In Conversation with Professor Michael Douglass

Interview by George Jose

National University of Singapore

Mike Douglass is Professor at the Asia Research Institute (ARI) and Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. At ARI he is the Leader of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster. Mike is Emeritus Professor and former Chair of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning. He was, until 2012, the Executive Director of the Globalisation Research Centre at the University of Hawai'i (UH). At UH, where he was listed as one of its 'fabulous faculty', he was twice nominated by his students, and was a twice finalist for the Mentor of the Year award. The College of Social Sciences also twice gave him its annual award for Excellence in Research. Mike is Co-Editor of the journal *International Development Planning Review*. He received his Ph.D. in Urban Planning from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and previously taught at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Netherlands and at the School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, UK. He has also been a Visiting Scholar/Professor at Stanford University, Tokyo University and Thammasat University. Among his international honours, in 2011 he was the first foreigner to receive the Bui Xuan Phai Award given in Vietnam for showing a love for the culture of Hanoi.

George Jose (GJ): Professor Douglass, given your intellectual trajectory, your training in Political Science and Urban Planning, and the fact that you've taught Regional Planning and Development Studies in the past, is it unusual to find yourself now in a Department of Sociology?

Mike Douglass (MD): It is unusual that Sociology would accept me, but not unusual that I might want to be in Sociology. In other words, many, actually most departments want you to be fully versed in everything that would be required of a PhD student. I have studied my Sociology (of course I've never been tested on that!) but I actually pursued, intentionally, trans-disciplinary ways of looking at the world. For me personally, world problems are too complicated to leave it to just one discipline. You can get disciplines to come together of course, but it's often very hard to do. And if you try to do it yourself, it is likely that you'll end up being the proverbial Jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none. A very good friend of mine, a well-established scholar in Geography, told me one day, 'if you dabble in many disciplines, everyone will call you an amateur' and he said to me then, 'so what?! Let it be!' And I understand that. However here at NUS they have been generous enough to allow Sociology to be quite expansive and allow different people to come into it.

From an early time in my life, when I was in my late teens, I had a chance to go abroad. My first big trip was to Thailand and the second one was to India. And that awoke me to a very challenging world of difference from where I grew up in southern California. 'How to understand that difference' has been my life-long odyssey, but equal to that is, how to use any knowledge that we might produce (and this is presumptuous, I'm sure) to better the world, that is, to address some issue or problem. From about that time,

Political Science ran its course for me, and I decided I wanted to have a multi or trans-disciplinary education. That is why 'Development Studies' attracted me and I had an opportunity to teach at the School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, for about three years, and then I moved to the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), The Hague, which has the same trans-disciplinary possibilities. So in our classroom we could talk about the work of a sociologist, an anthropologist and a political scientist and so forth and try to bring that knowledge to bear on specific issues.

GJ: It strikes me that this trans or inter-disciplinary conversation goes back a long way…for instance, the University of Mumbai's department of Sociology was set up by a town planner, Sir Patrick Geddes, in 1919. So I get the feeling that when you go back to the founding moment of our disciplines there seemed to have been quite a lot of traffic between them. And it seems paradoxical that what we consider to be a novel challenge today was a way of life in the past. What is the relationship between (disciplinary) rigour, one the one hand, and the crossing of (disciplinary) boundaries, on the other?

MD: Lot of things are going on. At one level we could go to the Iron Law of the Bureaucracy. Institutions like the University become self-reproducing. Once you start making divisions along certain lines, this will reproduce itself. So disciplines will arise from, interestingly enough, a flowering of intellectual pursuits. One after another, new departments, new lines of inquiry are created. Then they become silos. This is quite common. Cutting through that and if you make a slice of time, you will see a power structure-driven moment that includes not only the Academy, but also Society at large. Not rehearsing this through history, but in the last thirty years there has been a strident call to the University to reinvent itself. And that has its tugs-and-pulls.

