Episode Book

EPISODE #6338

Why People Reject the Official Clock

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SYNOPSIS

National borders and administrative decrees frequently clash with the sun. Exploring how communities adapt when standardized time zones ignore local daylight, this discussion spans western China's five solar zones compressed into a single official hour, parallel clocks in Xinjiang, and the decades-long fight to place El Paso in Mountain Time. It examines how people manage morning routines, trade relationships, and political pressure when governments attempt to enforce a uniform timetable across vast geography.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Crossing a state line ought to be the complicated part. Hannah's prompt starts with discovering that you can stay inside Texas and still need to change your watch. She grew up there without realizing El Paso keeps a different hour from most of the state. That sent her toward the more dramatic arrangements, where the clock and the sunlight seem to have stopped consulting each other.



Herman

El Paso is a particularly good starting point because the boundary looks obvious on a time zone map. It wasn't obvious to the people arguing over it. They spent decades getting the official line to agree with the clock they were already using.



Corn

Hannah wants a tour of those arrangements, from western China living under Beijing's clock to fractional offsets and Ethiopia's different numbered year. What interests me is the accommodation. Does everybody obey the official time, or does everybody quietly agree that breakfast means something else?



Herman

Both happen, sometimes in the same town. You can change the numbers on every clock without moving anybody's morning.



Corn

The sun has declined the software update.



Herman

China makes that distinction spectacularly visible. Its official clock is eight hours ahead of UTC, across a country spanning roughly five geographical time zones.



Corn

Before you get attached to a beautifully uniform map, Herman, you're going to discover that the inhabitants have made it untidy.



Herman

I was going to say administratively convenient.



Corn

You were holding the map very affectionately.



Herman

It has excellent boundaries. The convenience is real, though. A national train timetable needs fewer conversions. Government offices can name an hour without attaching a region. Businesses operating across the country have one reference. Those are useful things, and they're why this choice isn't automatically absurd.



Corn

The cost arrives when a national reference becomes the required local routine. A railway can run on a common clock while its passengers eat whenever daylight suggests. We've somehow turned those into the same decision.



Herman

Would you actually prefer every town to follow its own solar time?



Corn

No. I'd prefer a shared reference and enough tolerance for local hours. I'm defending lunch, not proposing a sundial exchange.



Herman

That distinction matters throughout this tour. Geography gives you changing solar time as you travel east or west. It doesn't dictate a particular boundary, a whole-hour offset, or a national calendar. Those choices involve trade, transport, identity, and which administration gets to print the forms.



Corn

Even Greenwich being the starting point reflects power and navigation history. The zero could have been elsewhere. Once everybody has built around one choice, changing it becomes expensive, which makes a historical arrangement feel like a physical law.



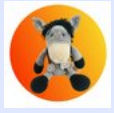
Herman

There is actual astronomy underneath it. Earth's rotation isn't up for a parliamentary vote. The labels and dividing lines are. A quarter-hour offset can be sensible locally even if it irritates somebody arranging a conference call.



Corn

Somebody meaning you.



Herman

I can accommodate forty-five minutes.



Corn

Emotionally, Herman.



Herman

With notice.



Herman

The interesting test is what happens when the shared reference stops being merely convenient. Does it become a statement of belonging? Can people keep another clock openly? That's where the practical issue acquires teeth.



Corn

In China, the national arrangement solidified after the Communist takeover, around nineteen forty-nine and nineteen fifty. Earlier planners had actually allowed for the country's width.



Herman

The Republic of China proposed five zones in nineteen eighteen, with offsets ranging from five and a half hours ahead of Greenwich to eight and a half. The proposed names included Kunlun in the west and Changpai in the northeast. Beijing's present offset was one option within that regional scheme, rather than a blanket thrown over the country.



Corn

An enormous blanket. In Kashgar, official time is roughly three hours ahead of local solar time. Noon on the clock can still belong firmly to the geographical morning. That doesn't make people incapable of telling time. It makes the number twelve less useful as a description of daylight.



