Making Realism Work, From Second Wave Feminism to Extinction Rebellion: An interview with Caroline New

Caroline New and Jamie Morgan[1]

Abstract: Caroline New is an energetic activist who has interpolated critical realist ideas into the front-line of political activism. In this wide-ranging interview, she begins by reflecting on her life in Cambridge and Oxford in the 1960s. She describes how she became a realist and her account is illustrated with personal anecdotes recalling memories of well-known philosophers and activists from the time, including Roy Bhaskar. She discusses how her identity as both a Marxist and a strong feminist set her apart from other feminists. She examines the interacting threads of long-standing debates on the political left, such as the different approaches to Marxism, as well as long-standing debates within critical realist circles, such as the relative importance of quantitative methods in social research and the scope for agency as a source of intentional change. She brings some of her ideas to bear on contemporary issues, such as the climate movement and the recent struggles over trans rights. This engaging interview gives some of the social context in which critical realism developed, while also pointing towards its future potential.

Key words: critical realism; second wave feminism; quietism; Extinction Rebellion.

Caroline New came late to academia. From 1994 to her retirement in 2010 she was a Senior Lecturer in Sociology in Bath Spa University, having spent the first twenty years of her working life combining part-time and sessional work in further and higher education with activism, writing, and the care of her three children. She discovered critical realism in the early 1990s when her PhD supervisor, Paul Hoggett, told her he thought she was an unwitting adherent. New is perhaps best known to older readers of this journal as a regular attendee at IACR conferences and for the book *Making Realism Work*, a product of the 2003 ESRC seminar on Realism and Methods and which she jointly edited with Bob Carter (Carter and New 2004).[2] In conversation New's name often comes up as a source of inspiration in critical realist circles. Never prolific but always interesting, her academic interests and published work have ranged across philosophy (the linguistic turn, relativism &c), feminism, and ecofeminism, as well as gendered issues of sex, childcare, work and the treatment of men. This work, however, constitutes only part of a long life that encompasses political organisation, community and union activism, motherhood, training as a co-counsellor and more latterly creative writing.

Some of New's work appears under her married name, Freeman. In addition to work published in *Journal of Critical Realism* (New, Roberts and Groff 2005; New 2006; New and Fleetwood 2006), New has written articles and reviews for various journals, including *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* (Cosin, Freeman and Freeman 1971; New 1994; New 1998), *Sociology* (New 2001), *New Left Review* (New 1996), *Sociological Review* (New 1995), *Science as Culture* (New 1999), *Free Associations* (New 1993) and *New Formations* (New 2005). She is the author, co-author and editor of several books (New and David 1985; New 1996; Kauffman and New 2004; New and Snodin 2012) as well as edited chapters (Freeman 1980, 1982; New 1991, 2003). Most recently she has written two as yet unpublished political novels.

Born in 1946, New first studied for a BA Hons in Moral Sciences at (New Hall) Cambridge University, graduating 1967, before studying at Nuffield College, Oxford, for a B.Phil in Sociology, awarded 1969. From 1970 to 1972 she taught at University of Durham and at Durham College of Further Education. Following the birth of her first child in 1972 she taught Sociology part-time in Bristol and became active in the Women's Movement. In 1974 she was appointed associate lecturer in Urban Studies at Bristol Polytechnic (now University of West of England) and was active in the Communist Federation of Britain, later the Revolutionary Communist

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[2] For a review in this journal see Lipscomb (2006).

League, from 1975-80. During the early childhoods of her second (1978) and third child (1981) New took on various jobs, including sessional teaching at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada in the late 1980s. She trained in Re-evaluation Counselling (co-counselling) and became an accredited teacher. She studied for a PhD at the School for Advanced Urban Studies, Bristol University, awarded 1993, set up Bristol Red-Green Group and was active in the anti-Poll Tax Movement. From 1991 to 2010 New taught Sociology at Bath Spa University. Among other things she was an attendee at the UN Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 and served as branch chair of NATFHE at Bath Spa. In 2013 she took an MA in creative writing, also at Bath Spa University (awarded distinction), and since 2010 has been active in green politics, serving as Campaigns Co-ordinator on the Green Party Executive from 2018-20, and more recently in Extinction Rebellion.

The following interview with Dr Caroline New was conducted by Professor Jamie Morgan for *Journal of Critical Realism*.[3]

Jamie Morgan (JM): Let's start with your formative academic experiences. Cambridge in the 1960s was, I imagine, quite different to today, though probably not quite as fiction portrays it. In the popular imagination Oxford and Cambridge merge to form a sepia imaginary location of bicycles, and pipe smoking young men sporting college scarves and clipped accents…

Caroline New (CN): Well, nothing seems sepia while you live it. The punts and bikes were real enough, the proctors who accosted you if you were out without a gown, and the prohibition against staying out late or having men in your room at night. In response my friends and I enjoyed dramatic escapes, drug taking, teetering deliberately on a vertical punt pole and splashing in, walking barefoot and scruffy along the streets in deliberate denial of our privilege. There were still a huge number of insecure public school boys and the gender ratio was 8-1. That was not actually much fun for female students. We experienced various forms of sexism without having a name for our disquiet, just the vague feeling that we were supposed to be enjoying 'liberation'. New Hall, my college, offered a form of pre-war feminism which didn't feel relevant to my experiences. Luckily there was also a big intake of grammar school boys at Kings College, some of whom became friends or boyfriends, and I got to know a group of Australian postgraduates (including Clive James and Germaine Greer) from whom I learnt a lot about art and literature. As your introduction notes I went to Cambridge to study Moral Sciences.

JM: And would you say that you were from the first a 'realist'?

CN: No, I didn't start off as a realist. I remember my Cambridge interviewer, Renford Bambrough, perking up as I told him of my radical scepticism. I don't expect he often met people who seriously doubted the possibility of knowing anything…

JM: The possibility of knowing *anything*? I've got to ask about origins here – had you convinced yourself through teenage rationalist introversion or was this a consequence of classroom debate, standard texts you were exposed to?

CN: Oh, definitely adolescent introversion. My girls' direct grant school wouldn't have been party to that sort of discussion, but I had read Plato's *Republic* and the allegory of the cave had an alarming effect. Bambrough was the first person I'd met who seemed to understand the deep awfulness of the impossibility of knowledge. I liked his classic rebuttals 'So what if a bomb hit this room, could you and I know that?', not for their power to convince so much as for his reassuring, authoritative tone. In any case, my pre-realist phase didn't last long, but

[3] See also in this series Archer and Morgan (2020); Rescher and Morgan (2020); Porpora and Morgan (2020); Norrie and Morgan (2021); Lawson and Morgan (2021a, 2021b); Jessop and Morgan (2022); Elder-Vass and Morgan (2022); Sayer and Morgan (2022); Alderson and Morgan (2023); Groff and Morgan (2023); Little and Morgan (2023); Patomäki and Morgan (2023a, 2023b); Danermark and Morgan (2023).

it left me with some disappointment that philosophical positions were apparently a question of language and argument rather than existential anguish. So, at Cambridge I became a proto-realist.

JM: Would you say that was against the grain at Cambridge at that time?

CN: I don't think so. I remember the insistence that all philosophers must be treated as contemporaries, to be compared and judged ahistorically, which I instinctively questioned. The Moral Sciences course was rather narrow, perhaps arrogantly so. Sartre, for instance, was never mentioned, whereas Wittgenstein was treated as the appropriate focus of study, as Cambridge property. We had to choose a couple of the masters to study: I read Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, but without any historical context I couldn't really appreciate their thinking. We studied G. E Moore, and I disliked his ethical anti-naturalism, since I was convinced that moral argument had real referents in the realm of the relational and the social.

One of our lecturers was a rather doddery A.C. Ewing who lectured, inter alia, about Berkeley and phenomenalism. The weekly numbers in his lecture steadily fell, but I felt duty-bound to remain until the week he said, 'Can I know, in fact, whether there is anyone else in this lecture room?' In that case there seemed no point in going, and I never went back. (Wikipedia tells me Ewing was only 65 at the time. I thought he must be 90). Professor John Wisdom was one of my favourites for his kindness to undergraduates (whom he plied with tea and cucumber sandwiches in his Fen Causeway flat) as well as for his exposition of the later Wittgenstein. I loved the *Philosophical Investigations*, but I can attest from experience that they are no clearer after a joint. When I had a clear head, I never understood them as in conflict with realism, although obviously it dealt a blow to the sort of correspondence theory that still bedevils the trans versus gender-critical debate.

JM: You mention several things we might come back to later. However, you graduated in 1967 and went to Nuffield College, Oxford to study sociology, how did that come about? Was it in response to your studies at Cambridge?

CN: I think it was. I hadn't known what philosophy was and had always imagined that it must address social relations. Like Cambridge philosophy, Oxford sociology was rather narrow in scope. We did a course on institutions which I found terribly boring. More interestingly, under Jean Floud and A.H. Halsey, there was a strong emphasis on class and social mobility. This was the period of the so-called 'embourgeoisement' of the working class (see Goldthorpe 1968) a thesis that was strongly challenged when the affluent car workers supposedly seduced into individualism went on strike in the UK. There were many other things going on in sociology that would have interested me, such as the sociology of deviance, Stuart Hall's work, Peter Winch, Thomas Kuhn and so on, but I didn't hear about them untill I went to Durham. My favourite lecturers at Oxford were in the politics department: Steven Lukes and John Torrance. I read Marx for the first time, and did so avidly, and wrote a dissertation critiquing empiricist concepts of class. It was 1968.

JM: Historically a year known for protest, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the rise to prominence of the Black Panthers, the Prague Spring…

CN: Yes, and it was also the year of the Tet offensive, the beginning of the end of the Vietnam war. In Nuffield some of the fellows supported the American intervention. Which reminds me: I used to visit Norm in Cambridge where he was writing up his PhD...

JM: Norm?

CN: Norman Freeman – my then boyfriend, now husband, was a Cambridge cognitive psychologist. He put a poster in his window advertising the anti-war demo, and his housemate Roger Scruton became very exercised and wanted him to take it down. Norm and I went to the demo that October. I'll never forget the terror of being charged by police horses in Grosvenor Square.

JM: And that's British philosopher Roger Scruton (1944-2020) author of *How to be a Conservative* (Scruton 2014)?

CN: That's the one. Norm and he were at school together, but Roger and I could never get on. However, he did teach me to make good watercress soup.

JM: Though you were still at Nuffield College, Oxford… As I understand it, Roy Bhaskar was also in Oxford at that time.

CN: That's right, that's where I first met him. He and Trevor Munroe, a Rhodes scholar from Jamaica, Athar Hussain and Barry Carr were the founders and possibly the entire membership of the 'Tricontinental Revolutionary Movement'. I remember Roy pacing back and forth expounding, for this minute audience of men plus a few female hangers on, the themes of his thesis... The content is gone, I only remember the pacing.

