

Michael Cohen

Speech to Recognition Ceremony

May 21, 2009

Dean Dunne, members of the faculty, graduates, parents, and friends. Today is one of the most significant days of the year. It is a day of accomplishment, of promise achieved, and of new commitments to be realized. The GPIA is very proud of this year's graduating class. In January 2009 we had 43 graduates and now 65 in May 2009, totaling 108 for this academic year. The graduates come from 35 countries: Afghanistan, Albania, Argentina, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Canada, China, Colombia, Cote d'Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, France, Georgia, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Ireland, Japan, Mali, Mexico, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines, Romania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom, the United States, and Venezuela.

Graduates, this evening I would like to talk with you about how the world has changed over the past three to four years, since you decided to apply to the GPIA, and what you have experienced and learned in this time. Today is a day of celebration, but it should also be a moment of reflection.

Long ago, remember, back in 2005 and 2006, when you decided to apply to graduate school. You were basically optimistic and you wanted to enter a difficult but exciting and worthwhile field.

You were applying to GPIA despite, or perhaps because, of the international problems around you. There was growing unhappiness about the war in Iraq; we were learning about photos from Abu Ghraib, a name most of us did not know at that time. The Democrats in the United States were preparing for the mid-term election amidst the growing unpopularity of President Bush. World leaders included Tony Blair (who?) and we had not yet learned much about Sarkozy, Angela Merkel, or even Gordon Brown, much less Dmitri Medvedev. Not many role models were out there.

Economically things were not so bad. The world economy was growing at the highest rate in a generation, with average economic growth in Latin America about 5 percent. The numbers of poor people around the world was said to be declining, particularly with rapid economic growth in China and India. For some countries the Millennium Development Goals were said to be within reach. Even with the natural disasters of 2004 and 2005, including Katrina, the tsunami, and a serious earthquake in Pakistan, the future appeared to many people to be bringing economic and social progress, even if we believed that inequality and injustice were also

increasing in most countries. Very few of you could afford to live in Manhattan where housing prices and rents were still rising. But hey, who knew what might happen.

As we entered the primary election scene in Iowa at the beginning of 2008 we were hearing rumblings of a housing finance crisis in the United States, but neither the presidential candidates nor the New School community was expecting an economic meltdown in which trillions of dollars in financial assets could disappear, in which a sub-prime mortgage crisis in the United States might provoke a global recession, with credit disappearing, followed by jobs, and contracting demand for goods and services all over the world.

And yet, in the past year we have seen personal savings and retirement plans lose their value, and more than 12 million families in this country alone lose their homes. That's equal to all of Argentina or more than twice the Netherlands. If today the US national unemployment rate is around 9 percent, it is twice that among African-American men. This economic tragedy has also proven to be a social tragedy, with the poor hurt hardest and the poorest countries falling even further behind as their commodities have lost value. One outside speaker at a GPIA seminar noted that even garbage for recycling – the commodity of the poor – had lost its value.

We have all closely followed these economic changes and seen them touch our lives as well. And we have also been outraged by the lack of government regulation of the actors and activities which provoked the crisis. As we watch the debates about bailouts and bonuses, about responsibility and regulation, we have been amazed that very few political and economic leaders saw this coming. And of course, no one takes responsibility for it.

And few among the best academic minds as well predicted the scale and depth of this collapse of capitalism. So by now, May 21, 2009, we do not know if the economy has hit bottom yet, if the so-called “green shoots” that Wall Street has been cheering lately are real, or just an effort to bid up stock values, or whether things will begin to get better or simply that the fall will be at a slower rate.

One important dimension of this global economic crisis is that it has also exploded many theories of economic behavior, suggesting that new paradigms are not only needed for the long term, but are in fact essential if we are to make wise decisions tomorrow. The horizon of hope has become, for many, a horizon of gloom. And importantly we do not have a clear road map to a solution.

These economic woes have been also accompanied by an absolutely unexpected and for most of us in this room, a joyful and hopeful election of Barack Obama as president of the United States. We were stunned that this country finally elected an African-American as president and that even beyond the issue of race, we are delighted that he has already proven

to be wise beyond his years, with an ability to articulate meaningful answers to difficult questions. The contrast with George Bush is so great that we have stopped comparing. The difference is as stark as animal and vegetable.

So I ask you this evening, is it the worst of times, the best of times, or both? For the country? For the world? And for you, as individuals about to receive diplomas?

To answer these questions, I want to remind you also of what you have been doing in this period, where you have been. First you entered the world of globalization, the world of debates and theories of how the world of the 20th century came to be, whether through Polanyi, Appadurai, or Stiglitz. You were immersed in different interpretations of the role of politics, nation states, economics, technology, culture, ideology, natural resources, and war in making the world of today. For some you were introduced in the GPIA to the seeming rationality of economics and macro-economic policy. Yet you quickly learned that other factors were important. How else could you explain differences between countries, between India and China, or Pakistan and Turkey? You learned about human development, human rights, about Gini coefficients, and the importance of social indicators.

