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The Sociology and Culture of Sustainable Development: an interview with Professor John Clammer

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Abstract

This is an interview with Professor John Clammer of Jindal Global University, Dehli, India. He is a British academic who has worked principally in Asia, and is now one of the leading writers and scholars on the vital issues pertaining to global sustainable development. This interview was begun while Professor Clammer was a visiting fellow at the Warwick Institute of Advanced Study (IAS) in 2018, and then continued with various iterations of our academic partnership since then. This interview cites his latest books, notably the publication *Cultural Rights and Justice* (2019), and also offers an historic overview of his exxperience of academic life within the evolving discourse of social and cultural development.

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Introduction

JV: *Professor Clammer, tell us about the occasion of visiting international fellow of the IAS, your current academic post in India, and importantly, your academic motivations.*

JC: I am here partly because of your kind invitation and having established links with Warwick over the last several years — this being a wonderful full-spectrum University. The chance to come and spend time with scholars who are working in fields that are adjacent to, or overlap with, what I am doing, is a wonderful chance for dialogue and deepening my own understanding or just finding out actually what is going on in a country that pursues these kinds of interest, particularly in relation to the discourse of culture and development. Although there has been talk about this for several decades now, I think UNESCO issued statements on the subject at least 50 years ago. In fact, very little has been done to actualise or innovate academic research in this field, so to find somewhere where a research agenda has been actively pursued is really quite something.

It relates to where I am now—my own career has been, in one sense, [metaphorically] 'schizophrenic'—it started perhaps that way, whereas professionally I've always worked in an established area related to development studies—my field is sociology. At the same time, personally I have been interested in the arts, and have practised some of them in my own way. It took me a little while to discover how to create a productive relationship between academics and the arts. I am currently working in India, which is a rather unusual career move, perhaps. However, my career prior to that was always international, having started out in the UK, indeed, in the UK after graduate school, then having lived in Singapore for over a decade, from there to Japan for some considerable period of time, part of the time spent in one of the major private universities in Japan and then the last seven years at the United Nations University (UNU, Tokyo). This was actually a think-tank for the UN—which included some teaching functions; it is essentially a research organisation that feeds ideas back into the UN system.

I had spent time in India in the past. It's a country that fascinates me; I really love it in so many ways. I've spent shorter periods there, including a semester teaching several years ago at Pondicherry Central University, which is one of the major state universities in the southern part of India; I am now in Delhi, which is in the north.

I was offered this opportunity, to actually live in India—which is always different from just visiting a country to experience it—and over, hopefully, a period of years, develop my work in a relatively new university; Jindal is, in fact, only just over a decade old. It is very innovative, and still at that formative stage where you are allowed to put ideas into practice — convince the Vice-Chancellor if something is good, and he will support you to initiate things! It's been exciting, something I don't regret at all; every day is a different experience, and I must say that culturally and sociologically, India is a paradise, for every day is a learning experience; one is never bored. At least, I'm certainly never bored in India, so I'm happy to be there, as unusual as that may sound. There's also another aspect to this, in terms of the globalisation of higher education. It was only a few years ago that Indian universities did not routinely hire foreigners at all, except probably in fields connnected to languages. Now they are beginning to, because they are themselves beginning to diversify. I rather like, in a way, being not head of a wave but at least on a wave which I think is going to transform many aspects of India and higher education. I would hope it does, in positive ways, in the coming years.

JV: *Tell us about your academic trajectory—where you started in terms of academic 'disciplines', in terms of research frameworks and theories, and who were your primary influences and how you developed a sense of academic independence in a complex international environment?*

JC: When I started out as a student, I had to face first of all one major decision. I entered university at a time when the group of 'new' universities [as they were known in the 1960s and 70s]—Essex, Sussex, East Anglia, Lancaster, and so on—were all

being established. The choice was, those universities (which were fairly innovative in the kind of course combinations they were offering), or Oxbridge (or the equivalent, like the LSE, which was another potential choice). I finally decided to go for one of the new universities, where I took a batchelors course, which I don't regret in the least. It sounds crazy, but it was a triple major in Philosophy, Politics, and Modern History. Looking back on it, it was a fantastic education; because, I think, at the beginning of one's education, of your intellectual trajectory, being exposed to major many subjects, on how to think in an historical perspective, on how to understand the structure of the contemporary world, and all of those contextual matters, is crucial. I was very attracted to philosophy, except that I was in the 'wrong' generation, that is, the subject still heavily dominated by so-called linguistic philosophy, which I enjoyed as a way of training my mind but I couldn't see myself offering me any kind of future. But, as a result of that experience I concluded that while philosophers had good questions they didn't really have the best answers. So I started looking for where I could find those 'better' answers, and it was actually this that led me to Social Anthropology. I still remember the occasion, I was browsing for something on the Library bookshelves and I came across Levi Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (La Pensée sauvage of 1962), and thought 'this is interesting', took it out and started to read it; I then thought, 'this looks like the answer to my problem'. The way in which my interests were evolving, I then went on to a graduate education in Social Anthropology and found there a positive but also a negative side. The negative side was that a lot of academic anthropology was still very fixated on issues of *kinship*, of a really rather narrow conception of what anthropologists did, such as the study of so-called 'primitive' society. Positively, however, I found anthropology an amazing subject because it is, in a sense, 'boundary-less'—you could ask questions about art, you could ask questions about mythology, about all sorts of remarkable things and they still somehow fell within the field of the discipline.