JM: But you were all involved in student politics?

CN: We were, but some of the things we did were pretty stupid. The temporary alliance between workers and students in Paris gave us an inflated idea of the revolutionary potential of students. A group of us went to a conference in Belgium and arrived many hours late because the French police had held up our coach. I remember Tariq Ali introducing the Trotskyist Ernest Mandel and praising him for his positive attitude to seeing his car burnt up on a barricade in the streets of Paris. So we felt as if we were part of a powerful vanguard, but our ideas of strategy and tactics were sadly lacking. Back in Oxford, we sat down outside a supposedly racist hairdresser in a working-class area – we were arrested for that. We protested against the University's strict rules and the power of the Proctors to enforce them. Once we confronted Enoch Powell in a car park, on our way to barrack him before he could give a planned speech. He immediately went up to a black member of our group (whose name I forget) and put out his hand. Our fellow-protester, having been brought up polite, found himself shaking it. The cameras flashed, and all else was anti-climax.

At the time I lodged with Gareth Stedman Jones, who was on the editorial board of *New Left Review*, and he was an influence. I used to sit on the floor behind the sofa listening to the board discussions. I wasn't a feminist at that time; I saw everything in class terms. Gareth's then partner, Gaye Weber, told me about the plan to disrupt the 1970 Miss World action; but I honestly could not see the point. My mentor then was Engels and *The Origins of the Family*.

JM: You might want to explain what that implies…

CN: Engels argued that women could only gain full equality after the revolution, once the means of production had become common property and 'the individual family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping [he included childcare] is transformed into a social industry.' (Marx and Engels 1968, 511). Until then, the aim must be to get women into the labour force as wage workers so that they could take a full part in class struggle, resisting their use as a casual 'reserve army' mobilised when capital needed more labour and as a means to undercut men's wages. You could say it was a reduction of gender politics to economic relations. Like me at the time, Engels didn't have children.

JM: Your reference to Enoch Powell is also a reminder of the febrile race politics of the time, and that too might benefit from some context for younger readers…

CN: Under Macmillan, the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1964 had limited immigration from the ex-colonies. By the time I was at Nuffield, Harold Wilson's government was planning an even more stringent piece of legislation. It limited entry from Commonwealth citizens who held British passports to those who could prove

British ancestry or birth, or a naturalised parent or grandparent (British ancestry was taken on trust for white applicants). They feared a big influx of Indian heritage people from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Before the Act was passed our little group assembled outside the Senior Common Room on the way to a protest. Criminologist Dr Nigel Walker surveyed us with distaste. 'You should be studying these phenomena, not joining in them.'

JM: That obviously struck a chord, since you can recall what he said half a century later…

CN: I was naively shocked. As Marx wrote in 1845: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world… the point, however, is to change it.' (Marx and Engels 1968, 30)

JM: Perhaps we might turn to how you came to write a paper in 1971 for the second ever issue of *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* (JTSB). Were you acquainted with the founding editors Rom Harré and Paul Secord?

CN: As a Marxist rather than a radical feminist, in 1969 I allowed myself to marry, to the annoyance of some gay friends. I've already briefly mentioned Norman. It was he who knew Rom Harré. Norm got a three-year research fellowship at Durham University, where I followed him. I enrolled for a PhD there as well as teaching part-time at the University and the local Tech. I was doing fieldwork in a nearby mining village, where I learnt a lot, but the PhD was to shrivel on the vine. Meanwhile, Norm and I and various friends, including Ben Cosin (a fellow Nuffield graduate), were systematically reading Freud and the critiques of psychoanalysis as a pseudoscience. Norm told Harré about this, and he asked us to submit an article to JTSB.

Around this time Norm and I both became supporters of a post-Althusserian magazine, *Theoretical Practice*, edited by Paul Q Hirst and Ben Brewster.

JM: And this is the Paul Hirst from Birkbeck College, University of London, perhaps best known for his work with Barry Hindess and others later in the decade (*Marx's Capital and Capitalism Today* [two volumes], *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* etc.)…

CN: That's the one. In those days Hirst was in his early twenties, and already a significant figure in structural Marxism. Later he was to enlist Foucault's work in his critique of Althusser and of the project of 'grand theorising'. There were many such precursors of the linguistic turn around at the time, including in the work of Althusser himself, but I was unaware of them. I found Althusser's work on 'interpellation' and Ideological State Apparatuses very exciting, as was his (Bachelardian) concept of an 'epistemological break' between the pre-scientific, humanist Marx and the scientific, 'structuralist' later work – in tandem with the idea that to discover the points of rupture you had to conduct a 'symptomatic reading'.

JM: Though I take it you came to think about this somewhat differently later?

CN: Hirst's symptomatic reading of Althusser and other Marxist texts eventually took him to the Labour Party (Botsman 2020). In the language I later took on, *Theoretical Practice* was shamelessly theoreticist. Its Leninist plan was to train a vanguard of cadres – that included us, of course – to lead the political class struggle, leaving the heavy work to the working class. We took part in a series of self-important 'Advanced Theoretical Study Groups' as part of our training. I remember B.R. Cosin, who shared a flat with Paul Hirst, telling me of a phone conversation between two of our cadres about the relationship between Stalinism and Maoism, in the context of the Sino Soviet split. There was a crossed line, and at some point an Irish voice intervened to say, 'I bet neither of you's ever done a day's work in your life.'

Later, I noticed a similar self-deceiving tendency in some members of IACR who seemed to imagine that our CR thinking, in and of itself, put us on the barricades as effective agents of change.

JM: That's a comment I'm curious about, but we don't want to get ahead of ourselves… We are still in the early 1970s…

CN: We moved to Bristol in 1972, where our first child was born. This was a shock to my anti-empiricism. I remember realising, when I first held her, that both of us were now economically dependent – and that we *needed* to be. I'd read some of the early feminist writings, Simone de Beauvoir of course, who famously said in *The Second Sex* 'One is not born, but becomes, a woman.' Another instance of interpellation. This brings to mind Betty Friedan, whose focus on middle-class housewives illuminated the relative autonomy of the oppression of women from class, and Shulamith Firestone, who in the *Dialectic of Sex* saw women as a 'sex-class' which could only achieve equality through a socialist-feminist revolution and artificial gestation. For the first time I glimpsed the enormity of the oppression these writers were trying to explain, and their limited focus no longer seemed so foolish. Continuing to work part-time, I got heavily involved in the socialist wing of the Women's Liberation Movement and some of my early articles date from that period.

JM: And this is the period of second wave feminism? Perhaps you might just summarise what that means.

CN: The first wave of the women's movement focused on suffrage, whereas the demands of the second wave (roughly mid-sixties to mid-eighties of the last century) were for equal pay and equal opportunities, free childcare, free and available contraception and abortion, sexual self-determination and an end to violence against women. It was an exciting movement, an explosion of ideas and creativity. It made the important epistemological claim that suppressed knowledge could be accessed through consciousness raising groups, in which women described their daily experiences and interactions so that the hidden interpersonal dynamics of gendered power became visible. We came to realise that positionality trumps intentions as a determinant of action: it was also oppressive, though safer and more comfortable, to be dependent on a 'good' man. The slogan 'the personal is political' is not just an epistemological claim, however, it can also be understood as calling for a depth ontology.

JM: So second wave feminism was a reaction to the illusion of the idealised nuclear family, the role of housewife and aspirational 'domestic bliss'?

CN: Yes indeed. It's hard now to remember (in the UK at least) how institutionalised sexism was, which is not to say things are ideal now. Women couldn't buy themselves a pint of beer in a pub; male trades unionists would go home for their dinner then out for a meeting without any notion that their wives might want a role in the public sphere; reliable contraception was unevenly available, especially for young and unmarried women; access to abortion depended on the agreement of two doctors; domestic labour and childcare weren't seen as work, nor acknowledged as skilled because they were supposedly 'natural' for women, and therefore easy; rape and domestic violence were normalised to a large extent...

Of course, divisions were built into the women's movement from the beginning. Radical separatist feminists and 'political lesbians' declared that they would no longer give men their time and attention. We argued about the age at which an innocent boy became a dangerous man, and whether boys over ten, for instance, could come to feminist camps or picnics. I lined up with the socialist feminists and trades unionists who formed the Working Women's Charter group. 'Wages for Housework', very eloquent speakers, were in some sense our rivals, since they too claimed a Marxist heritage. They thought that if household domestic labour were waged, the women who did it would be empowered as well as remunerated.

JM: And you were writing at this time…

CN: My first feminist article (for *Red Rag*, republished in Malos 1980) was entitled 'When is a Wage not a Wage?' I argued that the wage women sought was basically a grant or benefit from the state, not a wage. If it were a wage, the state would be our employer, and there would be an inspection system to make sure you actually did the housework, further cementing women into our traditional roles. I also wrote about 'The Understanding

Employer' (in West 1982) who was able to employ over-qualified women at lower wages by kindly offering them an early version of flexitime so they could take their kids to the dentist.

JM: Given your previous comment on Engels it seems worth asking here where male Marxists stood on the oppression of women?

CN: You could say, all over the place! Not usually with the anti-sexist men who were meeting to interrogate their masculinities, nor with the anti-feminist men busy beefing up their misogyny. For most Marxist men, domestic labour was a pre-capitalist hangover, because it isn't commodified. They acknowledged and deplored the mistreatment of women, but that left it individualised and contingent. Meanwhile, non-Marxist women were using the concept of patriarchy as though it were a system relatively independent of capitalism. Calling it 'capitalist patriarchy' didn't clarify anything.

JM: But, again, if we recall your comment on Engels in the context of what you have subsequently said, there was some rethinking going on among Marxists?

CN: Marxist feminists, including some male economists, came to realise that the capitalist mode of production relies on women's unpaid, non-commodified work to reproduce the labour force. It doesn't produce surplus value directly, but the production of surplus value is intimately dependent on it (see Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh in Malos 1980). Of course, from a capitalist point of view the gender of the person doing the unpaid work is immaterial.

JM: Though you weren't yet formally thinking of this in terms of realist philosophy or social theory (early encounters with Bhaskar notwithstanding)?

CN: No, and I hadn't met Roy qua critical realist! But feminists were generating social theory and identifying constraining and enabling mechanisms at the level of the dimorphic biology of reproduction; the culturally variable sexual division of labour erected on this; its discursive justifications, and the forming of gendered subjectivity. That work was done in universities as well as in cafés and kitchens.

JM: So, how did you get from Marxist feminism to critical realism?

