



**[Markus Kip]** Thanks for tuning into the Urban Political podcast today. This is Markus Kip and I'm joined by Ross Beveridge and Philipp Weitzel today. And we briefly frame this episode that brings together four researchers and activists who reflect on urban planning approaches and paradigms in places of the so-called global south. Our guests will reflect on avenues for decolonizing and de-centering planning approaches and discuss the role of academic research.

Our moderator today is Ihnji Jon, a lecturer in international urban politics at the University of Melbourne. And Ihnji speaks with, in the alphabetical order, Mark Davidson, a professor of urban geography in the Graduate School of Geography at Clark University; Prince Guma, a research fellow and assistant country director at the British Institute in Eastern Africa, Nairobi; and Smruti Jukur, an urbanist based in India, currently the program leader at the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Center SPARC, which is an affiliate of the Transnational Slum Dwellers International Network. Thank you everyone for joining us today, really looking forward to learning from you. Ihnji, the floor is yours.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Thank you, Markus. Hi, everyone. And thank you, Prince, for inviting me to be a moderator of this discussion. I myself don't have extensive research experience in southern cities. And I actually had a personal failure doing research in Nepal when I was a PhD student, which we can talk about later. So I'm really excited to learn from you guys as moderator today.

I will just to give you a bit of background as in where I'm coming from and how I come up with the questions I'm planning to ask today. My research interests in this topic, around this topic, is on 'What does academic research have to offer for developing an alternative planning approach, an approach that does justice to the urban realities of the South?' The research interest that I have began when I was having a conversation with a practitioner working for peri-urban settlement communities in Latin America. When I asked her what she thought about the UN's work on SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), she was a bit hesitant about it becoming the unilateral standard that determines what's a good development.

Her reason was that the standards don't always reflect the realities experienced and felt by the actual inhabitants, and that the citizens - not the morality from on high - should determine what works for them as well as how to fight against the forces that endanger the actualization of their own ideals.

And this was one of the reasons why my recent commentary on *The City We Want*, published in *Playing Theory and Practice*, emphasizes on the contextual specificities of normative directions in collective action. Drawing from geographer Robert Lake's idea of situated justice, I argued against transcendent values in defense of evolving values that only come alive in actual practices of social actors. Relatedly, Prince, present here today, in his recent article on provisional urban worlds, argues that "urban planners and practitioners need to open up to urban worlds whose materializations exceed unidimensional, conceptions of modernity and to incorporate the reality of provisional urban worlds into official city making and planning, recognizing the value of these informal and transient structures in people's lives."

So the theme that we try to delve into today, which is 'How can academic research be of service to envisioning alternative planning agendas that reflect the realities of the South?', entails these three key concerns. The first concern is in regards to epistemological contentions between theory and practice.



So Mark, present here today, noted in his recent article, *Going Bust in Two Ways*, published in *Urban Geography*... He argues that on the one hand, there are theoretical explorations that are invested in critiquing exploitive social processes caused by larger political economic systems such as, liberalism and capitalism. And on the other hand, there's practitioner space, which is often filled with applying or challenging regulatory confinements of everyday city making. So this is the first issue.

The second issue concerns who then decides what's a good or bad development or what's a good or bad policy? And this question has been well noted by Prince's work on incompleteness of our overrun infrastructure, where he discusses post-western heterogeneous modernities and simplicities.

And finally, if academia is about knowledge production that could not only help us understand our world a little bit better, but also become useful for our practical engagement with the world, either through re-descriptions, critical reflections, or collective inquiries, how do you address the tension between our scholarly pursuits, which is often driven by theories, et cetera, versus having an actual relevance to the life conditions of everyday communities? And what does it take for urban research or academic research to be useful for reimaging or reinventing new practices?

We're going to talk about three topics and I'm trying to cap 20 minutes per topic. I'm going to pose prompt questions to each speaker but anybody can jump in and ask a follow up question.

First topic is epistemological contentions. Second topic is how to decide what is good or bad planning or development. The final reflection is linking theory and practice. So going to the epistemological contentions to you, Mark. Your recent work on urban policy failure, *Going Bust in Two Ways*, discusses the epistemological contentions between urban geography's investment in critical social theory versus public policy's primary concern on how to generate desired changes of here and now.

In what ways are these two epistemologies different? And for non academic listeners, could you differentiate epistemology versus ontology? Thank you, Mark.

**[Mark Davidson]** Thanks Ihnji. And thanks for everyone being involved in this today. I'm looking forward to the discussion. Sure. Let me start with the last part of your question.

As briefly as I can put it, epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge. So it asks questions like, what is the nature of knowledge? What is the source of knowledge? How do we justify our beliefs? What are the possibilities of knowledge? What types of knowledge are there? So ask questions about knowledge. How do we know things?

Ontology is the philosophy of existence or being, so it essentially asks what is in the world. You can go right back to the ancient Greeks and see Socrates asking these types of questions. For example, you might try and categorize the world into things which are concrete, like a tree, a material, substance or something which is abstract like an idea. They all exist in the world. But what is that? What are the differences between them?

