

A Realist Journey Through Social Theory and Political Economy: An interview with Andrew Sayer

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Abstract: In this wide-ranging interview Andrew Sayer discusses how he became a realist and then the development of his work over the subsequent decades. He comments on his postdisciplinary approach, his early work on economy and its influences, how he came to write *Method in Social Science* and the transition in *Realism and Social Science* to normative critical social science and moral economy. The interview concludes with discussion of his three most recent books and the themes that connect them, not least the ongoing problem of a ‘diabolical double crisis’ of capitalism: extreme inequality and climate change.

Key words: Andrew Sayer; Critical Realism; Moral Economy; climate emergency.

Andrew Sayer is Emeritus Professor of Social Theory and Political Economy, Lancaster University.² Sayer’s early work focused on systemic modelling in urban studies and the influence of positivism on its approach to causation and explanation (e.g. Sayer 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979a, 1979b, 1982a). This work led to a growing interest in realism, methodology and philosophy which has informed all of his subsequent work – work which has ranged across social theory critique, political economy, moral economy and cultural economy. Sayer is the author of six single authored and two co-authored monographs. *Method in Social Science* (Sayer 1992a [1984]) was a landmark text and established his reputation as a scholar able to bring clarity to significant social science issues of the time. It was followed by *Micro-circuits in Capital* (Morgan and Sayer 1988), which explored issues of technology, uneven development and regional change and which led to a book on the relative neglect of the concept of division of labour by political economists, *The New Social Economy* (Sayer and Walker, 1992). Building on both of these works Sayer then turned to theories of markets, ownership, control and power and critical dialogue between Marxism and liberalism in the wake of the demise of state socialism in *Radical Political Economy* (Sayer 1995). This was followed by *Realism in Social Science* (Sayer 2000a), a set of essays exploring difference and similarity between realism and post-structural and postmodern stances on key issues in the social sciences. *Realism* concluded with a chapter on the scope and limits of critical social science (CSS) and the need for normative theory to address the urgent issues of our time and Sayer’s twenty-first century work can be viewed as a development of various strands of this expressed need: the underlying importance of class to both objective life chances and sense of self in *The Moral Significance of Class* (Sayer 2005a), the status of human being as evaluative source of concern which shapes and influences social reality and its potentials in *Why Things Matter to People* (Sayer 2011a) and forensic critique of the various legitimations of extreme inequality in *Why We Can’t Afford the Rich* (Sayer 2015a), a book that concludes with discussion of the most urgent issue of our times – the tension between resolving wealth and income inequality and forestalling climate and ecological breakdown.

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² For information on and access to Sayer’s work and related activity visit:

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/arts-and-social-sciences/about-us/people/andrew-sayer>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Sayer

<https://www.pioneeringminds.com/PQPosts/andrew-sayer/>

Over the years, partly in developing the themes and issues which would become his main monographs³ and partly in response to various debates occurring in and across social science disciplines,⁴ Sayer has written numerous journal articles reviews and chapters in edited collections – on issues as diverse as the meaning and significance of ‘space’ in urban studies (in light of the work of David Harvey and various others), the scope and need for cultural economy, the fact-value divide, matters of dignity in work, social justice, ethics and moral dynamics of conduct.⁵ Sayer’s seminal essay ‘Abstraction: A realist interpretation’, first published in *Radical Philosophy* is one of the key contributions to *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (Archer et al. 1998; Sayer 1981) and he has been a contributor to various realist focused edited texts (e.g. Sayer 2004b, 2004c, 2007d, 2009e) as well as to *Alethia*, *Journal of Critical Realism* and *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* (e.g. Kowalczyk et al. 2000; Fairclough et al. 2002; Sayer 1997b, 2002b, 2009d, 2012b, 2019).