CN: I made another detour first, joining a Marxist-Leninist group in 1975. I'd mostly been at home with our two-year-old, and much as I love kids, I yearned for wider horizons. Even the grand vision of women's liberation seemed narrowly Western-centred, while the world as a whole was in turmoil. The Cultural Revolution in China was nearing its end. Lin Biao, head of the People's Liberation Army, had just been killed in a plane crash over Mongolia that probably wasn't accidental. The Chinese population were enjoined to criticise him and Confucius, and reassert Marxism, and our local group obediently joined in.

JM: To anyone born after the mid-1970s the hold Maoism had over the left is probably quite difficult to grasp, but was profound…

CN: Even then, Trotskyism was far more popular in the UK, with its rejection of 'socialism in one country' and clear designation of the peasantry as an inevitably vacillating class, like the petit bourgeoisie. As for Maoism, nowadays people have read the likes of *Wild Swans* (Chang 1991), whereas we read Bettelheim (1975), Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* (1937) and William Hinton's *Fanshen* (1966), which described the land reforms of the 1940s in a Chinese village.

JM: It's hard not to come away from *Red Star Over China* and similar works without a sense of heroic struggle… The resistance to the Nationalists' Encirclement Campaigns, the Long March and so on…

CN: After I retired I started writing fiction, and my first unpublished novel is set in a Maoist group. It's humorous and not at all dogmatic, but I've come to realise from readers' reactions that nowadays Mao is hated even more than Stalin. There's no doubt about the disastrous effects of the so-called Great Leap Forward, for instance, but I don't find people counting the casualties of capitalism in the same way. And a few minutes reading the footnotes and references of *Wild Swans* shows that this is not a scholarly or a reliable work.

JM: Still, *Wild Swans* is supposed to be biographical rather than clinically statistical and there are lots of scholarly works on the horrendous events in China of the 1950s into the 1970s (which is by no means to suggest that China has since become a consumer utopia). While I take your point that capitalist states and corporations have perpetrated their fair share of harms in the world, there is a danger of inadvertently sounding flippant…

CN: I don't feel in the slightest flippant. Huge numbers of people died in the catastrophic famine (1959-61) caused mainly by the policies of the Great Leap Forward and the campaign to eliminate the Four Pests. Sober estimates range from 15-50 million out of a pre-famine population of c. 668 million. It was a massive and unnecessary policy error, not an inevitable result of modernity or transition to socialism. The famine had causes at many levels, including local officials' fearful over-estimating of the harvests, used to justify the enforced movement of grain from the countryside to the cities. I completely get why, in reaction to this and other terrible events, post-modernists would declare war on 'modernity' and all forms of 'social engineering'. But that term doesn't identify an overriding mechanism so much as exculpate the market and cover up the relationship between liberal democracies and capitalism.

Under 'the casualties of capitalism' brought about by state and corporate actors, we'd have to include the clearances in Scotland, the Irish famine, the scramble for Africa and the inter-imperialist wars. Recently, mortality from global increase in heat was estimated at 3.5 million a year.[4] Perhaps better analogies would be the low life expectation in the Niger Delta as an 'unintended' but well known and accepted effect of the oil industry (a TINA compromise, if you will), or the 'shock therapy' rapid transition to a market economy in Russia.[5] In all these and countless other cases a bunch of stratified mechanisms are operating, including the choices of individual agents, but these are circumscribed by the normalised capitalist system ….

JM: In any case, in 1974 you joined a Marxist-Leninist group…

CN: I did, influenced by Jane Tate, a friend who studied Chinese at Cambridge, and was then in Hong Kong working with mostly African American GIs on R and R from the Vietnam war. She used to write me long letters about politics and recommended the Communist Federation of Britain (CFB), which Norm and I both joined. A couple of years later, after an internal struggle with the Coventry group (mostly workers in the car industry) who were deemed too wedded to the economic class struggle, the CFB morphed into the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) and dedicated itself to party-building. At that point Norm left and I stayed.

The RCL followed Lenin's dictum that Conservative and Labour are two wings of a single bird of prey. As for its attitude to feminism, it was more concerned with the 'bourgeois errors' of liberalism, individualism and intellectualism than with sexism. Comrades were encouraged to be downwardly mobile. I never finished that first PhD, and my participation in the Women's Liberation Movement fell off. Our local group was building an industrial base in a local factory. My favourite philosophical reading, apart from the Marxist classics, became Mao's essay On Contradiction.

JM: I expect this all seems an exotic past, incomprehensible to a younger reader…

[4] Note from Caroline: see Ebi, Capon, Berry, Broderick, de Dear, Havenith, Honda, Kovats, Ma, Malik, Morris, Nybo, Seneviratne, Vanos and Jay (2021).

[5] Note from Jamie: see Adam Curtis's brilliant documentary series Traumazone: https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p0d3ktnf/russia-19851999-traumazone-series-1-6-part-six-1994-to-1998

CN: I expect it does. I'm naturally a bit defensive. No one wants to be considered 'mad', and today our group's deliberate practice of taking turns criticising each other and ourselves for 'bourgeois errors' must seem crazy. Yet I don't think the attempt itself was crazy. The regimes in which we live offer us reasons to act or abstain from action, bribing and threatening us on the basis of our intrinsic and acquired needs. The criticism and self-criticism ritual was an attempt to undo our internalisation of capitalist values – greed, arrogance, fetishising 'choice' and so on. It could feel reassuring because gossip was forbidden, although of course it still existed, but at a lower level. Criticisms were only supposed to be made to your face in a group setting, non-antagonistically, with you given the right to consider and reply, with no one reduced to their putative errors. Similarly 'ideological struggle' over policies was supposed to remain non-antagonistic for as long as possible...

JM: 'Struggle' is a word you may have to explain…

CN: Ideological struggle was a particular way of arguing over policies or 'lines'. Comrades would take turns speaking about their likely outcomes in class terms, sticking to criticism of the position rather than the speaker. Eventually the 'correct' policy was supposed to become evident to all, or almost all.

JM: That's not quite what I was getting at. Today the concept of 'struggle' has somewhat sinister Orwellian overtones:

> But I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes and in any case soon perishes: only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the Party holds to be truth, is truth. It is impossible to see reality except through the eyes of the Party. (Orwell 2000, 261)

… especially if one then associates it with grainy footage of 'struggle sessions' in places like China during the Cultural Revolution. The connotations are somewhat different than today's use of 'The struggle' to refer to collective opposition to structural racism etc. I take it your experience was different?

CN: Not altogether. As a co-counsellor for 40 years now I see many of our practices in the RCL as profoundly mistaken, as incapable of producing unity around a good policy for bringing about wanted change, 'emancipation' in Roy's sense.[6] But that's what they were trying to do, whereas your Orwell quote skips that step altogether. One difficulty was the lack of any recognition of how we comrades had been affected by our personal positioning, for instance in the class structure, and our personal experiences in childhood. We brought (unawares) into our politics all the rigid habits and perspectives that we'd developed in order to survive our early years, and we dressed up all that indignation, all those yearnings and coping mechanisms in Marxist-Leninist language. Certainly we were trying to address real issues, and our attempts were no more irrational than the default position of acceptance or powerlessness. Now that those struggles of ours have receded into history they seem distanced and 'grainy', but the self-righteousness and hatred observed in many current clashes are horribly familiar.

The problem of building and sustaining unity for collective action while allowing disagreement is a real dilemma for organisations. If they can't find a way of handling it, they experience painful splits and individual disillusion. Recent 'struggles' over anti-semitism and trans rights have quickly reached the point where combatants lose hope of reaching unity and resort to denunciation and 'cancelling'. This might be connected to the discursive turn, which can make agreement on a particular form of words a precondition for co-operation. In

[6] Note from Caroline: Bhaskar saw critical realism as 'underlabouring' for emancipatory projects as well as for the social sciences. A good society would allow the greater fulfilment of our potentialities, and shorter term projects could be evaluated by how effectively they led towards the ultimate goal of 'universal human flourishing'. See, for example, Bhaskar (2020).

the RCL discussants worked long and hard to find grounds for unity, but at some point discussion ended and the minority had to shut up and bide their time or leave. We've done better with it in co-counselling (Re-evaluation Counselling). I think that's because we formalise the practice of harmlessly expressing emotions to agreed-upon listeners in bounded sessions. We often discover the roots of our most inflexible positions in our early lives, and this can help us keep connection even when we disagree.

In any case, I left the RCL in 1980, largely because 'ideological struggle' became post-hoc, so we were back in the territory of that Orwell quote of yours. The Chinese Communist Party told us who was right or wrong, and we were supposed to struggle with ourselves and each other to agree, rather like religious people struggling against their own doubts about a piece of indigestible theology. We were now praising Deng Xiaoping whom we'd previously criticised – he of the slogan 'It doesn't matter what colour the cat is, as long as it catches the mice'. In effect the CCP was establishing state regulated capitalism, without any public self-criticism or analysis of recent history, using the Gang of Four as a convenient scapegoat.

JM: The Gang of Four were certainly on the wrong side of a power struggle, but they weren't exactly innocent victims who stood for some socialist idyll…

CN: Oh, I agree.

JM: And I imagine quite a few China scholars would dispute that the new leadership had any clear sense of where reform was heading ('state regulated capitalism') in the mid to late 1970s…

CN: I think you are underestimating Deng Xiaoping there!

JM: Well, that would tend to imply Deng had absolute power and a clear sense of what could and would be changed… Still, I expect we are getting off the point, since it was presumably the events in the UK which were at issue for you ultimately (as they must have been for many caught in the contradictions of what and who to align with as events in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China unfolded and were reported…).

CN: One of the RCL's weaknesses was that it wasn't sufficiently focused on the UK. No, it was the deference to the CCP that finally did for me. I was on the Central Committee (of this very small organisation!) and the rule was that whatever an individual committee member's views on a political line, they must uphold the committee's majority position to lower-level members. I rebelled, spilled all to my local comrades, and that was that.

JM: What did you do then?

CN: After six years, it was a difficult transition. We had another child. I rediscovered the women's movement, now more highly organised and providing actual services: women's refuges; contraception and abortion advice; and campaigning for childcare. It was also splitting at the seams; working-class women and black and ethnic minority women were meeting separately. I worked in the National Child Care campaign and taught unemployed people in a Bristol College of Further Education, and gender studies in summer sessions in Memorial University of Newfoundland.

JM: That's a bit of a leap, how did you come to be spending part of the year in Canada?

CN: I heard through a feminist friend who'd moved there that they were looking for lecturers for their summer sessions. Since Norm had been the main breadwinner, it was great temporarily to reverse roles. He used to bring the kids over for a holiday after I'd worked there for a few weeks.

