Dialogue actually is the weapon of the powerful (Interview of Pr. Gibson Burrell)

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Pictures of Gibson Burrell and Gislene Feiten Haubrich

Gislene: Thank you very much, Gibson, for accepting our invitation and being with us in this adventure that is JOCO, the journal we, as a network, are launching by December. Having you with us is an honour. Thank you very much.

Gibson: You're very welcome. Thank you very much for asking me. And I'll try and give you some honest sort of views. The person I live with has said I should not abuse any living people but I'm not sure that I will be able to do that. So, let's see.

Gislene: I'm pretty sure, it will be very good. We all are going to learn a lot and be thinking a lot after this conversation, as well for those who are going to read it. We are going to start by the most obvious question, I think. Prof. Gibson. You are very well known by the critical studies in the management field. Would you say the management studies in the critical studies, are very well understood? And how it has developed in the last years?

Gibson: The first thing to say is I regard myself, you know, self-identify as organisation theorist. And I've been doing that for fifty years. Critical Management Studies are often associated with Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott in that sort of school, in the 1990's. But the first appearance of the term 'Critical Management Studies', I think, is associated with two people in Industrial Relations, in the LONDON School of Economics, where they use that, they're talking about the development of industrial relations, but they use this term, Critical Management Studies. And I think that's from about 1977. But if we look at the field, it, like many, it all arises, it flowers, it decays. You know this is true of many things. I haven't seen it true of institutional theory, in organization theory yet, but I hope that it will happen!

So, the thing about it is… it's a portmanteau word. It allows you to carry inside the baggage all sorts of stuff. I think Bruno Latour and his actor-network theory have four recognised problems: what he means by actor, what he means by network, what he means by the hyphen, and what does he mean by theory? Same to Critical Management Studies: what do we mean by critical? What do we mean by management? What do we mean by studies? And I'm not going to go into all of that. But clearly, there's a tradition of critique, there's a tradition of understanding management, and there is what do you mean by studies; what methodologies do you use, and so on. And each of those elements in CMS is problematic.

What we've seen is… the way in which it seems like a standard, so there is a military metaphor: it seems like a standard by which to march, you know, to march behind, into battle, against to whatever your enemy is. But it then becomes this portmanteau, which covers a whole variety of stuff and then people start to say: well, what does it achieved? What has it done for those that are in this army, this marching, or a very small brigade or whatever? And the answer usually is it's enhanced their careers; it's given them some sort of reputation; it's something which they identify with and/or identified by. I think it was Thomas Kuhn who said: the real way in which a scientific field develops is when the old people die off. And it's a cruel sort of notion, but it may be that in order for things to progress beyond critical management studies, all that people that have exposed that, and that would include myself, would have to die off. So I'm not shutting out that possibility.

I think that critical management studies have achieved some things; it's made people think, but by no means is it new. People have thought about being critical of management if they've been in trade unions for a century and a half, at least. People are being critical of management by being workers. You know the Dilbert cartoons? If you if you see these, you know it's one of the bestselling things you will find in a bookshop, and it is all heavily hostile for management, senior management. To use the technical term, *it takes the piss out of* management very, very strongly. That seems to me what a lot of people do: they're going to work, and they think: this sloth, senior management, haven't a clue about what happens in this organization; haven't a clue what happens in the institution that I've just been thrown out of, oddly the

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University of Leicester. Exactly that. They haven't a clue about how an organization might function properly.

So, we can all be critical of management. Most people at work, in organizations, I find are very critical. They don't have a kind word to say about their managers often. But they just think "I've got to stay silent to have a job". And studies, in the UK, there has been a takeover attempt in the culture wars, so this is debate at the moment about all the culture wars happening in the UK. And the two cultures are: Sciences on the one side, and Humanities and Arts in the other. And it's maybe wider than that. But the Sciences is in the STEM subjects, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics are told this is where the future is for... You know, an island off the Western coast of Europe that has decided they don't want to be part of Europe, and the Arts and Humanities, their funding would have to be sacrificed. So, that's this struggle going on, and what that says is that critical management studies, because it studies using the arts and humanities, maybe more than the sciences, again is threatened. So, I'm sorry, this is a very long answer to your first question, but it gets me warmed up.

