**20180617 SSFS5 LAU Kin Chi: Utopia and Rurban Alternatives (35 mins)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7PEA5jSe2o>

Good morning. This is the last day of the Forum. Apart from discussing prepared papers, we hope we could be interacting with each other. Just now Professor Dai referred to Frantz Fanon's ideas, so this I will not repeat.

I would like to start by referring to what MP said. We had MP as the first speaker for this Forum. MP wrote a long paper well in advance, and circulated for dynamic debates. I have made a photocopy of his paper for you to refer to. After MP wrote the paper, many friends read it, and some told him “you're too utopian”. I think we are always encountered with this question of being dismissed as utopian whenever we put forth something that one almost cannot imagine. Yet I think this question of utopia is extremely necessary. Francois Houtart was with us in the Third South-South Forum on Sustainability. His keyword was also “utopia”. The utopia is practicable and is possible. There are many things in MP’s paper that one may or may not agree with, yet there are certain points which I would want to highlight because I actually agree very much with his views. Erebus Wong and Kho Tungyi had read his paper thoroughly and had made responses, and to which MP had responded before he came to the Forum. All these are on the Reader on the Global U website.

In MP’s paper, how does he talk about the question of abundance or development? MP says socialist experiments in the 20th century suffered from many features of capitalism, especially the mistaken notion of abundance. I would like to elaborate a bit more on this question, about the problem of abundance. The whole question about abundance is embedded in the notion of development. Abundance is mostly conceived in material terms, and even happiness and desire are so framed. Apparently, it always must find the material form in commodities. I feel MP has struck on a very key question. What we are faced with is, when we critique capitalism, it's not only the question of exploitation of labor, and the question of poverty, with which we are all very familiar with, but the critique is how this mode organizes our way of life, relationships between humans, and our relationships with nature. We have the notion of abundance, or better material life, embedded in the whole notion of development; we had this very romantic idea in the past, maybe a century ago. There was this romantic idea, that there are infinite resources, natural or human, that you could resort to, so that you could continue to develop the economy. Yet if we refer to the simple fact of the ecological crisis that we are encountered with, and the very imminent collapse of the entire civilization and of humanity, and possibly, with the threat of nuclear war, the end of the planet itself, in these times, we have to be radically revisiting the notions of the continuous and desirable development of productivity. In the idea of productivity itself, we have the whole logic of development and so-called material abundance.

When MP talked about the question of abundance, I think maybe the best example to take is the statement by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s, that “the only rock-hard truth is development”（发展是硬道理）. It is rock-hard; it is the only truth. Of course, we are also familiar with his other idiomatic saying: 摸着石头过河: You have to grope on the stones or the rocks while you are wading across the stream and the river. So there is the certainty in the idea that we have to develop, and the uncertainty of how to do it. You see this very paradoxical proposal that came hand in hand. I have very little time, so I would just highlight some points. We can go into the debates in the afternoon.

The second question is: MP quoted the Marxist idea about the ending of the contradiction between town and countryside. It's on the first page of MP’s paper. Then the question is: we see the huge polarizations and differentiations between urban and rural, town and countryside, and yet how do we resolve the contradiction? In mainstream discourse and mainstream practice, the idea is to resolve this contradiction by putting an end to the countryside, to agriculture, and even to the peasants. Their imagination is to go for urbanization. Because urbanization represents a better, more comfortable, cozy way of living than being in the so-called backward countryside. You can do away with small peasant agriculture, because you can have mechanized agriculture, and the machines can replace labor in production. So agricultural products are produced in an industrial way, it is industrialized agriculture. As for the peasantry, there is this age-old idea that they are the backward class, they are the potatoes. The best they can do is to go into alliance with the revolutionary proletariat. The idea to eliminate the peasants is there. You can find it in many official documents, in the ideology. As if no one would like to continue to be a backward peasant, working on the land, so the best way is to do away with the peasantry itself. And you have workers in industrialized agriculture. In China, you see this proposal of resolving the contradiction, but through what means? Through ending the countryside, the rural, the agrarian, the peasantry. But is this what we want? I think the idea of ending the contradiction is also embedded in the notion and the logic of development, which is based on the western model of capitalism, without mentioning its plunder and exploitation, as the path for humanity, as the ideal progressive way of life.

