

**agency**  
a perspective on social affairs

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- *Agency* represents an interesting lens through which to consider a wide range of disparate social phenomena and ideas
- One way (*by no means the only or uniquely best way!*) of making sense of the pickle we are in, socially and politically, is as *a crisis of agency*
- A unifying theme of a wide variety of potential social innovations or interventions is *enhancing agency*
- One way of understanding social stratification, both in positive and normative terms, is as a function of *stratification of agency*
  - *Or, one way of understanding stratification of agency is as a function and result of social stratification. In social affairs, causal arrows are nearly always bidirectional!*

- Agency is an *important dimension* along which people and organizations who arrogate to themselves a role of social entrepreneur ought to consider when formulating their schemes
- Agency is a dimension along which people and organizations who claim to be doing social good ought to *evaluate the effects* of their role and activity
  - *a lot of well intended work, I will argue, is problematic when evaluated in terms of its effects on agency*
- I find agency to be an increasingly useful tool for organizing my thoughts about social concerns and interventions. I hope you do too!
  - *I also find increasing agency, or extending it to groups that I perceive lack it, motivates a great deal of my social preferences, and the projects to which I am attracted or from which I am repelled.*



“ Agency is the condition of activity rather than passivity. It refers to the experience of acting, doing things, making things happen, exerting power, being a subject of events, or controlling things. This is one aspect of human experience. The other aspect of human experience is to be acted upon, to be the object of events, to have things happen to oneself or in oneself, to be constrained and controlled: to lack agency. ”

~ **Martin Hewson (2010)**

from “Agency”  
[Encyclopedia of Case Study Research](#)  
(eds A. Mills, G. Durepos, & E. Wiebe)  
United States: SAGE Publications, Inc.

*When you grow up you tend to get told the world is the way it is and you're life is just to live your life inside the world.*



*Try not to bash into the walls too much. Try to have a nice family, have fun, save a little money.*

*That's a very limited life.*

*Life can be much broader once you discover one simple fact: Everything around you that you call life was made up by people that were no smarter than you and you can change it, you can influence it, you can build your own things that other people can use.*

*Once you learn that, you'll never be the same again.*

*~ Inspirational Steve Jobs*

# what is agency?

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- By agency, we will mean the *capacity of people to act as protagonists* in ways that *meaningfully shape the world*, rather than merely to react taking options and circumstances as given
- The word “meaningfully” demands clarification
  - *We will distinguish between*
    - *internal agency*, under which “meaningfulness” is purely subjective to the actor; and
    - *external agency*, under which meaningful action is defined by objective criteria with respect to the external world
- “Agency” has *positive normative connotations*, and we’ll largely treat it as desirable, but it *needn’t be good*, in either form.
  - *It’s better if people who want to do bad things lack external agency*
  - *It may be a problem if too many people find blasting zombies in a videogame a sufficiently meaningful protagonism*



# what is agency?

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- The word “agency” is used a lot, in a lot of different contexts.
- Our description is similar to common usage among sociologists
- Economists use the term “agent” and “agency”
  - *to refer to entities that optimize, taking choices & external circumstances as given*
  - *to refer to problems associated with delegation of choice or action to a 3rd party*
  - *neither of those are what we mean*
  - *within economics, Amartya Sen’s “capability” would be the closest idea*
- I claim (without particular evidence) that, under most circumstances, ***absence of agency is aversive***, people dislike feeling like they are acted upon, not actors.
  - *But not all circumstances! For example, when actions have potential of yielding large negative consequences, people may prefer to believe they have no choice*
- Informally, I think it good to consider “agency” ***an antonym to “alienation”***.