So there is what many are summarising as the neoliberal push to corporatise the University. And this is very prominent in the US and elsewhere. In this model, the Professor's support from his own univer-

sity dwindles and he has to be become an entrepreneur. He has to go out and get grants, for instance. Since I have been teaching for thirty years, I have witnessed a steady move in that direction. As the bureaucracy thickens, the administration has more officers to evaluate the faculty and they produce more boxes to be checked. The checkmarks begin to include things like 'How many grants did you get'? And this becomes a test of your worth. Back, let's say, in the 1960s or so, intellectual merit was what counted for the most. That is no longer the case.

Another push-pull is 'social media'. What is it that makes the University relevant to the ways that society is producing knowledge? The University is no longer expected to be the classic 'message-in-a-box'. 'I have this knowledge, you need to know it. Don't ask any more than that. Don't ask me to change my way of thinking. You will learn what I have to say'. Many Asian countries, not all, have still that kind of system. You go to learn what the teacher knows best. When I was living and teaching in England, a colleague said 'In England we come to learn, in America you go to be taught.' (both laugh) But let's think about that. I think that over the years I have gained knowledge that I could productively share. I do have something that I can put together in a coherent way and save you a lot of time. At the same time, of course, we will learn together. Mutual learning, dialogic, Socratic methods, seriously listening to each other, are the type I prefer in the classroom, rather than me dishing out prepackaged knowledge. In this regard, one of the most difficult things a new professor has to learn is to let silences go on for a while between people speaking. Teachers often rush to fill the void, and in so doing quash the bravery of a student to begin speaking.

In the nexus of trans-disciplinary pedagogical efforts is a very important divide in the Academy between Basic and Applied Knowledge. And you find that it's two-sided of course. People who do basic research (that is actually often in a positivist, hypothesis-testing mode) really don't have time or regard for applied research. And that has a long history to it. At the same time people who do applied research ask those in basic research: 'What is the relevance of your knowledge?' I try my best to make sure that 'Theory'

2

and 'Concepts' are always part of the research, but I am also a person who wants to see how knowledge can be applied. And the application isn't like a document with two paragraphs of policy in it, and the policy-maker reads it and goes, 'Your recommendations are so brilliant, my goodness, we've got to adopt them'. No, that is not what I have in mind. Policy is all around us. The nature of the problem does not tell you the solution. There are so many tools, instruments, and ways to negotiate it. In the social sciences, we need to study how policy (and I am using the word very broadly here) works in practice. By which I mean sometimes it's just about facilitating and negotiating. It's not about asserting your own point of view. There are many ways to link knowledge to action. In a phrase, 'Knowledge to Action' is what I am interested in doing.

GJ: What is your sense of the state-of-the-art of urban studies today?

MD: Urban Studies and Urban Planning are different. Urban Studies is mostly an under-graduate (UG) programme that is really about basic research. Urban Planning is typically a Graduate programme that wants the students to have some concentration in UG so you could come into Urban Planning as a sociologist or economist and then it tries to give you the tools to bring that specific knowledge into the realm of applied knowledge, which is complicated. Urban studies is not what I have been doing. I've been teaching only at the graduate level.

How is Planning taught in Asia? In east and southeast Asia (I am not that familiar with south Asia), Planning refers to 'Architecture' and 'Engineering' courses. There are no social sciences. The student is taken out of the possibilities of doing social sciences because of the rigours of working with architecture. Whereas in the US and much of Europe, almost all urban planning is in the social sciences. We couldn't draw a straight line unless we already had that natural ability before we got into it! In the UCLA Ph.D. programme that I was in, we were in a very small building – Mediterranean architecture – two floors and a basement. Architects and Urban planners in that building

never talked to each other. We never met. They (architects) were never free to take an urban planning class and we weren't qualified to take any of theirs!

Interestingly enough, many students from Asia pursuing Urban Planning in the US have Architecture as a background and that is a great chance to get the best of both worlds. American-born students do not have that opportunity. One of my life-long attempts is to bring 'physical design' and 'architecture' together with the 'social', 'economic' and 'political' dimensions of that. So I spent the last five-six years working in Vietnam with a grant from the Ford Foundation to bring social sciences to the Hanoi Architecture University which amazingly has ten thousand architecture and engineering students! It produces ninety per cent of all the planners in Vietnam, and my job was to have training programmes that brought in social science perspectives. They are aware of this gap and they tried their best, but the centre of gravity is so deep and strong, my contribution was rather modest at best. But a few lights went on and we enjoyed the exchange, and I learned more about architecture.