Gislene: No, perfect. Feel free professor, go forward. Actually, it goes for the second question: if you believe the critical studies might have a life outside the academia, or if they are surviving in academia, they can go outside the walls of the university, to reinvent themselves, maybe.

Gibson: Yes, I think universities have become much more conservative. Let me use the British example because, you know, I'm not able to comment outside that really. But in the British example, there was a small period of time between, let's say, 1955 and 1985, when the academics were much more influential. Prior to that, the majority of British universities, but not Oxford nor Cambridge, were governed by local businesspeople, businessmen, and their families that funded the rise of the university. And this might be true right across the Western Europe anyway. But in the post-war consensus, as universities expanded, university senates became more powerful. And that was the period when these were liberal institutions, there were the forefront of some progressive stuff. But in 1985, which again fits in Thatcherism thinking, the universities were told that they needed to be under the control of Councils rather than Senates, and Councils were made up of local businesspeople, mainly businessmen, and that is what governs most of them. Oxford and Cambridge still remained relatively democratic. They still have academics that have some influence about what happens.

And the Latin phrase *primus inter pares*, you know, the vice-chancellors were one amongst several, one amongst many. In other words, they knew they were going back to becoming academics having been academics. But now that's over. In the vast majority of places, vice-chancellors want honours, they want Knighthoods or dameships, and that seems to be their motivation. You know, they want to build buildings as memorials to their own sort of name. So, universities are not good places to be at the moment, although I've enjoyed my 50 years in them tremendously. And that's important to say to young people. They can be great places.

What would critical management studies outside of academic life look like? Well, I think the journal you know, would have things to say; they would be able to say things about that. As I've said, trade-unions were a place of anti-management thinking. Libraries were a place where people would go and talk about the way in which the world was moving. Coffee shops originally. In London, they're set up against the "gin palaces". The gin palaces were seen as places of debauchery whereas coffee houses were seen as a place where you can have *soirées*, you could meet, and you could talk. So, there's a whole variety of things... in a coffee shop... Intellectualizing... The trade unions and other forms of collective which we've yet to see. Cooperatives of various kinds. But universities, at the moment, in the United Kingdom... They can be quite unpleasant. Whereas being outside of them, I think, it can be quite pleasant. Although obviously you know that's not a binary thing, there are huge intermediate positions. So yeah, it's very possible organise outside of a formal bureaucratic system, like university. It's quite possible. You will be told, of course, that you're need to organise, that you need to have leadership. Now, if there's one thing that we should explode in critical management studies and organisation theory, it is the notion you need a leader. Because what a pernicious sort of notion that is. And this goes back...

There was an infamous cartoon, in the United States, in the 50s, which was a space being, an alien, you know, landing somewhere in New Mexico, because at the time that is where they were thought to frequent. And who lands, turns to someone that he or she or it has met in the desert, and says: take me to your leader. And that just encapsulates the idea. It's all there in science fiction. Hollywood just hammers away at that sort of notion. So, we need to get rid of the pernicious notion of leadership. Whether it's acephalous, you know, without a head, or whether it's communal thinking, or whatever. Alex Ferguson, who managed Manchester United rather successfully for a number of years, used to say to his players, and I'm not sure that this is a good metaphor, but he used to point out, when they were practicing, to a flock of the geese that was flying over, and he would say: you see, it appears to be the one in the front, but every goose takes a turn at leading. That is the notion of his football teams... you know, there weren't just one captain

or one manager: everybody had to take their turn at leadership. And that story is about the level of the leadership theory. We must get rid of it. Most of it is absolutely dreadful. So, I've had a sideswipe but that is well, sorry.

Gislene: No, perfect, perfect, prof. Gibson. But if we don't have leadership, do you believe we have any kind of structure that might guide us, or help us, to build something else?