# ***claim: stratification of agency***

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- I think that ***stratification of agency*** is one useful way of understanding recent social and political phenomena
  - *by which I mean the usual bogeymen: the election of Donald Trump and the advance of other “populisms” left and right; Brexit; polarization across categories of identity and political parties; etc.*
- I don't claim that “stratification of agency” is an exclusive or the best or most important explanation of these phenomena!!!
- I do claim that lots of other putative causes — economic inequality, racism, technological change, urbanization, educational stratification, etc — interact with agency, and that stratification of agency is an useful lens through which to understand these issues and think about how to address them



# ***claim: stratification of agency***

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- But what's the point? After all, if economic goods like wealth and income are increasingly stratified (and they are), doesn't it follow trivially that capacity to act would be stratified as well?
- Of course it does.
- However, the connection between other forms of stratification and stratification of agency is not mechanical. Other factors besides wealth and income determine the degree to which people perceive to have or objectively do have agency
- Further, in social affairs, causal arrows are nearly always bidirectional. Addressing stratification of agency may help ameliorate other dimensions of stratification

# ***claim: stratification of agency***

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- Thinking in terms of agency is useful not so much because it elucidates some new objective fact about the world, but because it opens up new ways of thinking, and of addressing, other social facts of which we are already quite aware.
- I find it to be an incredibly fruitful lens through which to reconsider old problems, and understand my own interests (and resentments).
- I hope that you do too!

# agency, precarity, community

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- This is a very stereotyped *interfluidity* story, what initially was to be the core of the talk. (But then, *blammo!*)
- A capacity to act in the world goes hand-in-hand with a capacity to bear risk.
  - *diversification enables speculation*
  - *businesses hedge non-core risks to reduce uncertainty surrounding core plans*
  - *startup entrepreneurs overwhelmingly have safety nets, in the form of personal affluence, family affluence, or human capital that insures quick reemployment on failure*
- Insurance is perhaps the plainest economic dimension along which stratification has increased
  - *the “neoliberal era” has been characterized by an offloading of risk from firms and states onto individuals, cf The Great Risk Shift (Hacker), The Two Income Trap (Warren), etc.*
  - *the capacity to self-insure is largely a function of income and wealth, have been increasingly distributed to top quantiles*
  - *together these effects leave much of the distribution in precarity, reacting to shocks with improvisations, while an ever smaller cohort is both well-insured and well-capitalized to take action*



# agency, precarity, community

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- It's worse even than all that, as *The Great Risk Shift* itself has offloaded risk disproportionately to downscale cohorts.
  - *Firms subsidize the retirements of top employees with generosity sufficient to make up for the loss of defined benefits. Not so for downscale employees*
  - *The state insures upscale creditors during financial crises, leaves downscale debtors to face collateral calls at the worst possible valuations*
- Stratification of insurance magnifies stratification of agency directly, but also *indirectly, by reducing the concentration of people with agency within communities*
- Agency, even at an “individual level”, is not a function of purely individual characteristics
  - *We act meaningfully in the world by collaborating with others who are also capable of acting meaningfully in the world*
    - *In tech speak, “individual agency” is subject to **network effects***
    - *As a smaller share of the population is well-insured, the **concentration of potential collaborators declines** as well!*

# agency, precarity, community

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- Plus, *humans segregate* — geographically and socially — by affluence and insuredness, *further stratifying opportunities to collaborate*
- This is the part where I am supposed to talk up UBI
  - *An income-tax financed UBI is directly an income-insurance program*
    - *a fixed, floating swap in income*
  - *It's redistributive of insuredness*
    - *diminishes self-insurance through wealth and income at the top, for net payers*
    - *increases insuredness to net-recipients, in the middle and bottom*
  - *Widely touted (including by me) as “VC for the People”, directly as a program that would give people the additional capital and security they might need to take risks and meaningfully act in the world.*

- But...



# *the policy dodge and loss of agency*

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- There is little more directly *eviscerative of agency* than to say “there outta be a law!” when...
  - *there is unlikely to be that law anytime very soon; and*
  - *there is little one can do, no effective way to act, that meaningfully increases the probability or accelerating the timeline of that law coming to be*
- *Great! Policy! Ideas!* have little meaning if the political process seems too distant or unresponsive for people to meaningfully affect
- Part of the present crisis in agency is a crisis of democracy
- The ability to meaningfully intervene in political processes is stratified in ways that parallel other forms of agency



