Self in the World – Connecting Life's Extremes

Anthropologists are interested in economy, but economists do not reciprocate. Few have thought more about their interface than Keith Hart. He launched the idea of an 'informal economy', now a major field of development studies. Asked why he is an economic anthropologist, he says, 'Because I want to save my family from the economic holocaust to come'. His concerns are not just academic. He has held positions in many leading universities including Cambridge, Yale, McGill, Michigan, Chicago, Northwestern, Manchester, Aberdeen, West Indies (Jamaica), Oslo, Pavia and KwaZulu-Natal. In the last decade, he was International Director of the Human Economy Program at Pretoria, South Africa, and Centennial Professor of International Development at the London School of Economics. Keith is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is a full-time writer based in Paris, France and Durban, South Africa. Here he shares his insights on learning for an uncertain future

Keith's book, *Self in the World – Connecting Life's Extremes*, comes out in spring 2022. It is in part an account of his personal journey, part a clarion call for academia to change how we learn, and part a passionate source of inspiration for students of all ages and interests.

Keith holds that we each embark on two life journeys, out to the world and into the self; society lives inside and outside us. In time, each of us may acquire a world as singular as the self.

But self and world often seem to be at odds. In his book, Keith focuses on connecting life's extremes – individual and society, local and global, and personal and impersonal dimensions of existence. He hopes in this way to help readers explore their own place in history.

Research Features caught up with Keith as he put finishing touches to the book.

How would you summarise your idea of 'lifelong learning'?

Modern education aims to train young people to work and consume in bureaucratic societies driven by machines. Its method is 'the hose and bucket system' – forget who you are and what you think you know; we will fill you up with what you need to be a productive and passive citizen. This builds on the 18th-century Enlightenment's commitment to organise knowledge, but without their liberalism and humanism. Around 1800, the German Romantics broke with this approach. If the world is going to hell, why learn to adapt to it? Far better to concentrate on improving what lies between our ears (self-education for living). This may increase our ability to cope creatively with crises we can't possibly imagine now.

Much that passes for knowledge is just ideology, the dogma that comes from ideas passed down by authorities. Priests, lawyers, bureaucrats, teachers, politicians and celebrities tell people what to do and think. Education for life should be an ongoing conversation with anyone we care to take seriously. Both sides in formal education, teachers and students, can and should contribute to a dialogue. In my book, I share with readers my own life of learning, including some techniques of storage, retrieval and performance that I have picked up along the way. Key to all this is how we use and develop our sources of memory, both internal and external. I also share some observations about our world.

I draw on lifelong experiences inside the academy and outside it. I never stopped reading, watching, speaking and writing and in time became expert in some of them. The one person bound to learn from a class is the teacher: I teach in order to learn. I once drafted a textbook called *Anthropology and the Modern Economy* and abandoned it because it contained nothing of my own economic experience. I later wrote *The Memory Bank* which drew on my history of betting, writing for *The Economist*, financial speculation, times as a publisher and development consultant, plus criminal enterprise in an African slum.

I discovered the internet when I was about 50, and have since become a successful network entrepreneur, founding and running the Open Anthropology Cooperative with 22,000 members worldwide. For three decades my main research has been through active participation online. I learn more about the world economy from risking my money in the markets than from reading. Above all, I have learned that money as communication offers a bridge for connecting life extremes.

In Self in the World, you point to the tension between individualism and belonging to others. Where does this strain come from?

Anthropologists have long considered that stateless societies support better integrated personalities than is normal for citizens of states. We experience society as a conflict between public and private interests. Freedom is negated by invasive public bureaucracies and so on. The last century became a struggle for world domination between coercive bureaucracies operating in the name of equality and the unfettered power of markets, represented as essential to individual freedom. Yet the Pentagon fought for free enterprise as the largest anti-market collective in world history. On both sides of the Cold War most people experienced life as a powerless self in a vast unknowable universe. How can we get the two to co-exist better than that? No one book can provide all the answers, but I hope to stimulate readers to think more creatively about relevant solutions for them.

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What role does competition play in learning, and should competitiveness be encouraged in young people?