So these are philosophical distinctions and my work on urban policy failure came out of an attempt to try and understand the differences in explanations which were emerging principally in the US about urban governance after the great recession. And in dealing with the two literatures, one in geography, which was more critically oriented and the other in public policy... one of the ways I could explain the difference between these two literatures was by thinking about the ways in which they enact different types of reasoning.



In broad strokes, I think what you find is that literature in critical urban studies and geography tends to think about theoretical reasoning. And that is concerned with trying to explain causation, what's causing city governments to act in particular ways. And the public policy scholars are more interested in questions of how to act. And that's more concerned with what would be called practical reasoning.

I wanted to think about the distinction between those two knowledges. One way to think about that is, it is a distinction between practical and technical knowledge. This is a distinction which the philosopher Michael Oakeshott talks about.

A good example is if you think about buying a cookbook, say Antony Bourdain's cookbook, right? You buy the book and it's got a set of instructions into how to make a dish of whatever type. Probably the expectation you have by buying the book, it doesn't make you as great a chef as Anthony Bourdain was because it gives you technical knowledge. It tells you what to do, but in order to make the dish in the same way, there's a different type of knowledge which Oakeshott claims you can't write down. It's practical knowledge. It's tacit. It's practiced.

And going back to urban studies, I think what public policy scholars are trying to do is to tap in much more to that idea of the practical knowledge at play, whereas critical geographical and urban scholars have been more concerned with the technical. And that creates just different modes of explanation and in fact, different objects of inquiry.

There are debates about bringing these two things together and the point of that paper is essentially to argue what you're trying to bring together or - to keep my food analogy going - are apples and oranges. They may not be compatible. They may just simply be different types of knowledge. And so there may be barriers in the ways in which different people who are looking at the same thing construct different forms of knowledge.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Just a quick question on what are the pros and cons of each epistemology?

**[Mark Davidson]** That's a difficult question to answer because there's worth in both. And it depends on what you want to know and the object of inquiry that you are looking at and the quality of the scholarship involved in each. You need both. What public policy scholars are trying to do, they're trying to help people who are actually practicing. And there's an orientation towards that type of community and the priorities of that and critical scholars attending to talk to other critical scholars.

So it's hard to say pros and cons. They're just doing different things. And the utility of each of those varies over time.

I think I'm a bit of a relativist with that. They're discrete forms of knowing. In what realm that is applicable we will maybe come out to talk to a little bit later. But yeah, I tend to hesitate to say that one is better than the other. They're just trying to do different things. They're different tools.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Right. But Prince, I think your comparison with different epistemologies are a little bit different, but in a similar way, in the sense that the worldview differences that you highlight in your work on the Incompleteness of Urban Infrastructure. You talk about the western modernity and that there is an end goal that you have to achieve. You emphasize the fact that we have to go beyond the universalizing solutions to processes of the infrastructure universe, infrastructure heterogeneity. It is perhaps better to see infrastructures as emergent shifting and thus incomplete. So I think you really underscore the existence of different modernities and technologies that are currently underrepresented in western driven academic discourse.



And what do you think this implies for researchers who are interested in exploring southern cities, but not necessarily from Southern cities. And how do we go beyond extracting data out of the South to populate the same theoretical framework towards research practices that can have generated value in livelihood concerns in the South?

**[Prince K Guma]** Yes. Thank you very much for really setting this up. I'm really looking forward to the conversation. Yeah, so for me the contribution that I was trying to make in this paper, first and foremost, I think for me, it was really about me trying to draw from my own observations of work in policy and research circles, especially work that tends to depict Urban infrastructure heterogeneity as always being synonymous with failure or brokenness.

And so, I wanted to critique these often subtle expectations of infrastructures. The idea that infrastructure should always evolve in a linear trajectory - from less complete to more complete arrangements. Therefore I refer to these kinds of tendencies as a kind of completist law and inclinations that ought to be opposed.

It is upon this that I make the case for the notion of the incompleteness that you just mentioned. So I draw on this concept as a constitutive feature of infrastructures in transition, especially those that while diverging from the so called norms and ideals can not be described as failed, but as something else completely.

And the points that Mark was trying to draw upon, the ideas of tacit and practiced and practical knowledge and technical knowledge, the different forms of knowledge become really important. And especially it becomes important for us in trying to understand the different kinds of modernities.

Within the broader and global policy world, or policymaking processes, it also becomes the case that there is this wider critique. So the wider critique that I just mentioned seems to really extend, within these circles themselves. And there is a general urge and desire to conceptualize infrastructures or infrastructure projects through globally sanctioned trademarks of what a modern infrastructure or modern infrastructure project should be or should look like.

Here again, the infrastructures that diverge from the preferred ideal of modernity often tend to be disparaged, but also generally identified as being deficient, defective, unsophisticated, less developed and so on. I really want to completely agree with you regarding what the core argument here is: respecting the heterogeneity of different modernities and technologies, particularly those that are currently underrepresented within the so-called Global South. And so I think that we need to completely demystify this heterogeneity beyond proposals that discourage situated processes of development that diverge from the norms and ideals of what you refer to as the Western modernity.