Gibson: There are structures which are acephalous, you know, without a head. The trouble is the lens by which we look at them looks to 'lead' us. Once you got a cultural expectation that there will be a leader, we spend our time looking for who it is, rather than seeing it in much more democratic shared sort of way. I know people who live in communes, and the temptation that they find is to try and avoid someone becoming a leader. There's a ceremony in North America, mainly in the Northwest Pacific states, the Potlatch ceremony. The Potlatch ceremony is a way the tribe would try to prevent a leader from developing. And so what the leader, the chief would have to do was burn all his or her accumulated surplus from the year. And they would burn it. And that was to prevent them becoming an established elite. Now, all that people have said, is well, at the end of the next year, it was still the same people burning off surplus in the Potlatch ceremony. I'm not sure that's the case. But that society make huge efforts to prevent the establishment of elites, the establishment of ruling families. Yet, Hollywood movies and beyond that, novels, all tell us that the natural figure arises. And he or she will take their rightful position through birth, through physical prayers, or whatever, at the head of the organisation. And I suspect, if we have a look over the last 10 thousand years of how people were organised, leadership, as we understand today, may not have been that common. I would hope that I would be the case. It's just so entrenched in culture, current culture.

Gislene: Yeah, yeah. This is the challenge that I'm trying to decode with you because we see, for example, now with the pandemic, that everybody is hoping for a saviour, or in the economy. They are expecting someone to take the lead and solve the problems. And this is a cultural issue that comes after, maybe, an educational flaw or something like that? Why do you think, nowadays we expect so much someone to take the lead, and us assuming a position, not passive, but a kind of passivity?

Gibson: Yes, in who's interest is it that we are told we need leadership? The current leadership. Mao Tse Tung, who has a bad press, in the Cultural Revolution, was trying to develop anti-leadership notions, whilst keeping himself very much as the leader. He asked people to raise

the question about why the elderly should be given more respect? Why should it be that expertise only lay in one or two hands? There was a circulation of population again that many people know. People were working universities and went into the fields; people went to work in the fields and went to the universities. That circulation happened. And that's an attempt, what I called a long time ago, anti-organization theory, where you take everything that organisation theory says is right and normal and fixed and static, and you problematise it. So, under the Cultural Revolution that happened. But then, people said: well, in the Cultural Revolution people starved to death; there was the collapse of the economy, which may be the case. But, of course, faced with the cultural revolution in China, the people that supplied the technology, Western technology, to China stopped sending it. So, a lot of the machinery of governments, a lot of the machinery behind industry, ceased operating. But that was the western intervention in it. Noam Chomsky writes about this, he writes about Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and people have said: look at their killing fields, look at the number of people who've died. Clearly, that is a huge set of problems. It looks like genocide in some sorts of ways. But organizationally, there was an attempt to do something that was the inverse of the way in which people did it. Of course, those two things get put together, so people said: whatever you try do something differently, lots of people die, which does not have to be the case. I'm not defending the Pol Pot regime or the Cultural Revolution. What I'm saying is: there were interesting things that were happening in an organisational sense there that, at least, we should read about.

Gislene: Thinking about a possibility to change and considering the examples you got us from, for example, the cafes. We study a lot of the collaborative spaces and, *tier-lieux* in the broader sense. How could we understand them from the organisational point of view? Does it could be an organization? A cafe or coworking space: can we understand it as an organisation?