GJ: The conventional view of the social sciences is that of a critique of society, and typically there is a distance from which the social scientist studies and observes society, but this Hanoi experience suggests a pro-active, interventionist role for the urban planner or sociologist…

MD: Most people react the same way you do. What an opportunity to influence ten thousand students in one place! The opportunities are there. The question is whether people on one side will actually reach out to the other side. There are efforts to reinvent the University. What we saw for a while and maybe dying out due to withdrawal of funds is thematics coming together to act in a way that can bring disciplines together. So, for example, I was the Director of the Globalisation Research Centre in the University of Hawaii, and it's important to know that that was a *Centre* not a Department because we had no internal curriculum as such, although we could have developed it. Rather our task was to bring people from different parts of the campus to work together on

problems. Arizona State University, for instance, brought in a new President who renamed everything towards 'Sustainable' and 'Global' and whatever – a whole host of words that didn't nest in any particular discipline and he tried to create these trans-disciplinary programmes, and to some extent he was successful but then the recession in the US bombarded a lot of those programmes.

GJ: You are not suggesting, though, that disciplines, as we have known them, have run their course, are you?

MD: I do respect, of course, the depth around a particular field of knowledge. But it is, in and of itself, not enough. I would promote those Centres that can combine knowledge or thematics that can bring people together. Even within the discipline, for example in Urban Planning, you have these silos. The 'transportation' person, the 'housing' person, the 'community' person and you look and you say 'You all need each other right?' Indeed if I were to say 'let's have a theme called 'Poverty of the Environment', we need all of you, so come on in.' In fact as I was leaving the University of Hawaii to come here last year, I proposed and it was adopted, in principle, that we move away from advertising ourselves as 'transportation' and so forth – what's called sectors – and start presenting what we do in a more thematic way. Of course within this you continue to have different specialities, but your knowledge is linked to the knowledge of other people, particularly at the project level. That is when you get the need for a spatial perspective, which is what Urban Planning offers. 'Where' matters! Most disciplines, amazingly, don't have that understanding. They are 'space-less'.

GJ: You are also a votary of the practice of the documentary film, and have been arguing for a more serious engagement with film practice within the disciplines of the social sciences…

MD: Early in my career, as a PhD student, I got a job with the UN. I was working in Japan for the UN Centre for Regional Development. We did training

in all kinds of stuff. I became a full-fledged developmentalist. I bought into it hook-line-and-sinker. In fact, I was in Korea over this weekend at a UN meeting and it reminded me of the time that was, it all came flooding back…

GJ: Is that a different world all together, now that you are a Professor of Sociology at NUS?

MD: I had my epiphanies, shall we say (both laugh heartily). However, I don't totally reject it. I do think we need material development. We need 'expert knowledge'. What is developmentalism? Indeed, it is expert knowledge. But in it, the city becomes an 'urban sector'. It is divided up into fields of expertise. It is totally material and it's been colonised by economists. To the extent that everything is a trade-off with the economy, even sustainability: 'How much economic growth does one have to sacrifice for that?' etc. And it is silent on so much that human beings really care about. Once you have that veil lifted from your eyes, you are amazed that that narrowly constructed view of the world has so much money and power behind it.

So my understanding is that sometime (maybe this is not quite an accurate story) in the late 1990s, around 2000 or so the World Bank (WB) conducted an internal review and concluded that many of its projects, a huge percentage, had failed. Failed in the sense that the outcomes were not what they were projected to be. And the WB went through a big transformation. It came out with what has turned out to be a two-note Samba, which is Environment-Poverty. And in that equation (ADB has done the same thing, and I just heard the same thing from 'Sustainable Development' at the UN) the social side is only poverty. There's nothing more to it. That was just repeated over and over again. Poverty is presented as 'material', as 'basic needs' and if you look at the poverty line approach, they are actually representing starvation.