Just to answer your other part of the question regarding researchers interested in exploring African cities but are not from Africa. I think this also extends to African researchers as well who might be interested in different kinds of contexts and so on. So for me, this really calls partly for aligning with a kind of post-modern enterprise. So rather than reproaching unfamiliar and strange infrastructures and development processes and the urge to really disentangle them it is important to better understand them and to see them for what they really are. And this means trying to see the value in their own abilities to transform urban lives, to transform urban infrastructures and so on. We cannot just be normative about what's happening in these cities, in this case African cities, but we need to be trying really to go beyond the language of the normative. We need to go beyond essentialist and judgmental overtones. For me as an imagined scholar this really is about departing from dominant Euro-American urbanpolitical.online



traditions towards engaging a more nuanced discourse, especially one that brings the locals into a critical, innovative and situated engagement.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Awesome. So more on the process and observation than the end goal.

Smruti, related to this matter. In your conversation with me before we talked about the aesthetics of city making and how some development agencies and their understanding of what's beautiful or aesthetic can be sometimes patronizing and sometimes not very useful.

So could you give us some of the examples of these dynamics of who decides aesthetics, et cetera, and how that relates to your work and practice at the moment.

**[Smruti Jukur]** Yeah. Thanks, Ihnji. This is a topic way close to my heart. This is a question actually that duty bearers need to ask themselves. The reality of our cities today is that more than 50 percent of its people live in informality. They build cities from below. Now, design and aesthetics and place making has often been quite romanticized in theory. However, in practice, this is seldom the case when in case of proper designs.

Let's pick up housing designs for instance because that's done in mass numbers across the globe. Now, pro-poor housing solutions are patronizing in many ways, because when housing is built for the poor, or when the poor are facilitated with housing, they're often seen by decision makers as beneficiaries of a project, and they're very rarely seen as partners of city making.

In many cases, we would observe that. Design solutions are like cookie cutters. They rarely speak to the context. All the fundamentals of space, light, ventilation are completely compromised. So it's mostly like a tick box exercise, it's to ask 'Don't poor have notions of aesthetics and aren't they rightful city makers?'

So in our practice, we have seen that such myopic visions have been challenged and that design of the commons is the oldest practice. And there is a lot of architecture without architects that have built cities. They've been built over time with local resources that are affordable and solutions that have seen scale. Hence the key in observing how aesthetics are defined and perceived lies in the way people build and come up with local solutions.

**[Ihnji Jon]** So related to which epistemology is better or worse, or maybe it's not in the question of which one is better. But this kind of discrimination is sometimes needed to practice. So the second topic is how do we decide? How do we decide or who decides what is good or bad planning or good or bad development?

And just before jumping into discussion, I'm curious, just in one or two sentences 'How would you define the word development?' going from Mark, Prince and Smruti. Mark, how would you define development, the word development?

**[Mark Davidson]** I think development is probably best thought of as an act of problem solving. And I think that would align with the ways in which I think about some of the moral and normative dimensions that Prince and Smruti have just talked about. So I would plump for the idea of problem solving.



**[Ihnji Jon]** Problem solving. Cool. Prince, how about you?

**[Prince K Guma]** I couldn't really agree more. But so for me, what I could possibly add is that beyond that it should be a kind of development, or in this case, a problem solving that considers the situated realities but is also not as such that it follows a linear trajectory.

**[Ihnji Jon]** How about you, Smruti?

**[Smruti Jukur]** I think development is a response to expand on people's choices. That is how I could best think of development because anything that is in the name of development is to actually expand on what people want, what choices they bring out.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Awesome. We're going to talk about that soon.

But to you, Mark, just going back to you. I was really fascinated by your recent article, published in *City on David Hume*, and you talk about morality and where we should find the origins of deciding what's good or bad. And as a bit of a spoiler, you conclude that stressing the importance of understanding cultural and social conventions could help mediate tension between reason and passion.

What are the key insights from reading Hume, tracing the genealogy of good and bad, and what would that imply for an engaged urban geography research going forward?

**[Mark Davidson]** I guess I'm one of the few people who's engaged with Hume in recent years, at least in geography, and I think Hume is incredibly underappreciated across the social sciences. And some of the things that Hume says really do align with some of the things we've just talked about. Hume is a kind of skeptic of the early enlightenment and particularly ideas around, which we might put in the terms that Prince talks about linear modernities which suggests another way of putting that is to say that we are becoming more and more reasonable over time and that everyone should get on board the reasonable train.

Hume is deeply skeptical of that. And one of the ways in which Hume does that is to question that the ways in which enlightenment has tended to think about reason is that it's something we have, there's something we should become more and more aligned with. People like Rousseau and to some extent Kant are great examples of that.

Hume looks at himself principally and says 'Actually, reason is always playing second fiddle to the passions and the things that actually motivate us are passionate attachments. So we kind of love things, we envy things, we get angry about things. These are things that motivate us. It's really hard to motivate someone through a reasoned argument. Usually we use rhetoric with regards to reason to appeal to passionate attachments.

So that's the philosophical insight which is central to Hume's work. The ways in which I think that's important for critical urban study, geography, and the paper that you mentioned is really based around the idea that much of critical urban scholarship has been orientated towards a critique of reason.





Another way of saying that is a lot of urban scholarship has been concerned with what we call neoliberalism. And there is much that can be said about that concept, but essentially that is a diverse array of critical scholarship, which tries to expose the irrationalities of an approach to city making, world making more generally, which is based on reasoned argument. So neoliberalism is a great example of enlightenment thinking that everyone should become more aligned with this form of reasoning. The institutions should look like this.

