Professor and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen was presented with the Albert O. Hirschman Prize, the Council’s highest honor, at an event at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ.

This is a transcript of a video from the evening’s program, including a conversation between Amartya Sen and the SSRC president, Ira Katznelson.
Robbert Dijkgraaf:  

Good evening. My name is Robbert Dijkgraaf. I’m the Director for the Institute for Advanced Study. It’s a great pleasure to welcome you to the Albert O. Hirschman Prize Ceremony and program, which is organized now for the second time, co-organized by the Social Science Research Council and the Institute for Advanced Study.

Following the program, there will be a reception in Fuld Hall. Now, the introduction is according to the well-established principle of Russian dolls, so there will be various shells. I’m just the outer shell, then we come to the inner act in a moment. Of course, it’s also an occasion to welcome a few very very special guests. Of course, to start with today’s laureates, Amartya Sen, who of course, you have many honors and very important contributions that we’ll hear more about. But it all pales in comparison to your role as Institute Trustee from 1987 to 1994. It’s a great pleasure to welcome you home. It is great also to see Philip Griffiths in the audience who was at that time, the director, and you interacted with him a lot.

Of course, it’s also a great pleasure to welcome Ira Katznelson, the President of the Social Science Research Council. Thank you for allowing us to be your co-organizer again this year. Clearly, it was a good experience last year. In a moment, we’ll introduce ... The program will be that I will give an introduction to Didier Fassin, a professor here at the School of Social Science, who then will introduce Peter Lange, who then in some sense will introduce the inner act of our presentation.

Of course, this is a very important meeting for the institute if it only because it’s again, celebrating the legacy of Albert Hirschman. And I think one of the great pleasures of living a life of scholarship is that home is often not the place where you are born and where you start from, but it’s the place where you end and where you find your home as a scholar. I think this was very much true for Albert Hirschman who I think very much wanted to be here at the institute and had a wonderful impact.

Just to quote Jeremy Adelman, who wrote a wonderful biography of Hirschman, "There is no doubt that Hirschman’s time at the institute allowed him to become one of the great sages of our times. His unusual background, combination of intellectual tradition, and ironic disposition were combined to yield some of the classic works of the social sciences."
So although this is a very festive occasion, it's also a little bit sad. Because at this moment, I think we all miss Albert and Sarah Hirschman. But it's terrific to celebrate their legacy by having this great honor, and this ceremony here at the institute. So with that being said, it's my pleasure to introduce the next speaker, which is Didier Fassin, the James Wolfensohn [00:03:30] professor in the School of Social Science.

Didier is an anthropologist and Sociologist who conducted field work all over the world, Senegal, Ecuador, South Africa, and France. He was trained as a physician in internal medicine and public health. His early research was dedicated to medical anthropology. For instance, discussing the AIDS epidemic and global health. He then developed a field of critical moral anthropology, which explores the historical, social, and political [00:04:00] signification of moral forms.

And I must say, we're all extremely happy that we have Didier and the School of Social Science here. At any opportunity I think a director, you're forced to oblige to quote Albert Einstein, but my favorite quote here is that there were two things that fascinated him, which was the physical universe outside and the moral universe inside. So I'm very happy that we have that [00:04:30] inner universe highlighted today.

Currently, Didier's work is focused on punishment, asylum, inequality, and the politics of life. And he's developing a reflection on the public presence of the Social Science. So please join me and welcome the next speaker, Didier Fassin.

Didier Fassin: Thank you, Robbert. Three years ago, Ira [00:05:00] Katznelson, the then new president of the Social Science research council, proposed that the Albert Hirschman Prize, which has been awarded since 2007, be presented at the Institute for Advanced Study. It is an honor for the School of Social Science to be associated for the second time with this event. Which celebrates, as we just heard, the memory and the legacy of one of its founders, since in 1974 [00:05:30] Clifford Geertz invited Albert Hirschman to join the program in Social Science which he had just initiated.

The Hirschman prize is awarded to scholars- and that's the definition of the prize- who have made outstanding contributions to international interdisciplinary social science research, theory, and public communication. Of the first 6 recipients, one was an historian, Charles Tilly; [00:06:00] one a political scientist, Benedict Anderson; and four economists, Daniel Roderick, Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and this
year, Amartya Sen. And this is an interesting ratio for two thirds for a discipline to which Albert Hirschman formerly belonged, but from which he progressively distanced himself. That rock of solid positivism, he said in his acceptance lecture for another prize in 1980. It is indeed a remarkable product that he will have become one of the most cited social scientists world-wide, and be ranked among the top 100 public intellectuals of the United States, while having a difficult time being recognized in his own discipline, at least if one refers to conventional rankings.

But this might not come as a surprise. However, considering what was his project for economics, according to Jeremy Adelman. "Did your mind to ensure that economics still be part of the conversation among social scientists, at a time when the discipline's earlier ties to disciplinary cousins were breaking down. Albert Hirschman's imagining of a broader economics, in order to liberate the rational economic man", as he put it, "was like tilting at windmills."