We are now in the 100th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement in China. In India, a hundred years ago, it was much at the same time that Gandhi put forward the ideas about self-rule. I always feel that India is a little bit better than China, in that there are some reservations, or inabilities, to pursue rapid modernization, industrialization and urbanization, even if the mainstream imagination is urbanization, and of course, modernization. I think that is why we find this apparent contradiction, when China portrayed itself sometimes as capitalist, sometimes in the first stage of socialism, sometimes already into communism, and then in the early 1980s, it has reverted to the so-called preliminary stage of socialism. We can see many capitalist features in the Chinese characteristics of development. It is not just a question of critiquing capitalism, but critiquing the whole paradigm of development, the whole paradigm of modernization, which is if we look globally at the five hundred years of plunder, massacres, and genocide. That fact is very much removed from the mainstream horizon. The mainstream talk a lot about the massacres by the Nazis during the Second World War, and the massacres by Stalin. Yet the massacres of the indigenous populations in Latin America and Africa are very seldom mentioned. However this is integral to the capitalism we see today. We have to discuss whether there's possibly capitalism without imperialism, or capitalism without plunder and exploitation.

MP was trying to call on Gandhi's ideas to propose the ending of the contradiction between town and countryside. What did he propose? He proposed what he called self-reliant Village Republics, in the form of Grand Oceanic Circles, taken from Gandhi. The free individuals, the productive individuals, the self-reliant individuals, with their communities, form the village republic. They cater for most of their needs, material and immaterial. When the needs cannot be fully met in that community, you have the horizontal oceanic circles. It is conceived not as a hierarchical structure; it is a horizontal structure. We have Professor Mohanty here who can speak much better than I do on this idea.

The idea of the federation of self-reliant village republics has its base in the village, as republics, federated with other village republics, and the premise is from micro to macro. The micro is not the trivial. It is the primary. The community is the primary base, where there is a process of the micro federating with other expanding circles. There is the wonderful image that you are well placed in a room, and the windows are open, with the flow of the breeze. I think MP was trying to envision the possibility of ending the contradiction, not by eliminating peasantry, the countryside, and agriculture; but by having them as the base, where we have agriculture, handicrafts, and the necessary manufacturing industries which supplement our basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. If we take MP’s ideas seriously, we could theorize local community endeavors that we see in different parts of the world. They are micro. They may be fragmented. They may be under a lot of challenges. Yet they are the base. They are the seeds from which will grow a better, non-violent world, which can be a world that we can imagine for peace.

MP quoted Rosa Luxemburg saying that “the natural end of capitalism is barbarism not socialism.” It is the natural end. If we are not to intervene rigorously into the process, we will be in this natural logic of all of us being buried by the catastrophe. This means it requires our conscious intervention. Of course, there are all the debates about the vanguard, the party, the community, and we can go into that later. For MP, I think, the vanguard is not so much the political party, but rather, technicians, technical corps, micro enterprise consultants, engineers, scientists, teachers, health workers, that work together with the communities to ensure their livelihood and well-being.

MP is not talking like a dreamer. His ideas are based on almost 60 years of solid work in Kerala, with the KSSP, with the All India People’s Science Network, and with the people's planning campaign. If you are interested, please look at his biography published by Global U and available on the website. The ideas come from his experiences, with of course the encountering of a lot of problems and constraints.

Another point I think is also very important when we talk about the idea of the common. MP quotes Marx as saying that we are not the owners of the earth, but we are only its beneficiaries, and we are responsible to pass it on to the coming generations in better conditions. If we are asked how we are doing, how we are being responsible to the next generations, I think we will all be in shame and in guilt. Some of the problems are not brought about by us, but we are also part of the problem, and hopefully part of the solution. What is this world that we are going to pass on to the next generation in 10 years, in 20 years? A more distressing question is: Do we have a world, a planet, to pass on to our next generations? About this idea of the ownership of the earth, I think this is also the basis of our proposing the idea of the common. I don't think there is a kind of common as one entity, as a pre-existing concept, that we follow as a model. When we discuss the concept of the common, and look at the practices, we are looking at different situations in different historical conjunctures, based on the specific relationships within the community, and also the relations of the community to the state, transnational capital, and nature.