Looking back, I think that was a good choice because it allowed me to explore these two

dimensions at once—arts and material culture on the one hand; and what today we would call 'development'—not from an economist perspective but inevitably, in a way, from a 'cultural sociological' perspective. It was that, actually, which led me into this field, or the nexus between anthropology and sociology, (if you want to call it a 'field'). I don't think the particular way I work now existed at that time; I think this was something that had to be created. As a professional scholar I have had to create a dialogue, and to convince enough other people that this dialogue was a valid one — that this field wasn't simply a peripheral 'subject' of some other field. I had to convince people that this was something that raised issues that were not only interesting but hopefully quite fundamental to the study of both anthropology and development. Today there's more talk about 'transdisciplinarity' and my current university has even set up a centre to investigate and promote this; and I've never found it perplexing, because I think my work always was transdisciplinary; but at the beginnning it was very hard.

When I started my PhD, I remember going to see a distinguished professor at SOAS, London, who had worked in a similar geographical area to where I was going to do my fieldwork. When he looked at my proposal I still remember him saying to me 'What is this? Is this anthropology? is this linguistics? is this philosophy?' I said 'What, does it matter?' and he replied, 'Well, only in the sense you will have to get it through an examination board one day.' I was willing to continue to pursue that kind of—what was then an—eccentric direction, and with the hope that if I did it well enough it would justify itself. I think it did, and in a way the curve seems to have now met me coming back, insofar as this transdisciplinary approach is now exactly what people are talking about and it's evidently the way to go in many subject areas; but it wasn't in my generation! The beginning period was therefore 'sticky', in the sense that I had to convince others that this was the way to go; but I think we've now reached the point where researchers and scholars accept that widely, and whether I contributed to that in any way I don't know. I suspect, it is partly that the intellectual scene has moved and it's moved in a way which I

now find conducive, attractive, because I think it was the goal that I was pursuing from really quite an early stage. Possibly without any consciousness of being trans- or multidisciplinary, what I was doing has turned out to be a rather 'funky' thing to have done.

JV: *If we may continue to think on trans-, multi- or interdisciplinarity and how they work — where 'multidisciplinarity' can attain to a genuine dialogue between experts from different disciplines, trans- and interdisciplinarity assume a certain level of competency in different areas that, in reality, are very difficult to achieve (unless one is a gifted 'polymath' in the old sense of the term). I would say, however, that it does work in your books—sociology, anthropology, and some of the socio-ethical and legal issues around development, do come together. But is this a result of you heavily investing in a lot of time and reading in those separate disciplines and working out the methodological means of combining them — or is your approach more improvised (and perhaps creative)?*

JC: Yes, it is creative, I agree, and that a 'low-intensity cultural studies' can result from such combinations. I have to admit, I've read quite a lot of stuff in cultural studies which has had a very short 'shelf-life'; it was never going to last because it didn't have fundamental foundations. Having said that, I think two things: one is that you need to educate yourself constantly, and I was always a curious person in that sense, so I stray endlessly into any number of fields. When I look at my reading over the last decade, maybe I shouldn't admit this, but I don't read very much that sit safely within 'disciplines' anyway — my reading tends to cross disciplinary boundaries, the bookshelf in a bookshop that I would be attracted to will not be probably one that is labelled 'Sociology' but will be somewhere else, (and no regrets about that). The other matter of which I was very aware is the fact that disciplines themselves are social constructions; they've been invented through the way scholars institutionalise knowledge, prioritise certain methodologies, and make a living out of pursuing single tracks of inquiry. That can be 'low-intensity' too, in the sense that it operates with a kind of 'received

model' or established template. I think more than one scholar has made this distinction; I can't recall who it was, but the choice is between priests and prophets—it was easier to be a priest, because you have the package and you have to basically perform the rituals and do well enough with competence. Competence is involved here—but that's usually enough to create a really substantial career for yourself. I think if you want to break out of that, it's a question of partly realising the contingency of the way in which disciplines have been created and also taking a look at very innovative thinkers, somebody like John Maynard Keynes. Nowadays if you mention Keynes, people think 'economist'; but, he was also a major promoter of the arts, the founder of the Cambridge Arts Theatre and a founder Chair of the Arts Council of Great Britain. He married one of the dancers in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, was deeply invested in the work of the Bloomsbury Group—painters, writers, poets, all sorts of people. I don't think he practised the arts himself, but here is an example of significant consequence, where someone was pursuing a discipline but within a much bigger context of cultural competency. I think that has been more my model, that disciplines are OK but they tend to take you to a narrow conception of what you have to do, or what you should do. And, of course, it's more enjoyable to take the risks of trying, and while not giving up on established boundaries, to see them as a kind of springboard into another, broader, worldview.

So, if you start from the other end — instead of looking at the disciplines themselves and then start looking at the world, but to first think about the kind of questions that the world poses to you—then I think you can enter into a fruitful state of dialogue, which will *have* to be transdisciplinary. It will have to draw on any number of resources, including the various ways in which certain problems—like sustainability—involve a range of scientific data, particularly biology and biodiversity, at the same time not only being scientific but environmental, which is also social and cultural. It's a fruitful way of looking at something, to attend to 'interfaces' or the relations between different areas of knowledge bound up with a problem.