Although his 1958 “Strategy of Economic Development,” which has been translated in 10 languages, is considered one of the most important contributions to the field of developmental economics, it is his books at the interface of various disciplinary domains- one of his selections of his essays is significantly titled, "Crossing Boundaries-" that have had the most lasting impact in the social sciences. "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty," 1970, under three strategies possibly used by members of an organization when they are unhappy about the quality of its services, or the benefits they get from it. "The Passions and the Interests," in 1977, on the unrecognized roll of affects in the rise of capitalism in the 17th and 18th centuries. And the "Rhetoric of Reaction" in 1991, on the three styles of conservative argumentation against social reform.

All three books are widely referred to by sociologists and political scientists, as well as anthropologists and historians. Interestingly, they can also be found in some economist's libraries in Latin America and Europe, a sign that the evolution of the discipline is not perfectly uniform across the globe. Needless to say, in the current political context, the questions of the attitudes of the public when it becomes frustrated with its government, oscillating between exit and voice. That is, between withdrawing in abscentia and expressing its content via a protest vote. Of the significance of greed as passion and interest in the production of material wealth, economic prices, and social inequality in late capitalism. And of the force of
conservative rhetoric in the attacks against reforms in the domains of welfare, health, or rights.

All these questions, powerfully dealt with in Albert Hirschman's works, are of particular relevance today. We can still read these books as we read Machiavelli, Hobbes, Adam Smith, Karl Marx. In his article, "An Original Thinker of Our Time," the legal scholar Cass Sunstien affirms that "Hirschman's works change how you see the world. It illuminates yesterday, today, and tomorrow." But Albert Hirschman's works are not only important to understand the world; they are also important to transform it. At least, that is the hope that he expressed. In the last chapter of the volume suggestively entitled "Essays in Trespassing: Economics to Politics and Beyond," he explores the tension between morality and the social sciences. To begin with, he asserts that "One must realize that modern social science arose to a considerable extent in the process of emancipating itself from traditional moral teachings."

And that moral teaching could be religion or philosophy. And so the crucial move was from the old to the is. From how things should be to how they actually are. Hence, the need to keep the social scientists away from moral pronouncements. "If you have a brain and a heart," writes the poet Hölderlin, "show only one or the other. You will not get credit for either, should you show both at once."

The very existence of the social sciences depends on the establishment of this dividing line. But far from limiting his reflection to this consensually accepting principle, Albert Hirschman pushes his analysis further. "I have a more ambitious and probably Utopian thought," he writes. "It is possible to visualize a kind of social science that would be different from the one most of us have been practicing. A moral social science, where moral considerations are not repressed and kept apart, but are systematically comingled with analytical argument. Where moral considerations need no longer be smuggled in surreptitiously, nor expressed unconsciously, but are displayed openly and disarmingly."

Rare statement for a social scientist, let alone an economist. Yet without this admission, it is probably impossible to understand not only Albert Hirschman's academical orientation on developmental economies for instance, but also his personal life, since the time when he helped Europeans to flee Nazism and go to the United States. Thus, if interdisciplinary method and ethical concern are two major characteristics of Albert Hirschman's intellectual trajectory, then it is...
difficult to imagine a better recipient for the prize dedicated to celebrate him than professor Amartya Sen. Indeed, on the one hand, the conversation he has developed in his work [00:13:00] with philosophers such as John Rawls, Thomas Stenlund, and Martha Nussbaum, has contributed to shape his most original concepts that have capabilities in particular. And on the other hand, the research he has conducted on inequality has found an almost logical extension in the work he has undertaken for the United Nation development program.

Of course, there are also more personal ties that link Amartya Sen to Albert Hirschman. [00:13:30] In one of his writings, he remembers that in the late 1980's, his children " Particularly enjoyed visiting their grand-uncle and aunt, Albert and Sarah Hirschman at the [inaudible 00:13:43] state."

For these multiple reasons, I have no doubt that this prize tonight has a special meaning for him, as it has for us. But to present him and his work, I would have the floor to Peter Lange, Thomas Langford University Professor in [00:14:00] the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. A member of the Board of the Social Science Research Council, he chaired the Albert Hirschman Prize Committee. Having graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, professor Lange has taught at Harvard University before being appointed at Duke, where he served as chair of the Political Science department, and later provost. Among his numerous publications, I cannot not mention, for its evocatively Hirschmanian [00:14:30] subtitle, his book "Union Democracy and Liberal Cooperativism: Exit, Voice, and Wage Regulation in Post-War Europe." His current interests are on global higher education, comparative politics, and political economy. Please welcome Professor Lange.

John Lange: Thank you very much, Professor Didier. [00:15:00] I want to make clear that I am not here to try to summarize Amartya Sen’s career, since that would be an impossible task to do ... in the what, I have 7 minutes, 8 minutes. And I also am speaking really on behalf of the nominating committee, which included both Jeremy Adelman and Julia Adams. For most scholars, in fact for most of us who read for pleasure and enlightenment, there are moments we remember where we read a book or article [00:15:30] and think, "This is a piece that brings me into a world of such insight, breadth of vision, and social and political significance, that I want to meet the intelligence behind it so that I can learn from and interact with the person to whom it belongs."
That is how I thought about Amartya Sen, starting with an article of his from 1977, "Rational Fools," in which Sen describes and critiques the homo economicus assumption that underlies so much of modern economics. Highlighting the role of sympathy and commitment in human behavior, and hence the complexity of preferences, and preference orderings. And opening the way to a far broader view and an ethically far richer understanding of individuals and the dynamics of communities in which they live, with far-reaching implications for policy and policy intervention.