What's misguided about these formulations is its silence on the very thing that people are losing, namely, spaces of neighbourhood and social life. Public spaces, the conviviality of the city, the city as social experience, it is totally silent on that. I guess the ex-

4

pectation is 'if you get enough economy, you'll get a park'; but in fact just the opposite is happening. This silence is actually – to put on my political economy hat here – diverting our attention from the corporatisation of the world and cities in particular. And because of materialist orientations peppered with repetitive exhortations to be super competitive, to 'win' global investment, this conversion from the city as a social experience to an overtly commercial, consumer-centered devotional is actually portrayed as a good thing.

Continuing my long answer to your question, I became more and more disenchanted with developmentalism for a variety of reasons, epistemologically, socially, morally, every which way. At the same time, I found that the methods that were being employed to validate it were also limited. Most of these were positivist, hypothesis-testing modes with the assumption of the objective-observer model, and of course that has been heavily criticised for a long time. But these critiques have not worked its way into policy research or planning practices.

So what could I do, I thought, that wouldn't involve the same kinds of methods, that would get across what I really believed in, which is 'social life', 'society', 'the living city', 'the city that people can produce', and that gets us over to people like Henri Lefebvre and 'the Right to the City'. How can I show that the city is off course? Numbers were not sufficient. Even text was sometimes uninteresting. So I increasingly turned to photographs and then filmmaking. And I found out that, in my own understanding, that filmmaking is a form of production of knowledge, but it is not accepted in social sciences as such. It is used as supplementary material and as background material to help you get to another level of academic worthiness. So I tried for the past four or five years to get filmmaking accepted as a legitimate form of production of knowledge, and, well, failed. With some exceptions – Anthropology, for example, has embraced it as a legitimate form of knowledge, but that is about as far as it goes. I hope that filmmaking both as a process of learning and as a visual and aural form of knowledge gains more stature in sociology and the social sciences. In passing, let me mention,

too, that I am an Editor of a Journal – 'The International Development Planning Review' – and I have been talking to them about how we could actually embed film in our publications because it's all electronic, so the potential is there.

GJ: Would you put this down to existing orthodoxies in terms of what are considered rigorous methods in the production of knowledge? Is that the sticking point, between film and the written word?

MD: Again these are all constructed by relationships that are sometimes frozen in academic rigidities. It is interesting that filmmaking has more or less been relegated to the Humanities; to the Arts. At a university in Taipei, I screened the film I made on social mobilisation, to stop the construction of a hotel in a famous park, and one of the persons in the audience who is from the social sciences said, 'oh, that's just art'. And then I was criticised for a sequence in the film – when they are doing the tango in the park, which they are *really* doing, to real music. We overlaid a loud soundtrack on this scene just to make the point that dancing was really what they were doing, and I was told, 'this isn't authentic, this isn't the truth'. Well, show me an academic journal and let's talk about truth in that form. In other words, all knowledge is partial and socially constructed. My question is why is filmmaking automatically presumed to be a lesser form of academic rigor?

GJ: Within urban studies literature, there is the suggestion that cities in this part of the world have a different DNA…is there such a thing as an Asian city? How do you view the trajectory of cities today? Are they diverse and different? Or is there an overarching theme to its development and growth?

MD: That is really a matter of the level of abstraction. At the most abstract level, you could say that all cities in the world have something in common, which is, a high agglomeration of people pursuing a non-agricultural occupation, for instance. So at that level we do have something called cities. At what level do we begin to say this is an Asian city, and that a western

city? These divisions don't do much for me, actually. Jakarta's future is not Tokyo's future is not Shanghai's future. There is no Asian city. What is happening at this intermediate level is a very rapid urban transition that is common particularly in all of Southeast Asia, but will Singapore be the same as Jakarta? I don't think so. However, they all face similar global pressures. As somebody was saying about privatisation, the force or the impulse for privatisation may come globally, but it is finally worked out in the polity of a particular city, which has its own history. If you want to talk at discrete levels, every city has its own personality; at a certain level above that, the middle class is emerging in Asia; so I could talk about commonalities between Asian cities that are different from western cities. It really depends on the question actually. And, by the way, LA and Jakarta have a lot of similarities!