JV: *In obtaining academic posts — and you have had a number — how do you identify yourself professionally: do you still call yourself a Sociologist?*

JC: No, not really. I'd have to look for a label — in fact, I have discussed with young 'early career' fellows here at Warwick how career paths in higher education are now 'globalised'. My own career pathway has encompassed the UK, Japan, Singapore, now India, and various visiting positions in Germany, Argentina, South Korea, Australia, all now a concrete possibility for many young scholars. When I started out, the ruling assumption was that you would spend your career primarily in the national university system [in] which you've grown up—to move out from that meant not exactly 'failure' but certainly a hindrance to 'making it' in the academic mainstream. You would look for something outside if there's nothing else; but I don't think that's true anymore, and I think mobility between countries and between university systems, is now part of the new global reality.

But, having said that, if a young early career fellow asked me about this, I would in fact be slightly cynical and respond in two ways. Sure, to find yourself the job you need to be able to demonstrate competence in the discipline in which you are applying to be hired; but, within that framework, there are almost infinite possibilities for theoretical innovation. I worked in Japan for a long time and I'm reminded of the way in which art education and music education in Japan is structured. For the first three months all you're going to do is spend time learning to hold 'your bow' properly, never mind getting a tune out of your violin. I know foreign students find this approach very difficult—they may be anxious and say "I want to play something, why am I being taught this mechanical thing?" But the Japanese philosophy is rather like the philosophy of the tea ceremony, that creativity begins with the mastering of something quite small. Once you've mastered that small thing then you can innovate, but you innovate from a command of knowledge, of competence in a field. I think in most disciplines if you look at where the innovative work is occurring it is breaking out of

the 'classical' or established boundaries all over the place. I think it's possible to bring those two together. You can't legislate for creativity, but I think you can legislate more broadly for *lateral thinking within a discipline*. This again is where transdisciplinarity enters into our discussion. The discipline of Art history has been very influenced by sociology, by the recognition that you can move away from established approached (such as the study of style) and consider the complex social context of art—yet without destroying an attentiveness to, and by implication the integrity of, the art object itself. Of course, they are always in danger of over-socialising or 'sociologising' approaches to the study of art; but then, conducted in a balanced fashion, one can illuminate artworks in a way which I think cannot always be done within the older boundaries of Art History as it was traditional conceived.

JV: *The question of interdisciplinarity, specifically, is also a question of theory and not only the kinds of theory one finds useful but broader theoretical or epistemological commitments that have an ethical (or perhaps normative) dimension. Can you tell us about your relationship with theory and how you use theory?*

JC: As far as a formal relationship to theory is concerned, I have always been extremely eclectic, and I think there are good reasons for this. I think theoretical frameworks are always open to question, as well as which open up questions for you, so it's important to roam around to see what different theories can reveal about the world. Like the 'priests and prophets' metaphor I used earlier, being stuck in a particular theoretical framework is limiting and is also going to be a closure to inquiry as it's going to exclude certain approaches or perspectives on the world. I think part of the enjoyment, professionally, is exploring the variety of theory; and I say that, as I read theory that falls outside of the social sciences; I read a lot of philosophy, psychology, aesthetics, in fact. I'm also reading literary works, which, of course, is a profound source of insight into the world. I think your point about ethics is right. It seems to me that's partly because, ultimately, certain enterprises of inquiry, like development studies, are ethical disciplines. I think there are positives

and negatives in this, however. The negative thing is that I've never been terribly interested in development economics or the debates around distribution and resource allocation within the framework of 'basic needs', for example. I try to educate myself enough on economics to have some understanding of the world and what economists talk about, and obviously in the field of development it's hard to leave economy out of the equation altogether. But beyond that, my perception of economics is that it is a very different kind of thought process to the thinking on issues of human embodiment that I am interested in: It is, on the whole, not concerned with 'the good life'—whether we go as far as saying 'Utopia' is pushing it a little too far, but we should indeed be concerned with trying to define the optimal conditions in which human beings would like to live, and ideally should live. This, of course, includes our relationship to nature—but within the limits of reason as it's easy to come up with a looser, more negative sense, of a Utopian scheme, which so often remains un-realisable. I am committed to thinking in terms of what is realisable, and to think about the kinds of social cultural policies that promote that kind of goal. If it comes back ultimately, to me, to what was meant by such 'goals' of development, I would define them broadly in terms of 'the good life'— and not in just a hedonistic sense, but in the sense of a life which is creative, a life which leads to good relationships between people and with the rest of the biosphere, which itself is non-exploitative relation between people. I think most of us who come up with a list of that kind, I think that is the 'goal' area for which development knowledge should strive.