In the early 1980s I was working with Miriam David and others on a book about childcare titled *For the Children's Sake* (New and David 1985). We asked why fixed forms of the sexual division of labour remain so ubiquitous and deeply embedded in diverse cultures, although what is considered appropriate for men and

women varies considerably. We concluded that women's biological role in reproduction tends to give rise to specialisation by sex, especially in conditions of scarcity. Nevertheless, as Margaret Mead says, the 'original clues' (i.e., biological differences) are only and contingently related to the varied meanings and practices that they supposedly entail (Mead 1962, 30). The sexual division of labour at any one time and place is the inherited context for gendered agency (the important point about *time* that Margaret Archer was so usefully to formalise, Archer 1990). 38 years later, despite all the rhetoric about gender fluidity, childcare remains firmly gendered in the UK, at home and out, although the state now pays for more of it. That apparent generosity marks the end of any pretence that men earn a 'family wage'; it has nothing to do with children's or mother's well-being.

JM: Though surely there are a whole set of mutually reinforcing factors involved in this 'generosity' in the UK… The relative demise of mass employing manufacturing and extraction industries, decline of unionisation, the slowdown and sometimes stagnation and reversal in real wage, income and wealth growth among a significant and expanding proportion of the population… Today, the state is essentially subsidising through working tax credits etc great swathes of the private sector… while presiding over astonishing levels of relative and absolute poverty and inequality.[7]

CN: Yes, that's true, and that process was already developing in the early 1980s. I remember ex-miners in County Durham telling us that the promised new employment turned out to be light industry, mostly employing women at low wages. The 1970 Equal Pay Act only covered 'work of equal value', so those communities got much poorer. I was teaching unemployed people at South Bristol College, but soon this became politically intolerable, because the government was using the courses to massage unemployment figures. I wanted out, and in Newfoundland I'd finally realised that not all left-wing feminists thought achieving academic success was a sell-out. They even displayed their credentials on their walls. So in 1990 I signed up for a PhD. By then I was teaching co-counselling, and the gulf between its theory and that of psychoanalysis took me back to the problems touched on in our JTSB article (Cosin, Freeman and Freeman 1971). In essence, how do you choose between conflicting theories? How can you tell whether the objects they identify (such as the unconscious mind) are natural kinds?

JM: Those are quite abstract concerns for an activist…

CN: I wouldn't have used those words, but you could argue that activists are implicitly doing this all the time. Many feminists who'd urged the men in their lives to stop assuming patriarchal privilege found 'new men' boring and unattractive, and discovered (shockingly) that they had fantasies of being 'mastered'. Popular assumptions based on learning theory (gendered 'training' or 'conditioning') couldn't account for this. Instead, they looked to the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious mind to explain their own unacknowledged feelings. The trouble with this was that in most (though not all) psychoanalytic theorising, oppression (here the oppression of women) drops out as a mechanism. At most it is seen as reinforcing pre-existing internal conflict. The corollary of this can be that collective struggle against oppression is unlikely to have much effect. This troubled me.

JM: Was this the theme of your PhD?

CN: Yes, though not only with regard to women. It was entitled, *If Humanly Possible: theories of psychotherapy and the scope of human agency,* later published as *Agency, Health and Social Survival* (New 1996). It argued that the ecological threat to human social survival is such that postmodernist injunctions to forswear attempts at social transformation are highly dangerous. Instead:

[7] For various takes on inequality see the edited collection Fullbrook and Morgan (2020), and the bibliography in Morgan (2020a).

> To make history… we need to understand the complex network of *what is*, we need to decide *what should be*, and we need to assess *what can be*. Of the three strands of political discourse, *what is* is key, and it crucially involves psychological analysis to establish the mechanisms, the capacities and the limits of human agency, so as to reduce the opacity of this obstinate strand in the multiple determination of events. (New 1996, 28)

In the fragmented field of psychology, psychotherapeutic theories seemed the best choice to get a handle on the scope of agency, so I reviewed some of the key ones and their implications for the im/possibility of human agents collectively bringing about wanted and needed social change.

JM: There's a lot of scope for criticism of psychoanalysis from a realist perspective and if you had such affinities then I imagine this too was reflected in your thesis…

CN: That's right, especially Lacan's variety which is the obverse of the Churchlands' reduction of the mind to the brain and equally absurd (e.g. Churchland 2013). In the absence of any concept of emergence, Lacan whisks away psychological mechanisms altogether. They aren't replaced by the social level as a whole, but by language (New 1996).

JM: And how did you approach this?

CN: It wasn't a Popperian critique, by which I mean I wasn't trying to find falsifying instances at the level of the actual. I contrasted various schools of psychoanalysis with several radical therapeutic theories, including humanist and feminist therapy and Re-evaluation Counselling,[8] looking in particular at the possibilities and constraints for human agency that followed from these theories. To give you a taste, co-counselling sees the experience of systematic mistreatment (oppression) as becoming a 'recorded' part of the agentic self, whether the person had been in the role of perpetrator, target or witness. This recording is an internal mechanism affecting each person's capacities and relationships, but not always in the same way. The agent's responses can't simply be 'read off' their biography and social positioning, yet they are intelligible in context. A hermeneutic practice is needed which is validated by the physical release of emotions (non-repetitive, engaged talking, weeping, raging, trembling, laughing…) and a 're-evaluated' perspective. The claim is that this results in increased mental flexibility and freedom to act to make wanted changes, or to work with others to make these achievable.

JM: I expect some readers might find it interesting to consider this in the light of Andrew Sayer's work in *Why Things Matter to People* and perhaps Margaret Archer's various works on reflexivity and the internal conversation, but to return to the point, it was in the course of doing this work that you 'discovered' critical realism?

CN: I had a stroke of luck: my supervisor Paul Hoggett at Bristol's School of Advanced Urban Studies was engaged with these issues, and he suggested that I was a critical realist without knowing it. Paul was on the board of *Free Associations*, a journal addressing psychoanalysis, politics and culture. It published an article of mine on feminist therapy and internalised oppression: 'The Power of Lies', which argues 'that women are psychically hurt not so much by mistreatment and discrimination as by their own belief in the justifications offered for such mistreatment' (New 1993, 191). Another spin-off from my PhD was a chapter in the edited book *Gender, Power and Sexuality*, in which I critiqued Juliet Mitchell's 'materialist' defence of Lacan (New 1991; Mitchell 1974).

JM: Hoggett, along with yourself, Ted Benton and Hilary Wainwright was also one of the authors of *What on Earth is to be Done? A Red-Green Dialogue,* (Red-Green Study Group 1995). What led you to eco-socialism?

[8] Note from Caroline: Re-evaluation Counseling can be found at https://www.rc.org

CN: I began to understand the limits to growth in Newfoundland when I saw the devastation that industrial scale trawling did to the fishing grounds, and the misery that caused the local inshore fishermen. I read the Club of Rome's report *Limits to Growth* (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, and Behrens 1972), the 'Brundtland Report' (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), Ted Benton's *Natural Relations* (1993) and later Kate Soper's *What is Nature* (1995). It seemed vital to bridge the gap between socialists, who've historically focused on economic justice and seen the development of the forces of production as its potential engine, and greens, who'd foreseen the climate emergency by the early seventies but seemed to have little to say to the urban working class. Over a dozen of us worked on the booklet, meeting every couple of months between 1992 and 1994. It still seems relevant although the present situation is so much worse.[9]

JM: But thanks to Paul Hoggett you became aware of critical realism…

CN: Yes, and I started going to conferences.

JM: Do you remember what year that was? In several previous interviews there has been some confusion regarding who organized and under what banner some of the realist conferences. IACR was formed in 1997. The last of the Realism and the Human Sciences conferences (sometimes referred to as the Standing Conference on Realism) I could find reference to was held in Oxford in 1992 and Heikki Patomäki recalls attending a conference in London in the mid-1990s…[10]

CN: I'm pretty sure my first one was that Oxford conference, because I remember the rooms in Girton and going for a walk in Jericho with Andrew Sayer. The whole thing was intellectual heaven after my labours in Bath College of Higher Education. I caught up with Roy and met Doug Porpora who'd been a referee for a paper I'd written on Structure and Agency (New 1994). I'm pretty sure Roy was still talking about *A Realist Theory of Science*, maybe in relation to quantum mechanics. The difficulty and exhilaration of trying to follow his thought… But most of the conferences are mixed up in my mind. I do remember the concern about Roy contributing so much to them financially as a factor in the establishment of IACR.

JM: What about Andrew Collier? I would have thought he would have been someone you had common interests with – his early work on R.D. Laing etc (on Collier, see Collier and Calder 2008, 2009).

CN: I read it with interest, but we were coming from very different places. Later at Bath Spa I drew on his work in teaching about Laing and the anti-asylum movement in a great module called 'Issues in Mental Health and "Illness"' which often involved speak-outs from the students. Of course, when I was first getting into CR, Andrew's introduction to the subject was invaluable (Collier 1994).

JM: And your recollection of Bhaskar in those early conferences…

CN: I remember discussions between Roy and Margaret Archer, who was critiquing his earlier treatment of structure and agency. Also, the concept of explanatory critique, obvious once you grasp it, articulated the truth-based and needs-based moral reasoning that I and other activists often used, without knowing how to justify it. This was valuable generic under-labouring.

[9] Note from Jamie, others that spring to mind as early contributions include: Kapp (1950); Carson (1962); Ward and Dubos (1972) [An unofficial report commissioned by the secretary general of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment]; Georgescu-Roegen (1972); Schumacher (1973). For a recent attempt to bridge the divide that discusses Marxists etc. on theory of value and what it means to value 'nature' in something other than the transactional sense associated with the shift to valuation of 'natural capital', (critiqued for example in Spash and Hache 2022), see Hosseini and Gills (2023).

[10] Note from Jamie: Caroline confirmed in conversation that Heikki was correct and Bill Bowring did in fact organise a conference in London.

JM: Several others have said similar things, and most have their reservations about one or the other facet of Roy's work. In your case?

CN: I wasn't entirely satisfied with Roy's treatment of agency in *The Possibility of Naturalism*. He rightly pointed to the lack of a stratified science of psychology, but seemed to assume that psychoanalysis was the best contender because the concept of the Unconscious gave it depth. I think part of our difficulty with psychology came from a lack of clarity about its various objects, how and whether their real complex and stratified relationships related to the fragmented field of study. Norm, for instance, was looking at the development of children's representation of human figures in drawing, and at the development of their capacity to lie (theory of mind). Social psychologists were looking at the roles people take on in small groups. Psychology was a mess, taken as a whole, but it seemed clear that there could be no neat ordering of emergent mechanisms, and that causal processes worked in more than one direction. I longed to clear this up, but it was way beyond my capacity.

JM: So where are we in time now?

CN: Around 1992.