For me, as a still relatively young political scientist at the time, seeking to work with, but not be consumed by economics as a discipline, the article had a profound impact. It helped me, I might even say guided me, to the means by which I could reconcile my intellectual and political preferences with an interdisciplinary understanding of human behavior that made use of systematic and demanding coherence of economics, but gave room to looser but not less significant insights of the other social sciences. And of course, it provided a credentialed, interdisciplinary bullwork against the all too frequent disciplinary imperiousness of some of my Economics colleagues. Or worse, of my political science colleagues, who had themselves become rational fools.

Sen's article was one which I found a way to work into most of my syllabi, and which always provoked deeper thought among students, especially graduate students, than much of the narrower disciplinary production which they had to master. As I hope this personal introduction, Amartya Sen is not only one of the foremost economists of our time, but a scholar and public intellectual of striking depth and breadth, comfortable not only with the scholarly apparatus of his profession, professional discipline if we say, but with a deep philosophical and ethical implications of the economists practice. And, the practical consequences of their analysis for global challenges of hunger, famine, and inequality.

In these qualities, he seemed to our little nominating committee and ideal recipient of the Hirschman prize, as Professor Fassin just indicated. Fundamentally, Sen is most easily characterized as a scholar of welfare economics. But he has stretched the boundaries of that formal characterization in unique ways that have produced sometimes disruptive conclusions, that have profoundly changed how policy makers have understood the character, causes, and consequences of the challenges of inequality, famine, and human development in the developing world. In doing so, Sen has
demonstrated both the importance of an interdisciplinary understanding of those challenges, and also the importance of an empirical as well as theoretical engagement with the challenges themselves.

Sen's early work in welfare economics was deeply embedded in the theory of social choice, and the dilemmas raised through the work of Kenneth Arrow. And hence, inevitably both formal and verging on philosophical. Two topical areas of his subsequent work, however, highlight his special combination of welfare economics, philosophy and ethics, and policy engagement, and makes Sen such a worthy recipient of the Hirschman prize.

The first of these is his work on famines. Here Sen, using analysis of past famines and the food supplies potentially available in the affected areas, thoroughly debunked the notion that famine was simply and directly a product of the physical decline of the availability of food supplies. Instead, he demonstrated the role of multiple factors effecting the ability of a starving population to gain access to food supplies. Such as, having money to buy food in a market, especially given the factors of raising prices of food stuffs. Political factors affecting the ability of persons in danger of starving, to effect the allocation of available food supplies to needy regions. Here he has repeatedly underlined the role of democracy. And other factors.

The larger philosophical implications of this work, developed in far greater detail and subsequent publications, were that it was positive freedom, the ability to be proactive on one's own and one's family and community's behalf, rather than freedom from the more classical liberal understanding of freedom that was crucial to understanding why famines happened and what was needed in local affected populations to prevent them. This understanding has become crucial in the subsequent efforts to diminish and eliminate famines when they threaten.

The second major area of Sen's work that I want to highlight, that has profoundly affected international development policy, has been around the concept of human capabilities. In some ways, this work is an extension of the earlier interpretations of famines, but at a far more conceptually and philosophically sophisticated level. Again, the focus on what human beings are able to do, on their capabilities, rather than on the traditional indicators of development, which generally focus on statistically measurable outcomes for populations. Sen's Five Freedoms- political, economic, social, transparency assurances, and
protective security- are not as in the traditional development literature
the outcomes of the development process, but crucial to its
measurement and occurrence.

Again, this approach has profoundly affected thinking about
development and the prospective actions of some of the international
agencies for development. Without enhancing human
capabilities, it has been increasingly recognized, development itself will
not occur or will be highly inequitable in its distribution and its effect
on human lives.

I cannot resist, in closing, to underline the extent to which Sen's work is
infused with an ethical sensibility and humanity, which deepen and
extend its impact. In reading his work, you are aware not just of a great
intelligence, systematic thought, and careful research, but of a profound sense of caring about the human condition and how it might
be improved. Through actions not just of institutions and states, but the
empowered individuals themselves. It is this combination of scholarship
and deep moral commitments that make Sen's work so powerful, and
which also make him such a worthy recipient of the Hirschman prize.

Let me now introduce Ira Katznelson, president of the SSRC, to make an
even more direct introduction.

Ira Katznelson: [00:22:30] Well, warm thanks Robbert, and Didier, Peter, Jeremy, Julia,
for making it possible for us at the SSRC both to select the most worthy
of recipients for the Albert Hirschman prize, but especially [00:23:00] for the - I thank our colleagues at the Institute for the gracious partnership
in allowing us to confer an award grace by the name of Albert
Hirschman. 