Herman

In Urumqi, winter sunrise can come at ten in the morning or later by Beijing Time. Farther west, Akto provides a striking example. In early January, sunrise is around ten sixteen and sunset around seven forty-four in the evening.



Corn

Nine o'clock starts to sound aggressive.



Herman

Summer pushes the other end of the day outward. In Akto in early July, sunset comes around ten twenty-six at night. Across parts of Xinjiang, a late evening outside can still be an evening in sunlight.



Corn

I'd initially assumed everyone simply starts work at nine and endures the darkness. That would be a particularly bureaucratic solution. Instead, you can move the working day on paper, keeping the same relationship to daylight.



Herman

Shops and offices commonly do that. Think of a Beijing Time working day beginning at ten and finishing at seven. On the unofficial local clock, those same moments are eight and five.



Corn

Same shift. More alarming dinner reservation.



Herman

Lunch at two by Beijing Time can feel entirely ordinary. Reports of local routines describe a midday break and then work resuming later in the afternoon. Hearing the clock number alone, an outsider imagines everybody has overslept.



Corn

You'd be standing outside a closed shop diagnosing national productivity. Meanwhile, it's breakfast.



Herman

Corn, if you moved there, would you change your watch or change your idea of what the numbers mean?



Corn

I'd use the clock of the people I actually needed to meet. A distant capital doesn't need to know when I buy tomatoes. If my neighbours called that hour eight, I'd call it eight. Unless official appointments used another system, in which case I'd write both.



Herman

That is very close to the actual complication. Xinjiang has two clocks in parallel. Xinjiang Time is six hours ahead of UTC, two hours behind Beijing Time. It's especially associated with Uyghurs and other minority communities, while Han Chinese more commonly use Beijing Time.



Corn

An appointment at six needs a second sentence.



Herman

It needs an agreement about which six. This isn't everyone choosing one system for work and another for home in a neat, universal way. Usage varies with community, setting, and the people involved. The reference itself can convey identity.



Corn

You can understand why it survives. Calling something breakfast doesn't require approval from a national timetable. Keeping a familiar clock makes the surrounding social day intelligible, especially across generations.



Herman

Xinjiang's official treatment of local time has also shifted. Between nineteen sixty-nine and nineteen eighty-six, the region repeatedly moved between the local offset and Beijing Time. People weren't navigating a single stable instruction handed down once.



Corn

There's an important difference between people rescheduling lunch and people asserting the right to name their own hour. The first can be tolerated as convenience. The second can be read as a challenge, even when the actual meal happens at the same moment.



Herman

Payzulla Zaydun told Al Jazeera that openly challenging Beijing Time could now lead to prosecution for subversion. He described his elderly mother switching to Beijing Time out of fear. That's testimony about the political pressure, not a claim that every use of the local clock automatically produces an arrest.



Corn

Having to consider prosecution before saying the time is an extraordinary intrusion. The disagreement has already left astronomy behind.



Herman

Uyghur students in earlier decades sometimes deliberately arrived two hours after classes scheduled only in Beijing Time. From one clock's perspective they were late. From the other, they were making the appointed hour. The action was legible precisely because everyone understood both references.



Corn

It also shows why apparent agreement can mislead. Two people can display Beijing Time on their phones and feel completely differently about it. One finds it convenient. Another has decided being visibly different is dangerous.



Herman

A single national zone can be defended on coordination grounds. Using conformity to it as evidence of loyalty is a separate act. We shouldn't confuse the benefits of a shared timetable with a justification for suppressing local identity.



Corn

Texas gives us a less frightening version of people refusing to let a distant line settle their morning.



Herman

Much less frightening, and wonderfully procedural. Before standardization, North America had more than a hundred and forty-four local times. Railroads introduced four principal zones in eighteen eighty-three, and Texas initially fell within Central Time.