Gibson: Well, that's a very good question as well because the whole issue about what an organisation is comes to the fore of: how bureaucratic does it has to be? The history of organisation theories is about the rise of bureaucracy really. I mean, Max Weber talks a lot about the military, and it is the organisation of the military which lies at the origins of the organisational theory. So, what organisation means often is bureaucracy and someone like Paul Du Gay is very keen on seeing that linkage is very strong. Other people have said: well, what we're interested in is organising, not organisation. Organising as a process rather than as the fixed structures. I think that's where there's much more opportunity to think about how we would organise ourselves in an organizing sense, the processes, and trying to stop

structures from developing, maybe. Again, back to the Cultural Revolution, the circulation of jobs, the circulation of power around, the questioning of those that claim leadership, which happens in many anarchists' communes, anyway. Organising opens itself for much more, I think, to thinking about alternatives. But organisation often relates to bureaucratic structure. Michel Foucault talks, in French, about *l'organisation*, which gets translated by the British translator, as organisation structure. But I'm not sure that that's a good translation. So, organising allows much more leeway, rather than organisation as a way forward possibly in this.

But I wouldn't turn my back on organisation because the stances, the fixity, the structuring, it happens, and you start with it. You can structure a process and you can understand processing structure. Karen Dale and I talked about Riparian metaphor for this. Riparian is from the Latin for the riverbank, and it's the way in which the two things intertwine. The riverbank looks fixed and the water, the river looks like it's movement, but, in fact, there's structure is in the water and there's movement on the bank. It's a pretty mundane metaphor but the riparian sort of view of it, get that both structure and process. So, I don't want to end this little section on saying: there's organisation structure in one hand and, there is process on the other. There are bits of both. But it's a matter of emphasis. So yes, we can look at process and there's a lot in a process perspective we could get from a whole variety of different forms of organising.

Gislene: In your point of view, the concepts of commons, community, and the idea of communion, as a process, can help us thinking about these new collaborative spaces? Do these ideas connect or not?

Gibson: Yes, definitely. My grandmother was born in 1891. And she didn't say communism, she said *commune-ism*. She pronounced it that way. Before the First World War, the notion of commune was so central to those people on the left, who were interested in ideas. Community is such a powerful sort of notion too. But of course it could be some very right-wing communities. Someone does not necessarily imagine that community has to be full of people that have got progressive, liberal sorts of values. But one of the things that I have been quite keen on is the notion of the community of scholars, where people don't necessarily share the same sort of views, but they are united by the notion of exchanging, within a communal space, ideas, debate in their very heart. But you listen, it is not that your ears are closed to it. The concept of community, in many ways, I would regard as very positive. The concept of commune, I would see as very positive. And again that's been lost, you know, in the anti-Marxist late 20th century, earlier 21st century. The whole

value of thinking about that. Anarchism, for example. I think, and I may be completely wrong in this, and people will rather correct me, but I think in *Les Miserables*, there is a song in there about the red and the black, which is the flag of anarcho-syndicalism. But all that is lost, certainly in the English translation and when it's on stage. But at the time, it was such a strong notion, anarchism and syndicalism fused together. You know, acephalous groups but around the workplace. And that's gone. British trade unionism certainly has no flavour of that. I think it may be stronger in France and other places maybe. But that tradition, I only wish it has a fraction of the life that it used to have. So, a sense of history is really crucial for understanding organizations. There are people who say history is important; there's a number of scholars I could quote. But that's so true. If we want to look at the last 10 thousand years of how humans have organized, we will see so many ideas but what is told; there is 10% of what has happened that we're told is legitimate. And in that 10%, there's a whole of leadership, whereas outside of that, the 90% of the other ways that people have organised, I don't think we've got that as strongly.

Gislene: Yeah, I agree. And thinking about these new collaborative spaces and how they're connected to these new ways of working and thinking about new ways of working usually relies on the idea of the technology, and how technology enables people to work from anywhere and things like that. But also on the idea of the possibility, or the need we have to be part of a community, to be connected with other people. And many times we suppose that traditional structures would not have that kind of possibility. Do you think now we are experiencing this common movement in a genuine way? Are we looking for being part of a collective, really? Or looking forward to building something common? Do you believe we might have a sparkle of that anywhere?