Now the SSRC was founded 94 years ago by learned societies in
Anthropology, Economics, History, Political Science, Psychology,
Sociology, and Statistics. And the work of the SSRC ever since
has been directed to deepen scholarship and deploy social science as an
instrument of public affairs. And these duties - if I may echo a word
used in the “Rational Fools,” great essay by Amartya. “These duties are
grounded in essential obligations to scholarship, and the role rigorous
understanding can play in democratic life.” Awarded every
two years, the Albert Hirschman Prize, the highest honor of the social
science research council, exemplifies these commitments.
In the spirit of Albert's wide ranging and deep work, this award recognizes the significance of a social science of analytical intellectuality. The analytical, marked by a penchant for sharp and revealing theory. The intellectuality, marked by a restless curiosity and a remarkable range of reading and reference and deployment across fields. In Hirschman’s hands, and in Amartya Sen’s hands, intellectual work, intellectual history, social science, are prods to analytical reason. And analytical reason becomes the means to make sense of the range of human ideas and practices disciplined by normative purpose.

The traits characteristic of Albert and Amartya’s social science have produced work that offers some of the best extant examples of how to inquire within a field of tension, marked on the one side by the pole of frugal and portable theory, and on the other side by the density of proper name history, human circumstances and situations in which the human condition exists and only on occasion manages to flourish.

It's now my great pleasure to invite dear Amartya Sen to come forward to receive the 2016 Albert Hirschman Prize. This is the … Dear Amartya, this is the document that reads: "The Albert O. Hirschman Prize of the Social Science Research Council is awarded to Amartya Sen on the 19th day of April, 2017. The Albert Hirschman Prize recognizes academic excellence in international, interdisciplinary social science research, theory, and public communication." And it's an enormous honor to do this.

[inaudible 00:26:34]

Amartya Sen: I just wanted to say. Thank you. Well I just wanted to say thank you very much indeed. It’s … I won't dispute whether it was appropriately selected, that I was appropriately selected, but I'm delighted I am. So I'm very pleased. And I'm very pleased indeed that you're all here, and very kind words about my work. Really learned something about how to think about my own work, even though it's much too kind. But it’s really very nice still, for me to think about.

The positive take that can be taken on my work, I’m extremely grateful. Thank you very much, and thank you all for coming here.
Ira Katznelson: So Amartya and I will now proceed to a conversation, which will be followed by an opportunity for colleagues and friends here to participate.

In your autobiographical essay written at the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize, you wrote the following sentence, which has interested me ever since I read this statement a few years back, some years back. You wrote, "The union of my interests in the 2 fields," referring to philosophy and economics, "Far exceeds their intersection."

"The union of my interests in the 2 fields far exceeds their intersection." Stimulated by this interesting sentence, I wonder if we might talk about a number of intersections. Really I have three in mind. One of them, the last one, will concern intersections of scholarly fields, including obviously philosophy and economics. But the first I'd like to discuss concerns intersections with Albert Hirschman and his work. Then, turn to intersections of life and scholarship, your life and your scholarship, and their intersections. And then close with a discussion about intersections of scholarly fields.

Let's begin with Albert. Albert wrote the following in his essay "Against Parsimony." I quote, "In his well-known article on rational fools, Amartya Sen asserted that traditional economic theory has too little structure. Like any virtue, as he seemed to say, parsimony in theory, structure, can be overdone. And sometimes, something is to be gained by making things more complicated."

The first review ... I think it was the first review you wrote, was a review of Albert Hirschman's first book, am I right?

Amartya Sen: The Strategy of Economic Development. [crosstalk 00:30:23]

Ira Katznelson: That's exactly right. In 1960, the struggle for higher standard of living. And in that essay, you praised Albert for just this very sense of complexity, as he confronted developmental economics. I wonder if you might begin ... this was before there was a family connection to Albert Hirschman, and before you had ever met him, am I right?

Amartya Sen: Yes indeed.

Ira Katznelson: So say a bit about how you first came across this book, and what you had to say about it.
Amartya Sen:

Well, [00:31:00] I ... I had just got my PhD, I think. And ... I was chatting with the review editor of Economic Journal, named [inaudible 00:31:14]. And he said, "There's this book on development, have you read it?"

And I said, "No, I haven't. But somebody told me that it's an interesting book."

And he said, he didn't say would you review it. He said, "Maybe you [00:31:30] could tell me who would be a good person to review it." So after reading it a bit more ... and to complete the story, I told him, "Well, perhaps I might be a good person to review it."

And he hesitated, and he said, "Are you sure?"

And I said, "Yes." And I did. But you see, I was then ... and I think this [00:32:00] came up in this very kind and very thoughtful remarks on my work. I was very involved with social choice theory at that time, and later also. Which are much more formal. And I was interested in development, and I think it will come up in the conversation at some later state. I think one of the difficulty in reading Development Economics at that time, I thought was to keep oneself awake. Because it seemed [00:32:30] so difficult to take a real interest in it. And that applies even to some of the people extremely well-known and in many ways deservedly so.

But I think the great thing about Albert was his ... I cannot fathom. And there was no way you could fall asleep when he says, "Well what we need is not valid but unvalid scores. What we need is not [00:33:00] getting things done in your planning, but getting things wrong and getting out of your way." And I knew about that, that's the way you teach swimming. And then you chuck your child in the water, and then it comes out from the water. And I thought that development economics might really be quite an interesting subject. It had quite a profound effect. It was quite [00:33:30] a review. I did get a letter from Albert after that, yeah.