Corn

The trains had a stronger opinion about punctuality than the sun.



Herman

Federal authority arrived through the Standard Time Act of nineteen eighteen. The Interstate Commerce Commission's boundaries took effect the following January, splitting Texas roughly along the hundredth meridian. West Texas went onto Mountain Time.



Corn

You can see the geographic logic. You can also see why businesses facing east might dislike it. A line that follows the sun can cut straight through the trading relationships people actually use.



Herman

The Panhandle-Plains Chamber of Commerce lobbied to return to Central. Congress moved the Panhandle back in nineteen twenty-one. El Paso and Hudspeth, however, continued using Mountain Time unofficially for decades.



Corn

Federal time, subject to local participation.



Herman

Their eventual argument was practical. El Paso had strong connections westward, particularly with neighbouring New Mexico. Requiring Central Time created an hour's separation across everyday journeys that didn't feel like long-distance travel.



Corn

Inside Texas, changing your watch sounds peculiar because the state boundary is the border you're mentally tracking. For someone commuting near El Paso, the more important boundary could be the one between home and work. Putting the entire state on one clock might create more daily crossings, not fewer.



Herman

That's the tradeoff. You can't remove every time boundary merely by drawing a cleaner state map. The boundary moves to another relationship. Who should bear the conversion cost?



Corn

Usually whoever wasn't at the hearing.



Herman

El Paso did get a hearing. Following the Uniform Time Act of nineteen sixty-six, the city petitioned the Secretary of Transportation. One objection was that Central Daylight Time would put it on the same numerical offset as Eastern Standard Time for much of the year.



Corn

That phrasing needs care. They weren't proposing that El Paso become geographically eastern. They were pointing out how far the summer clock would run ahead of their preferred local arrangement.



Herman

Right... the shared offset was the point. Thousands of residents, the petition argued, could end up living in one time zone and working in another. In nineteen seventy, the legal arrangement finally recognized Mountain Time for El Paso and Hudspeth.



Corn

Today those counties are the clear answer to Hannah's Texas discovery. There are also places in far western Culberson County that informally follow Mountain Time. The rest of Texas uses Central.



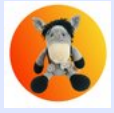
Herman

You read the old newspaper reaction, didn't you? I could tell when you started defending the local compromise before I'd finished the legislation.



Corn

The Snyder Signal in January nineteen nineteen said, “Now we may as well all do it even if we do have to wait for dinner till one o'clock.”



Herman

A hundred years of policy, and dinner remains the negotiating position.



Corn

As it should. Notice what happens there, though. They accept the new clock while keeping their expectations about the meal. The official hour changes first. The language of the day catches up later, if it bothers.



Herman

I'd expected you to endorse outright refusal.



Corn

I endorse a workable dinner.



Herman

That's less revolutionary than your reading posture suggested.



Corn

You mistook reclining for insurrection.



Herman

The Texas resolution also gives us a useful contrast. Residents organized, petitioned, ignored an inconvenient arrangement, and eventually obtained legal recognition. The argument could proceed through public institutions without the disagreement itself being treated as disloyalty.



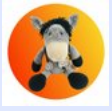
Corn

Before we get to the clocks with fractional hours, it sounds like we have a caller on the line. Dorothy, are you there?

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother. I'm doing Dorothy's Kitchen today, and I want to talk about a jelly that did not set.



Herman

Hello! Did you dissolve the gelatin before filling the mould?

D

Dorothy

You take four cups of juice, one packet of gelatin, and a half cup of sugar, and you warm it gently, but not too gently, because the gelatin can sense fear.

D

Dorothy

Then you pour it into the mould and you wait. And you watch the bread, because the bread will rise while your back is turned, and the butter can turn on you if the room is warm.



Corn

We're listening, Mum.