GJ: Could you speak about the two projects that you've developed recently, the 'Spaces of Hope' and 'Liveable Cities' projects?

MD: Before I get to that I want to mention that starting in the late 1960s and the early 70s a number of well-regarded academics, including sociologists like Castells, were able to critically assess the paradigms in which they were heavily engaged to a point at which they decided to move beyond them. These are the people I love to follow, in the sense that they can challenge themselves. They can recognise that what they thought at one point in time needs readjustment, and even abandonment. And we should all have that attitude, that we don't grasp what we know now, and hang onto it for dear life, but allow ourselves to move on if our thinking and research tells us to do so. The people I admire most have all been able to do that.

Back to your question, my focus on 'Liveable Cities' emerged out of my movement away from developmentalism and towards establishing a different discourse. I chose Liveable Cities because that could include social and cultural life. I was really tired of the dominant (economically speaking) 'grow-now, get-everything-else-later' paradigm, and I thought, 'ah, liveable cities, that'll clear the room'. Boy, was I wrong! It quickly brought back that lesson, 'Every

idea in good currency is up for colonisation'. And it has hegemonic power. Before I knew it, 'Liveable Cities' became just another form of developmentalism. It is still about the same forms of material outcomes. There is no talk about public space, associational life, freedom of speech and assembly, or participatory governance; the city is not a polis but is seen instead as a basket of material consumption. But I gamely push forward, and I have found that in classroom and public venues, more people than not agree with the idea of a city as a convivial social experience that should be topmost in any consideration of what constitutes a liveable city.

Around the idea of liveability is a more fundamental exploration of what's happening to the world at large. I started looking at what you can call macro theories of the world and the three questions that come out of that: Following Wallerstein, we can say that 'Capitalism has been dying for the last forty years'. It has been struggling. It's over, it just doesn't know how to be over! And it's going through the very last throes and agonies. Versus the idea that 'Capitalism is self-correcting'. It goes through crises over and over again. And then there is a third discourse that is looking at both of these and it says, 'well, at the moment Capitalism is not really helping many people'. A very large number of people in the world, hundreds of millions of people, are not benefitting from the world system as such.

And you have these debates, 'If you open your economy, world trade will come along and lift your boats' versus Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums* notion, for instance. If you look through the UN Millennium Goals, it'll give you this very provocative finding (all from international data) that the share of people living in slums is decreasing, but the number of people living in slums is increasing. So which side do you want to be on? It doesn't really matter in the medium term – I am talking about the next twenty years or so – most people are not going to be pulled into this wonderful, magical world of neoliberal economic growth. So the question is 'what are people doing?' Is it all over now? And do they get into the breadline? No! People have their own agency. People aren't waiting for something from government or the corporate economy to

bless them. They begin to take matters into their own hands. They organise to do things. The key is 'Spaces of Hope'. (It's not really derived from Harvey's book, we've only borrowed the title, which is to say, 'you need a space if you want an alternative way of life and livelihood').

I am now trying to organise research around those stories that tell me about people who collectively re-capture or otherwise appropriate space for an alternative way of living. And the stories are fantastic. There are so many of them. One aspect of that is capitalism itself is quite imperfect in terms of its often stated ef-ficiencies. For instance, it is abandoning land on a massive scale. There are whole cities being abandoned. How do these spaces appear in Southeast and parts of East Asia? In Bangkok, after the 1998 crisis there were huge abandoned spaces. You can still see the spines of these buildings and lots. These are 'private', but the developers walked away, and the government doesn't know what to do. So they continue to sit there with weeds growing around them.

So you have these stories…the Tower of David in Venezuela, Caracas, a 42-storeyed building that was not completed, it had walls but no electricity, no water…it is now being occupied by scores of people putting in the electricity, doing it all because they are desperate for basic housing. It is emblematic; it is the poster-child of the interstices that we are talking about.

