we have freely chosen to give them. We then lament that and complain that we're being oppressed by them and et cetera, but that is really very different than the Tanzanian farmers that were being, like, forcibly uprooted u- under threats of violence to have to live in these, um, you know, settlements that had been made for them. That was really, um, political power being directly exercised or, you know, Stalin, right? So, so, um, um, we may claim, okay, the, these AI companies or these tech companies are stealing our data, but, um, and in that sense, right, we... that, that's parallel to the authoritarian

state. Um, but what, um, what I think we've learned is that this whole process works better if the people themselves are clamoring for legibility, standardization, being made uniform, et cetera, and people will start clamoring for it. You don't have to impose it on them. And that's the world that we live in, but it is very much, I think, an, a world of abstraction.

Robin: So I'm, of course, familiar with this book because many of my associates are libertarian, and many libertarians have liked this book because they read it as, as you say, criticizing government more than capitalism for its, uh, trying to make things legible and, and abstract, im- imposing abstractions. Scott himself resists that interpretation.

Agnes: But he has no re- he offers no re- he basically is like, "I hate capitalism too." But his arguments, um, don't apply.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: 'Cause his argument says that in order for this to be pernicious, you don't just need the legibility, you need the authoritarian state and, um, the high modernist ideology. And, um, it's not clear that markets require either the authoritarian state or the high modernist ide- ideology. And so markets are an example of a way to create legibility, standardization, et cetera, you know, transforming quality to quantity via the price mechanism. That's some sentence he has in there. To do- does, to do all of that without these, um, top-down villains that he, his framework blames, um, the problems on. So yeah, he wants to object to capitalism, to neoliberalism, all of that as, like, he wants to disaffiliate himself with libertarians. But I see why libertarians like it because his actual argument I don't think applies. It, it doesn't create reasons for thinking that, uh, uh, unfettered capitalism would be any kind of problem.

Robin: So if you think about cities in the United States over the last century, um, a, a story is that roughly a century ago, large changes were happening in cities driven in part by city machines, political machines-

Agnes: Mm-hmm

Robin: ... who, being very centralized, could approve and often did approve large changes to cities, such as, say, building the subways in New York. Um, and sometimes it went badly, but then many big changes happened, like all the subways in New York, uh, happening because of these political machines allowing big changes. And then people like Jane Jacobs lamenting about people like Mo- Moses, um, shut that down, and we've prevented a lot of big changes in cities, and then cities have accumulated higher housing prices 'cause less has been built, and that we have, through zoning, et cetera, have frozen a lot of big change. So-

Agnes: Mm-hmm

Robin: ... there's this way in which government has done a lot less in terms of even the United States, uh-

Agnes: Libertaria- that, your friends should love that, right?

Robin: Well, they lament that, in fact, capitalism isn't being allowed to change cities because we've over-regulated capitalists. But that's in part via a rejection of this

old-style liberalism of embracing big idea- big ideas and trying to make big changes, and instead, you know, having a new idea of just let's protect all the little guys against, you know, encroaching on their space. So, you know, once upon a time, the left was eager to make public housing, and that, something Scott criticizes is that goes badly sometimes. But now they're not making much public housing, but we're not m- allowing much housing to be built at all, and we're protecting each person against neighbors building stuff that might block their views or something they might like. And so there's a sense in which regulation, as been noticed by, say, the ab- abundance agenda people, that, uh, government has no longer pursuing these large, grand projects in- powered by an abstract vision, and that's a- another big change over this time. And that's partly what I might say, we had a peak of abstraction. And it's not just about totalitarian governments, it's also about even in the United States government not being any more totalitarian than it used to be, a loss of appetite for big, grand projects.

Agnes: So, um, I think it might be something like, um, I don't think it has much to do with abstraction. I think it has to do with the sort of top-down implementation. I think we have had some big, grand changes. I think large language models are a big, grand change. I think the internet is a big, grand change. I think social media is a big, grand change. They are big changes, but the way that these big changes work is that they are somehow, like, emergent phenomena in some way from a bunch of small choices. Like, even large language models couldn't exist without the internet, right, and without all that data. Um, and so what they really contrast with starkly is, um, a sort of, um, uh, yeah, concentration of power and top-down administration of power that arguably is there even in capitalism, uh, and that we have developed a distaste for. And, um, uh, so, um, there's still a lot of abstraction. There's still a lot of big changes, but, um, I think that there's this thing that you had for most of human history, which was, like, the great man who has an idea and then he makes it happen and it affects, like, thousands or millions of people. We don't like that anymore. We don't want that to happen. Um, we want those, the idea has to come from the thousands of, or millions of people. And a big idea can come from them, and the, and the, the great men can have, like, a place in the story. They can sort of be channeling it. Um, but, you know, uh, so what we, what we have, we, we, that, so that i- is the change as I see it. And, you know, maybe part of the issue is that, um, um, these top-down projects sometimes work out really well and sometimes work out really badly, and maybe we feel like we don't have a good ability to tell from the outset which way it's gonna work out. And so we're just gonna, like, not do that, and we're gonna have it go the other way. Which that could also work out really badly, to be clear.