Sayer first studied for a London University external degree in geography at Cambridgeshire College of Arts and Technology (later Anglia Ruskin University), graduating in 1971, before moving on to University of Sussex to complete an MA in 1972 and D.Phil. in Urban and Regional Studies in 1975 (titled ‘Dynamic spatial models of urban and regional systems’). He began his academic career as Research Fellow in the Science and Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex in 1974 before being appointed temporary Lecturer in Human Geography at Sussex in 1975 and then permanent Lecturer in 1976. He remained at Sussex until 1992 before being appointed Lecturer in Sociology at Lancaster University in 1993 where he has spent the rest of his academic career, transitioning to Senior Lecturer in 1994, Reader in 1995 and Professor of Social Theory and Political Economy in 1996. He has been Emeritus since October 2020. Sayer has been an active participant in the International Association for Critical Realism (IACR) since its inception and was President of IACR 2003 to 2006. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by Lunds University, Sweden in 2009 and *Why We Can’t Afford the Rich* was awarded the British Academy Peter Townsend Prize in 2015.

The following interview with Professor Andrew Sayer was conducted by Professor Jamie Morgan for *Journal of Critical Realism*.⁶

Jamie Morgan (JM): As I briefly noted in the introduction your academic career began with work on systemic modelling in urban studies in the 1970s and perhaps we might begin with how this interest started you on the road to realism?

Andrew Sayer (AS): In the early 1970s as a postgraduate in Urban and Regional Studies at Sussex University, I was impressed by Jay Forrester’s system dynamics method of simulating complex systems – made famous by its use in *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972). Meanwhile, in urban studies, models of urban development used static equilibrium approaches, so I wanted to make them dynamic using system dynamics. But I found that trying to do so exposed the poverty of thinking behind positivistic modelling. In an approach similar to that of econometrics, such models assumed that certain empirical regularities – or often just correlations at a point in time – were quasi-laws linking events together, such that by treating some empirical variables, like population numbers, as dependent on others, like jobs, one could use these regularities to predict the former from the latter.

Little of this made sense in terms of how real cities develop (e.g. through property development), and it was clear that calculation of quantitative relations among variables at a point in time was being substituted for explanation.

JM: So your first interest was provoked by problems with modelling? A problem that economics epitomised?

³ For example, (Sayer 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1986, 1999, 2000b, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009f, 2010, 2011b, 2013b).

⁴ For example, (Sayer 1979c, 1980, 1982b, 1989a, 1989b 1991, 1992b, 1993a, 1993b, 1994a, 2002a, 2006, 2012a, 2013a).

⁵ For example, (Ray and Sayer 1999; Sayer 1987, 1994b, 1994c, 1997a, 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b).

⁶ 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 (2021); Elder-Vass and Morgan (2022).

AS: That's right. In developing a critique, I was initially inspired by critiques of neoclassical economics made by Maurice Dobb, Joan Robinson, Janos Kornai and Michal Kalecki among others. Georgescu-Roegen's critique of 'arithmomorphism' and the limitations of mathematical models for understanding qualitative change was also an important influence; quite simply, mathematics is a non-causal language (Georgescu-Roegen 1971: 15).⁷ Meanwhile, researchers like David Harvey, Dick Walker and Doreen Massey and colleagues in Urban and Regional Studies at Sussex were developing political economic theories of urban development influenced by Marx, and these focussed on mainly qualitative analysis of social structures and causal powers, and they explained rather than predicted.

Another factor which helped me realise what was wrong with the mathematical models was paradoxically my weakness at algebra: I had to spend several weeks trying to work out what the formulae meant by putting in simple hypothetical data to see how they worked. If I'd been good at maths so I had 'got' the equations immediately I doubt if I would have questioned them. I suspect that mainstream economics is dominated by people who find maths easy and therefore don't question what formulae are supposed to represent.

JM: Though it can work the other way, Ben Fine or Tony Lawson, for example...