The idea of replacing private property with state or public property sometimes looks progressive in some ways, yet we are still constrained in the framework of property, which is also why we see in China, in the 1980s and the 1990s, there was this process of turning publicly owned property into state property, then conveniently turning that into private property. We have to re-examine that experience of how that was done with all the rhetoric and propaganda about the inefficiency and bankruptcy of publicly owned and state enterprises to justify the shift. On the question of the common, it is also a discussion about property, and the ways in which so-called resources are organized. I agree with MP’s idea that the seeds of a new society have to grow from within, and when they become healthy strong plants, they disseminate more seeds.

I would like to invite you to read his paper carefully. There are things I may not agree with, but we can see how MP came up with his ideas based on his own actual experience in Kerala, working in the local communities. He proposed local self-government structured basically on watershed systems, because the soil and the water would be the main determinants of the organizing of society. He gave a very beautiful example of how this can be done. He detailed a scenario of a community of about 20 to 50 square kilometers, with 20,000 to 30,000 people, who can organize and manage on their own as much as possible in a self-reliant way. I won't go further into that now.

I would like to talk about some experiments that are exemplary, and I think they exist everywhere, everywhere in the world, near us, in the neighborhoods. The question is how we can recognize them, give them visibility, and help promote their resilience and sustenance. This time in the Forum, we have heard about the example of Rojava. This example is so beautiful, because it is happening in a very devastated war situation in Syria, as if there can only be despair, there cannot be hope, there can only be suffering. Yet, we see the Rojava experiment. I won't go further into that because I think many of you know about it. We also talked about the Mondragon experiment, which is a very famous example. When I was still an undergraduate, which was many years ago, the first thing we talked about with regard to the co-operative movement was to learn from the Mondragon experience. The Mondragon experience developed in the very difficult conflict situation in Basque, when the political aspiration for moving forward was political separation of Basque from Spain. Yet, the Mondragon experiment focused on building a local community, and foster local interactions, with or without state-imposed criteria. We also have many examples from Kerala, or the cooperatives in India that Bidyut Mohanty showed us yesterday which are generally perceived as being “backward”. There are a lot of examples. We are not romanticizing them, but they are examples of how in very difficult and constrained situations, women in particular have been able to create their communities, such as SEWA in India. The beautiful example of the Zapatistas also offers a very good experience of building local communities through the caracole governance. We will hear more about the Zapatistas this afternoon.

I would like to give you very briefly two examples from China. One example is the Yongji community. On the first day, you've heard from some of our friends here, like Liang Shaoxiong, who have gone to and settled down in Yongji community which welcomes young people by saying, if young people from our own village or from outside would like to return or come to our village to do farming, we will give them a piece of land. You plough that piece of land. You form a cooperative. At the same time, you take up creative work that you like. The Yongji community has gone through a long process of organizing. We have Yan Xiaohui here who is working on his Ph.D thesis based on the Yongji example. Many articles have been written on Yongji, it’s not as if they don't have difficulties, but I think it's one of the most beautiful examples of a local community organizing since the early 1980s when there was the state policy imposed on the communes to divide up for atomized production. Hence, the land was divided. But in Yongji they tried to later on recover some land for collective management and collective farming. I do not have the time to go into the details, but I think it is an example of how the peasants try to organize on their own in order to counter the negative effects of marketization and atomization from the 1980s on.

Another example is Zhoujiazhuang. I didn't know about Zhoujiazhuang until the first time when we organized the South South Forum on Sustainability in December 2011. Before the Forum, we organized three separate study tours for Forum participants to visit villages in different regions of China. In our group, we had Muto Ichiyo, Pedro Paez, Jorge Ishizawa, Isagani Serrano, Yan Xiaohui, and others. We went to visit this only and last people's commune at the township level. After going there in 2011, in the last seven years, every year some of us still went back to follow how it has been doing. This is an example of a very brave attempt by the peasants to not divide up, because in 1981-82, the state decided that the better way to go forward was to dismantle the people's communes, to dismantle collectivism, and go back to individual household responsibility system. So everywhere, whether you liked it or not, the communes were forced to dismantle. Zhoujiazhuang, with 14,000 population, had a good size in the Gandhian idea of running a community. Zhoujiazhuang is divided into ten production brigades, with 700 to 1700 people in each brigade. In 1982 they had an assembly to discuss among themselves, thought they had benefited from their collective organizing which has a history since 1956. So they said NO, “we do not want to divide up.” I won't go into the details. I am writing a paper on this. In this whole process, we see a very creative and bold effort by the members of this commune to try to own and manage the land and property collectively. In 1982, they got the word from the central government to allow them to go on in their preferred collective form, “You try and see if you do better than the others, and if you don't do better, you divide up.” They made an effort. They tried and did much better than the others. So they were allowed to continue. In the early 1980s, there was free education and free health care provided by the commune, and they started building a house with the same size for every household in the village.