Robin: So it's, seems to me worth categorizing areas of life and say that an area of life that had existed for a long time, what happened is people tried big projects, and then they put a lot of regulation to prevent them, like with h- buildings and zoning.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: But then what happened in the last few decades is some areas that just didn't exist before, and so there wasn't much regulation about them, all of a sudden technologists invented them and then had the space to do big things because-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... we hadn't expected that and hadn't had a history-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... of preventing it.

Agnes: Uh-huh. Makes sense.

Robin: Uh, and so-

Agnes: So they'll just have to find more spaces where things haven't been done.

Robin: Right, but that is at least, you know-

Agnes: That's what the Wild West is. It does stop being the Wild West once you settle it, and you gotta find a new Wild West.

Robin: But, I mean, I'd say there's, there was a peak of modernism, and it's worth noting that, that it was a, you know, there was a period of rising modernism and then a period of declining modernism. And, um, I want to highlight that that happened. And therefore, we are less open to modernist projects like we were at the peak of modernism, also maybe more like well before the peak. So, you know, I, I don't think in, say, 1700, there wasn't much appetite for big, grand projects to remake large areas of society. Uh, and then maybe 1900 to 1950 was a peak of appetite and willingness to do those things, even in areas that had l- existed for a long time. We were willing to change things that had been around for a long time then. And then after that we locked down on regulation and many of the old things and said, "Those things aren't allowed to change anymore," but we were allowing change in things that had never existed before, like the internet and AI.

Agnes: I guess I think that, um, if there's a thing that Scott uses the phrase high modernist ideology to refer to, I wouldn't equate that with modernism. Um, uh, high modernist ideology includes the thought that, um, uh, sort of, um, um, we can rationally design the social world. Um, and-

Robin: And the physical world. It had many worlds

Agnes: And the physical world, yes. The, that's, uh, the, the, the, the, the, the physical world, I mean the social world partly by way of the physical world. Um, so, so, um, uh, that, um, these were, um, things that could be subjected to rationalism and science, the social world and the physical world. So let's call that high modernist ideology. And it, and that somehow, like unproblematically and immediately, and as long as you were smart enough you could, you could immediately improve things and you could immediately see, see how everything would become more rational.

Robin: And that was part of modernism, wasn't it?

Agnes: I, I, I'm just not equating that with modernism.

Robin: Okay

Agnes: Because, like, uh, like I'm reading a bunch of-

Robin: It was correlated

Agnes: I, I, I'm reading, like right now, a bunch of, and teaching a class on modernism, and that's like one strand, and there's another strand in modernism that's super skeptical of that. Um, and, and a backlash against it that I think is equally modernist. Um, so, uh, it, like part of, part of what you're noticing is that Scott has picked out the people who are, um, you know, poster children for this ideology. But not, uh, not all important modernists were in that position.

Robin: Okay, but if-

Agnes: Most were not

Robin: ... take these two kinds of modernists you see, that is still different than the world 300 years ago. Those two camps didn't exist so much 300 years before then, right?

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: So modernism was the rise of a diverse set of camps, none of which-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... had existed before.

Agnes: I agree.

Robin: And that's the key distinctive, what I'll say was driven by abstraction. It's abstract reasoning that allowed people to embrace these different dramatic views of things.

Agnes: Uh, right. I think it was also abstract reasoning that allowed people to criticize the high modernist ideology.

Robin: Right. But-

Agnes: They both, so that's what I'm saying

Robin: ... right, so I'm, exactly.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: I'm saying-

Agnes: So, and, and, but that-

Robin: ... abstraction is a key part of moderns.