AS: I don't know about Ben Fine, but Tony Lawson came to economics with a degree in Pure Maths and yet recognized the limitations of maths for developing economic theory, so he is an exception. For many economists, the main question is not what is the nature of some system? but how to use formulae to calculate things. This huge contrast between the casual, data-driven definition of 'variables' in economics and positivist geography and the exhaustive examination of concepts in Marxism in the 1970s and early 1980s made a big impression on me. It is reflected in the emphasis in *Method in Social Science* on examined conceptualisation as the basis of theorising and on the difference between calculation or accounting approaches and causal explanation.

JM: Right from the beginning then, you were drawn to methodological critique combined with or leading to more realistic explanation of phenomena with an emphasis on qualitative approaches?

AS: Yes though I was always also interested in philosophy too and pursuing methodological critique fitted with that. Then in 1975 after I had completed my critique of urban models, some key books on realism came out, particularly Russell Keat and John Urry's *Social Theory as Science*, Rom Harré's *The Philosophies of Science*, Harré and Edward Madden's *Causal Powers*, and Roy Bhaskar's first book *A Realist Theory of Science*.⁸ These introduced me to realism and provided answers to many questions. For example, it became clear that mathematical models in economics and urban studies were actualist, allowing no room for social structures and causal powers.

But it wasn't just that literature that was important. Another influence was Sussex University's strong involvement in the early radical philosophy movement, and that interested me greatly. Marxism was strong then too, and not just in political economy; for example, there were lively debates on the work of Raymond Williams

⁷ Note from Jamie: 'arithmomorphic' is the assumption that every element of the economic process can be adequately represented by a number; critique of this formed a core aspect of Georgescu-Roegen's critique of classical mechanics and of mainstream economics of utility etc.; human nature cannot be forced into a mathematical structure, the economic process is dialectical and occurs in real historical time, and production is ultimately a thermodynamic process of transformations (with obvious environmental consequences), but an economy does not reduce to physics, leading then to his advocacy of bioeconomics.

⁸ Note from Jamie: see Harré and Madden (1975), Keat and Urry (1975) and Bhaskar (1975). As Doug Porproa notes in his interview, Harré was Bhaskar's thesis supervisor, a founding editor of *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* and amongst other relevant works went on to author *Varieties of Realism* (Harré 1986) and *Varieties of Relativism* (Harré and Krausz 1996). As his work developed he distanced himself from critical realism. John Urry worked at Lancaster University from 1972 until his death in 2016 <https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/john-urry/> Russell Keat worked at Lancaster from 1970 to 1994 before moving to Edinburgh and retiring in 2006.

and E.P. Thompson, and on concepts of nature in social science, some of which influenced my work (e.g. Sayer 1979a).

JM: And to be clear, the radical philosophy movement was centred on the journal of the same name, launched in 1972? And this was:

founded in response to the widely felt discontent with the sterility of academic philosophy at the time (in Britain, completely dominated by the narrowest sort of ‘ordinary language’ philosophy), with the purpose of providing a forum for the theoretical work which was emerging in the wake of the radical movements of the 1960s, in philosophy and other fields. [Beginning from the position]: Contemporary British philosophy is at a dead end. Its academic practitioners have all but abandoned the attempt to understand the world, let alone change it. They have made philosophy into a narrow and specialised academic subject of little interest to anyone outside the small circle of Professional Philosophers. Many students and teachers are now dissatisfied with this state of affairs, but so far they have been isolated. The result has been that serious philosophical work outside the conventional sphere has been minimal. The Radical Philosophy group has been set up to challenge this situation, by people within philosophy departments and other fields of work. We aim to question the institutional divisions which have so far impoverished philosophy...⁹

It strikes me one could substitute the word economics for philosophy here – which rather indicates something about the general trajectory of social science into the 1970s and onwards. *Radical Philosophy* has supported an amazing array of thinkers on the left over the years (see, for example, the edited collection of interviews Osborne 1996), all of whom have had interesting things to say but few of whom would be described as realists.