But economics could not explain politics. How had Nelson Mandela been finally freed in the early 1990s? or why did the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall collapse? And there were many mysteries beyond the missing weapons of mass destruction? Soon you became increasingly skeptical of theory, of so-called data whose reliability never really appeared to be what it said it was. And you learned that representation, from the drawing of maps, to the cutting of photographs, to the editing of films, and the very choice and manipulation of images also reflected someone's agenda and interests. Your papers began to change. You became more analytical and less impressed with well-known authors whose ideas did not really jibe with what you were seeing around you.

Some of you took your search for truth on the road. You went to India and China where you saw that whole civilizations existed and were not particularly impressed with the West and certainly not with the United States. Those who went to Buenos Aires and Rio saw alternative ways of life which were at least as attractive as the Big Apple – and anyway, the food, the music, and the style all appeared more interesting than in Greenwich Village. Those who went to Africa and to the slums in many cities came back impressed with the levels of poverty and the scale of the problems to be addressed. No one returned to the GPIA as sure as before that the great American ideal was or should be sustainable.

You also chose an area to focus on – a concentration – where you learned more, though admittedly, not quite enough to fully understand a field. And some chose to learn practical skills

through project development and program management, and also through the practicum in international affairs where you had to do real work for a real client. Others chose to write a thesis, and you learned the difficulties of articulating the question you wanted to answer. And if that was not enough, you had to also answer the question. Another challenge.

So even while the world was collapsing around you, you have been getting stronger, developing those muscles that I mentioned on a hot August evening at orientation a long time ago. You are smarter, more analytical, more informed, more skilled, better writers, and more excited by the world around you. The world is even more interesting that you thought it would be, even though it is also very frustrating and at times, quite frightening.

So I want to conclude by challenging you this evening. You were optimistic when you applied to the GPIA and when you showed up for Orientation. Bob Kerrey was right when he said you had not given up. Well now, it's the time to get to work, to enter the fray, and to figure out what you can do, maybe not to solve the financial crisis this year, but to be part of the many solutions the world needs to find.

In the 1960s, during the war in Vietnam, many of us in the US, some of your parents, were so offended and discouraged by our government that we turned away from public service in the United States. We never could have imagined that one day someone like Obama would be president and that it might be ethically acceptable to support him or worse still to want to help him. Well, I think that today you are entering the job market at exactly the best time. As Bob Dylan sang a long time, to my generation, "The times they are a changing, and you better lend a hand." We need you. We need your brains, your energy, your courage, and your heart.

The New School is proud of who you are becoming. The faculty was happy to greet you when you walked in the door and we're delighted to see who you are as you leave. Graduates from other years are doing well. They have found meaningful jobs, they are struggling to make sense of the world of work, of adulthood, in some cases new families, and mostly, of seeing paths to the future.

Each one of you will also succeed in that struggle. We will be rooting for you. Come back and tell us how it's going, if some of your readings and papers really proved to be helpful. And tell us how much fun you're having. After all, it's your life. Go for it!

Dean Dunne, the GPIA faculty committee of Lily Ling, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, and Vyjayanthi Rao reviewed five theses which were nominated by faculty advisors for the GPIA Annual Prize. This year, the committee decided that two theses should share the prize. The authors of the

winning theses are Nick Barber and Teo Balve.

Nick Barber's thesis, "Metaphysical Agnosticism: Radical Engagements with Indigenous Healing" examines Western engagements with indigenous healing traditions in Toronto. The Committee recognized this work for its conceptual innovation, the boldness of its theoretical exploration, for bringing a new approach and perspective to a complicated issue.

Teo Balve, who is currently in Bogota, Colombia on a Fulbright, submitted a thesis entitled: "Territories of Partition: Warlord Governance and the Predatory State". The Committee recognizes this work for its excellent and extraordinary empirical fieldwork in Colombia and its analysis which draws on rich historical material to show how the current formations of paramilitary government can be understood in terms of persistent patterns of quasi-government outside the state that can be traced from the United Fruit Company to leftist guerrillas.

Both theses relate theory to practice and provide rich scholarly insights. Congratulations to both of you.

In addition, the GPIA Faculty Committee of Mark Johnson, David Gold, and Phil Akre has reviewed the work of the nine teams of students completing the Practicum in International Affairs. The Committee has decided that the GPIA Award for the Distinguished Practicum should be awarded to the Cities Alliance team which has helped the Cities Alliance formulate a new initiative called the University Urban Research Initiative which will support universities in developing countries to undertake analysis of urban policies, programs, and projects in their cities. The GPIA will be the coordinator of this initiative and is organizing a meeting in Marseille, France in June. The GPIA yesterday received the formal letter providing an initial planning grant of \$75,000 for this work.

The PIA team consists of Allison Castaldi, Louise Daniels Moreira, Allie Essinger, Mark Farrell-Javits, Silvana Gramajo, Dabiel Liswood, Cinthia Marquez, and Marc Mousky. The team was supported by Pamela Hershey and Barbara Camus.

Congratulations to the team for their work!