

# Zak Stein

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

epistemic, people, education, intergenerational transmission, problem, culture, book, world, power, Zak, authority, called, society, situation, forms, elders, technology, transformation, point, global

## SPEAKERS

Zak Stein, Jessica Knezy, Sam Coleman, Zoe Varenne, Tom Pegram

### **Tom Pegram** 00:00

Hi, and welcome to Global Governance Futures based out of the Global Governance Institute at University College London. This is a podcast about the challenges facing humanity and possible global responses. If you're new to the show, and you want to get a list of our favourite books, other resources, listen to past shows, and join our community, go to [ucl.ac.uk/global-governance](https://ucl.ac.uk/global-governance). We're really excited to have Dr Zak Stein join us today. Zak is a writer, a futurist, a transf

**Jessica Knezy** 03:00

Hi, I'm Jessica. I work on the research and I'm very looking forward to hearing what Dr Stein has to say today.

**Sam Coleman** 03:09

Hi my name is Sam, I do the audio and the video editing and hopefully some of the thinking.

**Zoe Varenne** 03:16

Hi, I'm Zoe, I help with the social media and running of the YouTube channel.

**Tom Pegram** 03:23

Great. Okay, so to open, Zak, perhaps you can help us set the scene you describe in the book the years 2000 to 2050 as a critical turning point in the history of humanity and the planet. So what is so special about this 50 year stretch? And how does this interregnum, how does this turning relate to the educational system?

**Zak Stein** 03:53

Yeah, so that that specific time period, I took that on the cue of Emmanuel Wallerstein, who was the creator of world systems analysis, which is this fascinating kind of approach to doing big history, specifically, long term strd sysk-4(-)3(ea)4 TJ57 0.518 RG[03]4(-)400) TJETQ.000r(-)4(Heade400mq0e3(-)46)36-463



**Zak Stein** 11:45

Yeah, there's, there's at least kind of two ways to answer the question. One is that one of the things we're not getting right, is the communication and education of those people who are not academics, and who are not high level policy decision makers. So like, this is in part a decision making crisis, a capacities crisis among those epistemic elites, let's call them and decision makers who are laying out this solution ontology, right? Inadequately. So there's something, I'll get to that point, like what's wrong with the highest level models about the global situation and why those are inadequate. But prior to that, there's actually this issue that the degree of polarisation around climate change, for example, in the United States, the degree of intensity, even though it's low grade, it will emerge again, around



obviously, climate change is a collective action problem, a global collective action problem and is there a space for more cosmopolitan education? And working in a kind of global capacity or a cosmopolitan capacity to solve some of these collective action problems? So that we don't have one society that is, you know, really clued up but then constantly hitting up against brick walls around it?

**Zak Stein** 21:40

Yeah, I mean, I would, I would point to nationalism, at least certain forms of nationalism as one of those flaws in the highest level epistemic models that are plaguing the epistemic elites, a lot of epistemics in there. But you see what I'm saying? Like there's a, there's a bias towards certain ways of thinking about what the world situation is that makes it seem like the Bretton Woods agreements are still completely relevant and stuff when they're absolutely not, right, or as if the UN actually somehow imposed a global order when it completely didn't. So there's a there's a misunderstanding of what the actual realpolitik is at the level of what it's going to take to solve these problems. And so it, this isn't like, you know, we can't be naive and think that there will be international cooperation. But we do need to think about the forms of judgement. Like, as I was articulating, the forms of judgement, that allow certain people within certain nations to be truly cosmopolitan actors, to not say they're acting in the interest of everyone, but actually be interested in acting national interests, but that certain countries will actually have to sacrifice their advantages. Right, they'll actually have to sacrifice their advantages in order to secure any possible viable future for other countries who don't have an opportunity to actually save themselves because of the position they've been put in by those countries who need to make a sacrifice, right. So there can't be anything like good faith conversation between the global North and the global South, until the global North is like, "Hey, we're going to make some sacrifices for you guys." And so, and that story can be said, you know, East/West, like, North/South like this is a very complex situation. And so it requires a form of, let's just say moral judgement, post conventional, post formal operational, cosmocentric, cosmopolitan, moral judgement, which is a rare human trait. I point to in my book, when I say, I can literally as a human development expert, I can, I can point at those capacities that we're going to need, right, we're going to need very complex forms of ethical self-understanding, which position you within the local bio region within some kind of national structure within some kind of global structure, probably within some kind of larger structure of universal value, ultimately, and that is not something you get from the American public education system as it stands now, for example, like we are not preparing post conventional dialectically thinking global citizens. No we're preparing basically simple minded consumers, sometimes consumers of cultural warfare so that they can participate in the

have to resolve this history of injustice that we're living with. Or else who's going to want to join your future sustainable, super technologically awesome society, like, like, it just doesn't make sense. Like we have to, there's a certain healing at the level







populace is like, 'Alright, on the other side of this, those guys know what's going on,' which is what it feels right. Right now most people feel like no one really trust the media, we do what the media tells us because we're socially pressured to use certain words and to have certain beliefs, especially in social media. But if you look at the statistics, most people just simply don't trust the media outlets. They have allegiance to certain ones, because they're useful in cultural warfare. But they don't actually really trust what's being said by the media. And so when you have this kind of duplicity, and this deep sense that well, somebody must know what's actually going on.