AS: Actually I think the Radical Philosophy statement is *more* applicable to economics than philosophy! (Later, in 1981, as you note in your introduction, I wrote a paper on abstraction for *Radical Philosophy*). Anyway, I was able to attend packed lectures and seminars given by Roy Edgley, Paul Feyerabend, Istvan Meszaroz, Ted Benton and others. Bhaskar also gave a few lectures while he was briefly a visiting fellow at Sussex, though I didn’t get chance to talk about philosophy with him.¹⁰ More generally, I was fortunate to be at Sussex during its early years when its mission was to ‘redraw the map of learning’, before the neoliberalisation of universities had got going, and it provided a tremendously stimulating environment. There were no departments and both students and lecturers had to spend half their time on interdisciplinary courses. When I started lecturing, I was asked to teach a course in social science as well as courses in human geography, so I chose ‘Concepts, Methods and Values’ - a compulsory philosophy of social science course for undergraduates. This meant a steep learning curve but a career-shaping one.

JM: Setting you on the path to writing *Method in Social Science*?

AS: Eventually it did, though the reading lists and topics I inherited on that course reflected the dominant philosophical debates of the time, before critical realism had begun to make an impact, namely positivism and the critique of theory-neutral observation, Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend on scientific change, hermeneutics – approached via Peter Winch’s *The Idea of a Social Science* (Winch 1958), and values and critical social science.

JM: Works that also figure prominently in Bhaskar’s *A Realist Theory of Science* and *The Possibility of Naturalism* insofar as they were common academic currency...

AS: I was dissatisfied with most of this literature from the 1970s, so *Method in Social Science*, first published in 1984, was partly a critical response to that view of the agenda of the philosophy of social science.

⁹ Note from Jamie, quote taken from: <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/about>

¹⁰ Note from Jamie: this is the period around Bhaskar (1979, 1986, 1989).

JM: And would you say this created something of a pattern for you? Wide-ranging teaching interests providing the inspiration for research and writing – which in your case was to become ‘postdisciplinary’. As you seem to suggest, this was quite against emerging and now dominant currents in disciplinary academia, especially in the UK – though there are a few outposts in Europe – Roskilde, for example?¹¹

AS: It was certainly the pattern while at Sussex (At Lancaster I had a more limited amount and range of teaching to do.). Later at Sussex I was also called upon to teach a course on founders of social science, and I chose Marx, Smith, and Mill. This again proved to be of long-term value many years later when working on moral economy and class. It was clear that research could be teaching-led.

JM: And ‘postdisciplinary’ ...

AS: A further consequence of beginning my career at Sussex was that after just three years of lecturing I became committed to a postdisciplinary approach to social science in which one discarded disciplinary blinkers and followed connections wherever they led. The simultaneously parochial and imperialist tendencies of academic disciplines encourage reductionist explanations in terms of their favoured objects and tropes, leading to misattributions of causality. Later – in 2000 – I published a paper on postdisciplinarity in an edited collection, though it didn’t get noticed much (Sayer 2000c). Of course, one can hardly avoid publishing in journals devoted to particular disciplines, but most of what I have done in that respect has included critiques of those forms of reductionism.

JM: And this continued at Lancaster?¹²

AS: Lancaster University’s sociology department has always been very open to interdisciplinarity, and I have been able to teach and research pretty much whatever I liked there, as have colleagues. Some outsiders assume I’m a sociologist, but given the continued division of academic labour in social science into disciplines, and its reinforcement by the Research Excellence Framework, I suppose this is to be expected.¹³ So, thanks to those early years at Sussex, throughout my career I have moved back and forth between philosophical ideas and work on substantive social theories and empirical research, and that was how my interest in realism began. I’ve also moved back and forth between political economy and social theory. Lancaster provided more time for research, but it was in a department in which postmodernism and poststructuralism were growing in influence; hence Bob Jessop and I (and later, David Tyfield and Sylvia Walby) were in a minority as critical realists, though there was also Steve Fleetwood in the Management School who ran a series of seminars on critical realism for visiting speakers.