And, of course, what the moment we're living in and what the paper's responding to is a moment of populism. And populism isn't based in reason in the same ways in which neoliberalism is as a doctrine. It's quite apparent to anyone to just look at the promises that populists make. And it is quite clear, they can't keep those promises. There are deep inconsistencies within those. And that doesn't matter because they're really appealing to desires, to passions.

I think that's a different object of analysis. So as our cities look more and more populist, as they become inheritors of national populist politics, and as mayoral candidates embrace the populist politics, that's a different critique. Hume gives us great insight into that and his responses essentially don't get fooled by trying to come up with a more reasoned argument to think this is playing out in reason, that you have to think about cultivating the passions that motivate us in essentially more civilized ways.

I end the paper with an example from Orwell which came to mind when I was writing the paper. Orwell after World War II, I think it's 48 writes about nationalism. And Orwell is critical of the left at the time who is very much internationalist and opposed to the nation. Actually, Orwell's point is people are deeply attached to the idea of a nation. His proposal is quite human in a sense that what he calls patriotism, which is - I'm going to butcher the quote here - to be a patriot is to believe your country is better than the rest. Believing however it is the best country but no better than any other is to have pride but not some kind of hierarchical pride.

That's a very humane answer. You have to recognize that populist cities are appealing to things which are the things that motivate people. Hume is in great opposition to someone like Rousseau, who believes people have to be forced to be free. They have to be forced to be reasonable. And Hume fundamentally disagrees with that.

So what I'm trying to think about in that paper, when it comes to going back to your question about what is good and bad is that probably doesn't play out in terms of the types of intellectual contest about reason and theoretical reason that we have got used to practicing, that we've got used to appealing to passionate scholarship, right? You can say this neoliberalism in the city is terrible. There's no trickle down economics, the poor are becoming more impoverished. And here's an example, a narrative, a story. That's a passionate appeal to an unreasonable set of ideas, but populism switches that.

We need to think pretty deeply about how we engage with critique in a world which is moving away from the veneer, at least the justification of certain things based on the idea that it is more reasonable.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Fascinating. Related to these prints, I think your work criticizes this mainstream modernity. But what I also find interesting is the relational constitution between the mainstream and heterodox. So the mainstream only exists insofar as heterodoxy exists and heterodoxy exists only so far as there is a mainstream, which we would think is Western modernity.

You say that the contingencies of infrastructure are assemblages of social, political, economic, and technical negotiations, both trivial, significant, mundane, and strange. So what does this relational urbanpolitical.online



constitution between mainstream and heterodox mean for official policy actors, as well as the people who work in the peripheries of urban governance?

**[Prince K Guma]** Yes, I think this idea of who decides what is good and bad planning... at the heart of it, of course, is, for whom is urban planning being made and to what end? So the motives and obviously so many other rationalities involved in how some of these processes tend to be shaped. But I think for me what this really is about, the Concept of who decides good or bad planning is about attention to different modes of ordering because there are always going to be different angles of what bad or good planning is and for whom that is good or bad. But I think appreciation for different modes of ordering becomes really important.

The dynamic between the mainstream and heterodox and the relational constitution of the two here becomes really important. Because for me, really, I think that a lot of what is happening in the Global South and I think everywhere else for that matter is not a process that necessarily manifests through a contrast of good or bad failure or success and so on.

These realities often tend to be embedded, and also located, in a mode of practice that is, if you're talking about cities. mostly shaped through resident initiated processes that sometimes tend to even transcend the state.

Some of these developments might sometimes appear to be irrational for some actors, but in actual sense, they're really not irrational and they are shaped by different kinds of urban lives or livelihoods and so on.

How people interact with infrastructures, technologies, development projects and so on is often going to be determined by the contingency that you just mentioned. This is in addition to political and economic conditions, social aspects and other technological articulations and so on. This can always be trivial or significant. They can be mundane or strange. But either way the shaping of an infrastructure project or technology is always going to be dependent upon some of these factors. Hence the fact that the reason why projects tend to be always contingent.

**[Ihnji Jon]** I was just wondering, what do you think of this reason and passion, this tension between reason and passion? How does that play out in your case in contingent infrastructures?

**[Prince K Guma]** Yes, so reason and passion, I think it really plays out in different kinds of calculations that drive different actors to how they react to an infrastructure project that just came into their neighborhood, for instance.

So the different calculations and speculations that inform different actors' response to something that just came into their lives, it could be a technology or infrastructure and so on. Or it could even be a response to a government policy. But I think for me, it's really more about these kinds of, very minute calculations and speculation that often come into play to inform people's actions regarding how they interact with something that just came into their lives.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Thank you. And relatedly, Smruti, one of my favorite parts of your TED talk... you mentioned that 'Poverty changes affordability, but not aspirations'. You therefore conclude that 'how to





broaden their choices should be at the heart of our work, or researchers' or practitioners' work, rather than us choosing what's right for the poor.'

What kind of knowledge or knowledge making processes do you think could help everyday professionals in concocting such menus for everyday communities to choose from?