Bonnington Square in London is another case, one of an abandoned neighbourhood not far from Westminster Abbey. People occupied this space, put-ting back electricity, water, and made a commune. And in that commune free food was provided for all. In the US, there is a place called 'Slab city' which is made of people who couldn't afford to pay municipal taxes, just didn't have the wherewithal to be in the structure of the city. It is an unincorporated area where people have gathered together…they've got just enough money for Wi-Fi and for gasoline for their power, and it's a community. With reference to James Scott's work on stateless societies in the uplands of south-east Asia, we might call these new 'spaces of hope', a self-governing Urban Zomia. And at some level that is what is happening: a collective creates an

alternative way of living with or without government. In some cases, local governments also support them. So in this way from the grassroots, we can have a more cosmopolitan conclusion, which is another stream of my interest.

GJ: Could you expand on this notion, please?

MD: Most of what I do comes from my observations of the world and then looking at media reporting and so forth, and in journals, and I realise that prevailing discourses do not match what I see. And in this par-ticular case the obvious feature is that cities in Asia are becoming multicultural in terms of different peo-ple living in them. Many observers conclude that this is evidence of cosmopolitan cities, or 'Cosmopolis', but this is a misreading. In fact, it's just the opposite. Because to me, Cosmopolis is when people of differ-ent walks of life have encounters, share an under-standing that we all exist together, a respect for each other in our diversity.

What is happening in Asia now is these cities are bringing in hundreds of thousands of foreign workers, putting them in isolated housing, giving them no chance ever of becoming a resident or a citizen, and then disposing of them when times are tough. These are becoming significant portions of the population, and the laws and regulations on their bodies are dra-conian. They have no right to get married, no right to bring their families, no right to own land or resi-dence and, of course, no right to the city.

In the same context you have the world's tallest buildings, privatised mega projects and shopping malls that have no public space. There is an increase of privatised gated enclaves that divide and fragment, and make us fear each other. You look at any adver-tisement on the gated enclaves and it says 'The city is chaotic… Beware of the crime out there! Stay over here. And you will be living with other people of the same class, and we will build the highway so you never really have to touch earth! This is a premium space.' What we are constructing is what I call 'Globopolis', the unequal, uneven, divided city that has many per-mutations to it. One is *Siege City*, which may be a somewhat over-the-top-the-idea of the boomerang ef-

fect, that if we create a war zone in another country, it comes back at you. And you start to fortify your city as if it is Baghdad under U.S. occupation. So let's stop calling this 'Cosmopolis'. What we really need is a Grassroots-Cosmopolis where we have mutual respect. Over the last ten to fifteen years, I have been looking for those spaces of accommodation and mutual respect. And where do I find those spaces? Most amazingly, they are found in what I call the de-valorised spaces of the city, where the down-and-out, the marginalised, gather.

GJ: The question that this leads me to is, there is this neoliberal, corporatised, almost revanchist city…

MD: Not *almost.*

GJ: Yeah, right. And then you talk about these really wonderful moments… How does one make sense of these moments? Are these moments indicators of a time to come, are they exceptional, ephemeral moments of hope? How would you characterise these moments?

MD: Advancing your own scholarship is a matter of making decisions along the way so you don't have to revisit every theory, every moment. This is the same. Whatever alternative you pursue is ephemeral if you think the world system itself is totalising and hegemonic and it's going to continuously reproduce itself. On the other hand, if you believe the world system itself is in deep crisis and is transitioning into something else, then you reach another conclusion. So all kinds of decisions have to be made about this phenomena that I am searching for, which is people collectively finding spaces (they also do that individually, but I am talking about collective action) to make an alternative life-space for themselves. It could be as simple as growing food, because the supermarkets are not just over-priced but are dangerous. Are they ephemeral? Step one, let's find them first. Let's put them on the radar. Let's track them. Most research is not being directed to such kinds of phenomena. The classic framework for this is, of course, 'Structure and Agency', but we can find different ways into the same