JM: It must have been about then that you got the job as Sociology lecturer at Bath College of Higher Education, which later became Bath Spa University…

CN: Yes, by the skin of my teeth. I was now 46 and from a career point of view I'd made stupid choices. Most of my work had been part-time (a classic female dilemma which has had an awful effect on my pension), and in further rather than higher education. I was Bath College's second choice, partly because they thought I wasn't a 'proper' sociologist. Of course, they were right. Luckily their first choice found something she liked better.

JM: And I imagine the role came with the standard expectations?

CN: I had successfully to submit the PhD and get something sociological published as soon as possible.

JM: And PhD study and then full-time employment typically makes activism more problematic for various reasons…

CN: You're right. I'd been working in the Anti-Poll Tax Campaign, and I remember missing the big demo, the so-called riot in March 1990, because I was finishing off the PhD. This was arguably the only campaign I've been involved in which actually achieved its objectives! The poll tax, officially called the Community Charge, replaced the rates which funded local government. It was incredibly regressive but dubbed 'fair' by Mrs Thatcher because all adults paid the same amount: £400. A family of four unemployed adults, including two teenagers, would have to pay £1,600 in all, an incredible amount in those days. During the halcyon days of the PhD I had gone to the courts every Tuesday to encourage frightened people, waiting to be called up before the magistrate for non-payment, to make the proceedings more expensive by questioning names and addresses and otherwise slowing them down. There were obvious class differences between those who refused to pay on principle, and those who simply couldn't – between 'won't pay' and 'can't pay'. It was a scarier experience for the latter.

JM: Teaching loads can be quite demanding, especially early on, did you find time to write?

CN: The teaching was demanding, because our 'widening participation' students needed 'value added', but it was certainly interesting. I felt I had to write to prove I was now a sociologist. To be honest I can't imagine how I did it with three children and a full time job.

JM: Imposter syndrome?

CN: Not really. More insecurity about becoming an academic in a discipline I didn't really identify with.

JM: This was around the time that you (like many others) were writing about Anthony Giddens?

CN: Giddens was the sociologist *par excellence*, so a good choice to establish my disciplinary credentials. I compared 'structuration theory' with Bhaskar's 'transformational model of the society-person connection' in an article in JTSB (New 1994). To my disappointment, when I met Giddens in a seminar held at the University of Bristol, he said that the issue of the differences between his and Bhaskar's theorisation now left him cold; he'd lost all interest in the structure-agency debate.

JM: Hard to imagine that would prevent an intellectual defending their work, if in fact they had a feasible response to a criticism… What approach did you take?

CN: I came back to my abiding preoccupation: 'the unsatisfactory position that society is transformed by "knowledgeable agents" ... who know not what they do, since they both change and reproduce society by mistake, unintentionally, as a side effect of everyday social life' (New 1994, 200). This takes attention away from the possibility of and conditions for deliberate change and for me, transformative change.

Giddens is pessimistic about the difficulty of deliberate social transformation, because of the increasing volatility of society (Mingers 2004). More hopefully, Bhaskar conceives a 'non-alienating society' as a continuing process of social transformation, of discovery of human 'natural (species) powers, rather than a fixed set of social forms' (Bhaskar 1979, 37). Drawing on them both, and *pace* Archer's pessimism, I concluded that the key to making history is understanding the social relations in which you try to intervene, and maximising the individual and collective 'structural capacities' of agents (see Callinicos 1987, 235). 'It is true that trying to make history is a high-risk activity, but quietism is equally so' (New 1994, 202). I think today I would put that more strongly.

JM: Given when you were writing, I expect one issue was the postmodern opposition to grand narrative and its various consequences…

CN: Yes, a lot of postmodern and poststructuralist critique was a timely challenge to social scientists. But it was hard to swallow the idea that once we acknowledge the historicity of grand narrative we are imprisoned in the realm of the discursive – the retreat from ontology. They represented themselves as empowering subalterns by giving a voice to marginalised perspectives, yet their own philosophy didn't allow any way of judging the truth of these perspectives (see Spivak 1988).

JM: So, like many realists you were not a fan of the rise of postmodernist theory…

CN: The maddening thing was that it was never consistent – how could it be? Bauman and Beck were the men of the moment in sociology, the sophisticate's choice against furniture-kicking realist bumpkins, yet they combined interesting work on real tendencies with a refusal to analyse causal mechanisms. Bauman rejected moral realism in favour of intuitionism (Bauman 1993), while, in *Risk Society*, Beck gratuitously confused real risks with perceived risks (Beck 1992). I criticised this in another 'sociological' article, 'Sociology and the Case for Realism' (New 1995).

JM: In any case, you seem to have been fulfilling the standard requirements for a career in higher education. Did these publications establish your position in the Sociology Department?

CN: I'm sure they helped. I settled in, and after a few years I became the chair of the Union branch. At some point I realised that management referred to me as 'Chairman New'. Meanwhile, Bob Carter and I got a grant from the ESRC for a seminar series on 'Social realism and empirical research'.

JM: This is Bob Carter who I think was then at University of Warwick and who worked on realism and racism and with Alison Sealey on realism and language?

CN: That's him. I got to know Bob at the critical realism conferences, and appreciated his work on racism, which I used in my teaching. I remember we gave a paper together at a day conference in Paris where our realism was roundly attacked.

JM: And the book grew out of an ESRC funded seminar series…

CN: That was exciting. The seminar series brought together a diverse bunch of critical realists (and fellow travellers) working in the social sciences. Obviously Bob and I shared the editing, so I'm not qualified to comment on all the chapters in the eventual edited volume *Making Realism Work* (Carter and New 2004), but I've got vivid memories of some of our discussions during the series.

JM: It might be useful if I chip in here with the odd elaboration and also prompt you to provide some substance for those unfamiliar with the material…

CN: Please do! One of my most vivid memories is of Ray Pawson, whom I'd characterise as a principled pragmatist, critiquing opportunist pragmatism. As readers probably know Ray Pawson wrote *Realistic Evaluation* with Nick Tilley. His critique of Cochrane type meta-analysis (the combining of data from existent studies in a systematic review) was both spellbinding and plausible. Pawson's argument is quite straightforward, though he doesn't quite put it this way, if you have an inappropriate ontology you will either adopt inappropriate methods or misconstrue what the findings from use of methods imply. 'For the realist, one cannot know how a social programme works without understanding its multiple mechanisms, outcomes and contexts' (Pawson 2004, 29). He sums this up in a formula: O = M + C. Yet, he shows, meta-analyses meld programme mechanisms together, oversimplify their outcomes, and conceal their contexts. Clearly, mechanisms are not triggered for all subjects in all contexts. If this is so, the meta-analytic focus on empirical generalisations falsely claims to assess the effectiveness of social policy. In contrast, a realist evaluation is based on a generative understanding of causation. Pawson goes on to offer a 'miniature demonstration review using "realist synthesis" on the topic of "public disclosure policies"' i.e. 'naming and shaming' (Pawson 2004, 26).

JM: Ray is I think retired now and is emeritus at Leeds.

CN: Another memory is of travelling with Malcolm Williams on a bus, intrigued by his position on the ontology of probability while struggling to fully understand it. His contribution was written with Wendy Dyer and eventually published as Chapter 3 of the edited collection. They write 'Frequentist probability is a measure of the world, or more accurately our ignorance of it, but the claim of realism must be that the world itself is probabilistic – a conclusion not logically open to empiricists' (Williams and Dyer 2004, 83). The main argument as I recall was that CR has misunderstood probability despite its talk of 'powers' and 'liabilities'.

JM: This is an issue that continues to confound and divide realists… Tony Lawson and Andrew Sayer have both provided argument questioning whether quantitative methods and models (rather than more limited use of descriptive statistics) are appropriate ways to investigate social reality, Doug Porpora and various others have taken a different position.[11]

[11] Note from Jamie: see, for example, Porpora (2001); Ron (2002); Næss (2004); Olsen and Morgan (2005).

CN: Yes, Malcolm and Wendy deplored the (partial) critical realist retreat from quantitative research, seeing it as limiting their potential impact on the empirical sciences.

JM: Malcolm made similar arguments later in a chapter in *Studying Organizations Using Critical Realism* (Edwards, O'Mahoney and Vincent 2014). The argument had two main aspects. One about implications for and from ontology (a discussion of Bhaskar on natural necessity and the issue of contingency). And one about specific quantitative methods – cluster analysis and case based quantitative methods do not exhibit the problems associated with variable based methods (validity drawn from samples etc. and realists typically have these latter methods in mind when criticising quantitative methods, with their problematic focus on frequency for the purposes of probability).

CN: Have many people engaged with these arguments?

JM: No, it's surprising how little attempt there has been to engage with his criticisms, for example re how to reclaim probability in the context of open system contingencies etc (though there has in general been a lot of work with broad crossover over the years from Dave Byrne and Wendy Olsen, both of whom also contributed to the edited collection). You would think that his argument would have invited more response from realist economists. Moving on…

CN: 'The greedy bastards' hypothesis sticks in my mind. Graham Scambler, Paul Higgs and Ian Jones presented work on how successive reports on health inequalities reduced class to a statistical variable, skipping over the causal powers of social structures.

JM: Graham has been a prominent figure in realist circles for a long time now and is still active despite retiring in 2013. His book *Sociology, Health and the Fractured Society* was awarded the Cheryl Frank Memorial Prize fairly recently (see Scambler 2018, 2020). You might want to just briefly clarify the 'greedy bastards hypothesis'.

CN: There's a long tradition of research showing the different health outcomes (life expectancy, incidence of types of illness etc.) of sections of a population. This includes commissioned government reports whose recommendations to reduce material inequalities were profoundly unwelcome to the government (e.g. Black, 1982; Acheson 1998).[12] I expect everyone is aware of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level* (2009). Much of this research is statistical, based on 'demi-regs' (partial regularities, see Higgs, Jones and Scambler 2004, 93; Lawson 2003, 79) which show some consistent degree of correlation between health outcomes, poverty and other factors. Graham and his collaborators argue that standard methods tend to individualise factors that may contribute to health inequalities and then treat them all as similarly relevant. As Bob and I say in the introduction to the book, 'A realist social explanation… will not only identify co-acting mechanisms, it will also recognise that mechanisms are stratified' (New and Carter 2004, 11). Graham and his co-authors argue that income distribution is a poor proxy for class, which should in any case not be treated as just another variable. 'Inequalities in health are not primarily about particular factors associated with membership of a particular class *per se*, or indeed about changes in economic arrangements' they are rooted in class *relations* – differences in power and control of resources. The greedy bastards hypothesis (GBH) is that 'the UK's widening health inequalities are the largely unintended consequences of the adaptive behaviours of its [the UK's] power elite, informed by its capitalist executive' (Higgs, Jones and Scambler 2004, 102).