# technocracy, research, and loss of agency

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- People “like us” are tempted to seek agency through policy research and intervention in technocratic debates
- Under the current research practices, distributions of capacities, and distributions of credentials, technocratic research is an embodiment of stratification of agency, not a remedy
  - *It's not inconceivable that unusually privileged agents could succeed through technocratic interventions to alter policy in ways that countervail the stratification of agency and other social and economic resources*
  - *Until that happens, technocratic research is an extraordinary stratified practice, whose first order effects are to reduce the influence of the vast majority of humans in favor of a specialized caste, itself stratified by institutional affiliation and other forms of prestige*
  - *One might hope that this Mandarinate, full of eager, well-intentioned social scientists, would diagnose the stratification of agency as harmful to welfare, and intervene with such powerful evidence and effect that currently privileged interests including the researchers themselves cede their own unusual influence in favor of empowering outsiders*
  - *But the political economy here is... challenging. And the history not so hopeful.*
  - *If we're going to try, let's be conscious of all this*

# technology and agency

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- Marc Andreesson:

*“New technologies can be thought of as giving people superpowers, superhuman abilities that humans did not have before.”*



from <http://www.businessinsider.com/marc-andreessen-on-google-glass-2013-4>

Then why are so many of us acting as though we feel powerless?

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**PARTIAL  
EQUILIBRIUM!**

Then why are so many of us acting as though we feel powerless?



# ***technology and agency***

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- Superman is Superman because he's the only person on Planet Earth with his powers
- Human action is competitive as well as cooperative
- If everybody has a “superpower”, from an individual perspective, it's just a shift in the baseline of competition
- Even we are not directly competing, technology expands baseline expectations of behavior, creating new liabilities to offset the new capabilities
  - *You didn't need a car to get to work before the invention of cars*
- In practice, technology augments the abilities of some more than others, stratifying our capacity to act
- In aggregate, technology renders us more powerful. But as individuals, we often reasonably experience it as disempowering.

# ***technology and the collapse of locality***

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- In our definition of agency, we rather vaguely described it as a “*capacity..to...meaningfully shape the world*”
- What world? The whole world? Of course not. We were invoking some notion of an individual’s world, of ***locality***.
- The telegraph was famously described as the “great annihilator of time and space”.
- It’s remarkable, then, that the entire universe as not collapsed into some sort of black hole with the invention of digital technology
- It is becoming difficult to define the contours of concerns — which are local, which are distant — to any given individual.
- Geography is an ever worse proxy for locality, along any dimension other than the geographical, where previously, lots of notions of locality — “close” relationships, economic exposure, etc — would have been correlated with geography

# technology and the collapse of locality

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- This is visible politically
  - *The collapse of locality is a collapse of meaningful Federalism*
    - *You are much more likely to know who the President is than who is your mayor or county executive*
    - *“Local” journalism is dying while a few national outlets thrive*
- This future is unevenly distributed
  - *Older, poorer, and more rural people are more attached to traditional notions of place than younger, wealthier, and more urban people*
- However, external, objective agency is increasingly divorced from traditional locality for almost everyone:
  - *Even if your world remains your neighborhood, the choices that determine whether you and your neighbors prosper, whether and how you will have health care, are less and less likely to be made by people physically local and geographically accessible to you*

# ***technology and the collapse of locality***

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- Urbanization preserves (somewhat) compact geographic locality, but expands scale
- For both urban and rural residents, the scale at which decisions are made — whether in geographic or population terms or both — is growing, *rendering agency more competitive and more stratified along differential capacity to exercise power over distances and through bureaucracies*
- At some level, “Make America Great Again” is really just “Make My America Small Again”. Brexit is “Little England” trying to be little again.
- By reconfiguring so radically the scale at which we organize, we have eliminate the substrate upon which people might feel able and in fact be able to exercise some control over their world and circumstance



# technology and the collapse of locality

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- Social media redefine a new form of local in a reified social graph, but **polarize relationships**.
  - *We trade a moderate number of moderately strong ties (that would once have been determined largely by continued collocation) for a large number of a new form of unusually weak ties.*
  - *We are left with strong ties to family and perhaps our closest friends, and these odd, weak ties to everyone else.*
- Polarized relationships may (or may not!) effectively shrink the range of people we can call upon to collaborate in order to meaningfully shape our world
  - *The effect is ambiguous: more contacts to potentially call upon, but weaker ties to make claims against*
  - *The net effect is likely itself stratified:*
    - *More “powerful” or “desirable” people may gain on net, as they find eager collaborators in a wider social network*
    - *Less powerful or desirable people find they cannot easily make claims against their large network of digital acquaintances, where previously they would have been able to leverage the stronger ties of a smaller network of physical acquaintances*