JM: But in any case, it is clear from any reading of your work that it is not just ‘postdisciplinary’ *and* critical realist in some received sense. Much as Bob Jessop has, you have drawn on other work to enrich and diversify realism.

AS: That’s right, realism isn’t the only kind of philosophy I have found useful; from the late 1990s I also became interested in neo-Aristotelianism and in care ethics at Lancaster, benefitting particularly from conversations with fellow former Sussex colleague, John O’Neill.¹⁴ These seem to me to be compatible with critical realism, and necessary for developing the latter’s rather thin view of normativity. I was dissatisfied with the justifications of

¹¹ Note from Jamie, visit: <https://ruc.dk/en/about-roskilde-university>

¹² Note from Jamie: Bob Jessop notes in his interview that Andrew was responsible for introducing the term postdisciplinary at Lancaster in 1993.

¹³ Note from Jamie: for a critique of the REF see Derek Sayer, *Rank Hypocrisies* (Sayer, D. 2015).

¹⁴ Note from Andrew: John had also moved to Lancaster University, before moving on to Manchester University.

the standpoints from which critical social science developed its critiques of social practices. In relation to political economy, that led me to explore the possibility of moral economy. Going back to Smith, Marx and Mill, and indeed Aristotle, I realised that these ‘moral philosophers’ or ‘classical political economists’ benefitted from being ‘pre-disciplinary’, ranging across matters that are now dealt with by separate social science disciplines and blending positive and normative discussions seamlessly. This was what I wanted moral economy to do, too.

JM: Perhaps you might briefly explain what you mean by the term moral economy here – though we will likely come back to this. And it might be worth noting that Marxists tend to categorise Marx – his pre-disciplinary status notwithstanding – separately from both the classical political economists and subsequent ‘vulgar’ political economy.¹⁵

AS: I realise the term moral economy has been used in many different ways – which is fine – but what I mean is an approach to economic life which not only seeks to explain its structure and how it works but examines and evaluates the normative justifications for its practices, including their constituent norms (for example, regarding property relations), and their consequences. To do this it acknowledges that all economies are moral economies in the sense that they depend on the acceptance of certain norms regarding what people are expected and allowed to do in economic matters, and that moral beliefs both influence and are influenced by economic practices. This is what the classical political economists did, and, in his own distinctive way, Marx.

JM: In any case, you broadened your interest in philosophy...

AS: Yes, to develop the critical standpoints of critical social science I realised I needed to learn about ethics, and after spending a lot of time reading Rawls, utilitarians and deontologists without much benefit, I found that the more naturalistic approach of Smith and virtue ethics offered much more scope for making sense of not only political economy, but many topics addressed by social theory. Andrew Collier's work on values and ethics was helpful too. I had also become a fan of Pierre Bourdieu in the 1990s, though I thought his approach needed modification to make explicit the normative issues implicit in the lived experience of inequality that he studied, for example, by paying attention to the emotions, moral sentiments and evaluations of individuals.

JM: The work of Bourdieu seems to be something of a dividing line for critical realists – though not quite as contentious as analytical statistics. You are notably more sympathetic to Bourdieu than Margaret Archer.

AS: I'm sympathetic to both. As regards his approach to agency, Bourdieu's concept of habitus shares with Aristotelian approaches a focus on dispositions that are acquired through practice, but it ignores the role of reflexivity and emotional mediation in their acquisition and exercise, which virtue ethics emphasizes, so that at times his work repeats the bad old sociological trope of people as cultural dupes. While I appreciated Margaret Archer's analysis of structure and agency and reflexivity (and especially her emphasis on evaluative being), I felt that it need not be at odds with the concept of habitus. As dual process theory has it in psychology, we have both fast semi-conscious responses based on acquired dispositions and slow responses involving reflection, and in many cases, they work in concert.