My problem with a lot of development studies, which I have read in the past, is that it was to do with technicalities, and those technicalities are also realities, obviously—whether in land irrigation, the delivery of healthcare systems, or whatever—but they are all too often embarrassed to talk about the larger goals. I wanted to draw that bigger picture back into development discourse and foreground it. In the light of that, going back to your theoretical question or your question about theory, I find the best way to do this was, in fact, to pursue it through multiple channels, such as through ethics itself—this is partly where art comes into my thinking. Art is a form of non-instrumental thought, which, of course, can have practical outcomes; but that's not usually its main goal area. One of the ways in which you can open up perspectives on the desirable forms of human life, ways that classical social science doesn't, is through the connection between arts and development. And the way we do theory on the potential of this connection becomes something that is related to human goals — (and so less to do with internal discourses within a discipline, and partly because, let's face it, you can write wonderful stuff that probably almost nobody reads. What you want to do is write the kind of stuff that might actually have some kind of impact in persuading people who can influence actual patterns of social-trust formation, to try and push it in those more humane directions).

JV: *What you have just said resonates heavily with me, as I detect it in your books — though not explicitly — a 'capabilities approach' to development: and yet, while your books are what we would call 'human-centred', there seems to be much more about social agency than the capabilities of people.*

JC: It's interesting, without wanting to present myself as an innovator in this way, the capabilities approach seemed to emerge after I started to think in these terms. That was nice, because I discovered that there was somebody else coming to these conclusions and I wasn't a 'voice in the wilderness'. However, the relation between culture and development has another provenance, such as UNESCO in the 1980s, albeit never very operationalised in part as it's too vague, as 'culture' can mean a lot of things. One of my early research objectives was to try to pin this down to actual manifestations of culture, and pursue the question of where that would take us in concrete ways. So, of course, human capabilities were being included in that, not only in the manifestation of capabilities as artistic production, but in my experience on this does to people's sense of subjectivity, of empowerment

and of competence—that they can produce things, they can influence the world through this, and that's enormously powerful.

Actual socio-economic 'development' as it has been managed and implemented since the 1960s, obviously represents itself as a very positive process, where in fact much of it is very violent, even literally so in the sense of the displacement of people through dam construction, or through big infrastructural projects that can displace people psychologically from their ancestral lands, and so forth. It can also be described as 'psychological violence' to force people to re-think their relationship to the world, because, whether they like it or not, they must be 'modernised' in some sense. Our task, then, is to try to think of a way in which the positive dimensions of development can be enhanced. The violent aspects of development should be minimised—it's not just a positive process; it is important to try and push thinking about development in the direction of that more positive humanising process, and not simply something to do with more electricity or bigger dams or things economic. This is not to discount the importance of those things, with their ancillary benefits in employment, training and income and so on, but to try and relate them to other kinds of human purpose, without which they become destructive. But also, as we know, we must relate the processes of development to the kinds of environment that gets damaged in the process of pursuing those kinds of development goals.

JV: *Tell us a little bit more about the role of art: what's the significance of aesthetics to you for your development context?*

JC: If you take the big context, what I'm talking about is a holistic picture. It doesn't exclude the socio-economic or technological dimensions at all, but it obviously point to other dimensions of development. So where's the role of aesthetics? Well, its role is multiple once you start to unpack it a little. I've talked to people who are sceptical of the idea of 'culture and development', but to them I'd say "What do you do in the evenings?" and they say "What?!" And I say

"What do you do in the evenings?"… "Well I listen to music, I go to the movies or I go dancing or I read novels." "So well then you are consuming culture, right?" "Ah, that's true." In other words, on what levels are the aesthetic dimension? You may remember the old 'basic needs' theories in the 80s, where they used to come up with lists of needs, and which, of course, they were always the things of economics—food, shelter, income, etc. The role of aesthetic and leisure needs were never wholly empasised, but I used to think that the deprivation of those needs is actually quite a serious form of deprivation, a kind of poverty. You can be culturally impoverished, while leading possibly a relatively secure material life, at least on some kind of basic 'needs' level.

One of the ideas I find really central to all my thinking is imagination: if you extend the idea of imagination and what I would like to think of as 'social imagination', if there's such a notion. Where do fresh ideas come from that end up being transformative of society? And, if you look closely enough, you find a lot of them come from not technical thinking about creating social change, they're coming from—if you want to use that word broadly—the 'aesthetic' dimension. I've argued, in other things that I've written, that in almost all the research that I've read on social movements, arts movements never appear. I've written about this in another book, where I was arguing that art movements are social movements, not only because they are important as social movements themselves but, secondly, because they've been the source for fresh thinking that permeates society and culture more broadly—more general social thinking at the political level in all sorts of ways and act by a kind of 'osmosis' rather than by direct impact. One could find examples from the early European avant-gardes, like Surrealism, which in retrospect had a huge social impact on other ways of thinking. It seems to me that if you put the 'aesthetics' back in, or if you try to unpack what the aesthetics actually means in that bigger context, it really does turn out to occupy a very much bigger space than most of us had imagined. I think to bring that space back into development discourse, and to alert people of the existence of that space and its relevance to other dimensions

of development, is a serious academic task. The other negative way of looking at this—James Scott, the Yale anthropologist, has written quite a lot about great development failures, and if you read his writing, and of others on this subject—you will uncover the way well thought-out policies (or what appear on paper to be well thought-out policies) that were nonetheless implementated to the detriment of many people and their places of habitation. In the many grand development policies that haven't worked, you commonly find an ignorance of culture—including an ignorance of the role of gender, the body, even the health implications, of their own views of their world.