**Zak Stein 40:51**

And so there's this deep suspicion. And this lays, of course, the groundwork for much of the cultural dysfunction we're seeing around you know, so called conspiracy theories and things of that nature, which emerge from the sense of somehow there's a ceiling of epistemic asymmetry, that the main kind of media like news media, social media, the ways we're supposed to get up and into understanding the world, don't give or don't kind of work in context of legitimate teacherly authority. So there's, so it's a, it's a widespread and deep problem, because now we're cynical about the idea that there could even be teacherly authority. So I think to your point where someone said, "Don't believe what you read online," I don't think it's that kids forgot that, I think it's that they don't believe what they read online, which means they don't believe anything, because all they do is read online. So it becomes it moves from like, there's a true story. And then there's this crazy online stuff to just like, there's just crazy online stuff. And the idea that there's a true story somewhere. That's not even really an idea anymore. I'm telling you, like, if when you look at the epistemologies of people under 20, what you end up getting is kind of widely diffuse epistemic nihilism, you know, where there's this fusion between entertainment and belief, and a fusion between a need to have in-group membership in a culture war and motivated reasoning to believe certain things. So the, the sense of like having integrity truth and an orientation towards ongoing learning, and having access to stuff that would allow you to do that, and that would encourage doing that. These are, cultures like that are few and far between right now, and hard to find. But they need to be created. And I think when they are, I do think people will, will be attracted to them. Because most people don't trust the media, but they want to know what's going on. Like people want to know, it's not that people don't want to know, it's that there's a certain cynicism or nihilism about the prospect of success of knowing that we've been disadvantaged in our ability to know. And there's a lot to say there. Some of the research I'm doing now is on the nature of the history of propaganda, information, warfare and communication sciences. And it's a long history. Two decades and decades and decades, we've been working on how to like, kind of like manipulate large populations through communication science, often with a kind of technocratically benevolent notion that the masses need to be helped in making the right decision. And that brings us back to the point I made about the relation between the epistemic elites and the so called people.

**Jessica Knezy 43:44**

Yes, that point really resonated with me, especially it, it gave me the idea that it seems that true education, where everyone can have access to a primary source is mutually exclusive from control and power. I was wondering if you have any thoughts on that and whether the epistemic elite or high level policymakers, would ever be motivated to relinquish control and power that has been designed and

**Zak Stein** 44:19

Very, very good question. Yeah, the, the relationship between power and education and the relationship between power and teacherly authority in particular, in so the, it's funny because I say teacherly authority, and everyone thinks like a school and I use that context, but actually it's the mother and the child or the parent, the parenting one and the child, where you get that most basic actually most kind of like anthropologically primordial case of, of teacherly authority. And what you see in that relationship is in fact, the, the power, like the power of the mother over the child, right, let's talk about that. Like, what kind of power is that? It's not the same power, as what Roy [inaudible] used to call power over





kids do whatever it wants. It says no, it's we're in a fundamentally different situation of intergenerational transmission. It's actually more attention is needed, we need to be more careful to pulling out the responsiveness and the kind of native intelligence of the youth than just giving them rote curriculum that we've been given for a decade. So there's some asking for more attentiveness on the part of the elders and the youth, more intergenerational transmission just of a different kind. And it's, it's not the case that that the youth are prepared or instantly adapted or evolved for it. They're not. So yeah, the nature of our responsibility as educators has changed.