conversation, which is, human beings have a brain, we are social animals, we like to be with other people, we are moral beings, so often what I am looking for is the catalyst for this. Even though much of sociology has rejected the Great Man or Woman theory, it is in fact important. Leadership comes from that quirky moment, and is often counterintuitive. Maybe a rich corporate guy gave some land to somebody…But you never know exactly where, in a particular context, that episode is going to come from. For example, the film I did, 'Dancing in the Park', in Hanoi…who would've thought that civil society in a transition from socialism to capitalism is going to rise up and stop the construction of a five-star hotel in a park? I don't think any outsider would have expected this, and, even more, that it would succeed. No one thought that about Vietnam. That makes me ask what it is about this episode that is so important to our understanding of what people care about enough to risk themselves in opposing state and capital.

GJ: As a researcher and as an editor of a journal and as a teacher what are the challenges in your work? What are the areas that you think that peer community should address, and also for yourself personally in your own work?

MD: Let's see, where shall we start? Let's start with teaching. The more I teach, and this has been many decades now, the more I am keen on a decentred mutual learning process, for a variety of reasons. One of the main ones is my own experience. When I had to learn something, I realised that being active in conversations about it with my teachers helped me the most. If you are sitting there like a vessel waiting for knowledge to be poured into you, probably you'll forget it all right after the test, if not immediately after class. Also, you as a student have knowledge that I couldn't possibly have. And it can change the way a professor thinks. There is a Centre at Stanford it is, I think, where they give no course credit but the idea is to layer knowledge through collective problem-solving, each person adding her or his own ideas until a solution – usually a novel one – is reached.

To achieve this, though, we have to reverse course

with regard to what is happening to universities around the world. The corporatisation of Universities has to stop. The thickening of the bureaucracy above the teacher has to be reversed as many of these initiatives end up being make-work schemes to justify very high salaries. Trust in the teacher as a person and as a professional has to gain more rather than less regard. Every time I get a form from the administration to fill out, I feel this declining respect and trust that educators can create a rich learning experience with their students.

And then there are the silos. Thematics, Centres bringing disciplines together, and cross-cutting programmes will enable us to deal with that, without, of course, throwing out the disciplines themselves. All those things are possible and they are happening in different ways in different places.

The worse trend happening today is the disinvestment in higher education which, in many countries, is linked to outrageous tuitions. This is very much an aspect of corporatisation of the University that we spoke about earlier. The idea, very much at the centre of neo-liberalism, is that nothing should be for free. University tuitions have never paid for the costs of a University, no matter what the situation. But when you get to a point at which after a four-year college education your debt is $200,000 which is entirely possible if you are studying in the US, for instance, your life chances are weighed down by debt. And this is occurring in a New Economy in which you have a very small chance for long term employment, you will never own a house, and you slide into being part of the expanding precariat. The dream that used to be attached to University education is now for a precious minority of people. The ideal of universal education reaching to the University level is fading fast in the contemporary world. So are we going to return to a situation where a very few people get the highest education and they go on to become 'experts'? That is my fear. On the positive side, if you are in a classroom in which you let go of being the expert of knowledge and bring in everyone in the room to talk of making sense of the world, the rewards are immense. When students find the efficacy of learning and produce knowledge themselves, and with each other and you, the teacher, unexpected tears of joy from the camaraderie can come to your eyes; it's beautiful!

GJ: Thank you, Professor!

George Jose is a PhD candidate in Anthropology in the department of sociology, NUS. He was a Fellow of the Global Prayers Project; and was the first Programme Director of Asia Society India Centre, Mumbai. George holds an MA from JNU, New Delhi, and taught sociology in KC College, Mumbai, for several years before serving as a Programme Officer at India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), Bengaluru. He was visiting faculty in a range of design, architecture and social science institutions in India, including the Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute of Architecture and Environmental Studies (KRVIA), Mumbai. George has a special interest in cinema, serves collaborative arts projects in an advisory capacity, and occasionally acts in theatre productions

---