One of the big 'silences' in cultural studies has been religion. It seems to me now, having worked and lived in Asia for most of my career, this is a huge omission, as not only is religion is so deeply implicated in people's daily lives, but also their vision of the world, their vision of causality, their vision of health, medicine, their body, their future, their afterlife, their reincarnation, whatever it all happens to be—religion also deeply influences the aesthetic dimension. The expressive culture of so many people across Asia cannot be separated from their religion; for example, you cannot understand Indian art, historically at least, without understanding the religious basis from which it springs, regardless of whether it's Islamic, Hindu, Jain, Sikh. That again concerns my need for holism, and how I identify how subjects a little unfashionable can drop down in priority with a research discourse, but surely mistakenly so. And, it doesn't signify a lack of relevance to our knowledge needs, it just means that we don't want to talk about them at the moment. A research ethic of holism will draw back a consciousness of those things we don't want to talk about.

JV: *What about UNESCO? Did you think that culture should have been instituted as one of the sustainable development goals (SDGs), as a separate 'goal'? Were you aware of the lobbying and the arguments over whether it should be a separate goal or whether, rather, it should not, and by implication the lobby should be for making cultural dimensions within all the other goals? Did*

you get involved in that debate or the conversations around that?

JC: Yes, I was at the UNU in Tokyo at the time when the debate about the new sustainable development goals was emerging. Exactly during this crucial period we had at least one visit from the Secretary General, and other significant executives. We talked about these kinds of issues and the two aspects of this will answer your question. One is, that if you look at the way in which an organisation like UNESCO—which does wonderful work by the way (promotes translations from 'minority' languages, and so on) — tends to bureaucratise the idea of culture, this carries with it a limited and I think often a sensualist concept of culture. UNESCO's declarations are wonderful, reminding us about cultural diversity, the dangers of the erosion of cultural integrity by globalisation, but it doesn't actually do anything substantive—it has no teeth.

The second aspect of my answer would be to think about the embodiment of culture. It's a bit like the way in which now people talk about gender—you used to have 'gender and development', it's something you added on, to think about the way you thought about development. As many feminists rightly argued, you can't do this, it's not 'gender and development', but you have to integrate aspects of gender into all dimensions of development thinking. Ideally, therefore, I would argue the same for culture; the proviso is that people do in fact talk about it, and my fear would really be that having announced it, as a kind of wonderful principle that none of us could disagree with, it would then be forgotten in practice. The SDGs have only just become operational, so it will take some time to find out whether they really have any transformative effect and whether the requirement to 'report progress' and so on is actually going to persuade governments to really pursue the Goals. Declarations and the reality on the ground are always two very different things, and I'm afraid culture may well be one of the victims of the disjunction between these two—it will remain a desirable goal but doesn't enter very much into the implementation. There's a reason

for that, too: consider development training and education—culture and the arts isn't afforded much influence, very little in fact, I think the programme you run at Warwick is one of the very few. Most, even very, very efficient professional schools in development studies, do not feature culture or the arts.

JV: *Remaining with UNESCO: do you think it has more of a value shaping global cultural politics than it does within development practice? Do you have a view on the potential role of UNESCO within global development — an independent role, and not just supplementing the work of UNDP, WIPO, UNHRC or UNCTAD? Is it something that concerns you, regarding promoting humanised development throughout the world?*

JC: I think that all the declarations and the cultural conventions that UNESCO manages are, as you indicate, do not entail a substantive role in global development. I often think of UNESCO as I do the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — it is a lofty guide, and people who violate it can be criticised for violating it, in terms of "You signed up for this and you are not practising it". But in terms of its global cultural policies, there's something to be said for UNESCO purely in these terms. If you look at the 2005 Convention on promotion of protection of cultural diversity, for example, it has all these clauses about encouraging governments to protect diversity, and to promote it, which is all very right and admirable. Obviously there is a danger that this is simply rhetoric, but in its own terms it is valuable. Beyond, this, however, if I ever found myself as the Director General of UNESCO, I would certainly make some changes in terms of its involvement in implementation. Education is a major part of UNESCO's role, and here we find a similar issue, if we may elaborate a little on this point: the impacts or social function of education in 'development' (particularly in sustainability and environment), should be a more emphatic part of the education agenda and not some specialised field of policy knowledge. Development studies, I think, has an identity problem with implementation and engagement in the sense that many researchers and scholars I've met see it as a sort of transdisciplinary would-be polity,

grounded in a sort of ragbag of bits of economics, bits of political science, bits of sociology, probably bits of agricultural science or who-knows-what—it doesn't really actually have an intellectual identity. It is in the relation between the thought and policy theory, and the implementation, that we need to face issues that are now the critical issues of humanity.