**[Smruti Jukur]** Yeah, I think that also comes in response to the reflection of the topic itself of who decides what's good or bad planning.

In neoliberal cities, power, positionality, politics and people decide most of it. People are often left behind. There's a whole argument about how power appropriates what is good and bad and what works and what doesn't work. So that same thing reflects in terms of aspirations. But the challenge is that poor people like what they see around just like anybody else. They have very similar aspirations, but it's often misunderstood when professionals look down upon what people need and then go around building something that's completely low cost solutions coming up with ideas that they think works for people, but it's probably not what they want. Unarguably, affordability is definitely a constraint in a lot of communities.

But what that means is that there are solutions in local knowledge, which is very advanced. And it's much more adaptable and sustainable. It has stood the test of time and millions of people use it as evidence to acknowledge that it has worked. The role of professionals here is then to expand on that local knowledge and bring technical advancements to improve on what exists. Instead of doing it the other way around.

There is an opportunity for co-production. Now this is a term that's quite often used in research, but very rarely understood in practice. So simply, let's say for instance, we talk about standards all the time. A lot of people in reality use second-handed material to build their houses or places. These materials or this method of construction is probably not listed in the codes of construction practices. But 40 percent of large cities are being built by people exactly like that.

So accepting that, as professionals, that's the reality is the first step. And that kind of reality is challenging. How to broaden those solutions that may be acceptable in everyday practice is actually the gap that professionals need to bridge because whether we like it or not, whether we accept it or not, whether our standards accept it or not, people are going to build it anyway. So it's, yeah, so it's time that aspirations also come to reality. It's affordability that's the problem. It's not aspirations that are the problem.

**[Mark Davidson]** If I could just jump in there, I think that's a really good example of - with reference to good or bad- how you think about those categories. And then when you impose this distinction between practical and technical knowledge on it, there is a tendency to preference the technical at the cost of the practical. That's something quite inherent within the intellectual position, that preference of the technical, the bookshelf, that type of knowledge which of course has its place. But it's a very powerful form of knowledge and therefore gets elevated and we can assume that it overrides the practical. That's a certain perspective, and it's sometimes also Humean, that the ways in which different communities have managed to think about it.

Condition and develop conventions to solve social problems can be overridden completely by a certain elevation of technical knowledge. That's not limited to urban planning, which that's a societal condition. And moving away from that is difficult because it's not an either/or, you need to bring them



into dialogue with one another. But it means, as Smruti says, a fairly radical shift in the ways that we've tended to bring expertise into certain problem solving exercises. And unless we have these distinctions, it's very hard for us to take what I think is a quite modest position in the type of knowledge we have and produce into bridging these kinds of connections we're talking about today.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Yeah, that's awesome. Prince, would you have any comments on that?

**[Prince K Guma]** I completely agree with Mark.

**[Smruti Jukur]** Just to conclude on that note. What Mark said is that technical knowledge has been very traditional and very rarely it's ever been questioned or challenged. And I think everybody is just following some of those things for a very long time. Practice has not necessarily challenged these technical advancements.

**[Mark Davidson]** And there's a real sociology to that, right? So technical knowledge requires something like the university or something similar to emerge and develop. And that's where we, on a sociological basis, have tended to put expertise or people who know stuff. And that's not where all knowledge resides. But it's been socially elevated and unfortunately, I think many of us tend to buy that completely but we shouldn't. One of the dominant impressions I have when I go out and do research work in cities is how little I know and how little I have to contribute, usually despite a stock of technical knowledge. That's a hazard of the occupation, but it's a sociological hazard, too.

To say that we're going to elevate to a position of expertise doesn't mean an expertise in everything, even the things that we're an expert in. Dealing with the sociology of that is a particularly challenging part of bridging the gap between theory and practice.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Yeah, this really links smoothly to the final topic that I wanted to ask you about. Relatedly, Mark I'd like to know your experience from engaging more with European radical thinkers, such as Rancière, and now more with American pragmatism, such as Rorty, and what that implied to your research work in practice. Also, what do you think of the tension between scholarly versus engaged and Archimedean global view versus situated?

**[Mark Davidson]** There's a lot there. I would describe my theoretical engagements as being rather eclectic. And that, as you say, has involved continental European radical traditions and American pragmatists like Rorty and many others. Besides, one of the things I think I've learned from that work I guess two impressions:

The first one, there's something that Rorty says about philosophy and theory generally which I can't quite shake. He says most of the things that we discuss in philosophy and theory have actually no practical relevance outside of the seminar. That's not to dismiss them, they're important. But when it comes to pragmatism and practice, they're not really relevant. We tend to intellectualize things and think there are intellectual solutions to things which there aren't. It implies a certain limit to things. And that's, I think, a very difficult thing to negotiate because in a seminar room, you're talking about



explaining all the world around us and coming up with these big theoretical explanations. And I don't want to dismiss those. Those are important, but there are real limits. I think Rorty is fairly brave to suggest something like that. And so I appreciate that for sure.

The other thing I learned by working across traditions is the partiality of any perspective. In some sense, that's human skepticism of enlightenment thinking, right? The kind of linearity of it. And the importance of reading the contrary opinion. As soon as you start to agree with something, you should run away to the hills and read everything that disagrees with that opinion. We are - I forgot who said it but - dogma prone from the womb. Reading across those are things that - on a theoretical basis - relate to me.