JM: We might be getting ahead of ourselves a little here, since your work spans five decades (and is heading into a sixth) and we are in danger of rushing towards your later work without paying due attention to what came before. To me, retrospectively at least, there seems to be a clear line of development in your work. To what degree would you suggest this was the case?

¹⁵ Note from Jamie: for extended discussion of the contested meaning and significance of classical political economy see Morgan (2022).

AS: Your excellent introduction to this interview makes the transitions appear seamless and in hindsight there does appear to be a clear line, though I had no long-term plan. I mainly pursued hunches and responded to problems and interests as they emerged, and made commitments to research and publishing projects. But there were no leaps into wholly new topics: new themes always emerged from old ones. I often found it easiest to write on topics that began as digressions from what were meant to be my main projects, but which seemed both more interesting and more manageable. Again, I've always found moving back and forth between philosophical issues and substantive, social scientific studies hugely beneficial. As was clear from the failings of positivist research, social science neglects philosophical issues at its peril; on the other hand, philosophy becomes ineffectual when too far removed from substantive subjects and issues.

JM: So *Method in Social Science* emerged out of your teaching interests, but in keeping with the inspiration provided by the radical philosophy movement and the work of other scholars you previously mentioned in urban and regional studies, you were keen to provide relevant explanation?

AS: That's right, though it was also influenced by some empirical research. When I was writing *Method in Social Science* in the early 1980s, I was also doing research on urban and regional uneven development, and studies of industry and division of labour (Morgan and Sayer 1988; Sayer and Walker 1992). At that time, research on these topics was dominated by Marxism and other kinds of radical political economy, which in part had an implicitly realist approach to theory and explanation. But it seemed to me that much research in this field jumped from abstract theory to explanation of concrete events without considering how the many mediating circumstances of concrete reality made a difference. At worst, concrete social processes were explained by wholly reducing them to abstract concepts such as the reproduction of labour power or the law of value. At the substantive level there were heated debates between those who saw Marxism as sufficient for explaining the concrete, and others, like me, Kevin Morgan and Doreen Massey and others, who were sympathetic to Marxism, but rejected the reduction of the concrete to the abstract (e.g. Massey 1984). My work with Kevin Morgan on industry and space was guided by what I was trying to work out at a philosophical level regarding how to move from the abstract to the concrete, and to do so in a way that acknowledged that concrete processes are always spatial, and that this makes a difference to them (Sayer 1981; 1984; 1987; Morgan and Sayer 1988). Of course, Marx's own seminal discussion in the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* of the move from abstract to concrete and the dangers of 'chaotic conceptions' in 1857 was the starting point (Bob Jessop, as your interview with him discusses, takes this analysis of the relation of abstract and concrete in processes of economic development further).¹⁶

JM: Yes, Bob has quite a lot to say about this and you too returned to this repeatedly over the 1980s and 1990s in various forums and contexts...

AS: I did. One theme concerned another form of reductionism that was common in radical political economy at that time: this was the reduction of the diversity of concrete forms of capitalism to a standard model of 'Fordism' or 'post-Fordism', so that a new kind of grand narrative served as a substitute for research into these diverse concrete forms. As Kevin Morgan and I found, only a minority of workers worked in anything resembling Fordist labour processes, even in industries like electronics. Further, contrary to the general presumption in radical political economy, competitive success of capitalist businesses often depends on other things than the control of labour and automation: product innovation and getting access to markets are important too. Commodities are not, as Marx said, simply 'thrown on the market', and there are no profits to be made from producing obsolete products with ever greater efficiency.

¹⁶ Note from Jamie, the 1857 text is available as an appendix to the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, for the 1857 text visit: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Contribution_to_the_Critique_of_Political_Economy/Appendix

JM: So you were concerned that nuance and difference inform explanation and researchers resist fitting everything to received concepts?