Agnes: Right. But, but in that sense, right, um, so, so one way that I would put, um, what modernism is, um, I don't think you can learn what modernism is that well from reading Scott's book. I just don't think-

Robin: I agree

Agnes: ... he focused on that. Uh-

Robin: But it, it's part of modernism

Agnes: Yes, it is part of it. But you, but you can get a very distorted picture of something by-

Robin: I-

Agnes: ... only learning about what is part-

Robin: Sure

Agnes: ... part of it. So let me just say the other part. I think modernism is characterized, in part, e- even this is not the whole thing, by a certain split, um, that Musil calls the split between precision and soul, or that has n- you know, um, C.P.

Snow calls the two cultures, or that we now say humanities versus tech. Um, um, that is, it is the time period in which the people who, um, believed in, um, progress and innovation started to split off from the people who believed in, um, like culture and the soul and-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... et cetera. And it's that split that characterizes modernism. And in that sense, we are still modernism. Modernism hasn't declined. I don't think we're in a post-modern period. I think we're just in modernism. It's just continued. That, that, that, that battle is continuing today.

Robin: I would say that battle is weakening and declining today. That is, it's not as strong as it used to be. But I don't know that, you know, I'm not sure pursuing that helps us understand Scott here per se, but there, there's, that is a question. It rose, we agree that it rose, and then it reached a high level compared to previously, and then the question is did it decline again from there, or did it stay at the same high level from, say, 1900 to today?

Agnes: Yeah, I think it is just as high today. At least, and this might be my v- you know, well, you're in the same vantage point of being at a university, but it feels like the core battle of the university is, like humanities versus STEM. It feels like that's the fundamental split. To the, to the extent that I don't think people realize that that didn't used to be a cut inside the university. It didn't used to be like you had to make a choice.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: Do you read novels or do you know math? Um-

Robin: So, look-

Agnes: That, that's not some eternal thing about thinking.

Robin: But-

Agnes: That's-

Robin: I think we agree that something has changed since 1900, and part of that is, say, the less, fewer totalitarian versions of-

Agnes: Mm-hmm

Robin: ... these ex- ver- experiments that Scott presents.

Agnes: Yeah, we got a real distaste for totalitarianism, uh, I think as a result of our world wars.

Robin: We also, you know, for example, with the rise of, uh, regulation and zoning and, say, squashing nuclear power, we squashed many what would've been high modern projects. So say nuclear power, it isn't a totalitarian thing. In 1900 people might have just gone wild with it. Uh, like they went wild with oil, say, in Standard Oil-

Agnes: Mm

Robin: ... or something, uh, or cars. So in the late 1800s, early 1900s, we had many new techs that were plausibly quite disruptive that people just embraced and went wild with. And then, you know, starting 1970-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... or so we shut a lot of that down. It wasn't just-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... shutting down totalitarianism, it was shutting down a lot of modernist visions of change.

Agnes: Right. Right. So I think that's right. Like, so I think that, um, you know, what's... I would say that that kind of humanity STEM divide, that understanding of modernism, it's, the conflict has risen and escalated over time. That is, the people who really noticed it in 1910 were like, like, a, you know, handful of intellectuals and novelists and whatever. Um, um, but, uh, it then becomes like the commonplace at some later time. And one way to think about that, one way to think about regulation is that, um, the inability to adjudicate this war between humanities and STEM means that there is just a standing skepticism about anything understood as scientific and technological progress in the social realm. Because you science and tech people haven't actually proven to us that you can integrate soul, and in fact you kinda stopped trying. And so we just have a general worry about you. We have a general feeling of danger-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... and that's gonna ground a move to regulate and control and confine.

Robin: But we have to explain why there was a change. Did, how did the skepticism win out when it wasn't winning before? Why was there the switch?

Agnes: I don't think it completely won out. I mean, I think that-

Robin: It certainly, there's a change.

Agnes: Right. So I think that, um, I think that, like, the, the way that you might think about it is that, um, uh, the, the battle started to, um, find its place in politics, um, where, like if you wanna read the authors who are talking about, hey, the world of precision doesn't make room for soul. If you wanna, like, read those authors in, like, you know, 1920 or something, those authors are all, like, novelists or, you know, philosophers or whatever. Um, um, they're, they're not people who are involved in politics or who could potentially be doing any regulating. And eventually this idea spreads outside of those circles. That's what I would say is just that the, um, um, what we are seeing is full-blown modernism, whereas in 1920 you just had the beginnings of it, and the people who are pushing the, the tech progress were enough that the c-the, the, the war hadn't really started to happen yet. And so even if there were these people who were resentful of it, it could still kind of go unfettered.