And referring to the latter part of your question around theory and practice, I guess one of the things that I've learned relates back to where we started in terms of epistemology. As an urbanist, we're dealing with an incredibly complicated thing: the city.

As a kind of epistemological inquiry, there are different aspects to the city, which enable us to produce different types of knowledge. And Karl Popper has a really interesting notion here in terms of thinking about social science and what we can know and he divides the world into what he would call three worlds or three ontologies. There are aspects of the social world which fall into his third category, third world of ontology.

But those are regularized things, things that you could produce. He doesn't suggest it's a purely scientific explanation, but you can produce something like predictable theories. But those are mainly institutional things. So cities are, if you like, a set of regulated regularities, right? There are things that we institutionalize but there are also many other things in a city which you can't put into that group. And so, when you think about urban scholarship, one of the things I've learned reading across different theorists and being engaged with epistemology is that you should really always be asking 'What kind of knowledge can I produce? What kind of theories can I produce about the thing that I'm looking at? And Popper's suggestion is that we should always be developing what he calls the kind of boldest conjectures, the boldest hypothesis we can. And that is if you like grand theories. Because they may be out there. You may be able to say that in the world of institutionalized urban development, there are certain regularities that we can theorize about.

And I think we do a lot of that, right? Theory is elevated pretty high in terms of what we value in academic knowledge. The part of it that we tend to miss, I think, is the other part of popular formulation, which is refutations. We don't test our theories very much. Much of them would reside in the kind of pseudo scientific. That they are more abstract explanations.

I think that's when you run into the gap to practice because it's probably a pretty regular occurrence for a junior scholar to go out imbued with a theoretical explanation and then find themselves in the world of practice. And people will just look at you and think 'What are you talking about?' This is just so abstract and it's not clear to me that the things you are saying are causing us to do what we're doing are actually there at all. One of the ways you can get around that is to think 'The theory that I've produced, how can I validate it in one way or another?'

That's not to say that all urban theory should be scientific in that sense. But when you're talking about practice, there is a much greater emphasis on having a really strong, verified explanation that can then be articulated to people in practice.

I guess my summary answer here is, the link between theory and practice, it depends on what you're looking at, and it depends on the type of theory you're trying to produce. It may be that we can't all strive for this connection, and it may be like different projects give us a different opportunity to do. That's what I like about Rorty. The idea that a lot of things we're discussing in terms of theory may be



really important in our own field, but that's where they should stay and that's fine. It tends to be hard to resist the temptations because of the incentives of the occupation in many ways to stretch a little bit beyond that realm. Between working across these things, I've probably become a bit more modest in my own work because of them.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Awesome. Prince, do you have any comments on that? You're holding a brokerage role between external scholars coming from different backgrounds and you are a person actually living in the South. You probably run into a lot of Western scholars or other scholars in a field with a certain theoretical range that are quite different from the Southern realities. And I'd love to know what your experience is on that.

**[Prince K Guma]** First, I just wanted to provoke Mark to think. Before we actually begin to think about theory and practice, I think we need to think about whether we actually have the right theories. And if we do not, how do we think about theory and practice?

Because I think there is really an assumption that there are actually theories that one would think reflect the realities on the ground, but sometimes some theories tend not to actually play this role. I just wanted to ask this question, if we actually have theories or if this is something that needs to be addressed first before we could be able to speak about theory and practice.

But yeah, regarding your question for me, I think it has been an experience of learning as much as unlearning. In my work there are times, even in Nairobi or in Kampala, the cities that I have recited a bit more, there are times I feel like I'm an external scholar in one way or another.

So I think this question really has implications for any scholars, regardless of whether they are external scholars or not. And so it's always going to be a process of unlearning as much as it is a process of learning. And in my methods I had to follow a network, both tangible and intangible. I've had to learn how to be open to different kinds of articulations. And so that means different modes of practice, modes of being in the world. I think that it becomes really important to be open to other realities. But most importantly, I've come to gain a bit of grasp of the inherent incompleteness of knowledge itself and at the same time appreciate and be open to the plurality of knowledge. This is about understanding that things can coexist.

Just to go back to your question regarding the current direction of a global scholarship. I don't think there is a single direction to global scholarship. I think there are different directions and, of course, various scholars growing from different perspectives.

So then it becomes really important for us to understand that things can always coexist, including knowledge. So I do not really believe in the idea of a single direction of a global scholarship, even within urban studies, I think that there are many directions. In all of this, however, I believe that there is so much that global scholarship can offer to research and policy practices of grounded realities such as those that I'm experiencing in Eastern Africa. So for instance, scholarship, I believe, could perhaps be more open to different forms of mobilization and sociability and modes of interdependence.

And it could also perhaps try to offer more and better explanation of the molecular details of everyday lives. Because for me, I believe that this is where innovation lies. And I feel that it essentially becomes really important for us as scholars. Perhaps in our work there could be more propositions in how we explicate these aspects of everyday lives and different interactions and interfaces.