Gibson: Yes, commonality, I think is really important. Many people do not like working from home, partly because they are exposed to their family. This is a joke by the way. But partly because of the loneliness of being isolated. The Americans have got the phrase about *water cooler moments*, where people go and get a glass of water when they know that the people are there, just to engage in human interaction. But certainly, in the west, - in the west of the USA, in particular - the rise of a culture which is so self-centred, so individualistic, so narcissistic, where everything is a mark of oneself. So, there's this whole sort of tradition. No, tradition is too strong. There is this development of the ideas of impression management: you've got to seek to impress your superiors and your equals; the presentation of self, which Goffman talked about. It's all about the self, it's all about even the *id*. Identity has got *id* at the beginning of it, so it means an entity which is all about your *id*. That concentration

down into what used to be called a <u>transcendental ego</u> – the true self - but the transcendental ego is really the self-part, the culture emphasizes that so much. It tends to go against cooperation, it's so competitive. "How you look? How you perform? How you behave? What you've achieved? What you've got? What you drive? Where you live?" All of those trappings there, the commodification of self. They seem to me to go against ideas of community, ideas of shared moments. But of course, even those incredibly narcissistic people like shared moments because they can show off. People who believe in social interaction at large scales have been frightened by meeting those that are infected and so on. So, it's cultural. There are cultures which do emphasize much more communitarian sort of perspectives, and there's, as I just said: communities which are incredibly individualistic. But organizations themselves have those tensions within them. The way in which work is fragmented into individual sort of tasks and the way in which, allegedly, it's all about teams. And it seems to me allegedly.

There's the American program that Trump sort of fronted, *The Apprentice*. It has been in Britain, and it keeps coming back. It's all about your interaction, in a communal sense, with a group of other people but all the time trying to stab them in the back. That just adds fuel to this idea about: "Do you want to be collective? Well, trust nobody".

In the not-for-profit sector, in the NHS, in a whole variety of voluntary organizations, it's much more open to collectivity and sharing things and so on. I was once in a hospital's *Intensive Care Unit*, and I happened to be awake at the time, and the way which the staff were trying to stop people dying was to eat together. They constantly ate together. So, that sense of collectivity through breaking bread, and there's, obviously, a biblical reference there, it's so strong. They constantly ate together. People would bring stuff in, and they would eat together. That was the one way in which in the face of very difficult circumstances, people dying all around them, they kept it together.

Gislene: We're going to touch one of these points that's the power relations in this kind of new ways of working. And you touch it a bit but if you could say something else about it because we have this idea, that is maybe just a discourse: we're looking for horizontal organizations, flat organizations but we might not be used to it. How do you see these things?

Gibson: The first thing that comes to mind is the power of algorithms. If we are communicating through technology, there's a whole hidden world there of hierarchy of which we are not aware. You and I are

talking, we could see each other, but behind this, there's a huge infrastructure of Zoom and so on. The first thing is: in interactions, there are always powerful organizations at play. So, if you sit in a room, there's the furniture, there's what you wear, there is the arrangement of the room, there is the way in which the boss's chair is often higher than yours. You've got an uncomfortable seat while she or he has got something that is very comfortable, and they can lean back and do the way they like feeling comfortable. The technology around us is part of the power structure. The algorithms that people are using through screen-to-screen communications are really powerful and we are not aware of those. Behind almost every human interaction, there's structure which we, sometimes, don't appreciate. You and I are speaking English because you're very kindly doing that, but the structures of language are important: what language does one speak?

We're told that dialogue is in an egalitarian thing; we are equal in a dialogue. Dialogue actually is the weapon of the powerful. They insist on dialogue: they can deny it, or they can allow it. But it's when people talk behind their back, when they have conversations which the powerful are excluded from, then their regard gets problematic. I've been part of an organisation until recently, where our emails were being read. So, the idea that egalitarian structures are possible, of course, they are! But *my god*, there's many, called, structural forces, that encloses in what Max Weber might have called <u>an iron cage</u>. So, the processes take place within that. The trouble is: we're not aware of them.