Robin: Even in 1920 we had already had 70 years of rapid technical progress and business change, so the world had accepted large changes in structures and abstraction-driven, you know, businesses and reorganizing things. So it would be-

Agnes: Well, there were also huge critiques of those, right? I, uh, I, just a few days ago I watched, um-

Robin: But they weren't effective, clearly, right? That is-

Agnes: That's my point, is that, that the war didn't, like, um, it wasn't a hot war yet. It was like a cold war. And, um, um, so yeah, you have like, uh, like we watched, in my class we watched a movie called *The Crowd* that is, like, a critique of the city

as a form of organization, and there were other such, there are other such fa- famous movies.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: Um, this movie's from 1928. And cities were happening. It's not like they were happening... It's not like The Crowd stopped cities from happening. But, um, it's that the, you know, um, outlier views of a few intellectuals became mainst- mainstream views, and then views that politicians could then implement.

Robin: So if you look at, say, Stalin, um, that's well before then.

Agnes: Yes.

Robin: So you might say in some sense modernism penetrated politics through authoritarian governments well before it penetrated politics through democratic zoning, et cetera.

Agnes: Right. So I think i- in, you can, you can point to specific cases, right? So, um, it didn't mostly penetrate. He, Stalin was an outlier. Um, that-

Robin: Well, not, Hitler was also doing a lot of big social changes.

Agnes: Right. So I mean, in general I think that, um, an, um, you know, an authoritarian ruler is going to have, um, some incentive to move towards legibility, um, if they can. Um, incentive to, um, increase legibility in order to increase their control. That's a point that, um, Scott makes.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: But, um, but I think there's good reason why, um, you know, he didn't choose Hitler and he chose Lenin and Stalin because there, there, this kind of, um, like, the, the high modernist ideology is one that y- can be much more clearly illustrated with them in terms of turning the whole country into a kind of factory.

Robin: Right. So it seems like there's a interesting time asymmetry here. That is, we have the rise of the modern world where there are many, I mean, the rise of the nation state happens in the last half of the 1800s, right? Uh, and so that's *Peasants into Frenchmen*, enormous changes in legibility and structure.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: So that was happening even without modernist rationalization or abstract discussion of it, right? It, it happened as a fact in the social and physical and business world. And then, uh, that led to- You know, people like Stalin and many of the more totalitarian or, you know, central control governments doing a lot of big experiments. And then you have the rise of the critique part of modernism becoming strong enough to restrain those sort of grand ambitions all over the place. So if we look at the two sides, as you might say, of modernism, modernism itself was embrace- was in those two sides, but the world was going on a separate trajectory without much influence from them. But as they grew in influence and attention, then they started to be able to influence policy and politics and, you know, the arts and public opinion. And then, then that is when there's, there's more restraint because the, the restraint side now has sufficient intellectual support that it might not have had before. If that's a theory,

I mean, the question's like, why couldn't the public just have been skeptical before without the intellectuals? But we might say the intellectuals need-

Agnes: Yeah, so-

Robin: They more needed the intellectuals to be skeptical, and then they finally had enough intellectuals to be skeptical, and they reach, res- restrained the high modernist project building.

Agnes: So I'm inclined to think that some of the story here is even with people like Stalin and Le Corbusier, um, see which way the world is running and then get out in front of it and say, "I'm leading."

Robin: Right.

Agnes: That is, the process th- And this is something that I think Scott is, kind of just gets wrong, but Peasants and Frenchmen gets right. The process, this thing isn't, this, this, this standardization and homogenization isn't really happening because a few people get that idea in their heads and they're like, "Now this is how everyone has to be." It is somehow a, a organic process, um, that, um, I... The only way that I can explain it in my head is something like, um, there are just a lot of gains from cooperation that people start to see that they can realize, and then they more and more start to shape themselves in such a way that they will then be able to participate in those forms of cooperation. So they might, um, you know, learn English because they want to be able to, um, uh, coordinate with everyone else who knows English, and that's alienating them a bit from their native language or whatever. But, um, they're willing to accept that cost. Um, and so I think that, like, the, the, the, the writers who first, who I'm reading in my class, um, uh, they are not, um, saying, "Oh, I discovered something." Th- like, "I, I, I came up with a new great idea." They're looking at the world around them, which has already changed, which has already become modernist. Um, and they're saying, "What the hell is happening?" Like, how could, how could this be happening? How could we be losing our, like, local differentiation? Um, and, um, this is a kind of catastrophe for, like, human nature. Um, but they, they're not claiming that somebody came up with this idea and then imposed it on everybody else. They're sort of noticing a process that seems to be internally driven. And then, you know, some of these guys notice that same process and they're like, "Okay, I can, like, speed it up." And that speeding up didn't always work out. Sometimes it did work out. Sometimes it didn't work out. But it kind of seems like the underlying process which keeps happening, and it keeps happening in, in the face of regulation, in the face of everything else, uh, i- is what's of interest. Um, we are, um, really strongly incentivized to homogenize ourselves and to become more abstract as creatures, um, in order to cooperate with more and more people who are further and further away in both space and time.