But I used to tease him that, since I wasn’t famous at all, when he reproduced his book there were four confessions at the back from his reviews. Three of which went in the order of the review. And mine just said "The Economic [00:34:00] Journal."

Ira Katznelson:

Now in this period, you also were writing about choices in economic development. And, how did you see the world of choice and economic development?
development as similar or different from the ways in which Albert was writing about it at this time?

Amartya Sen: That's an extensive ... yeah. I mean in many [00:34:30] different ways. I was really working on social choice at that time. Some of my early papers. I mean-

Ira Katznelson: Both.

Amartya Sen: If there's a faster way, economic society found.

Ira Katznelson: So it is-

Amartya Sen: That were coming out. I think there weren't necessary sufficient conditions of consistency [inaudible 00:34:48]. Except for all these came out around the same time.

Ira Katznelson: But it said that, and correct what is said if it's incorrect, that you were deeply involved at that very point [00:35:00] in social choice theory. But Cambridge University and colleagues there were less receptive. And your PhD thesis itself was more oriented to other ones.

Amartya Sen: Yeah. I think they saw it as this is a complete waste of time. And social choice theory, for those who are not concerned with it ... you know, we live in this society, everyone has different views, [00:35:30] on ... on different subjects. And somehow still we think that the society thinks such and such things happen, should happen, and so on. So we arrive at some sort of aggregate judgment. We also arrive at aggregate decisions, whether by referendum or by some other electoral method - discussion and consensus. And we also have to get certain indicators. [00:36:00] I think it came up in the context of human development.

And all these involve somehow ... the mathematics of it is that you have a cluster of individual ranking. And you have to arrive at a social, either ranking, or a social choice function in the sense, given any manual you can say this is the best. Or if you don't want to use the word best, [00:36:30] you could say, this is an alternative which is no worse than any other. It's not the same thing. It's a maximal, optimal alternative. Now that requires ... certain discipline of relating individual preferences, a cluster of them, to the outcome. [00:37:00] And so I was concerned with them, and near causing to some impossibility. So I was, I did a couple of other impossibility things, but also showed why the impossibility could be overcome. And that's how, if my getting involved
with Albert was one thing but getting involved with [inaudible 00:37:20]. And of course, he died only early last month.

Ira Katznelson: Yes.

Amartya Sen: Yeah. And of course, that was an enormous influence on my work. Those [00:37:30] things continue, and there's a connection, we may come to that. But I was very involved in choice, and I didn't take the view ... I guess, on the whole people would tend to think of me as being on the left of politics. Which I think is okay. On the other hand, I've never taken the view that choice is an unimportant thing. Choice is a very important thing for human beings. And Albert taught that too. But it [00:38:00] isn't the way it's characterized.

Ira Katznelson: Both of you, in different ways, and perhaps complimentary ways, argued and thought and claimed that the ways in which many scholars, including at the heart of your discipline at Economics, think about choice as artificially constrained by two simple notions of words like preference. So your advice in the rational [00:38:30] fools essay, in which you say that the world preference is too thick, carries too much meaning. It's too simple and congested all at once. And you recommended alternative ways of thinking, including an approach to rankings of different kinds of preferences. Which included various ethical dimensions associated with words like commitment and [00:39:00] duty. Is that fair?

Amartya Sen: Yeah. It is fair, but the thing is that we can't ... I mean I believe along with Gramsci and Wittgenstein, that when we communicate with each other we have to find out what the meaning of it is. And I wasn't going to suggest that we redefine the meaning of it [00:39:30] in a particular way. Just that we recognize that in that sense, in that use, there are many different ways that the word preference is used. And if we are using the same word for many different things, they come to be identified as the same thing. And they are not. And that's why the rational fool paper to which a very kind reference was made, was to point out that [00:40:00] it could stand for what is best for a guy, or it could be what a person could choose, or what a person thinks should happen, or what he thinks would be ideally the best in the best possible world.

All these are different meanings. And if you put them together, you get a person who cannot distinguish between them in the rational form. That's the thing. I had great difficulty, by the way, in getting ... The paper was published [00:40:30] in Princeton, in fact, in the Philosophy
and Public Affairs. But the proofreader kept on correcting it into “rational tools.” And even when I reinstated the f, I in fact got an apology from the assistant later. The editor saying, "I'm sorry, I don't know what's going wrong [00:41:00] here. They keep going back to fools, even though I've been telling them it's tools."

So I think that ... Albert wrote an article called Some Ways of Complicating Economics. And you need that economic. And you need the complicat- I mean, let me give an example of why it's very important. [00:41:30] Yesterday, the Prime minister announced that they're going to win the election to make things easier, including for Brexit. Now there was a vote in the 23rd of June last year, in which 51.7 percent voted for Brexit. And 48 percent voted against it. [00:42:00] Then we heard that British people have chosen. That's a big statement. Britain has decided to leave, that's a very big statement indeed. You have complicate the world here.