# technology and the collapse of locality

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- Social media introduce new forms of uncertainty and malleability in our new reconstructed “locality”, challenging our capacity to place events and information into context in ways that would adaptively inform our actions.
  - *Facebook alters at will what it shows us and why, making it difficult for us to draw inferences from apparent changes in our environment*
    - *Did something actually change, or did the lens through which we are observing the world change?*
  - *Facebook in particular is quite explicitly in the business of helping advertisers monetize manipulation of the inferences you might draw from your social environment*
    - *This week, we seem to be shocked, shocked, and especially troubled by this, at least with regard to political advertising.*
    - *But the effect on locality and agency is constant — it is hard to shape a world when the inferences that underlie your actions are based in information selected according to criteria you do not know or understand by an outside actor according to its own or its clients’ agendas*
  - *It’s not just Facebook. Speaking from experience, you will make consequential errors in judgment if you treat your Twitter feed as representative of community views and let that inform your actions*

# *drinking game: agency and...*

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...political parties

...high-scale platforms (e.g. Uber, Medium, etc.)

...regulation

...structured information technology

...the increasing opportunity cost of commitment

...business scale

...course vs fine-grained urban development (Andrew Price)

...specialization / professionalization

...the politics of guns

...credentialism

# expanding agency: what is to be done?

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- Locality by construction / “intentional community”
  - *Idea: Use legal or cryptographic tools to create durable commonalities of economic interest within local communities*
    - *Tokenized cooperatives*
    - *Tokenized municipalities*
    - *Mutual insurance arrangements (neofraternalism)*
    - *Staked commitment games (altruistic punishment)*
- Small is beautiful
  - *Alter regulations, city planning, etc to be more conducive to the formation and financing of small business*
  - *Build tools to ease small business formation, reduce the opportunity cost of commitment inherent in running a small business, etc.*
- Reform politics
  - *Reward membership in cohesive communities*
    - *Replace winner-take-all elections with some form of proportional representation (ideally stochastic)*
  - *Meetingstarter*



# expanding agency: what is to be done?

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- Provide social insurance
  - *UBI, universal health care, universal child care, etc.*
- Reform government
  - *Flip the incentives, with respect to interaction with government (in the same way that the profit motive flips the incentives of people with skills and resources to make them available rather than steward them stingily and lazily)*
    - *government workers should compete to engage with citizens rather than citizens competing for government attention*
  - *“Active labor market policy”, but less focused on traditional full-time employment*
    - *We need Julies (from The Love Boat)*
- Reduce and unbundle credentialization
  - *Discourage use of college degree as a universal filter*
  - *Promote a variety of recognizable capabilities that open doors to meaningful agency*
- Open technocracy
  - *Build tools that render it easy for a much wider range of people to participate in, and especially to contest, technocratic research*

# ***expanding agency: what is to be done?***

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- Discourage private scale
  - *Anti-trust*
  - *Use tax and zoning tools to encourage fine-grained urban development*
- Discourage public scale
  - *Adopt policies that support many dense, compact mid-sized cities rather than a few overwhelmingly dominant megacities*

- All of this is loose conjecture. But.
- Agency, as a perceived fact or (somewhat relatedly) as an objective fact, is an important dimension of human contentment and thriving
- As social and physical technology increases the complexity and scale of the sphere that directly impinges upon human lives and circumstances, agency can become stratified between those with resources and connections that enable them to leverage expanded opportunities and those without such resources, whose fortunes are buffeted by a strange new world they have little capacity to manage — *“Average is over!” ~Tyler Cowen*
- Much of the ugly politics we are now experiencing, that is often attributed to “nostalgia” or racism or economic precarity, can also be viewed as attempts by people who feel stripped of agency to restore the world to forms they believe they can meaningfully understand and successfully act within

- Rather than destroy the modern world or pretend we can bring it back to some gauzy misremembering of the 1950s, we should urgently work to create tools that expand the capacity of people to retain agency in evolving world that we live in
- And, we should constrain the evolution, of technology and other institutions, to ensure that it remains compatible with widely accessible human agency
- Thinking in terms of agency offers a useful (but not uniquely useful) perspective on social affairs. I find that most of the ideas and projects that interest me are, one way or another, means of expanding and increasing human agency