Robin: I think you're right to distinguish processes in the world from just talk among intellectuals, and to see the talk among intellectuals as largely caused by the world rather than vice versa. Um, but I still want to see that there's a dynamic here.

It wasn't a constant across time thing. So certainly if you look at the year 1500 or 16 or 1700, you're not seeing this huge-

Agnes: Right

Robin: ... abstraction and legibility and these changes. Then in the 1800s through n-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... early 1900s, you see a lot of that more modernist process where big projects happen and legibility is attempt, and it sometimes fails and often succeeds. And people are abstracted from their local once varied conditions. Um, but then that reaches a peak, and then it declines, I see. And I might say, well, you know, there was just a really strong drive of the world to change from being peasants, say, into cities and factories and, and the modern world. But once you had a rough structure of the modern world, there was no longer such a drive to change it radically, and so people were willing to sort of lock it in and say, "This is the way we're gonna be now, and we don't wanna change it so much." Uh-

Agnes: Yeah, I think legibility has massively increased since 1950 in, like, just about every respect. So I, I think it's just going up and up

Robin: But our-

Agnes: Big, big projects, okay? Big building projects. I agree with you. I agree that there's a lot of NIMBYs, and that we have a lot of regulations, and libertarians wanna complain about that, and you wanna complain about that.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: And that's fine, but I just think that that's one point. And the question, how legible are two random human beings to one another? Pi- pick them up across the planet, pull them up. How much can they understand one another's lives? How recognizable will their lives be? How similar will be the music that they listen to?

Robin: Right.

Agnes: How sim- will they be able to talk to each other?

Robin: Okay.

Agnes: On all of those fronts, we've just become way more legible.

Robin: But not because of grand projects to impose legibility.

Agnes: Yeah. As I said, I think we're, we are a little bit-

Robin: We're-

Agnes: ... averse to the grand projects, yeah

Robin: Right. Okay, so that's a difference I wanna notice.

Agnes: I agree. That's a change. I agree.

Robin: Okay.

Agnes: But I think what we learned is that we can g- we can get this increase in legibility without grand projects. We can get massive increases without grand projects.

Robin: Which then means we don't have to reason so abstractly about our lives and world. That is-

Agnes: Right, so-

Robin: ... we are more legible, but we are less using abstractions to make big choices about our world.

Agnes: Well-

Robin: So that's a way in which-

Agnes: ... I think we, I think that's not true. I think the, the median human being uses tons of abstractions to make big choices about their world way more than, say, in 1950, and certainly more than in 1920, et cetera. I think cert- like, a s- a tiny subset of great men who were doing things aren't doing those things now. That's a change. But, um, we're doing more with abstraction. We live more abstractly. We live less, with less concern for the details of our local environment. We are constantly abstracted from where we are, and, and glued to a screen, uh, where we, like, are engaging with a bunch of symbols. Like, all of it's way more abstract. Our lives are way more abstract than they ever were.

Robin: Maybe we could wonder how long that could last. That is-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... are we, can we sustain this degree of legibility and loss of connection to local details, and immersion in some shared world abstractions? Uh, is this the new normal for humanity for thousands of more years? Or are we in an sort of unusual moment that can't last? Uh, how well can we sustain this?

Agnes: Yeah. I, I don't know. Um, I, I'm inclined to think that it's a big enough change that, um, w- we're gonna be different, very different sorts of creatures after this. We're not going back. Um, but we, we might not continue in this mode of abstraction. Um, but-

Robin: Mm-hmm

Agnes: ... um, uh, we, um-

Robin: I mean, as you notice, as you know, I've focused on the loss of variety here.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: And worry about cultural evolution not functioning from this point on in a world with such little cultural variety. And that's, you know, the peasants had all this local variety, and we've crushed that.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: And now people aren't very eager even to be locally different, or to have much local structure or detail in their world. Or, or it doesn't, not very important to them.