And then, to [inaudible 00:42:19], lots of my friends by the way were involved. I spent half my life in England, so I'm very concerned with it. [00:42:30] That we must get it to the Parliament. Because anyone who has read John Stuart Mill would know that Britain is a very representative government. And you don't decide things by plebiscite [inaudible 00:42:41], you actually have a debate, and you have a discussion. And the parliament parlays, talks with each other and arrives at something. When it came to the parliament in the lower case, in which some of my friends were involved, and the one ... [00:43:00] and the supreme court in England has one, Britain has one ... decided that they should go-

Ira Katznelson: This was the Miller decision?

Amartya Sen: Indeed. And the result was, however, that when it went to Parliament, the majority, a big majority were against it. Now they all said, "Now that Britain has decided, we have to discuss how to make it," what they were saying “best.” What it really means, least [00:43:30] painful.

Ira Katznelson: Yes.

Amartya Sen: That's what they were discussing. What happened to the role of Parliament? I thought that Mill would be turning in his grave that Parliament did not decide to talk about this at all. I think that the complication, the rational fool is mainly addressed in economics. But the same things is true in so many areas. And leader of the [00:44:00]
opposition, who doesn't seem to either oppose or lead at this time, decided that since Britain has already decided, even though he was against Brexit, he must be now in favor because Britain had decided.

All of this is on the basis of one snap vote, with a terrifyingly complicated mis-statement about how much money Britain would save, how much of it will go to national service. I remember as an undergraduate at Calcutta, trying to read some John Miller. And it seemed that we are talking about the matter of Parliament, the country from which all these discussions came don't seem to be able to tell between what a vote is and what a decision is, in a society where people can talk with each other, can react with each other, can arrive at a conclusion on the basis of all that.

And so all this is a connection that applies to world social choice theory. In some ways, it is a social choice theory problem. And yet, it's also development from a [inaudible 00:45:19], what Albert was concerned with. We need sufficient complication to understand what's going on, rather than try to convert it into a level of simplicity, which would not be able to retain any content.

Ira Katznelson: Within the lives of any of us, but including the lives of a significant scholar like yourself, choices of subjects may grow sometimes out of personal experience and complexity. I was struck again in reading your autobiographical statement, about your personal experience witnessing a famine in the northeast of the Indian subcontinent. And also, the personal witnessing you had as a child, a young child, of the way in which politics of identity during partition could in fact produce violence which you witnessed personally. Did these very early experiences, could you say a bit about how they shaped your own formation as a scholar, as an intellectual, as an analytical thinker?

Amartya Sen: Yes indeed. You know, each of these experiences of course leave a desire to deal with it when you can. I witnessed a famine in '43, in which about three million people died. And I think it was two years later the Muslim laborer was knifed by some Hindu thugs around my home. We lived in a Hindu area Dhaka in Bangladesh. And there people identified themselves basically as Bengali or in those days before partition Indian, or human beings, or Asians. But suddenly all that changed. And they were sharply defined Hindus and finely defined Muslims killing each other. Of course, killing each other really means the easiest people to kill on the other side are the poorest. They don't live in secure home, they live in slums. You can go at once, go kill 25 people.
This particular chap was Kader, who died on my ... well [00:48:00] he didn't die on my lap, but I was the first, he came in and I tried to help him, I was 11 or 12 I think then. And my father took him to the hospital, and he died there. But he had come to the Hindu area because he had had some prospect to earning an income there. And they had no money at home, the children were hungry. So he took the risk of coming for [00:48:30] some day laboring work. And on the way to the work, just outside our gate, he was knifed. And he kept on saying that his wife had told him not to go.

But it's not just the identity issue that made - how easily identity could change. Though that was a big thing. They ... all this was in the '40s. By beginning of '50's, [00:49:00] east Pakistan was agitating about Bengali language. And the Bengali identity became very big. It doesn't mean that the Muslim identity went away, but politically it was not something that trumped being a Bengali or being a human being.

In fact ... this is by the way Dhaka University, Bangladesh university, [00:49:30] university tie. I don't think you think about it being a particularly Muslim tie in any sense. It's a jolly tie, it's a celebration of people being together and doing things together. And so I think the important thing is that identities coexist, [00:50:00] and they're not, there's a choice involved in it. And that's why I really have difficulty when people say I was born this, I have no choice, I have to be that. Because you're born hundreds of different things simultaneously. As a Bengali, and Indian, Hindu, Bengal family. A secular thing, a skeptic of religion. An economist's interest in that, and all these are a part [00:50:30] of me. And then I have to decide which of these to do.

Ira Katznelson: So I asked about this precisely because it seems to me that this is a zone in which the various theories and approaches to this key word of choice connect to actual historical situations with a very wide continuum of potential outcomes, depending in part on how we choose, in part on the institutional [00:51:00] conditions within which we choose. And you continue to be passionate about these issues, both in India and the United States. And in Britain today. But my-

Amartya Sen: Yeah. The famine thing [00:51:14] with which we got, that was quite hard to get across, because there is an organization and there was then the same organization named FAO. Which was dedicated to the [00:51:30] view that famine's interconnected with food availability. So that, because the Food and Agriculture Organization, it's survival seems to depend on it. So when my book came out, I got real attacks from all that. And I had the BBC arrange a debate between the head of FAO and
me. And he said, "So you believe that if you gave people cash, which gave them the money to buy some food, some more food would be generated."