I would like in the remaining five minutes to discuss some concepts. Today we talked about the question of post-capitalism. I wonder whether we need to talk about post-civilization instead. I'm not trying to be apocalyptic, but the question is: with the capitalist civilization, the civilization of plunder and exploitation, are we going to survive it? When we talk about possible ways forward, I think it's not a question of whether it is capitalist or socialist, or post-capitalist or post-socialist. If we are more practical or pragmatic, the question is how to survive the catastrophes that may befall us, with a scenario of maybe 1% or 10% of the human population that can survive.

MP again. He proposed that we should share knowledge and skills as much as possible with the masses. Everybody should know how to grow things, how to make a fire, how to have survival tactics, how to use appropriate technology, so that the survivors of nuclear disasters or severe climate change can make do. He proposed spreading survival knowledge and skills. Secondly, we should change our diet, and go for fruits and tuber-based diets, the roots. You can see what we have grown in the Lingnan Garden. We have been working on the project of Lingnan Gardeners for two years. My students are encouraged to learn some farming and food processing. We have courses on agriculture and on food sovereignty. If we have the scenario of catastrophe, if the worst may come, how can we make the best of it?

Lastly and very quickly on the question of agency. Yes, we have been talking about the proletariat as the revolutionary class, but in the book that I co-edited with Remy Herrera, *The Struggle for Food Sovereignty” Alternative Development and the Renewal of Peasant Societies Today*, we elaborated what La Via Campesina has been talking about: the question of food sovereignty. I wonder if the subject of history should be people who produce food and life? It is not peasants in the old sense of the word, because that is placed in the hierarchal order of modern division of labour, in an unequal and unjust paradigm of the city dominating the countryside, the industrial class more “progressive” and revolutionary than the peasantry. The subject of peasantry is placed in that kind of understanding of history. Yet in the model of the common, everybody should be producing food and life, so shouldn’t food producers and life givers be the agents of history, agents of revolution, of survival? MP would call them “rurban producers”, combining the word rural and urban. In “rurban”, the rural and the urban are not two concepts in antagonism. It is one. It is one entity. You are a rural-and-urban producer, a life-giving person.

My last point is: we have also talked about, debated about, the question of rights in our Forum, but I think the question of rights is part of the paradigm of capitalism. In our imagination for the common, I think the keywords should be trust and cooperation for interpersonal, interdependent and reciprocal relationships. It is through a sustained period of living and working together that we can evolve a pattern of managing the common. Trust and cooperation, instead of rights. I don't totally reject the idea of rights, because it could be used in specific contexts.

My last word is: do not reject utopia. We need it to continue with our hope, to fight despair. If we are capable of seeing all the courageous and bold endeavors existing today, we can imagine the future. Thank you.

PS. History may have taught us to be hesitant and have doubt about utopia for it seems to suggest a future reduced to one voice and one mind, or voices and minds that are the same. However, such an understanding only suggests that we are deficient in our understanding of how efforts cooperate and work together to produce and create new relations and new forms of life. To free ourselves from such a trap that leads us to abandon our creative energy and capacity for holding dreams and a sense of direction, refusing to give in to despair, Gandhi’s idea of federated communities and Nature’s biodiversity can have important lessons for us to learn. Rather than one voice, one mind, we have many voices, many minds, various creative energies interacting, coming together and parting ways in events of encountering in history, allowing evolving regions of partnerships to emerge in the forming of sustaining forms of life. Here, utopia is testifying to the creative cultural dimension of material existence, that is, we do not just exist but more importantly, we give forms to our existence, forms emerging through differences acting on one another.