Agnes: So here's, like, a question that I have about local variety. Like, from *Peasants into Frenchmen*. Um, in one way I agree with you that there was variety. So there was different forms of dress, and there was even different languages, and there was, like, different, like, marriage norms about, like, were you not allowed to marry your cousin? Did you have to marry your cousin? Like, et cetera, right? But in a lot of ways, the peasant life, like, that gets described is actually quite homogenous. Like, they've all got charivaris. And not just in France, in Norway, right? So, like, all across Europe, all these peasants are actually living kind of similar lives in a lot of ways. They, um,

um... I, I, like, I, I... The, the question, has variety increased or decreased, I, I find a bit difficult to answer because the question is, which forms of variety are important to us? And, um, yeah. So-

Robin: Well, for the, for my purposes, the idea would be that each place could be different, and often chose to be different, but selection pressures would have caused the homogeneity. That is, the homogeneity across Europe when each peasant group could be different would then be explained by the fact that they had a healthy cultural selection world that then induced them all to be relatively efficient because they could be different. And when they were different, they either got the gains or benefits from that, and we had this information process of all these trials helping all of Europe figure out what worked. And now the question is, if we're all in a shared world culture where we aren't actually doing much local experimentation to deviate, how will we learn what to do when we need to learn something different than what we're all doing together?

Agnes: What's driving the cultural evolution in the old peasant world, um, is, um, you know, like, first and foremost, just kind of, um, natural constraints, right? Um-

Robin: Yes

Agnes: ... um-

Robin: Death-

Agnes: Uh

Robin: ... disease, poverty-

Agnes: Right, like how much-

Robin: ... famine, war

Agnes: ... crops can the land bear, and climate. Um, and, um, you might just think that doesn't, um, you- Create that much of a push towards variety, and that's why the peasants were living pretty similar lives to one another. Um, again, with some differences, like language differences-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... but, um, and that it's when you start getting, like, being formed a lot by, like, war pressures, and then forming into larger groups in order to be able to fight the other people, and then coming up with, like, a internal political organization to increase the power of your group, um, that, that is... Now we've moved somewhat away from peasant world, right? Even though the peasants could be inside one of those things, but-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... it basically ignores them. Um, uh, th- that is the point at which there's this kind of enforced monoculture, at least locally, right? Um, um, and that monoculture seems, um, like where we have the, um, where we get sort of the incentives for innovation and variety. Um, that is, peasant life doesn't actually produce a lot of innovation. They're not... I remember one chapter-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... where somebody had developed a much better way of, like, doing hoeing, like a certain device that was way, way more efficient. But the problem was they're all

so, um, starving, they all have so little food, so few calories, that they couldn't build up the strength to use this thing. Um, eh, like, so they're kind of stuck. The peasants are kind of stuck where they are.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: And, um, so it isn't this mecca of, uh, experimentation-

Robin: Oh

Agnes: ... and variation. It's kind of a stuck world, and it looks like, um, it is in some way the loss of variety there that gets you innovation and variety in another sense.

Robin: Right. So that's been part of my thesis, that there are these two levels of culture, and we do great at the level of tech and business practice innovation because we can vary those easily across our society. And because we have this huge integrated society, we have world record rates of those things. Uh, it's at the level of shared cultural norms, values, status markers, et cetera, that we have less variety, and we find it, it's hard to see how we are searching in that space. But even though we are changing our culture in that space. Right. So, uh, you know, different ways of hoeing we're great at. You know, somebody-

Agnes: But what I'm saying is the peasants weren't.

Robin: R- I agree, right. So that's a, that's an improvement. It's in the, say, marriage practices or-

Agnes: Right

Robin: ... war attitudes or democracy-

Agnes: But maybe one of those things-

Robin: ... or gender equality

Agnes: ... comes at the cost of the other.

Robin: Right. That, it does. That's, that's the key point, right. Um, but, say, many of these, um, projects, uh, in Stalin or Tanzania or whatever, they were projects to sort of change a whole society together at once. There was this idea that-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... they couldn't just piecemeal make these changes happen. They needed to s- get a whole bunch of people to make a, a big set of changes together at once. And that's the sort of thing that happened in that high modernist era that doesn't so much happen now.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: We aren't trying to make whole regions suddenly change everything together.