We think if we're in the open air talking to someone, a thousand miles away, somehow, we've got freedom, and then being able to talk to people. But we are encased within a whole set of structures which allow what we're saying to be listened to, extracted, monetised... Yes, it is possible with these technologies, these new structures be more egalitarian. But let's not forget: that old thing that the last thing a fish would theorise is the sea in which it swims. So, we might theorise the interaction between us, but around that, there's a whole ocean of structures and processes that allow us to do this, of which we might not think very much about. Ever.

Gislene: We usually think about power relations in the physical, let's say, environment: what we can see, touch each other, but actually, power relations are everywhere.

Gibson: Yes, absolutely. One doesn't have be a Foucauldian, I think, to see that. Let's just mention <u>Habermas</u> about the <u>linguistic world</u> in which we live. Language itself is full of power. Language itself has a whole variety of structures built into it, whether it's

English or other linguistic forms. The medium that we use isn't egalitarian. In order to be truly thinking about structures, we have to change almost everything. So, would it be _Esperanto_? I'm not sure that it would, because I think there's a lot of structure built into that too. But if we start saying the language that we use, in order to escape, is itself imprisoning, it's not a very optimistic message. So, finding new forms of discourse... but would we entrust anybody to come up with a new form of discourse, without calling them leader?

Gislene: Gibson, we have two questions to go yet, and this one, well, you've mentioned you've been working for 50 years in the field of management as an academic. When you look back at your career, which moments make you proudest? And there's any regret when you look back?

Gibson: Yeah, having criticised West Coast narcissism, this is a question which encourages it from a British person. The thing which I would like my colleagues to think is that we've tried to build a community of scholars. We tried to be communal, to celebrate the successes of others. And that community I've already mentioned. You didn't have to agree with each other. It wasn't as if it was a mono-dimensional, monotheistic sort of thing but at least you had to listen, you have to come and be prepared to listen, and to argue and debate and go away muttering afterwards. That's part of it. The Greeks have the idea about the _Agora_, which was a marketplace, I think, in Athens. The _Agora_ was a place where people came and debated, the senate... well, it wouldn't be called a senate, would it? The way in which the groups would talk to each other... - all men of course, no slaves either - but they would talk to each other and that sort of approach of debate, but without the phallocentrism, and without the slaves, seem to me that it would be an ideal thing: you would sit around, and you would talk. Now, lots of people would say, where's the action in that? Is a talking shop what you think is the way forward? Well, it seems to me that has to be done at some point. So, a community of scholars, in one or two places, that grew, and then died. But it was a way of organizing, I think, which brings out the best in people, I would like to think. It's supportive, it encourages people to say what they think, not to be quiet; it allows great release of energy sometimes to know that people are interacting with you on the basis of friendship. The thing about Leicester is, people who are my colleagues and they are my friends. Because of the adversity that we've been through that's important. I'm not saying that we have to be friends with everybody. Lots of people, I would never say I'm friends with, but I would respect them, and I hope it'll be the same. So that's the community of scholars. That would be some small sort of contribution, even though it doesn't exist anymore.

The things to be ashamed of? The regrets? Not supporting the British coal miners more when I should have, in the 1980s. That's a deep regret. I wake up at nights about that. I lived in Lancaster at the time, and there were a group of people striking nearby who were from a coal mine that was very close to where I was born. It wasn't the same place, but it was pretty close. They spoke in an accent I understood.

They were living in tents to stop coal being imported from Poland. They lived in tents, and I thought: "I should ask them for dinner, to come to the house and have a bath", that sort of thing, but I never did. I had three daughters who were all under eight years old at the time. That was my excuse: were these guys going to come drunk or were they going to swear in front of them? But I really regret that. I should have done so much more. And that that haunts me, because I'm from a coal mining village and I should have done much more.

Also I should have resisted a pro-vice chancellor once, who was horrendous at the job. And I used to say to myself: "well keep your powder dry, Gibson". There's a military thing about you don't fire your gun because your powder is wet, so you keep your powder dry, and you can resist. And I used to say to myself: "keep your powder dry Gibson, you'll be able to use that some other time" and I never did. I never fired a shot at this one particular person, and I should have fired many shots. Organisations create quiescence, they engender fear. They bring about some of the worst forms of unethical behaviour, that you are forced to do because your superiors say that you have to.