AS: Very much so. The social world is complex, and we cannot expect to understand it unless we are open to things not addressed by individual theories, even ones as broad in scope as Marxism. We can't understand the economics and politics of particular industries and places unless we do open, concrete research on how the many different processes producing them come together, producing diverse outcomes and lived experiences.

JM: And in thinking about problems such as the reduction of diversity, you also developed critiques of the treatment of space in social theory?

AS: Reductionism always involves the overextension of what can be claimed to account for something, and I felt that many geographers were making exaggerated claims about what theory could and should say about space. (This tendency was surely influenced by disciplinary imperialism – an attempt by geographers to raise their status.) I argued that while geographical, physical space was indeed important and always made a difference to how processes worked out, at the level of abstract theory one couldn't say much about the specific spatial forms that social phenomena would take.

Social structures like those of class or the division of labour have a high degree of spatial flexibility such that they can take on many different spatial forms and exist in a range of different contexts and yet still function, though those contingent forms would make some difference to how they worked. Thus, labour market areas can exist in many spatial forms, particularly now with the development of online working. For this reason, I argued that abstract social theory could make only very loose claims about spatial forms, and that to understand the difference that space makes, one had to do concrete empirical research to see how the spacing and timing of constituent processes – the contingent generative mechanisms – produced certain concrete outcomes at the level of the actual.

JM: This seems to resonate with your previous comment that you have often found yourself following 'hunches' and threads – that your research interests developed or emerged as a form of productive 'digression' around themes...

AS: This work on the concrete forms of capitalist economic activities led to work with Dick Walker, an economic geographer at Berkeley, on theorizing divisions of labour (Sayer and Walker 1992). A major theme in *Method in Social Science* had been the importance of 'modes of abstraction' – how we carve up the world to theorise it. Marxism's mode of abstraction focuses on production and 'vertical' property relations, and while the division of labour was analysed by Marx (particularly in early works such as *The German Ideology*), in later work the way in which markets coordinate the social division of labour was treated as secondary. This prioritising of the 'vertical' relations of the social relations of production over the 'horizontal relations' of market coordination resulted in a common underestimation of how far the division of labour really does divide labour economically, culturally and politically, and an underestimation of the difficulties of coordinating it by means other than markets and prices. Mainstream economics' mode of abstraction inverted this, emphasizing market coordination and ignoring the social relations of production, and hence classes.

JM: So this line of research was leading you to think critically about the fundamental commitments or framing of economy by Marxists, radical political economists and mainstream economists?

AS: Yes. In conducting that research it became clear that one of the deficiencies of Marxist and other radical political economic theory was an under-theorisation of the implications of the development in capitalism of an extraordinarily complex and geographically-extended social division of labour, that was beyond the control of any single agency, whether authoritarian state or democratic body. It's an example of quantitative change – the

ever-increasing numbers of producers and consumers – producing qualitative change. Theorising invariably involves abstracting from complexity, but sometimes it's problematic. Capitalism's development is 'anarchic', as Marx said, not only because it is controlled by multiple competing capitalists but because the material and informational/epistemic complexity of its advanced division of labour is intractable regardless of who seeks to control it. To some extent, Hayek was right about the 'epistemic' challenge of a market economy. This was the subject of my book *Radical Political Economy: A Critique* (Sayer 1995).

JM: Quite a few realists have taken an interest in Hayek and related issues. For example, Steve Fleetwood, Paul Lewis, and Mario da Graça Moura (though he is better known for work on Schumpeter). *Radical Political Economy* takes us to the mid-1990s and what seems clear is that your work had been heavily informed by realist philosophy/social theory but not always stated as such – it is implicit in the *explanatory* form and in the constructive critique of underlying problems of theory and concepts.