Competition was inescapable as a young child since playing games was everywhere. I was also an avid reader, and readers are loners. When I was eight, we made a day trip to Cambridge. Apparently, I asked: 'Why have they got so many churches?', and was told, 'They're not churches, they're schools'. 'When I grow up, I want to go to a school that looks like a church'. In family lore this became: 'Keith wants to go to Cambridge'. That meant I had to get into Manchester Grammar School, but there were only 200 places for 10,000 applicants. I made it, the first from my district.

Now competition really kicked in. 200 boys, all of them the brightest of their circle, were put into seven ranked classes, then competed within each class. Few of them could be top of the class, so the social norm became no collaboration with the enemy. It was a horrible place. I didn't know how much work I needed to get into Cambridge, so I overdid homework, usually 40 hours a week. I also took refuge in religion, sports, novels and betting. When I won a scholarship to Cambridge, I could relax. I never wanted to go back to that teenage experience. For me, the worst aspect of our societies is training children to believe that they are in a race with others of their own age. The second is

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CONNECTING LIFE'S EXTREMES

Keith Hart

Self in the World – Connecting Life's Extremes will be published by Berghahn in March 2022.

to rely on knowledge banked at school as human capital for life.

When I read about you as a university teacher, I am reminded of Socrates' reported words: 'Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel'. Do you agree?

Yes, but the flame is self-generated and can never be supplied by the teacher. It can go out if untended or repressed. Education is the context of learning, not its source. 'Belief' in Old English meant beloved, something held dear. If we are to act on our beliefs, we have to experience them as our own. Being told what to think is the opposite of what a real education should be – I didn't want my students to treat me as an authority, but I did hope that some of what I shared would stick because it made sense of their own lives.

You speak of a 'revolution in knowledge' that's happening now, but to which most academics are seemingly oblivious, choosing rather to cling to the relics of the last one.

What is this revolution and how should the humanities respond?

Organised knowledge may be particular (humanities) or universal (science). All academia needs to take the coming revolution on board: the word means a break with the past. I have mentioned some features of 'modern' education, that we are told we should deal with the present by dividing it into small bits and becoming a specialist in our bit. This is how our academic disciplines emerged. Chemistry broke off from physics by studying only molecules; physics at Cambridge was split into two departments – elementary particles and solid-state physics – which couldn't talk to each other. We have lost the Victorians' ability to study nature and society together. The natural scientists know nothing of human complexity and the social scientists mimic their methods, but don't know how the world really works.

The next revolution will break down these divisions by being interdisciplinary, perhaps launching human sciences that study nature, society and culture. The digital revolution has opened up many new possibilities, providing a global network for sharing universal ideas, but it has been hijacked by Big Tech. We have to make the most of the formal institutions that are available, but not at the expense of denigrating informal methods of learning. As students we learn more from talking to our peers after midnight than we do from classes.

You say that 'we must learn to cope with an impersonal world', yet social media today encourage us to share our most personal thoughts and moments. How is our world 'impersonal'?

It is true that the digital revolution allows more personal information to be shared and amassed by remote bodies and this was missing from long-distance trade before. We can now share the intimate details of our everyday lives online. But we are also subject to forces that we don't know – from the insides of our computers and laws made by others to economic depressions, natural catastrophes, revolutions and wars.

My Zulu friend Lindiwe knows her own life better than anyone, but she can't answer questions that affect her yet lie beyond her experience. Why is there no work in the mines anymore? Why are schools a disaster for our children? Why has a Black government increased poverty and inequality? This is a huge issue for political education. But it has to start by extending what she already knows into areas that lie beyond her own experience.