**Sam Coleman 59:13**

I think the question of differences of generation is such an interesting one. And I was wondering if we think of a hypothetical new generation in a utopian society, that is not a generation of knowers. So a generation that's been raised on knowing stuff, knowing things, but a generation of thinkers, I think we've skirted around, and we've addressed as well, some of the real benefits of that, you know, generation of thinkers, but I just wanted to red team for a second and think of what are some of the challenges of having a generation of thinkers because the instruments we have at our disposal, aren't geared towards the generation of thinkers, and I was just really interested to get the kind of red team

that's part of the arguments that have been unfolding for such a long time, around this kind of negative view of education, you know, that there's been a manufacturer of consent, and kind of an arrangement of selective attention, which is like, a psychological defence mechanism, right? So if I'm a neurotic person, say, I'm just not very nice to the people who are close to me, I will selectively not attend to those behaviours, which disconfirm my view myself as being a good person. That's why it's so frustrating to be with someone who has his neurosis. "It's so clear Dude, that you're doing this, but you can't see because you're defending yourself." So defence mechanisms, selective inattention. And so similarly, at the cultural level, we're taught not to think about certain things. We're taught to studiously ignore certain ways of framing problems, selective attention is part of the education system. So if we start to remove those defence mechanisms, to what you're talking about, which is what you want to do in psychotherapy, when that happens, you know, you get a divorce, you change your job, like you move, like start having crazy dreams, like your whole life changes, right. And so this is what we need, we need some kind of cultural Renaissance, we need the equivalent of a midlife crisis or a resolution of

time, a false scarcity, of cognitive supply, false scarcity of cognitive resources, a artificially generated scarcity. And so that's important to get and some of what has been made scarce are the conditions for the possibility of love. I mean, this is one of the main reasons in my book, I talk about these social miracles, it's really about creating a society where people have or don't have to be courageous to love one another. Right, because like, if you don't love anyone, then you can't get hurt. Full stop. Like, if I love you a lot, and you die, I'm in a lot of pain. If I love you a lot, and you do something that disappoints me, I'm in a lot of pain. So there's, again a defence mechanism psychologically to in a world where you can't predict what's going to happen to the people that you love. Right? When you can't, you don't even know, if you can get up to where you want to go to be economically or whatever, or to get the skills you want to have the self-understanding like, because of the sense of precarity that many people feel there is. And most of that I believe is economic and politically generated. There is a, there's a tendency, yes, to withdraw into the isolated, atomized individual and take a cynical view towards anything that would deepen connection, and love because of the risk that's there. So one of the things the elders can do is actually demonstrate the courage that it takes to, to love in a world that's, well, in a world that in an unworlded world if I can say that, in a time between worlds, right. And it's when you're in a world, it's easier to love. Because you can say, "oh, here's how the world works. Safe to love you. Because I've got this many years before my life is disrupted or whatever, right?" But right now, there's this danger. So we need to do the opposite. And, and so the, I do not like the phrase emotional intelligence. So I talk about like emotional self-regulation, emotional self-awareness, and the languages of emotional self-description, and emotional connection. And these are as essential, if not more essential, and especially to notions of ethical identity. So right, if you think about the situation, we're going to end up in, as the wheels start to come off. I talk a lot about you know, that parable of the Good Samaritan. "Mike, what do you do when you meet someone, a stranger, on the road, between civilizations, which means you're not beholden to the law of either of those civilizations, you're on the road, you're in the wilderness, there's no cops going to show up? Right? No one's going to come and tell you, you disobeyed the laws of the city. You're just a stranger in need on the road. Just you and him and in the Bible, God, what do you do?" Right? We're going to be confronted with that kind of situation where we're meeting strangers on the road, and sometimes those strangers they'll be numerous and it's not, it's not a cognitive question. It's not a calculation or a game theoretic relationship that needs to be taken up. It's a problem of feeling. That's a problem of the human heart and the ability of the human to see another human as a human. And so yeah, those are the deeper, the deeper kind of strata of the personality, which are also in play right now. So I'm glad you raised that. And, you know, the approaches that I've seen in this area, social emotional skills, mindfulness, education, things of those nature are, are good and important. But, again, to speak to kind of psychotherapeutic context, we're going to need to learn how to process intense emotion to not just to be calm. But to figure out how to deal with grief, sorrow, tragedy, righteous anger, there's a whole bunch of stuff that we need to be able to work with, aside from just like, staying calm, and I meditate a lot. But the point is that you need to be able to, to move emotion through you in a complex way. So yes, that's a whole other whole other, you opened a giant can of emotional worms there, but it's an important one, and I can't see a way out of it without. And again, I've listed in my book, I can't remember which page notes, but it's post con



**Zoe Varenne** 1:11:44

Well, thank you for such a comprehensive answer. And just a really thought provoking conversation, it just stirred a lot of things in my mind, and I'm sure I'll, I'll go away and tell my mum about it. Because I feel like she's very much, she's very much on the emotional spectrum of things with, with me and so. So yeah, thank you very much.

**Tom Pegram** 1:12:02

Yeah, I'd like to echo that. Thanks so much Zak, a really grounded to profound heartfelt conversation, really appreciate it. And to end on that note that this is also a problem of feeling, of emotion. There is