And so we need to be open to other forms of articulation wherever these might be. But at a more grand scale, I think that we need to think of possibilities of decolonizing pedagogies or, at least being more open to more diverse pedagogies. And of course, this really draws into what Mark already mentioned about, the populist movements and, the points by Smruti.

More voice to the people becomes really important and going beyond these regimes that tend to silence different sections of societies. It becomes important for us to draw ourselves more towards pluriversal approaches, particularly those within the margins, and think of planning as something that can be transformative and take place and context into consideration. But finally, it's important to be more attentive to articulations that exceed the language of the normative.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Thank you, Prince. Just a quick question to you, Mark on Prince's provocation on good or bad theories. Does it happen only in that theoretical circle? Or could it be tested as an experiment on the ground?

**[Mark Davidson]** Yeah it's provoking. We could probably talk about this for days on it. I think Prince said, do we have the right theories? There's something that I'm resistant to in that framing. I think the search for the right theory is essentially a theological position. That's not to say, I think actually a lot of scholarship has that theological orientation. I think we can talk about better theories, better explanations without ever aiming or expecting that we'll arrive at the right one. There are lots of reasons why we might think that. But I do think there are better explanations and theories out there. I think some things are more settled than others. I think we have a vast inheritance of theoretical developments, scientific developments, which are useful and remain useful.

I don't think we're involved in a process of trying to figure out the right way to understand things. I'm much more inclined to take the kind of non-essentializing, scientific approach that we should continue to be looking for a better way of doing things. Whether that's theory and that kind of theoretical reason sensor, or practices in a practical reason sense and how we decide on what is better.

It aligns more with a human approach that we need to figure out if this is a more civilized and productive way of doing things than it used to be. Not necessarily the right one. Because again, I think searching for such essentials theoretically in any sense appeals to the worst of our theoretical tendencies.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Yeah. It really resonates with the pragmatism focused on the reframing or offering. A new perspective could also be a good theory. It's practical, it's useful in some sense as a way of offering a new, fresh perspective or something.

**[Mark Davidson]** Yeah. I think there were limits to the pragmatist approach. Sometimes the better isn't practical. One of the things I learned from engaging with someone like Rancière is the centrality of a notion of equality. That's not a claim that everyone is equal in any form or another, but in terms of their political status. That should be our approach. I'm a Democrat above everything else in that sense.

But I don't think that is often a practical thing. I think that's often a very difficult thing to work through. I think there are real limits to the pragmatist approach, but I think there is also a great deal of merit and perhaps it is ultimately a pragmatic approach to say 'We need to figure out which is the best



way to look at this particular problem we are dealing with.' And that may not be necessarily pragmatic. It may be that there are some moral positions that you just have to hold and live with. But again, that's to be non-essential about those moral positions you're holding.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Awesome. Thank you. I will go to Smruti now. I just wanted to know in your work you don't only advocate for the rights of citizens to occupy space that they currently reside in. But also you try to offer adequate strategies to manage the tension between the mainstream development activities versus those who hope to maintain their heterodox modes of being in the world.

So would you share some of the stories of how such tensions were able to relieve in a just or equal or social justice way?

**[Smruti Jukur]** Yeah, sure. So in an ideal world, we would believe that the city is for everyone. And hence it should be just to all the citizens. When there is an absence of formal structures or a city is unable to provide basics is where informality thrives.

The urban poor in most cases have always been put to test to demand their rights in the city. For example, the pavement dwellers in Mumbai, around the 80s and 90s, there were rampant evictions and they were being evicted then and again. Pavement is not the place for people to sleep because it's for the city, that's rightfully accepted. But then, what happens when cities fail to give what is affordable to the marginalized?

The first generation of the Federation leaders, especially the women, identify themselves as the Mahila. It translates as 'Women Together' in English. So they negotiated with the city with the laws to look out for a piece of land in the city that belonged to the public, let's say it's public land. It took them so many years in order to do those negotiations with the city and they identified a piece of land and negotiated for it and also paid for the land. And so building on that land housing for themselves and for similar people from the pavements end to end. So I think that changes the way we understand how to resolve tensions. There's always a way to negotiate. And that's something that leaders and slum dwellers federation has always believed in. To work together with the city.

Regarding the topic itself, the latter question, I think the critique with academic knowledge is that it's very esoteric to practice. Theory has a different purpose and it deserves this acknowledgement. It comes from rationalized thinking.

We've had researchers coming all, all over the globe to work with us. The question that communities ask, when sometimes in conversations, when we discuss theories, is that if it cannot be realized in practice, then who are these theories helping? It's helping build the knowledge base and how it is of use for solving problems of people on the ground now, research is built with evidence and there is little evidence of what people do themselves. The question, talking about the practice and what research can bring back, is 'How much of research comes back to people?'

That's a very fundamental question that I tend to ask a lot. When we look out for research proposals, we're looking for collaborations to work together. So I think it's time for academia to also come back to communities, to give back what they found. So the information is always taken away. And that also comes from data extraction from so many other discussions in academia. So where is all this data going, who is it serving? It's time that research and academia ask themselves: Is there a way to go back to communities to tell them what they found with that big deal of information that was collected and so that information is also translated in local language. That data can be used by local communities to





do whatever they like. They could use that data to plan better, to negotiate with municipalities. That's where collaboration and research comes from. And that's where we're talking about real partnerships.