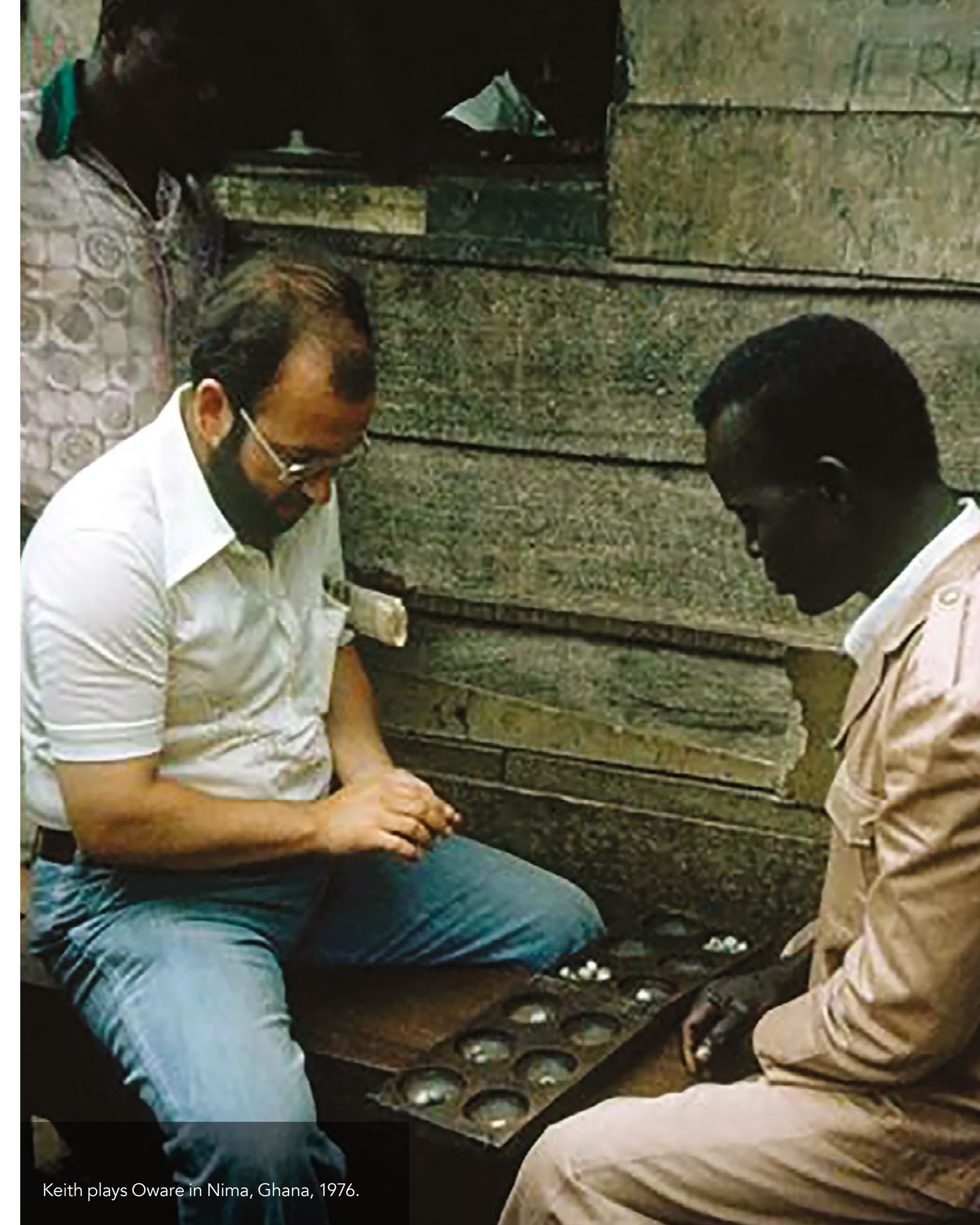
You endorse open access to information and say that we should defer less to authorities like writers and lecturers. How can we ensure that what we learn is reliable?

Of course, we learn from writers and our teachers. My book refers to much literature because I want my readers to follow up on what interests them. Information was always parceled out in a top-down way. Now we can all become producers and consumers. Reading books in school carries the weight of that unequal tradition. I tell my students to read what comes easiest to them. Our own reading history determines what we can make sense of; no-one's is the same. Reading is always personal, whereas insisting on a set syllabus suits teachers more than their students. Education should foster students' selective judgment. Reliance on formally approved sources produces minds that lack judgment.

What key insight would you like readers of your book to walk away with?

You are a person with subjectivity who shares the world of objects with all humanity. The task is to make them mutually consistent. Religion once did that and perhaps we need new religions compatible with scientific laws. Our educational institutions reduce subjectivity to producing the right answers. This denies students access to the meaning of life and human history.

In the last century, universities were committed to bureaucratising capitalism and broke up knowledge into uncommunicating narrow compartments. As a result, governments are now paralysed by challenges like global warming. Indeed, for many people, nothing in their politics and education has given them the means of thinking constructively about what to do next. Ours are dangerous times, but we can be better prepared. Tell yourself that you are the most important agent of your own education.



Keith plays Oware in Nima, Ghana, 1976.

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