[12] Note from Caroline: The incoming Conservative government delayed the publication of the Black Report, which was ready for publication early in 1979, to August Bank holiday 1980. In 1983, the General Medical Services Committee complained that two years after the publication of the Acheson report, the government had not yet issued any response.

JM: Neoliberal globalised capitalism and its local effects? The implication being that without an appropriate theoretical framework one just ends up with standard neoliberal policy that individualises the response (i.e. approaches that ask, how do we improve diets and encourage better choices, rather than how do we improve lived conditions systematically – which, for the authors, is achieved by an explanatory focus on the causal role of class relations)…

CN: Exactly. We see this right now around policy on obesity.

JM: Before moving on, since you were the editors we ought to at least mention your and Bob's contributions.

CN: You've already mentioned that Bob was collaborating with Alison Sealey. Their essay 'Researching "real" language' begins by outlining the interrelated and changing concerns of sociology and linguistics. They show the value of the realist understanding of language as emergent from the engagement of human practice with the material and the social world. Languages pre-exist speakers; so, in that sense they are independent of human agents. Drawing on Archer's morphogenetic theory, Carter and Sealey criticise both 'the more robust forms of structuralism' (Carter and Sealey 2004, 117) and Chomskyan linguistics (which is often taken as canonically realist because of its identification of generative mechanisms). For Carter and Sealey both these approaches 'disregard human practice' and the 'perpetual interplay between practice and language' (Carter and Sealey 2004, 117). Turning to empirical research, they look at corpus linguistic studies of recurring patterns in spoken and written language and the development of new meanings. This rich data might easily be dismissed by non-linguists as empiricist and superficial, but as Carter and Sealey put it 'the empirical always tells us something about the social world and theory is essential to telling us what it might be' (Carter and Sealey 2004, 28).

JM: And your contribution…

CN: That was written with Angie Hart and Marnie Freeman from whom I learned a lot. The paper discusses issues of research design and a (failed) application for ESRC funding. The focus was the interaction between health visitors and their clients, in particular health visitors' construction of clients as 'advantaged' or 'disadvantaged'. The official aim of the health visitors' interventions was to lessen inequalities in health outcomes, but the researchers' informed guess was that the structural properties of the relationship made such outcomes unlikely. Theirs was an eminently realist proposal using participant observation and interviews to analyse the interplay of structure and agency over time (see Archer 1995). It was accepted by two of three referees, but the third one's negative report prevailed. That referee objected that to establish a causal relationship you had to compare a case where the proposed cause is present with one where it is absent… which is one way of rejecting the possibility of naturalism.

JM: Because?

CN: Contrastive explanations are of course valid where possible, but as Andrew Sayer commented at the time, this requirement would make it impossible to investigate the effect of gender in an organisation unless you could compare it with an ungendered organisation.[13] We commented that before the proposed intensive work could be carried out, 'prior conceptual work is necessary to retroduce possible causal mechanisms from the pattern of outcomes' (Hart, New and Freeman 2004, 166). Subsequent investigation – if Hart and Freeman had been allowed to do it – would have shown whether their retroductive inference was useful or inadequate, but that conceptual step could not be left out. The paper highlighted one of the issues critical realists face in attempting to get space for empirical research, when the basis of applied research is still dominated by empiricist expectations.

[13] Note from Jamie: this should not be conflated with the use of contrastive question forms in some strands of realism for economics.

JM: You've already mentioned that there were some common threads to the series beyond merely 'realism and…' But if you were to summarise its key insights…

CN: The main thread was the importance of realist ontology for effective practical research and the need for a focus on causal mechanisms rather than event regularity outcomes. This was against the background of bad abstractions - 'chaotic conceptions' (Sayer 1992, 139) - the dominance of discrete variable-focused quantitative research and a stultifying split between large scale statistical research and 'interpretivist' qualitative studies. Clearly, recognising the co-working of mechanisms (Pawson's 'context' etc.) and the stratification of social reality can transform empirical research. There was, of course, then as now a problem that few researchers are self-identified realists, if by that we mean they have engaged with philosophy and methodology, but there are many researchers who recognise the constraints of methods and frameworks…

JM: Though it is probably worth mentioning that the criticism one sometimes hears that 'realists don't do research' is overstated. As Andrew Sayer notes in his interview, a lot of what he has written barely mentions critical realism, but it is always informed by it. As Berth Danermark also notes in his interview, there is a great deal of research (by no means a majority) that works with open systems, agency-structure dynamics, causation rather than mere event-regularity identification or isolation… and that resists a simple split into quantitative and qualitative research.[14] In any case, while the empirical focus of *Making Realism Work* is mainly health it is, in retrospect, a landmark book for realism and research, though it is by no means a 'how to' methods book (from the time see also Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, and Karlsson 2002).

Let's turn back to your own work…

CN: Between 1998 and 2006 I wrote a series of six articles about feminism, using critical realism to defend the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' which had been so important in the second wave of the women's movement.

JM: Perhaps you might outline some of the argument you were making across these articles, given the subject matter it probably doesn't make sense to set them out in chronological order…

CN: My starting point was the reality of sexual difference as part of the intransitive realm. Sex is ontologically prior to gender, i.e. 'the beliefs, values and expectations attached to sex categories, and the social relations and practices which they legitimate' (New 2005, 64).

JM: A claim that has, however, become increasingly and antagonistically controversial in recent years (a situation not helped by opportunistic politics of culture wars &c), and it is probably worth reminding readers that things written fifteen to twenty years ago could not be expected to be posed in terms of specific concerns regarding sex and gender that some might state today.

CN: Fair enough, but the continuities are striking. So back then I, and of course others, were saying that while sexual difference isn't entirely dichotomous, its bipolar distribution is part of our evolved species-being. In that context intersex is rare but ordinary; developmentally explicable in terms of a largely bipolar morphology. Where 'race' is a 'chaotic conception' (Sayer 1992) sexual difference is a 'good abstraction'. It's not difficult to imagine a society in which the various phenotypical differences used as markers for 'race' lost social significance, but it's hard to imagine one in which sexual difference doesn't have tremendous salience, unless, perhaps, humans lived to be 200 and in their second century could hardly remember their reproductive period. (I said that once in a conference and two listeners thought I meant racism was less important or less cruel than sexism– no.)

[14] Note from Jamie: for recent work either applying or discussing a range of methods see, for example, Fletcher (2017); Price and Martin (2018); Stigendal and Novy (2018); Danermark (2019); Jagosh (2020); Brönnimann (2021); Bukowska (2021); Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021); Fryer (2022).

Of course, all this tells us nothing about the actual form gender orders may take in particular cultures. There are so many co-acting mechanisms at work. As a basic, lower-level mechanism, sexual difference is compatible with many ways of regulating reproduction, sexuality and the sexual division of labour – and many forms of gendered subjectivity, as discussed by some of the contributors to the reader, *Critical Realism, Feminism and Gender* (Van Ingen, Grohmann and Gunnarsson 2020).

JM: Even in the late 1990s and early 2000s this was not the consensus position…

CN: No, it wasn't. In the early 2000s it already brought me up against strong ecofeminists on the one hand, and strong social constructionists on the other. The former saw women as a sex-based unitary group with common interests. For the latter group, 'sex' was a discursively constructed artefact of gender, and it was a desirable political aim to deconstruct the category 'woman'.

JM: And these epistemological and ontological disagreements between feminists are longstanding. Feminist standpoint theory, for instance, has attracted quite a bit of attention from realists and interlocutors over the years (see also Flatschart 2017; Sweet 2018).

CN: Yes. Feminist Standpoint Theory, in its multiple versions, posed the questions: are women a group with common interests? And how can we, how can they, know what those interests are? Back in 1974 Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith had criticised the social sciences' neglect of women's experience and tacit knowledge, proposing a 'women's standpoint' as a corrective (Smith 1974). This gave rise to an extensive discussion of whether women (and other subjugated groups) are 'epistemologically privileged', which wasn't Smith's contention. That hard-to-handle position was to morph into the idea of a 'feminist standpoint', not given by women's experience but achieved through analysing it. The feminist standpoint here represents the truth about women's oppression and therefore about women's interests in change. I discuss this debate in 'Realism, Deconstruction and the Feminist Standpoint' (New 1998), concluding that while women are *better positioned* than men to know how gendered power relations work to their detriment, counteracting mechanisms may produce quite different outcomes. 'We can characterise the feminist standpoint… as the imagined upshot of an investigative political programme that aims to build unity on the basis of knowledge of the social world…' (New 1998, 370).

JM: So we're back to ontology. And *are* women a group with common interests?

CN: Yes, in some contexts, but not inherently. That's where I'd join discursive feminists in opposing 'strong' (affinity) ecofeminism.

JM: By which you mean?

CN: The view that male domination of both women and the natural world is rooted either in men's and women's *inherent* (biological) natures, or through an ancient (but historical) repressive cultural equation of women and nature as beings to be dominated by men. Thus the current status quo – war, rape, violence and all – becomes an expression of men's interests (e.g. Salleh 1997).[15] Particular perspectives on social reality emerge from, or are made believable by, particular historical conjunctures. One of these moments was the Greenham Common's women's camp, outside the US cruise missile base near Newbury in Southern England. It's the segregation imposed by gender orders and their cultural justification, that give strong ecofeminism its plausibility. Greenham

[15] Note from Caroline: For Salleh, the 'deepest contradiction… [is] the nature-woman-labour nexus' (Salleh 1997, 86-97). As I wrote in a review 'If human, man, culture are valued, then by the same token animal, woman, nature are separated off and devalued' (New 1999, 106). Salleh calls this the zero-sum game characterising capitalism, socialism and most forms of feminism. See also Plumwood (1993).

was a place of potent symbolic significance; almost a caricature of the sexual division of labour. I used to go there in the late eighties, with a friend and a tent, standing guard overnight to protect the sleep of some of the women who lived there. They were frequently plagued by soldiers throwing dead rabbits or live coals onto their sleeping bags, and local young men hassling them for a laugh after a night out. Nuclear missiles sat behind three grim perimeter fences topped by barbed wire. In that muddy, desolate space men drove around in camouflaged vehicles, radioed each other in urgent, authoritative tones, guarded by two circles of soldiers. Women slept in fragile shelters under the trees, or on the narrow verge between the road and the fence. The wires were adorned with children's drawings, photos of family life, messages of peace, sanitary towels and other symbols of womanhood. From time to time the women used wire-cutters to breach the gates and dance on the silos, until they were arrested by the men. You could see the whole set up as either an expression of the performativity of gender, emphasised by Judith Butler, or of the ecofeminist vision of gender relations.