The key there lies not only in writing academic papers, because that's what sets up the standards for academicians, but it's also to see how it can come back to communities. What? How? The findings come back to research.

And I think there's a whole deal of real ethics in research that lies there. You want to do research and there are these different theories that you want to test. All that is fine, but then whatever you collect in the process together with people should come back to people in some way.

So can you change your methods in a way that it helps people in some way, that there is a real contribution? And a simple way to look at it is asking what kind of budgets or finances is allocated within research to do that. So there's a whole different thing about it and we can go in all together off the tangent to speak about it.

But very briefly speaking I think that's how research can really help bring something to communities, and there's a big opportunity there because there's so many resources that go into doing so much research.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Thank you so much. I'd like to conclude by asking two questions to each speaker.

So the first question is, what are your inspirations or sources of hope for political transformation in the context that you're familiar with? And the second question is what political opportunities do the epistemological treat critics and practices that you referred to generate? Just a few sentences, starting from Mark.

**[Mark Davidson]** Oh, that's rather big questions to finish up on. I was hoping you might ask Prince or Smriti to answer first. Look, I think there are intentioned people who want to enhance and protect the things that they love in their lives and their cities all over the place. And I would hope that continues on. And I don't think any city is void of those forces. And I would like to think that they win out moving forward.

In terms of epistemology I'd go back to some of the things that Smriti was just saying. There are really important questions that the Academy has to be asking itself about the work that it does and the work that it asks itself to do. There has been a race to the bottom in that we are all asked to produce the same type of work. So all of our institutions want us to produce globally significant scholarship in one form or another and that tends to the theoretical, tends to the abstract.

I think the danger in that is that it has an increasing distance from practice and from the actual object of analysis. It is possible, I think, to live in a world of theoretical abstractions about the city, but it just produces more echoes for the academic echo chamber. And the worry that I have is that - in a globalized context that we've been living in - essentially, we've all been incentivized to produce that type of knowledge. It's come at the cost of the academic who is incredibly well versed in their local context. The one that is able to shepherd the intellectual and the theoretical into that context because of that expertise. My worry is that this type of academic, that type of intellectual is less and less possible in the world that we live in. And so the type of knowledge we valorize, elevate and celebrate in the academy has to become much more diverse than it is currently.



**[Ihnji Jon]** That's a really good point. Prince. Would you agree? What do you think?

**[Prince K Guma]** Yeah, of course, I completely agree. How can I not? Also really well said, Mark. But yeah for me, I think Smruti mentioned something about how we're dealing with a really complex thing. The city. It often seems to me that cities are always going to produce novel forms of urbanism regardless of how we might want to interpret them through a universal lens, in some cases. So I think this realization is really important and for me, really inspiring to try to be really keen on what kind of knowledge I am looking for. And what is my contribution in all of this?

I had the chance to do research about Nairobi for my PhD. Nairobi is one city that is really, highly fragmented and, highly splintered. Regardless of how well designed a project is going to be, as soon as it's deployed in Nairobi, it's always going to coexist with a large-scale urban fragmentation and formality of Nairobi. That in itself speaks to the complexity of the city that we are dealing with.

Where else I draw inspiration from is the urge to speak to different kinds of temporalities. The contingencies that you've mentioned at first, the context specific conditions of cities. For me, these become really important concepts to even work with for my own work.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Yeah, the emergent qualities that you highlight, right? It's emergent so it doesn't exist in theoretical abstraction because plural people are generating new realities every day, right?

**[Prince K Guma]** Yeah, exactly. And so how do we really theorize that? How do we speak to that? And so actually, my provocation to Mark wasn't really about a theory in and of itself. But I really believe that first what we should be working towards is trying to find ways of better operationalizing theoretical pluralism and being really sure that we have the right interpretations for the multitudes of urban wealth and realities. For me, that is a good point to start, and I think that's really where I draw inspiration, but that's really just to add on to what Mark just said.

**[Smruti Jukur]** In the lives of poor people, especially where we work, they are so constrained by just being born poor that they have to stand up every day to stand up to their vulnerabilities and that itself gives a lot of inspiration, a lot of hope, to say that there is anything, if there's anything that can be done in order to better their lives, in order to, help them lessen the burden that they're facing anyway. So I think that is where a lot of inspiration and hope comes through to a lot of people, in fact.

Even for academicians, they're trying to help build knowledge that they think would help change the way the world works. So I think that's where a lot of inspiration is to come.

**[Ihnji Jon]** Yeah. It reminds me of AbdouMaliq Simone's endurance of rhythms. It's the endurance of people that don't really have a lot of traditional or conventional resources per se, but they do have that energy and endurance to go on with their lives regardless of different circumstances that endanger their everyday livelihood.



**[Smruti Jukur]** Yeah. There are a lot of urbanists and researchers, Appadurai and Amartya Sen have spoken about aspirations and capacities of individuals to aspire. So there's so much capacity in individuals that they can change and they can do something.

Professionals, like us, can just support to make that happen.

**[Ihnji Jon]** But also the social infrastructure, right? A lot of Southern realities, we do still have the customs and social infrastructure that sustain the vulnerable livelihoods. Thank you so much everyone for this thought provoking conversation.