So I said, "No, I didn't say that. I said that if food prices would rise a little, and food will come from elsewhere, because it moves with price."

And so the BBC chap said, we discussed how it worked, and the BBC chap asked "So what do you think of Mr. Sen's book?"

To which the FAO head said that "It's the worst book I've ever read."

So I thought that was too harsh, so I asked him, I said, "Do you mean the worst book you have read on this subject?"

And he said, "No, it's the worst book I have ever read on any subject."

So I said, "Look, that's very distinguishing – it's not easy to produce that book." Which can get ... but there was a problem in that, but I have to say, I've always been well served by the media. Because BBC, a lot of people use that. And then of course, it becomes part of the UN wisdom. And FAO too,

Ira Katznelson: Well we're not going to revise our certificate of award to take into account that you have written the worst book ever. I have a question which, as I ask it, I'm not sure precisely of my own motivation. But it's simply an interest of mine. You've lived your life in India, in Britain, in the United States. You lived your intellectual life in institutions. Delhi School of Economics, Harvard, MIT, Cambridge, Oxford. How, if we were to do a counterfactual of Amartya Sen only in Britain, or Amartya Sen only in the US, or Amartya Sen only in India, or what has not become the part of India that now is Bangladesh, once India. Or once Pakistan as well. Do you think your own formation as a scholar would have been different?

Amartya Sen: Well it depends whether I could read things or not. I mean, certainly the experience of being able to talk with people and having friends in all these countries of course had a profound effect on me. But I think basically you’re raising a very big issue, namely how ... our ideas are affected by what we receive from the world. And that right now is a very big issue in India today. I'm very proud of being an Indian,
and Indian citizen. [00:55:30] I stand in long queue – India doesn’t permit dual citizenship. So I don't have American, and I don't have British, so I stand long queues everywhere.

And we were quite proud of that fact, a secular democratic country chose to recycle that democratic at a level of poverty, which no other country had done and all that. Well that's all going, of course. We are moving relentlessly [00:56:00] towards the Hindu rapture, I believe. And then an election which all the papers, again, inadequate discussion as Hirschman would say, describes landslide victory. Landslide victory with 31 percent vote, that's [inaudible]. It caused a landslide victory in terms of seats, but that’s because of the system we happened to have.

Now, [00:56:30] increasingly what's happened that India's being redefined. Not even in the grand old Hindu sense, but as something where some total [inaudible] of outside influence. I mean, India is a country which had Christians from the third century, and had Jews from the first century. It had [inaudible 00:56:58] began [00:57:00] in Persia. It has had all the way to Bahai. It's a long long tradition, we can be proud of.

All that's gone now. It's basically, people say majority tell, and I object to it. Because the majority of Hindus don't take that view. It's a determined group of people who can win elections, and they are perfect at that, winning the election. Absolutely no question, they can win pretty much any election by organization [00:57:30] and sometimes dedicating themselves to undermining tradition by stories that circulate, and so forth. But one result of it is, and one of it takes that we found for example would be looking back at Indian History - I’m quite a fan of Indian religion. Not only non Hindu like Buddhi, well known as Buddha I guess in the West.

But mathematics. [00:58:00] Now they tried to emphasize Vedic mathematics. Vedic was 1500 BC. I’m one of the few persons who have read the principle Veda, Rig Veda, since transcript along with mathematics for one of my main subjects I was very interested in. And it’s had a ... it has lots of very interesting things, including a number of very agnostic thoughts. But it didn't have any serious mathematics. [00:58:30] Serious mathematics began in India only when under the influence of Greece and Babylon. When that came, suddenly what was basically arithmetic, converted. And the Indians became the top group in trigonometry. So much so that it was spreading everywhere. Most of the Arab mathematicians, including Al-Khwarizmi, after whom the name algorithm comes.
They all knew Sanskrit, because of what was happening. The Chinese did that they head of the Chinese board of Astronomy in eighth century, which is a very big period of Chinese astronomy, was Indian. Not only in India, but the three top candidates were all Indian. All that wouldn't have happened without the Greek influence. Greek and Babylonian influence. But then, of course, it spread the other way, because the [inaudible 00:59:29] Vaskar, [00:59:30] they were all producing extraordinary new things. It's to take a word like sine. What's the origin of the word sine? The Indian mathematician Aryabhata, who wrote about it, very extensively about it, how you could use it for astronomy and so on, called it jya ardhha, [01:00:00] jya is a diameter, ardhha is half. So it's half diameter, it's a radius, you can see why a sign might be called that.