JM: And you'd emphasise 'men' over soldiers, trained to be soldiers, socialised to a way of being in the world?

CN: I'm not a strong eco-feminist! Women certainly *can* be trained to be soldiers, with all their psychological capacities and liabilities although for well-understood structural reasons this doesn't happen often. However, there are women fighting in the front lines in current wars. I don't know enough about sex hormones and their effects on the brain to know how much more difficult it is to train females to do this, but we do know that it doesn't come easily to males, and that it frequently results in long term suffering.

I certainly reject the essentialist version of ecofeminism. But in its less reductive form, 'social' ecofeminism sees both men's greater tendency to aggression and women's subordination as socially constructed, and argues that it's both possible and necessary to bring together the split halves of humanity. In 'Man Bad, Woman Good? Essentialisms and Ecofeminisms' (New 1996b) I argued that the rational kernel of ecofeminism is its recognition of gendered subjectivity as a significant causal factor in the reproduction of ecologically destructive practices. And that's an important political point.

JM: Perhaps we could come back to it. So, you found yourself between camps in these feminist debates?

CN: That's right. It often happens to critical realists. As epistemic relativists we recognise that our understanding of the world is fallible, enabled and limited by our social positioning, by direct and indirect experience. But we aren't judgemental relativists; we don't accept that there are no good ways of judging which perspectives are better or worse renderings of reality. This can look like fence sitting.

Both strong ecofeminists and discursive feminists massively oversimplify the causal picture by having no concepts of counterfactuals or weak tendencies. It wouldn't be fair to call strong ecofeminists biological reductionists, because they certainly believe that patriarchal society works to prevent women recognising their sex-based collective interests. That implies some recognition of co-acting or counter-acting mechanisms, but it still makes biological sex difference the primary key to the social world. On the other hand, strong social constructionists argue (rather like empiricists!) backwards from the actual outcomes, and take their diversity as proving there are no real mechanisms operating outside of language.

The middle ground can be an awkward place. At one feminist academic conference my paper critiquing reductive versions of ecofeminism was put in the wrong stream, so I had to deliver it to strong social constructionists who yawned behind their hands at the idea of bothering to point out that women are not inherently closer to nature than men.

JM: From an activist point of view I imagine you had more sympathy with the ecofeminists?

CN: Not only with them, but with all the feminists identifying and organising against the material and cultural forms the oppression of women takes. I went to the women's NGO Forum alongside the UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. I was there with a co-counselling project ('No Limits for Women') that ran workshops where women from many nations listened to each other across intersecting identities. The women

were fully aware of their diversity and of the oppressor/oppressed relationships within the group of women. But their political aim was to discover a real basis for alliance and to construct a degree of political unity on that real basis (New 1998).

Contra Judith Butler, if you restrict feminism to the discursive realm you can't gather as women to try to right the wrongs that women suffer, or only on a very local and temporary basis.

JM: At the risk of being reductive, if one searches Butler on the subject of sex and gender one usually gets a selection of quotes from *Gender Trouble* along the lines of:

> Sex is an ideal construct forcibly materialised through time… The 'body' is itself a construction as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark of gender?... Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (Butler 1990, 1, 4 and 13).[16]

Her point seems to be that the apparent pre-discursive existence of sex is itself a product of gender and so both are constructs, though it is not entirely obvious that this is a simple or non-nuanced claim about the physical body alone. So, contra Butler in what sense?

CN: I must say I like reading Butler. It's like having a workout. And she's making the important point that we have difficulty thinking about human bodies and relationships without specifying their sex. But that's a cultural, a historical effect. Although I have argued that sexual difference will probably always be socially salient, that doesn't mean it need be as salient as it is now. Two points: bodies do have extra-discursive substance and powers, and in some places Butler recognises their softness and hardness, their capacities and vulnerabilities. Secondly, there are contexts in which we can and do signify human bodies independent of the mark of their gender. Mortality statistics before they are disaggregated. Physiotherapy for the neck and jaw. Civil engineers calculating the amount of weight a footbridge can safely take. Why? Because in some contexts the causal powers of human bodies are not a function of sexual difference.

Perhaps Butler is also saying here that the aspects through which we socialised humans signify bodies are a tiny fraction of the conceptual and practical possibilities. Some other beings who perceive auras (if there were such things) might have completely different idea of the boundaries of human bodies. A fly would see a human body without 'the mark of gender', even if male sweat smells and tastes different from that of females. We humans can't so readily do this. But so what? Bodies are both constructions *and* real. Gender is their necessary interpreter since historically it's been or seemed to be a survival issue to organise human societies around sexual reproduction. Economic and technological change has made this less true in wealthy countries, enabling deconstructionism. But disruption of gender categories is still seen as profoundly threatening in countries where a rigid sexual division of labour feels like the only thinkable way of surviving infancy and old age.

I am not sorry that Butler and others have challenged our facile acceptance of sex and gender, but I do think the linguistic turn has had a disastrous effect on feminist politics. Explanatory critiques based on needs and harm are seen as a mere bid for power; as inherently conservative, like all claims to truth. For Butler, '…to prescribe an exclusive identification for a multiply constituted subject...' (Butler 1993, 116) is both reductive and limiting. It consolidates the social hierarchy within which women are 'abject' subjects. In 'Contingent Foundations' (Butler 1992) she recommends a politics of 'disidentification', of finding a more diffuse sense of self. I can't see that these discursive tactics would have effective bite against the material oppressions women undergo – such as poverty and violence.

[16] Visit, for example: https://genius.com/Judith-butler-gender-trouble-chapter-1-subjects-of-sex-gender-desire-i-iii-annotated
See also Hull (2006); Gunnarsson (2011); Gunnarsson (2014); Gunnarsson, Dy and van Ingen (2016); Saavedra and Pilgrim (2022).

JM: Let's return briefly to your statement that 'gendered subjectivity' has been a factor in the damage humans have inflicted on our environment. You might elaborate a little here. When I think of what it is that is leading to our current ecological and climate predicament, I think first of the basic tendencies of a capital accumulating economy built around industrialisation, consumerism, extraction and intensive and extensive growth… in what sense did you pose the issue as one of gendered subjectivity?

CN: Successful economic systems have ways of distributing people to the positions that need filling so that the system can work. Coercion works up to a point but is expensive, it's better to win consent and harness subjects' agency, even though that's constrained by the inherited structure. People who see sense in what they are doing do it better than those who are only coerced, and ultimately make more profit for the owners. An important motivator is the constantly repeated message that this is the only possible way to organise society, and the only path to the life satisfactions your position potentially allows you.

The distribution of roles rests on a cultural infrastructure. It involves psychological as well as practical training, and that's where gendered subjectivity comes in. For instance, the 19thC sexual division of labour in England and its cultural justifications conflicted with the use of women to drag carts of coal. In the end that work was incompatible with the cultural meanings and physical demands of motherhood and was stopped.

Of course, men's (average) greater upper body strength means they tend to be better at heavy manual work, and possibly the higher level of testosterone in their bodies makes them more able to ignore some sorts of pain and injury. These bodily factors are part of the causal picture, but they are massively reinforced and exaggerated in the training we have from childhood about what it means to be a woman or a man. Men have to be treated in certain ways from childhood to make them willing to do difficult and painful things, such as heavy manual work that shortens your life; or risking your life in war. Part of that training is the message that a real man is superior to people who can't or won't do those things, including women. Women have to be treated in certain ways from early on to make us willing to let men have almost all the public power and make decisions which are profitable for corporations but destructive for humanity. Meanwhile we worry about our appearance and our children. That's how gendered subjectivity contributes to the climate crisis.

But ultimately, there are no inherent opposed male and female interests. I developed this idea in an article on men, 'Oppressed and Oppressors? The Systematic Mistreatment of Men', which argues that men are themselves injured by the gender order within which they're positioned as agents of women's oppression (New 2001). I outline a stratified model of needs-based gendered interests as motivators of action/inaction.

JM: But they can have different needs?

CN: Yes. I discuss three. First, bodily differences give rise to specific needs, and therefore interests. Males have a specific interest in effective treatment for prostate cancer. It's in females' interests that medical research no longer treat males as the default human. Another example: are unwanted or forced sexual relations necessarily harmful to females brought up in cultures where these are seen as normal? I discuss this in 'Feminism, Critical Realism and the Linguistic Turn' and conclude that they are. (New 2003).[17]

JM: An argument that can't be made without first recognising that there is a being with certain properties and capacities who can flourish or suffer (see Cumhail and Wiseman 2022)?

CN: Yes, exactly, which Butler et al surely can't admit. Then (second) there are gendered interests within current gender orders. We all have conservative interests in finding a way to live well within the status quo. If hairy

[17] Note from Caroline: Here I was taking issue with 'post-Marxists' Laclau and Mouffe (2001, 153) who argue that while relations of subordination can be identified independently of the way they are described by the people involved, oppression only exists when the subordinated and subordinators are in antagonism. Instead, I defined oppression as systematic mistreatment involving harm.

women attract unpleasant responses, they have an interest in hair removal and a need for good painless methods of doing it. Which doesn't mean they have to.

JM: And third?

CN: Emancipatory interests. If, as I think, current gender orders and rigid sexual divisions of labour disadvantage all of us, both sexes have emancipatory interests in replacing those orders or reforming them so that they are less harmful individually and socially. There's a personal cost to pay for inequality, although this may be harder for men to recognise as the dominant group in the gender order.

JM: And what might be an example of emancipatory interests?

CN: One example might be men who organise alongside women for women's land rights in Sub-Saharan African countries, or for women's education, or in opposition to Female Genital Mutilation. Empowering women tends to result in lower population growth, less autocracy and a better chance at rational policies (see Hornset and de Soysa 2022). And beyond our emancipatory interests as men and women (and as members of all our other intersecting identity groups) there's our common human interest in mitigating climate breakdown and constructing non-oppressive societies.

JM: In any case, three types of needs…

CN: Yes, which sometimes overlap and are sometimes in opposition to each other. Which of them results in individual and collective action depends on co-acting mechanisms and triggering events.

JM: OK, in discussion I think you've ranged across five of your articles here, somewhat thematically (for proper appreciation one must, of course, read the originals)… The last article in this series was written in collaboration with Steve Fleetwood, a former (the first, I think) president of IACR (New and Fleetwood 2006)…

CN: With help from Ruth Groff and other CR friends, the two of us made detailed observations of gender differences in participation in the IACR conferences over three years. In that time women, who were about a quarter of participants and less likely to be plenary speakers, never spoke first from the floor in plenary sessions. When they did speak, they tended to preface what they said with a self-denigrating comment such as 'I may have misunderstood you, but…' We interviewed twenty participants to try to get an idea of what mechanisms might be producing these interesting differences. It seemed that both women and 'old' CR men committed to IACR shared a 'helpfulness' ethic which influenced when they spoke and what they chose to say. For these people, a 'good' contribution helped the speaker clarify their thoughts or helped the room understand them. The other men, on the other hand, saw a good contribution as one that made a strong, intelligent point.

