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**Noah Smith & Ezra Klein:** [Interview: Ezra Klein, journalist and author:](#) **Noah:** I still remember when I started reading Ezra Klein, way back in 2005, living in my little one-room apartment in Osaka and thinking about maybe going to grad school. It was Ezra who first opened my mind to ideas about urbanism, housing and transit — who made me realize that the functional city I saw around me was the result of deliberate policy choices. His intellectual but casual writing style was also an inspiration for me to start blogging. Fast-forward a decade and a half, and I don’t think it’s a very controversial statement to say that Ezra Klein is one of the most important journalists in America...

**Highlights: Ezra Klein:**

I’m a Californian. The state has terrible problems that neither its wealth nor its liberalism have come close to solving (and, in some cases, they’ve worsened them). A lot of those problems are rooted in scarcity and the difficulty of building anything—houses, high-speed rail, green energy projects—here. So an ongoing confrontation with the problems of the state I love is pretty core to my journey here (and, of course, recognizing that these problems are mirrored in many other blue states). Another is that I’ve spent the last few years trying to understand what decarbonization really demands. An America that decarbonizes is an America that builds, and builds fast. We do not, now, have that competency. If you care about decarbonization, you have to care a lot about building!

I’ve watched the way politics plus technology can do what politics alone cannot. Since 2010, we’ve underperformed on passing climate policy, by a lot, compared to what I would’ve hoped. But the policies, in America and elsewhere, that subsidized wind and solar and battery research and deployment have way, way outperformed expectations—they’re the only reason we have any hope of non-catastrophic climate outcomes today. Similarly, the pandemic hit, and within a year, the politics supporting distancing and lockdowns and solidarity was clearly collapsing. It was vaccines and other therapeutics that really came through (though of course there’ve been problems with political polarization around vaccines, too)!

¢ And if so, what can knock us out of this zero-sum special-interest mindset?

Mancur Olson and the public-interest types have gotten a lot of people confused. He was too focused on people carving up the pie, and not nearly focused enough on post-material or even pre-material concerns. People who want to sustain the nature of their community or fear that developers care little for ecosystems or simply don’t want to annoy all of their voters by focusing on institutional reform aren’t focused on redistribution. I will spare you a long rant about how much I loathe the metaphor of the "the pie." But I will say I think the most common way of misunderstanding politics, both on the left and the right, is to apply an overly narrow materialist analysis. I would in many ways prefer that political motivations were more materialist, because positive-sum settlements would be easier to construct!

I tend to be more pessimistic than many on the possibilities for persuasion, particularly when people are dug into their positions. A lot of what can change, if it can change, will have to happen through institutional or procedural shifts—granting certain kinds of affordable housing projects presumptive clearance or fast-track status if they meet a set of objective criteria. That effectively disempowers local opposition. I think you’ll need a lot of policies like that. But you can’t pretend any of these policies exist wholly outside of politics. You have to think seriously about how far you can go, and where you can have real space for community input, and how you can bring people along, and how you can understand what they will accept and what benefits or even compensation they can be offered!

People are the heroes of their own stories. People respond rationally to real abuses and problems they see. A lot went wrong to create the counter-processes we now see. I’ve been critical of the ways the California Environmental Quality Act or the Clean Air Act can sometimes be weaponized, but that has to stand alongside an appreciation for why those bills were passed into law, and the disasters they stop even today.

It’s just a mistake to not try and understand extremely widespread sentiments. I think it’s telling that you see extremely strident rhetoric on building more and building faster out of the A16Z crowd, and you also have Marc Andreessen’s name [on a letter](#) opposing multifamily housing in Atherton. Recognizing how natural and widespread some of these impulses are, how they vie for primacy even in the minds and households of people who hold a broadly pro-development politics, is just table stakes...

Musk. Even if he just continues on his current course. That [Twitter] is so thoroughly Musk’s robs it of the illusion of being, in any real way, a demos. On the other hand, there’s really no alternative to Twitter. If there’d been something that was plausibly usable and fun, Twitter would be in much more trouble than it is. I’ve tried Mastodon, and while I honor what they’re trying to do there’s it’ll never be a replacement for Twitter. The biggest question is whether someone builds something capable of harnessing the interest in an alternative. I’m halfway surprised Meta hasn’t opened up a barebones clone!

I really miss the basic functionality of RSS (and the functionality it still provides for podcasts): I’d like a place where I could simply sign up to see when people or institutions I choose to follow release new stuff. I’d like to see some kind of writerly ecosystem re-emerge, where there’s more room for conversations to play out—Twitter ate that side of the blogosphere, but did so in the worst, most toxic way. Right now we have too few behemoth platforms trying to do too much and doing it too poorly. I’d like a lot more platforms trying to do fewer things really well. The bareness of the social media cupboard has been a surprise!

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