Then he referred to it often as he was writing as jya, not the ardhha. Now Arabs when they translated it, his book and his disciple, the book was translated six or seven times in Arabic. They translated jya into jiba. Now [01:00:30] Arabic being like Hebrew, a consonant only notation. There's no vowel sound. So its like jb. Now jiba has no meaning in Arabic, but the word which was spelled exactly the same named jaib. Which is a very easy Arabic word, because it means a bay or a cove. [01:01:00] So later generations of Arab authors were beginning to call it jaib, you can see it from the context. 1150, when Gherardo of Cremona translates the Arabic books on Trigonometry into Latin, Gherardo chooses the Latin word for a bay or a cove, sinus. [01:01:30] From which the word sine comes. So in this one word, you see a history of transmigration of ideas. I think neither would we understand Indian achievement without giving credit to the Greeks and the Babylonian. Nor would you understand how Indian influence went to Europe.

and there are many other words like that, you [01:02:00] can presume. So I feel in some ways, being fortunate in living in different places, as if I was having been sitting at the feet of Aryabhata … at the feet of Al-Khwarizmi, and Gherardo of Cremona. And very lucky.

Ira Katznelson: Beautifully said. So I want to close with just this last question, [01:02:30] thought. Asking you to reflect on the following scholarly intersections that you’ve navigated. Within economics, this is symbolized by three teachers you had at Cambridge: Maurice Dobb, Piero Sraffa, and Dennis Robertson. All remarkably different, yet all influences on you. Then, there’s been an intersection in your [01:03:00] work of pure theory, especially in social choice theory. And practice - capabilities work is aimed at measuring so that we can do, not only so that we can think. And then there's the intersection which has been spoken of between
philosophy and economics. You're teaching, you've taught with John Rawls, [crosstalk 01:03:28] and [01:03:30] others, just as you've been close to [inaudible] and other leaders in modern Economics.

In closing the conversation, if you wouldn't mind reflecting on how you've navigated these multidimensional intersections, which most mortals in the social sciences simply don't do.

Amartya Sen: [01:04:00] I think they do do it. I think their feet falls without knowing it. I think we all take different influences or a different sides. But I've commented a little bit about Arrow and Hirschman. And the three teachers you mentioned, Maurice Dobb was a Marxist economist, a member of the [inaudible 01:04:30] colonist party. I mean, he was the most well-known Marxian economist of our time, no question about that. But he was nonextremist in terms of his political beliefs. But definitely a member of the communist party.

Piero Sraffa, who was very close to the communist party, and used to write for the [inaudible 01:04:57]. [01:05:00] Came from Italy when he was being harassed by Mussolini, and came to Cambridge. And there was Dennis Robertson, who was a very standard economist, but absolutely the best. One thing to say, I was very lucky to learn something from each of them. [01:05:30] Piero Sraffa by the way, which I'll pursue later, had a big connection with philosophy, in the sense that the whole thing, Wittgenstein moved from his first theory when he was the Tractatus period, to the philosophical investigation period, when he was going into the philosophy of Linguistic Language Communication. It's something which is extensively discussed in Lodein and Nobel, [01:06:00] and by Gramsci in particular. In fact, one of his essays in the [inaudible 01:06:06] book, begins by saying that all human beings are philosophers.

Because every time we use the language, we have to use philosophy. And he does that. And Sraffa was the one who put Gramsci into ... they had never met, Gramsci and Wittgenstein. But he was the purveyor. And of course Wittgenstein [01:06:30] acknowledged. People often think that was just a polite thing, that the strongest influence on this work came from Mr. Sraffa.

So I think there's that connection, and so in some ways I'm extraordinary lucky to get all three of them. When Maurice Dobb was appointed ... and I like the fact that they were in the same college, because Cambridge [01:07:00] was ridden with a dispute. And it was nice to have a college where the three people with very different views
were all there. And when Dobb was appointed, Maurice Dobb, this I heard from Sraffa, then I asked Maurice Dobb. I don’t think I ever asked Robertson on that. But it was Dennis Robertson who offered Maurice Dobb a job. [01:07:30] And he said, "Would you like to move to Trinity, and be a Trinity?"

And he was excited, he accepted. He went home. And then being a very stodgy Englishman, he decided that he had failed in his duty. He should have told Dennis Robertson that he was a member of the communist party. so that Dennis Robertson should have [01:08:00] the opportunity to decide whether to offer the job, after knowing the full disclosure of his politics. So he wrote a letter, longest letter I understand, explaining why he feels miserable that he has failed to inform him in time. But he is doing that now, and saying that actually if after taking into consideration all of these things, if you decide [01:08:30] that I'm not a fit person to be appointed to teach Trinity undergraduates, I would like you to know I will not hold that against you.

Sraffa who told me this story, told me, "Can you think of a more idiotic thing to say?" He got a letter back from Dennis Robertson, which said, "Dear Dobb, So long as you give us a fortnight's notice before [01:09:00] blowing up the chapel, it will be all right."

And I thought that gave me some confidence in the college. Which I later had the opportunity of being head of, so it was nice that my introduction to the college already had a feature other than intellectual excellence, [inaudible 01:09:21], and [inaudible] and all that. Also, a quality we've been discussing. And which [01:09:30] I think Albert Hirschman would have liked and admired.

Ira Katznelson: Thank you Amartya for making this such a memorable occasion. As we close, I want to thank the staff of the Institute for Grad Study, and of the Social Science Research Council, especially Kate Grantz for making this event sing. And now, it's my pleasure to invite everyone [01:10:00] to Fuld Hall, for a reception where the conversation can continue. Thank you for coming.