To return to UNESCO—who should be the 'thought-leader' in this area—but the problem, I think, is that they are not pro-active enough in promoting the kinds of cultural diversity that have impact on development, And I think they are probably unwilling, for political reasons, to engage in the global public sphere. In fact, culture is already highly politicised and once you recognise that fact you have to realise that it's not just some nice unifying thing that we have, like an eye colour or something like this; it's an extremely contested field. One of the things that I think cultural studies has drawn attention to over the last decade, is that culture is the site of struggle. And I think a weakness of UNESCO, maybe it's difficult in that kind of UN organisation, is to squarely address that problem—culture is political—because that is obviously going to raise interesting questions. If you took the trouble of actually reading, say, the 2005 Convention, it's also worth reading the small print at the end. A number of countries have agreed to become signatories with provisos, and those provisos (the articles of the Convention which they opted out of) show very clearly the internal politics of culture. Australia, for example, one thinks of as a very democratic, friendly country, opted out of one of the clauses that may invite aboriginal people to make claims of territorial and other natures on their ancestral lands, with obvious economic and political implications, and a problematic recognition of the authenticity and right to exist of one or more of their own indigenous cultures. If I was in the hot seat there—it might be difficult to do within a bureaucratic organisation—I would want to push UNESCO more in that direction. While I'd like to encourage what they have done in the educational and literary translation programmes, all sorts of valuable things still exist—indeed, as a kid I used to read the *UNESCO Courier*—but we

need UNESCO to become exposed to actual cultural diversity and the politics of its implementation.

JV: *Do you remember the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity? It asserted quite strongly that we are not going to get diversity without genuine* cultural pluralism*, and further, that we will not get cultural pluralism without a* political pluralism*? By the time we arrive at the 2005 Convention, the necessity of pluralism is gone.*

JC: I've argued somewhere in writing, (in an edited book on the UNESCO conventions), that the 2005 Convention is actually, a retreat from 2001 (as you have argued yourself). In 2001 there was, as you say, a push towards taking a much more politicised conception of culture into account and encouraging people into thinking in those terms. By 2005—not long, only four years—I don't know why this is, I'm not in UNESCO (whether this came from pressures from within the organisation to retreat actually from that, I don't know). I think, conceptually, it was a backward step—obviously nothing wrong with promoting ideas for cultural diversity/protecting cultural diversity as a principle, but something else was indeed lost in the process. I wondered about this, whether again you look at this as internal politics of UNESCO itself, and having been in the UN organisation I've seen this myself, the way in which a very strong declaration will, over a day or two of debate, become more and more watered down until it's the lowest common denominator that everybody ends up signing, (in which case it is understandable that 2005 lost the cutting edges of 2001, and lost the power that it started out with). Whether it's something else, whether it's what one scholar has called 'ambient fear', the idea that you got to the edge of the ocean, you put your toes in, and thought "This is kind of cold, actually" and you think globalisation is threatening, and do we really want to commit ourselves to that kind of pluralised role, because it has implications… and so on. In principle, how I would understand it, is that this would have had implications for a much more radical form of democracy, of cultural democracy and a recognition of cultural rights. I think there are

many governments that would be uncomfortable in committing themselves to that more radical conception of democracy… not just to vote every four years, vote every five years., In a way, I would think of democracy in the way I think of development—it should be a much more holistic notion. I can't, in a sense, answer the question: I don't know what the dynamics of that retreat were, but I certainly do see it as a retreat from a more critical position into a rather woolly 'who-would-disagree-with-cultural-diversity-and-its-beauties' position, with which you can't really argue. But the question is, where does it take you in terms of somewhere beyond this to take it forward, and I don't know that it does. The only positive thing that I can see is the protective aspect possibly. You should protect indigenous cultures, but it lacks the dynamic concept culture in the sense of culture being something open-ended and forward-looking, that's missing I think from the 2005 Convention. That's a pity.

JV: […] *When did sustainability start becoming an issue for you, and where did you take that?*

JC: I think that your comment about this danger of this co-option, coming back from London a few days ago on a 'Mega Bus' [a cheap, popular form of transportation] I passed a number of trucks going the other way, trucks with big signs on saying 'Green Movers, which is a nice idea, but I don't think they were running on hydrogen. So where did this phrase come from? Well, it came from several sources. One was kind of the civilisation critique, on "what's got us into the mess that we are in now?" I don't want to be too depressive about it, but if you really look critically at the modern world, we are in a mess. We source problems—terrorism, war, depletion of resources—you can make a huge list—pollution, junk in the ocean, everything like this—how did we get there? You can't just blame industry, because industry itself is contextualised in a bigger social settlement. The first question was, do we need essentially a civilised critique here? If so, we have to look at the nature of our culture to ask questions about how we got into this mess: I think it's a valid way of approaching this, if you get that far and we agree that at least quite substantial ways it is, looking at your bookshelf I

see a number of books with the word 'consumer' or 'brands' in the title. This is what we've got, we've a got a hyper-consumer society, resource hungry, and it's enough in development thinking, very little forward thinking, although people talk about "we can't go on as business as usual", well, what is the alternative to business as usual? Then there is no answer.

I did come across extreme versions of this when I was at the UNU Tokyo. We had the then prime minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, give a public lecture. What has remained in my mind to this day (and this was over ten years ago) was his point at which when answering a question of this kind he basically said [to paraphrase from memory] "You people had your fun, you cut down your forests; now it's our turn... Western environmentalists are coming down here saying "don't do this"; well why should we listen to you? You've done this, and now we've the right to pursue a course of development of our own devising." And I could honestly—I think most of us could see, politically—where he was coming from in saying this: but, in sustainability terms, it's obviously a disasterous position. He's no longer the prime minister; the current one is another story.