Agnes: Right. I think for largely the reason that Scott gives, namely it often works out horrifically badly.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: But that was the sort of modernist substitute for the old decentralized competitive evolution process. The, you know, modernists thought, well, not only could

we, you know, invent particular things, we could try to invent whole new s- you know, communities. And-

Agnes: But-

Robin: ... that's a thing we've stopped doing pr- for good reason, but-

Agnes: So, so when you say it's a substitute for the evolution process, what I'm saying is the evolution process produced the peasants who were stuck, who were not innovating, who were not producing variety, right? Not of the kind that you're interested in.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: And so it's not-

Robin: No, no

Agnes: ... it's not like the modernist thing isn't-

Robin: No, but they, they were producing variety of, at the level of marriage practices and gender equality-

Agnes: Yeah, yeah

Robin: ... and stuff like that, that, that. So that's what-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... peasants could do that well.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: And then they couldn't do the, you know, hoeing thing well. And now the modernist 1900 world was doing hoeing great.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: And then they also think we could also do this other thing, as long as we, like, design it and, and deliberately do it. And then that's what we've retrenched on and saying, uh, okay, I guess we can't do so much of that.

Agnes: Right. I mean, I think that, you know, even the peasants didn't think of themselves as, like, innovating in marriage practices.

Robin: Sure.

Agnes: Of course, they were all cut off from each other, and they just thought their one way was the only-

Robin: Right. Absolutely

Agnes: ... way of doing anything. Um, uh, so it wasn't, so the, like, I think that there is, and this is what the modernist writers noticed, that cultural variety is a real problem for human beings. We kinda can't deal with it.

Robin: Yeah.

Agnes: Except it's like, wait a minute, they're doing it this other way. Maybe we should be doing it that way or not. Let's, let's figure this out.

Robin: Right. Right.

Agnes: Um, and, um, the thought that, like, we can just let them do their thing and we'll all just do different things, um, it's like that works so long as we don't know about each other, and the minute we know about each other, we start either trying to kill each other over it or just trying to deliberate together over it and be like-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... “Let’s settle how we’re gonna do this.”

Robin: We have this clever trick of liberalism tolerance-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... where we declare that it’s not a problem because we pick some set of things and saying, well, we have to, of course, agree on these things. And then the other set of things we say, well, it’s not a problem if people vary in these things, and even if it is-

Agnes: Yeah, but that’s-

Robin: ... we just declare it

Agnes: ... like 10 minutes after we do that, we decide the second set of things aren’t important.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: You get the fall of religion and whatever. So-

Robin: Exactly

Agnes: ... the po- the point is, the stuff that we don’t all have to agree on becomes unimportant because we really, really care about all agreeing. And so then liberalism just becomes-

Robin: Right

Agnes: ... 100% religion

Robin: Or when something becomes important to us, we just move it over to the first category and say, no-

Agnes: Exactly

Robin: ... we have to fight over that, right?

Agnes: Exactly. Right. So it’s the-

Robin: You know, once trans is important, we have to agree on trans. We can’t have different states-

Agnes: Exactly

Robin: ... have a different opinion of that. We must have a national or international agreement about how to treat trans.

Agnes: Right. And the first, the first principle where you can see that is liberalism itself, right? That’s the part where liberals are not willing to be tolerant for other ways of viewing things. Um, they’re like, “No, you gotta agree to my liberalism principles.” Um, and then you can think whatever you want of all the stuff that’s totally unimportant. Um, so right, that, that’s just the core problem. Like, I think it, the paradox of tolerance, um, is a real paradox, and, um, where it seems to go is just that we devalue all the stuff that we’re tolerant about.

Robin: So if there are some intrinsic contradictions or issues of modernism or the-

Agnes: Mm-hmm

Robin: ... modern world, you might have thought we would have to deal with those, but here we are a century or more and a half past the initial rise of modernism, and we seem to be in a somewhat stable scenario, where a bunch of these contradictions

just sit and remain as contradictions and conflicts that don't get resolved. And will they just stay unresolved, I guess?

Agnes: I think that's a really good point. Um, I think that there's this weird thing when you start to see a new era dawning, um, uh, you know, as these writers did. Um, you, you, you, you, you see some problems and you're like, "Okay, let's get to it. Like, probably solve these in, like maybe 5, 10 years or something." And I think that the deep, some of the deep tensions of modernism, um, for instance, the question how can we allow, um, cultural difference? How can we stomach cultural difference? The question, how do we relate precision and soul or humanities and tech, that they're just really hard. And I, we might... We're- I don't think we're much further along than these authors were. Maybe we have, we're more aware of them. Um, but, uh, I, I think that, I, I guess I think they're gonna be with us a while longer, um, and like maybe on the order of, like, a couple hundred years longer. Um, uh, you know, the Enlightenment, like, we, we have Enlightenment thinkers in the 17th century, right? But the big ideals of the Enlightenment start to get realized hundreds of years later. Uh, and, uh, so there's a kind of, uh... Yeah, I guess, I guess I just think, um, maybe we'll never figure it out or maybe it was, it's just gonna take a really long time.