I know someone that worked in a call centre, and her job was to tell people that their gas supply would be turned off because they hadn't paid. She was not allowed to listen to the stories that people said about their husbands leaving, about losses of jobs, etc. All she had to do was to stick to the script, in this call centre. Every night, she had to come back home and have a very deep bath and wash the sins of the day away. And I just thought: "how come that's such a powerful story", where you've got to wash away the organisation, because it had such a corrosive effect on your skin, on your mind, on your soul. And I have one or two of those experiences. Well, not the same as the person I'm mentioning, who every day had to do that. So, yeah, regrets, I should've "fired many shots" at this pro-vice chancellor and I should have been done more to help the miners who I empathize with so much. Two regrets. And lots of others I'm not going to tell you about.

Gislene: I think those two are great for us to think, and most important, for us to listen to your story and how

you perceive the story, because at the end, we are people who are trying to do our best to change the reality around us and sometimes it doesn't work the way we want to and it's good to know that we all have the chance to look back and see how we could have done things. So, thank you for being so generous and telling us this stuff, that's quite personal. And for us to finish: for those people who want to follow the path in academia, in the university, or maybe not at the university itself, which pieces of advice would you provide us?

Gibson: The first thing to say is: they're great! Ok, I have spent my time saying that they are bureaucratic and have all sorts of problems with the people within them, but they're great. If you are part of a community of scholars, if you are dealing with young people and shaping the way in which they see the world. That's fantastic! Absolutely fantastic! At the time, people who were doing a degree as undergrad or postgrad, they may be so glad to finish. But occasionally, very occasionally, someone will come up to you, twenty, thirty years later, if you're an old person, and say: "I really enjoyed that. What you did for me was the change the way in which I saw the world". And if that happens you know once a year, once a decade, you think: absolutely great! So, the first thing is universities are full of interesting thoughtful people, who are in the main doing their best to think. And thinking is the key thing. They are places where you can research, in most places, you can research what you like, you are given this freedom to actually open the doors to your mind, the doors of perception maybe, and think about things in a very deep sort of way and that's a huge privilege. A huge privilege. You haven't got the mundanities of being in a call centre, not being able to say to someone: "sorry", when you're cutting off their electricity or their gas or whatever.

They are places where you get a sense of the openness of humanity to thoughts of all sorts. I mean, really interesting thinkers are the ones who would never fit in universities. The really interesting thinkers are the ones that would be fired very early on. The really interesting ones are those people that are often thrown out the universities or never get promoted because they challenge far too much, as far as the systems concerns. They're great to have around, they're difficult sometimes. They're really difficult.

I've told the story before, but I worked with someone called Bob Cooper who was a friend of mine. We were asked to do a talk and he was fantastic, and I was decidedly very average. This was not at the university; it was a private consultancy. They wanted us to stand for pictures in Amsterdam, with bowler hats and umbrellas, as if we were the stereotypical sort of British or English person. Bob, turned to the organiser, and he said angrily:

"we are proper fucking academics!" And it's that notion that I've always found so good. So, that's my advice to young people that want to go into universities: be proper fucking academics. That's a wonderful career if you can make it. But you've got to get rid of all of that model of old folk, people getting in the way. You got get to rid of all the powerful people getting in the way. A new generation can make universities much better than the currently are.

Gislene: We hope so. But the challenges are big. We're hoping so. Thank you very much, Gibson, for your kindness since our very first email exchanging, for accepting our invitation. We knew, from François, who's suggested your name, he told me it would be a great interview. And absolutely, it was and I'm pretty sure everybody will enjoy it. So, thank you very much.

Gibson: Thank you very much for asking me and I thoroughly enjoyed it. But that was the nature of the interviewer, and the questions and the fact that, you know, I like talking about these things. So, thank you very much.