Beginning with a civilisational critique, I think, will take you into an examination of what are the cultural bases of non-sustainability. If you start to examine this, issues emerge—one is a re-thinking of what is meant by development. You could, of course, implicate many patterns of development in the achievement of non-sustainability—if, clearly, the concept of sustainable development isn't a self-contradictory term, as some people would argue). Beginning with a civilisations critique is also going to lead you into issue-based questions about what is it that is in our culture that has led to this lack of 'sustainability', this lack of foreseeing the kind of future we are creating for ourselves? You have to then raise the question of alternatives and, e.g., I would have liked to have asked Dr Mahathir, if there had been any opportunity— about India, where I now live, or China. You can't argue against the demand for development. To do so would clearly be political suicide; but then again, even for China, it's also

unrealistic to simply argue for 'business-as-usual development', because the costs of this are so apparent, and because other countries have already asked the questions. Global warming illustrates, literally, the global nature of the problem to which they are going to contribute even more. How would you 'sell' people a picture of development that takes you out of poverty—without it becoming a pattern of development that leads to just more consumption, more resource use? I've been tempted once or twice to write a science novel which embodies that particular vision of the future. You clearly want to eradicate poverty, but if you can't do it through the classical mechanisms of development what other ways could you do it? I think that one of the answers to that question would entail taking us back to this issue culture. I don't know if you've ever read the famous utopia novel *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach [1975]?

It brings me back to culture, it seems to me that a viable, sustainable culture is one in which people find credible. When I was a student, one of the 'hot' writers that we read was Herbert Marcuse, (as a 1960s revolutionary guru, he's probably not read much these days) and a phrase in one of his books has remained in my mind: the 'education of desire'. That struck with me as a key idea, because it puts your finger on exactly what is the problem. If it's possible to *educate desire*, in our case, away from the possession of more stuff, high-energy consumption, more things, to a different conception of desire, then therein would probably lie a lot of the answers to your question on what a future sustainable development might look like. It would have to be 'a culture', it would have to be a culture based on the transformation of our desires towards desires which themselves are sustainable.

JV: *Your recent book is called* Cultural Rights and Justice *(Palgrave 2019). Please tell us about the intellectual origins of the book—why did you choose this subject, and how did you frame a subject that remains quite diffuse and indeterminate (both at the level of international law and national cultural policies)?*

JC: The intellectual, and maybe the practical, origins of the cultural rights and justice book arose

out of the trajectory of my previous writing over the last several years — that had encompassed issues of culture and development, including the very neglected topic of art, and of sustainability examined from a cultural perspective, and I then intertwined those explorations with other themes not usually considered central to development studies. Around the 'edges', as it were, of my books, I was writing shorter pieces on subjects such as solidarity economy, religion, the work of the great Indian Dalit ('untouchable') leader and primary framer of the Indian Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, the poetry of exile and displacement, and other subjects. What holds all these together, at least to some extent, is the preoccupation with culture. But absent from discussions of culture, especially in the context of development, has been the question of cultural rights. Obviously, endless debate has taken place about the nature and universality of human rights themselves, but little has been done to more thoroughly examine the extension of human rights into the sphere of culture. Yet, in fact, and paradoxically, one of the unfortunate side-effects of 'development' is often the destruction of cultures: the erosion of languages, the physical destruction of the indigenous built-environment, Hollywood or Bollywood displacing local cultural production, fast foods and jeans replacing traditional cuisines and fashions, and so forth.

Social and cultural change is of course natural, and often desirable ('traditional' cultures and social structures often concealing hierarchies of gender and power which are often far from benign), but in development discourse in general, including its latest incarnation as 'sustainability', the right to practise and indeed to actively promote one's own culture is rarely discussed. But this is important for many reasons: it is, as I have argued, itself a right (*cultural self-determination*), it maintains indigenous knowledge which is itself often the repository of deep wisdom on matters such as ecology, health, dispute resolution, and child socialization. And, as many would argue, cultural diversity is as important as bio-diversity; monocultures are rarely, if ever, very healthy.

It was as a result of the lack of a discourse on cultural rights that inspired the book, and which suggested that it needed to be reintroduced in a more central way into not only development talk, but also into both international law and national cultural policies. UNESCO has issued a number of declarations, as it so loves to do, defending the principle of cultural diversity and its right to flourish, along with the attendant dangers of globalisation and its tendency to erode that diversity. Declarations are not a bad thing, but the principles that they embody need to be reinserted into both intellectual discourse and political consciousness. One modest aim of the book is to undertake that task, but also to do so in a fairly innovative way, employing not the language of law, but of cultural studies.

JV: *The large-scale framework of your book broaches questions of political economy, transnational cultural discourse, and global policies for sustainable development. But you also have a micro-sociological interest (to refer to the book's sub-title) in the arts and 'the body'. Please tell us about your ascription of such significance to the arts in this expanse of global issues.*