Robin: So Scott, here, the book we're focused on, is focused on big projects that were inspired by the modernist confidence in-

Agnes: And were bad. Big, bad projects.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: He could have called his book that.

Robin: Right. Uh, but there's the question of have we just stopped doing such projects? Is that no longer part of the modern world, or does that only happen in areas where, say, it's never happened before, so we just haven't set up blocks to it, say, with AI or social media or something, and we have big projects there? But as soon as we decide that we need to regulate that, we'll stop that, and we'll no longer allow those worlds to do big projects. Uh, is Scott's big project stuff over?

Agnes: So first of all, like I, I'm not sure how to think about this, but I, I'd be inclined to think that, um, the Wild West of, like, idea space is a lot bigger than the Wild West of, like, the United States, say. Um, that is, like, yeah, maybe we'll come in and regulate, and then people will come up with some new thing we haven't regulated yet. Um, that, that, that it's at least possible that that's the way that we'll get more by the way we'll get more big projects is the way that we've been getting them, namely in domains that have been hitherto unregulated. Um, I think it also is the case that we will be choosing... There's a kind of equilibrium here that shows up, right, which is that we also choose domains that are harder to regulate. So the, the whole bottom-up thing, right? You could think of that at, like, it's really hard to regulate Facebook. If... Like, we've all been trying, right? It's really hard to regulate social media, TikTok, AI. Um, uh, there's this an- there's this, um, impetus to do it. A lot of people wanna do it. But it's somehow a lot easier s- to, like, have zoning or just be like, "You can't build a building here." But exactly how do we prevent Facebook from getting people's data

if they're giving the data to Facebook? And so it may be that we will start to find big ideas in domains that are harder to regulate over time. We're more and more gonna select those domains.

Robin: I feel like if you look at the government officials who tried to reorganize Tanzanian farmers-

Agnes: Yeah

Robin: ... their level of understanding of that farming world was comparable to our understanding of Facebook, such that if we had had the hubris they had, we might well just go in and throw a bunch of rules and, like, throw our weight around and see what happened.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: So I think what's more happened is we are more shy about... At the same level of knowledge, we aren't willing to do as much. We're less willing to start and approve big projects like this compared to what they were back then, and part of that, I guess, can be the learning from these bad ex- bad examples that-

Agnes: See, but I, I, I'm inclined to think that it's, like, the, the proposition of... It seems to me that, like, how you do the regulating. Like, with the farmers it's like you can threaten them with death if they don't move somewhere else or whatever.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: You build them houses and, you know. Like, uh, like I could have the-

Robin: If we had that power, we could do that in Facebook. We, we could definitely make rules that were-

Agnes: Well, right, but, but the issue is that-

Robin: ... death threats

Agnes: ... right, but the issue is that it's like what exactly do we want? We, like, like the government could sort of shut down Facebook maybe, um, but that's not what people want, right? And, and so-

Robin: People have a lot of proposed draconian rules for Facebook. We just don't create-

Agnes: Absolutely, but they're all different

Robin: ... a consensus on it, right.

Agnes: Right. But they're all different, and there are many, many voices-

Robin: We haven't empowered... I mean, there were probably lots of different concepts for how to reform Tanzanian farming. There was just one guy in charge who said, "No, we're gonna do it this way," so it happened that way.

Agnes: Right. So then it may be the great man issue. That is, we're pretty committed to doing things via really large groups of people who never want to agree about anything, and so we're not gonna do very much.

Robin: That does seem a plausible key. We're in the modern world without central powers because we're shy about empowering central powers, and that's-

Agnes: And we resent, we resent the great man. Like, why do they get to do everything? To the extent we have these great men who, like, are really not a lot like

the great men of, of yore, right? But they're like, they run, like, tech companies or whatever, and that's already bad enough.

Robin: Right.

Agnes: We already hate those people. Imagine if they had the p- kind of power that Walter Rathenau or whatever, you know, um, those, those people had. Um, um, people who designed Brasilia.

Robin: Well, I think that is a change in the last century.

Agnes: Yes.

Robin: Um, I'm not sure how to, what, what to attribute it to-

Agnes: I agree

Robin: ... necessarily, but-

Agnes: The decline of the great man approach. Yeah. I agree that that is a, that is a real change. Yeah. Okay.

Robin: I think we're about out of time.

Agnes: Yeah.

Robin: Thank you for talking.

Agnes: Yeah. Bye.

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