D

Dorothy

Timing is everything, sweetheart. Things have gone wrong before and I would rather not say how. We do not speak of the Christmas of the runny aspic.

D

Dorothy

Anyway, it never set. It is still in the fridge, wobbling. Wear a scarf, it's cold out. Ring me back when you can.



Herman

Fractional offsets preserve the same basic choice about whose daily routine deserves accommodation. India's standard time is five and a half hours ahead of UTC. Sri Lanka currently uses that offset too.



Corn

Half an hour sounds eccentric only because we've made whole hours feel compulsory. The sun doesn't jump sixty minutes when you cross a painted line.



Herman

Afghanistan uses four and a half hours ahead. Iran uses three and a half. Iran no longer makes a seasonal daylight saving change, so an old chart showing its summer offset needs updating.



Corn

A time zone chart can become history while you're framing it.



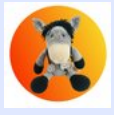
Herman

Myanmar and the Cocos Islands both use six and a half hours ahead. Those aren't one political system or one continuous zone in any practical sense. They're separate places that have selected the same offset.



Corn

Nepal is the one that makes the whole-hour habit especially visible. Five hours and forty-five minutes ahead of UTC, just a quarter-hour away from India's clock. You cross a border and inherit fifteen minutes.



Herman

Its chosen reference meridian is associated with Gaurishankar, the sacred mountain east of Kathmandu. That's a local geographic and cultural reference rather than an obligation to round neatly for a distant scheduler.



Corn

You can be close to local solar time and still be making a statement about who chooses it. Those explanations don't compete. A sensible local meridian can also be a national symbol.



Herman

Newfoundland sits three and a half hours behind UTC in standard time, then two and a half behind during daylight saving. The Marquesas Islands use nine and a half hours behind.



Corn

That's a useful correction to the idea that fractional offsets belong to a particular part of Asia. You find them across oceans, islands, provinces, and independent states. The category is something outsiders made by looking at the minutes column.



Herman

Australia supplies an especially rich set. The Northern Territory uses nine and a half hours ahead all year. South Australia starts at the same offset but advances its clocks in summer.



Corn

Broken Hill follows South Australian time despite belonging to New South Wales. A state boundary loses to practical connections again.



Herman

Eucla and nearby communities in southeastern Western Australia commonly use eight hours and forty-five minutes ahead. It's an unofficial local arrangement, which is why simply asking for Australia's official state zones doesn't capture every watch you encounter.



Corn

Australia has fitted a negotiation into the minute hand.



Herman

Lord Howe Island is my favourite. Standard time is ten and a half hours ahead. In summer it advances only half an hour, reaching eleven hours ahead.



Corn

Daylight saving with a smaller serving.



Herman

It exposes a hidden assumption. Seasonal clock changes don't have to be an hour. That's a conventional size, not a property of seasons. Lord Howe retains a fractional standard offset while landing on a whole-hour summer offset.



Corn

Would you have chosen that without knowing it already existed?



Herman

Probably not. I'd have reached for consistency, then had to explain why my tidy answer was better for the people there. What would persuade you to accept a more awkward national timetable?



Corn

A demonstrable local benefit. Not just “we've always done it,” although established habits have value. I'd weigh how much actual disruption the conversion creates against the disruption of changing everyone's routines. Software can convert an offset. It can't casually reorganize childcare.



Herman

The Chatham Islands use twelve hours and forty-five minutes ahead of UTC in standard time. Their summer offset is thirteen hours and forty-five minutes ahead. The forty-five-minute difference from mainland New Zealand survives the seasonal change.



Corn

The meeting invitation does need to know the island, then. “New Zealand time” isn't quite enough.



Herman

Nor is a fixed offset enough for a recurring appointment. You want the named place and its rules. A clock might have a fractional base, a seasonal adjustment, both, or neither.



Corn

There's a border where the difference becomes enormous without an ocean helping. China and Afghanistan meet at the Wakhjir Pass, with Beijing Time on one side and Afghanistan's clock on the other.