JC: You are right that in a sense the book operates at two levels—a 'high'-level one of engagement with larger issues of sustainability, transnational cultural discourse and so on; and then a seemingly 'micro'-level one discussing questions of art, beauty, narratives, and the body. My argument is, of course, that far from these being two disparate levels they are actually deeply implicated with one another. How so? We could start at many points, but let me take just one or two. The word 'sustainability' (and I am well aware of the debates that flow around it, and in particular the view that the notion of 'sustainable development' is an oxymoron) often has something of a last-ditch sound to it: It says that we have to hang on to what we have and at least prevent its deterioration and figure out a way to keep the system going without bringing about environmental collapse. But it should be evident from the book that I am using the term in a much broader way: *sustainability is directing us to a flourishing life and not just to survival*. It should constantly provoke us to discuss the kind of society, economy, and culture that we really want and to determine and work towards forms of

those institutions that promote human well-being, social justice, and ecological diversity and health. It seems to me evident that such a project cannot only be determined by politics and economics: there has to be a cultural answer too. How will we live? What forms should our creativity take? What is the (ideal) role of religion in society? In this context I have argued that the arts (broadly conceived and including such forms as architecture) are central: they define to a great extent a civilisation (we rarely think of going to Paris or Kyoto just to look at factories), they are major and almost always benign expressions of human creativity; they provide the most socially legitimate way in which the imagination can be exercised, and through that imagination they conceive of social, cultural, political, and economic alternatives. Furthermore, 'sustainable cultures' are as important as any other form of sustainability. Many (including myself) have argued that it is exactly our culture of (excessive) consumption that lies at the base of many of our current planetary problems—over-use of resources, pollution, waste, at one level of analysis—and the promotion of a culture of competition and status-seeking at a sociological level.

Another example relates to the idea of an 'economy'. We often forget that an economy is largely a system of values expressed in material activity. The very words used in economic discourse immediately reflect this if we stop to think about it: 'competition', 'productivity', 'efficiency', 'profit', and so on are all value terms. The first political economists (Adam Smith for example) were well aware of this, but the idea has become lost—that economics is (or should be) and ethical and cultural activity. We also often forget that a large amount of the economy is culture: food, fashions, film, publishing, theatre, art galleries, and so on. Rather belatedly, both UNESCO and the UN Development Program have woken up to this fact and have begun to promote the 'creative industries' as ways out of poverty and as important means of economic development. In practice, the role of the arts goes well beyond this, and there are now many studies to show their connection to peacekeeping, healing from trauma, healing in general, the promotion of

inter-religious dialogue, eco-psychology, and many other areas. The common move in many places to erode the arts (including the 'humanities' in general) in favour of engineering, science, economics, and management studies, is in my view a very mistaken one that will backfire by producing a culturally impoverished world; although I suspect that there are many individual 'cultural creatives' out there who will not let this happen, precisely by resisting this erosion of the arts and maintaining their creativity despite such ill-considered policy decisions.

JV: *The final and concluding chapter of your book uses the phrase 'sustainable futures' and advocates for a cultural activism and 'politics of the imagination'. Can you consider something not mentioned in your chapter or indeed in your book at length at all—whether universities have a central role in this? Both human rights and the very conceptual substrate of a political concept of 'global development' rests on a certain institutional universality (of an institutionalisation of knowledge and knowledge-based practices relevant and of benefit to the whole of humanity), and are arguably indebted to the fundamental concept of a 'university' (certainly for the early days of UNESCO). Your own university (Jindal) has the word 'global' in its title or brand name: we all know of the pressures of universities to claim their place in the competitive global economy, but in the context of your call for a cultural activism and 'politics of the imagination' what role could universities really play?*

JC: That last comment is in a way an answer to your third question. I think, in many ways, universities have become part of the problem rather than holding out in maintaining something of their original vision. The very word 'university', which originally implied diversity and holism, now means, as I think you suggest, a kind of institutional convergence. There is indeed sociological theory about this, suggesting that the same thing has happened to law courts, armies, banks, and the professions as well; that is, to be 'modern' is to adopt the same processes of integration and corporate institutional formations as the rest (largely the West). Hence the slightly absurd sight of African High Court judges wearing

the horse-hair wigs that were once the height of judicial fashion in the British Empire, and still in the UK. This process in the case of universities has I think been fueled by the mania for 'rankings' and the attendant obsession with citations, Scopus, Orchid, Google Scholar, the constant abuses of the 'peer review' system and other forms of personal and institutional self-promotion. One result has been not only the well-known promotion of STEM subjects over the social sciences and humanities, but the fact that many highly innovative and creative universities score low in the 'rankings', especially ones primarily concerned with the arts. The result I think is a kind of negative 'politics of the imagination'—the universities feed the status quo by producing exactly the kinds of graduates that what we used to call 'the system' wants. Is it then any surprise that 'business as usual' is so hard to resist? That is precisely the role of cultural activism. If my arguments about the centrality of the arts are correct, then cultural activism is in fact an important game-changer, and, as I have shown elsewhere, and particularly in my book *Vision and Society* of 2014, art movements are also frequently important social movements. I have doubts as to whether many universities are really able to become change agents. Perhaps, and speaking as someone who once taught at the famous Bauhaus in Weimar, we should look more to the art schools to find the seeds of cultural transformation.

It is, interestingly, that the current COVID-19 pandemic is now causing such questions to be raised in a critical way; and many are beginning to question the role of the universities and whether they can even continue to exist in their present form—or whether they are capable of playing a creative role in reshaping an alternative future that is now presenting itself to us. Potentially, perhaps—and especially as they are the one major institution that still harbors a remarkable concentration of creative minds—they could recognize more specifically how an imaginative cultural activism is now a crucial requirement for a sustainable future.

John Clammer: *central texts*

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