JM: I'm wincing a bit reading this, since I am annoyingly talkative and treat public debate as taking an interest in ideas and thinking out loud as a way to learn…

CN: We gave the paper in Australia (pause for shame about our collective carbon footprints). I was disappointed that although we had included ideas for reforming the conferences to equalise gender participation, no one took us up on this or expressed concern or interest, other than the veteran CRs who had helped us gather the data.

JM: I guess that was due as much to lack of continuity in organisation as to indifference…

CN: Yes, we must take some responsibility for that.

JM: OK, as we start to bring this interview to a close there seem two different strands from these articles and your work over the years we might briefly discuss with contemporary issues in mind. First, the issue of trans rights has changed the context and political significance of the issue of biological sex in relation to gender.

CN: It has. This interview is already long but I can't resist commenting on the conflict between gender critical feminists and trans activists and allies. I was part of a couple of attempts in the Green Party of England and Wales to reach mutual understanding, or at least an 'agreeing to disagree'. These attempts failed, for reasons well described by Pilgrim (2018a).

JM: And this is David Pilgrim, Professor of Clinical Psychology, whose position on this subject was contested recently by Jason Summersell in *Journal of Critical Realism* (see also Summersell 2018a; Pilgrim 2018b; Summersell 2018b). Critical realism, seemingly, by no means provides easy answers to this set of debates. It strikes me that a trans person cannot but find some sets of claims about biological sex unsatisfactory. If transitioning is at root becoming what you have always been, then any suggestion you are merely adopting a gender translates the concept of construction into some weakly held form of choice, and that all too easily becomes a feeling of denigration that fails to recognise what it means to transition. Resisting making your sense of self a source of 'debate' becomes more explicable from that point of view.

CN: I don't think all trans people would describe themselves as becoming what they always have been.

JM: And I expect becoming is somewhat different if one identifies as 'fluid' (such as Eddie/Suzy Izzard)…

CN: Yes, but becoming what you always were is certainly the most commonly expressed view of transition… While 'gender dysphoria' is stigmatised as a psychiatric issue, there is a big incentive to think of transitioning in terms of making your body congruent with your real self. Trans and non-binary people rightly point out the similarity to the treatment of homosexuality, which was only removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in 1974, and only completely in 2013. This is horribly apparent in what's happening in the US.

JM: To use a phrase you used earlier, given how oppositional the issue has become in public discourse there seems little hope currently of 'mutual understanding'…

CN: That's too true. The dispute is particularly fierce in political parties because they are hoping to govern. However unlikely that is in the case of the Green Party, the opposing views are treated as a struggle for the soul of the party and as a survival issue for the two oppressed groups who are at odds. Each group uses the term 'erasure' around issues of language. I'm still hoping against hope that within political organisations we can agree to disagree and co-operate on working to end the climate emergency. We aren't going to get unqualified agreement with statements such as 'a transwoman is a woman, a transman is a man', or 'misogyny is based on biological sex'. These simplified phrases cover up big ontological disagreements.[18] In the future I hope for we'll have interesting, relaxed discussions together. But in this current emergency it doesn't make sense to use identity groups as bunkers, or to insist on the absolute right not to feel offended. We have to build alliances to survive. Both these oppressed groups experience the cruelties of the rigid gender orders – there should be some basis for empathy. A useful goal would be to find mutually acceptable practical short-term solutions to the points at issue, rather than trying to deplore, educate or exclude the other group.

[18] Note from Caroline: Surely also between transmen and transwomen on the one hand and nonbinary people on the other. If transitioning is understood as regaining an existing essence, isn't that at odds with gender fluidity? It is hard to reconcile these positions without reducing identities to feelings, rejecting any extra-discursive ontology. But in the current state of conflict, this discussion can't readily be held.

JM: I take your point, but a lot of the core differences turn on issues where if one grouping gets what they want another will not…

CN: Some of the 'wants' are easier to compromise over than others. Would the majority of 'cis-women' be worried if a person with a penis presenting as a woman were using a lavatory cubicle next to theirs, washing their hands and doing their hair at the same mirror? I don't think we know: the antagonism has got in the way of real consultation. Obviously if the person were behaving strangely or threateningly that would cause anxiety, but that would be true whatever their sex or gender. If we could find agreement on principles it might help with practicalities. We can surely agree that the society we want should ensure people's safety, including protection from violence and from harm to developing children. Then we need to establish what safety means and what constitutes harm. The hostility has sabotaged this discussion and impeded needed research.

Going back to ontology, I agree with Summersell (2018a) that who is a 'what' partly depends on context, and with Gunnarsson that '…womanhood is an abstraction, distinct from femaleness...' and '…a primary target for both the feminist project and the trans liberation movement should be the elimination of misogyny' (Gunnarsson 2020, 118). 'Woman' and 'female' don't mean precisely the same thing.[19] I see transwomen as women in contexts where it's social womanhood rather than femaleness that's relevant. Gender critical-feminists tend to say that women are oppressed 'because of' their biology, and that even if a male person succeeds in being positioned as a woman in the gender order they are not targeted by sexism. But they can be, even though that person has brought a different set of experiences to their womanhood. That said, Pilgrim is right that in public policy we need to retain the concepts of female and male. It would cause harm if self-identification meant losing access to biological information.

JM: In any case, as you previously noted, there isn't the scope here to do justice to every aspect of this debate, so perhaps we should turn to the second strand of your work and interests that I mentioned might bring this interview to a close with contemporary relevance, and that would be climate activism…Extreme weather events and reference to human induced climate change are now familiar and frequent components of the global news cycle.[20] A day doesn't go by without another damning report from a major organisation highlighting the need for urgent and major action. You're a member of Extinction Rebellion, how did that come about?

CN: Very briefly, I'd been working on the Green Party Executive as joint campaigns co-ordinator. We were setting up local groups to support Green Councillors in getting local authorities to declare climate emergencies and take local steps to cut emissions. That was a good campaign, but the party didn't fully back it, and in my frustration I turned to Extinction Rebellion (XR). It was a relief to be protesting on the streets. But I'm not a member of XR – it doesn't have members. I do belong to a small 'affinity group' with whom I've mostly been working on opposing the expansion of Bristol airport, using the courts to challenge the planning process as well as protesting.

I don't agree with all of XR's organising principles or published theory, any more than I did that of the Green Party. But that doesn't matter, it's been a good place to work. XR has three key demands of government:

[19] Note from Caroline: Wittgenstein on 'family resemblances' is surely useful here. 'I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. …And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.' (Wittgenstein 1997, 32, §67)

[20] Note from Jamie: Caroline has already mentioned various realists and others with an interest in the subject. Other notable realists who have written on the subject include over the years: Hubert Buch-Hansen, Petter Naess, John O'Neil, Jenneth Parker, Leigh Price, Andrew Sayer and Clive Spash. See, for example, Bhaskar, Frank, Hoyer, Naess, and Parker (2010); Price and Lotz-Sisitka (2016); Buch-Hansen and Nesterova (2023). For related issues see also Hickel (2019, 2020, 2021); Morgan (2020b, 2021; 2023); Gills and Morgan (2021); Morgan, Chu and Haines-Doran (2023).

'Tell the truth' (about climate breakdown),[21] 'Act now' (to drastically cut greenhouse gas emissions), and 'Decide together' (set up citizens' assemblies whose decisions lead government policy). It's 'theory of change' argues that a certain percentage of active 'rebels' with broad public support will constitute a critical mass for change, especially if direct action imposes big material costs on the state. I wish that were true, but I doubt it. In any case XR has had a big and important effect in changing public opinion in the UK, along with Fridays for Future and other organisations.

JM: Earlier in the interview, you quoted yourself, '"It is true that trying to make history is a high-risk activity, but quietism is equally so" (New 1994, 202) [and then said] I think today I would put that more strongly.' You also drew attention to a 'self-deceiving tendency in some members of IACR who seemed to imagine that our CR thinking, in and of itself, put us on the barricades as effective agents of change'. I said we'd come back to this and here seems an appropriate point to do so. Clearly, quietism is not an option now, but what makes for effective change…

CN: As realists we try to understand and analyse the world, and that's an essential basis for strategy. In that sense CR thinking can be extremely useful. But just as climate scientists are now recognising that they needed to speak more strongly sooner and in ways that everyone could understand, critical realists can only put our thinking to good use if we also take it out of the academy. It's a class-based silo, and by themselves academics cannot change the world. That's why I used to get increasingly frustrated as CR turned to DCR and then to TDCR without committing to drawing out practical conclusions.[22]

What sort of activism do we need? Just to take the UK, we need to be working on so many fronts. We need the Labour Party and Trades Unions to actively commit to a green transition and to lay down demands to make it just. We need campaigns to cancel the debts that make it impossible for indebted countries to adapt to climate change. We need communities to organise co-operative, sustainable ways of living. We need religious organisations, we need the 'high net worth individuals' with influence within corporations and financial institutions, we need the environmentalist Conservatives. As individuals we each need to figure out what we can best do from where we are and with the people we can influence. That's what I'm trying to do right now, yet again, recognising that I'm an old white middle-class English woman with some skills and resources, but not others.

We don't all have to do the same things and we shouldn't lose sight of what else is important to us. This summer I've finally allowed myself to take the time to finish editing my novel Blank Times, which I kept putting on the back burner because it always seemed less important than activism or caring for my family. The novel is set on a caravan site, where its four narrators are stranded by an apocalyptic event. This turns out to have been cyber-engineered by an environmental group trying to stop a geo-engineering project. It's a political fable. Trying to make art is one of the things that make me happy even in current times, and its moment has finally come.

JM: Are you optimistic?

CN: I'm actually heart-broken to think of the increasing suffering that our past and present actions make inevitable. This is even more poignant because, as we all know, the parts of the world which are suffering most are those from which my country and other colonial powers extracted wealth and resources, and that injustice has not stopped. But although existing causal processes are propelling us inexorably towards tipping points, as realists we know the future is not determined. There are many, many intelligent people trying to turn this destructive course. Somehow I feel both pessimistic and hopeful, and I'm constantly inspired by the courage of

[21] Note from Caroline: Critical realists will appreciate the significance of the demand that governments 'Tell the Truth', since for decades deliberate and systematic misinformation and omissions have been an important causal factor in the climate crisis.
[22] DCR refers to dialectical critical realism and TDCR to transcendental dialectical critical realism.

indigenous activists in the Global South, and by human ingenuity in finding ways to adapt life to increasingly harsh conditions.

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