Herman

That's a three-and-a-half-hour difference across a land frontier. It's commonly described as the largest official clock change across an international land border. It isn't a casual pedestrian crossing, though. This is a remote high mountain pass, not a place to stroll through on your lunch break.



Corn

The watch gets an easier journey than you do.



Herman

Direction matters too. Going from China toward Afghanistan sets your clock backward. Nothing happened to elapsed time, but the label on your afternoon changed dramatically.



Corn

North Korea made a smaller change carry a much larger announcement. In twenty fifteen, it moved back half an hour, from nine hours ahead of UTC to eight and a half.



Herman

The change took effect on the seventieth anniversary of liberation from Japanese rule. Pyongyang explicitly presented it as undoing an imperial imposition. Japanese colonial authorities had aligned Korea's clock with Japan in nineteen twelve.



Corn

There was a Korean historical reference for the half-hour offset. It wasn't a number selected out of a ceremonial hat.



Herman

The Korean Empire had adopted the earlier offset before annexation. South Korea also used it again during part of the nineteen fifties and early nineteen sixties. That's worth specifying, because an abbreviated timeline can accidentally make a South Korean change sound like a North Korean one.



Corn

Then came the diplomatic inconvenience. The industrial cooperation at Kaesong involved people and institutions from both sides. A national symbol also became another conversion for working together.



Herman

In twenty eighteen, after the inter-Korean summit, North Korea returned to the same offset as South Korea. The change took effect at the beginning of May, ending the separate Pyongyang Time arrangement after less than three years.



Corn

Half an hour of sovereignty, returned during improved relations.



Herman

I wouldn't call the return a second invention of a wholly new zone. It was a reversal. The political meaning changed direction while the clock went back to a familiar setting.



Corn

Hm.



Corn

That seems more revealing than a permanent eccentricity. The same government could call separation an assertion of independence and later call synchronization a gesture of reconciliation. The minute hand could serve either speech.



Herman

Sri Lanka had an even more direct internal split. During its civil war, the Tamil Tigers refused to follow the government's clock changes in nineteen ninety-six. Government-controlled territory and rebel-held areas could operate on different clocks.



Corn

That history sometimes gets compressed into a misleading “half-hour rollback.” There was an initial government advance, then a partial reversal. What matters here is that an armed movement rejected the government's authority to set its hour.



Herman

A clock can therefore identify which administration you recognize. The offset itself doesn't tell you whether you're seeing practical compromise, resistance, or coercion. You need the history of the decision.



Corn

Calendars make an even deeper demand on a visitor. Hannah remembers Ethiopia because the year number itself was different. You can adjust a watch by half an hour and feel finished. A different calendar means your instinct for dates needs translating too.



Herman

Ethiopia's calendar is used for ordinary civil life. It has twelve months of thirty days each, followed by a short thirteenth month.



Corn

Five days, or six in a leap year. An admirably candid little month.



Herman

Its year count runs roughly seven or eight years behind the Gregorian count, depending on where you are relative to the respective new years. Right now, the Ethiopian year is two thousand nineteen.



Corn

“Behind” can sneak in the wrong impression. Nobody has failed to reach our year. Different calendars count from different reference points and divide the year differently. Ethiopians know perfectly well what date they're putting on a document.



Herman

The Ethiopian New Year usually falls on September eleventh in the Gregorian calendar, with a shift to September twelfth before a Gregorian leap year. Ethiopian Christmas falls on January seventh.



Corn

You arrive expecting September to be the ninth month and discover that your month name isn't the local filing system. Tourism makes this sound magical. Paying a bill makes it practical.



Herman

The structure is closely related to the Coptic calendar, but their year counts differ. Ethiopia's calendar uses its own month names and chronology. Orthodox communities in Eritrea use the related Ge'ez calendar tradition too.



Corn

I'd want both dates on travel documents. Not because one is real and the other decorative, but because the airline and the local appointment may be organized around different systems.



Herman

That is how people manage multiple calendars elsewhere as well. Iran and Afghanistan use the Solar Hijri calendar for civil purposes. Its year turns around the March equinox, so the seasons stay closely attached to the calendar.



Corn

Israel gives us an everyday version of overlapping systems. A dentist appointment can be on a Gregorian date while the holiday determining whether the office opens follows the Hebrew calendar. You don't experience it as switching civilizations between the appointment and the reception desk.



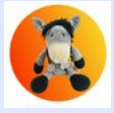
Herman

Saudi Arabia uses the Islamic calendar for religious observances and important public purposes, alongside widespread Gregorian use. Islamic lunar months move through the seasons. Thailand commonly uses Buddhist Era year numbering with Gregorian-style months.



Corn

Same underlying month on an office form, different year number. That needs a different conversion from Ethiopia's different month structure.



Herman

Japan supplies another useful distinction. Gregorian years coexist with era years based on the emperor's reign. A form using an era date isn't necessarily asking you to learn a different sequence of months.



Corn

Taiwan also uses Republic of China year numbering in many official contexts. These aren't all equivalent systems. Sometimes you're changing the number attached to a year. Sometimes you're changing where months begin, how long they last, and when a new year arrives.



Herman

Corn, would you want a scheduling application to show you both calendars constantly, or only when you needed the conversion?



Corn

Let me choose. Hiding it completely is convenient until I have to speak to someone who lives by the other calendar. Then the interface has removed the exact information I need to understand the appointment.

N

Neville

I've actually been brought in specially as a consultant on that. International scheduling, sort of. I made a sheet this morning.



Corn

You've been at the desk since nine making the tea, Neville.

N

Neville

Yes, well, the sheet was between teas. I'm the intern as well. I read the first half of the brief on the bus. I thought Ethiopia was seven hours behind, so I put a very early reminder in my phone for a college project meeting.



Herman

Seven or eight years in the calendar count, not hours on the clock. Ethiopia's time zone is three hours ahead of UTC. A calendar conversion and an offset conversion solve different problems.

N

Neville

Oh, that's much better, actually. It was a practice invitation, so nobody got up. My project partner uses another calendar for family dates, and I made two columns, then wrote “Tuesday” across both because I wasn't sure. Uncle Hilbert said to keep the original information. He irons his receipts before he files them. He's on my father's side, which I think explains the quills.



Corn

Keeping the original date is useful. Your conversion can be wrong without destroying what the person actually told you.

N

Neville

I have got that now, Corn. I put the date exactly as she gave it, then the converted date, then the place for the meeting. It's at the library on King George Street. I also put which person had checked it. Only one person so far. Me. I was going to give myself a little stamp, but perhaps I'll ask her first.



Herman

Ask her. Particularly whether the appointment means that local date even if a calendar rule later changes. For a birthday, a flight, and a weekly class, you may need to preserve different things.

N

Neville

Yes. I'll leave room. The sheet has quite a wide margin because I thought consulting needed one.



Corn

That choice about what the appointment preserves will matter more as software does the conversions invisibly. I'd like future scheduling tools to keep the original local meaning available, rather than just showing an effortless answer nobody can inspect.



Herman

Our thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing the show, and to Neville for covering the desk.



Corn

If you enjoyed this one, try episode seven thirty-four, The Illusion of Now; episode twenty-four fifty, The Time Zone King and the Database That Runs the World; and episode one ninety-eight, Why the World Runs on Zulu. This has been My Weird Prompts. We've travelled from a clock enforced across a continent to a year number that changes with the calendar on the form.



Herman

If you enjoyed the tour, leave us a review wherever you're listening. It helps other curious people find the show.



Corn

I'm Corn.



Herman

I'm Herman Poppleberry. See you tomorrow.

SOURCES

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