AS: This was intentional. In my work on substantive topics like economic systems my main task was to address them in the most persuasive way I could. They were not intended as vehicles for demonstrating the power of critical realism. In any case, I think there's something quite commonsensical about critical realism, especially its view of causation, so that often one doesn't need to burden – or alienate – the reader with digressions on critical realism in order to make points about substantive issues like how inequalities arise. Of course, a critical realist approach was implicit, but one still has to argue for particular accounts of substantive matters: an impeccably realist account might still be false. But there's a tactical reason for the strategy too: prefacing everything I wanted to say with a summary of critical realism and a critique of irrealist contradictions in other social theory would have put off many readers. Irrealism or anti-realism is an impossible position to hold to consistently, so those hostile to realism in their philosophical beliefs can't avoid presupposing realist ideas in their practice, including academic writing, and these unintended realist elements can be a basis for constructive engagement.

As I argued in *Method in Social Science*, one of the main jobs of theory is to identify the necessary conditions of existence of its objects, distinguishing them from conditions which are merely sufficient for their existence, and from conditions which are merely co-present. *Radical Political Economy* was driven by realist questions such as: 'what is it about capitalism that makes its development anarchic and uneven?'; 'What forms of ownership do markets presuppose – what forms can they co-exist with?' Capitalism is certainly the dominant form of market economy, but markets can exist with other kinds of property relations.

JM: A subject Dave Elder-Vass takes up in his *Profit and Gift in the Digital Economy* (Elder-Vass 2016). Of course, you haven't just undertaken work informed by realism you have made major contributions to general social theory and critical realism and it would provide a distorted impression of your influence over the years to neglect this – and this, of course, begins with your *Method in Social Science*, a book we have alluded to a couple of times already. Perhaps we might briefly discuss its enduring appeal and that of your later essays, *Realism and Social Science*, before turning to your work in the twenty-first century.

Method in Social Science is subtitled 'A Realist Approach' and whilst it was written in the 1980s and revised in the 1990s its arguments and insights remain highly relevant, even if some of its literature and targets have dated. I think part of its value is not just its substantive arguments but rather its construction and intention. It is quite different in its ethos and invitation than standard methods textbooks one finds, for example, in business schools. These, it strikes me, have been infected by the direction of travel of social science – the increasing emphasis on instrumentalities of output, publication rankings and other metrics that dominate research impact, little of which has to do with actual quality or with the adequacy of knowledge or goals of social good (even if impact these days is supposed to be about such things).

Standard methods textbooks invite trainee researchers (undergraduates doing dissertations, postgraduates doing more advanced research etc.) to select the category of approach deemed most appropriate to their pre-existing concerns and received methods and focus, and then state the terms of reference of these: 'I am doing econometrics, what do I need to say in order to tick the boxes for these methods?' 'I am doing case

studies, case studies are...'. This is the antithesis of research as an open process of inquiry, requiring iterative learning, multiple perspectives and contingent or developing insight. In the name of professionalism it treats methods as a mere toolkit and discourages reflection on the research process. It inculcates superficiality of process, often disguised by technical sophistication or creative nomenclature. Methods are discussed in terms of consistency, application and advantages and disadvantages, but somewhere along the way the broader point of what knowledge is and research is for tends to be lost. How do you account for the enduring appeal of the book?

AS: Actually, *Method* was originally going to be called *Realism and Social Science*, but the editor at the publisher told me that a book by Karl Popper that they were publishing at the same time had realism in the title so I wouldn't be able to use it too! So I opted for *Method in Social Science: a Realist Approach*, but as the subtitle indicates the contents were primarily about 'approach' – which suggests something broader than methods. I was also determined that it would be different from the kind of books on the philosophy of social science that were influential in the early 1980s, which ran through some standard philosophical issues in social science but failed to connect with recognisable social research. For example, there were several books that merely described and critiqued positivism, hermeneutics and critical social science but left themselves no room to propose alternatives.

I wanted to show how some basic ideas of the realist philosophy of social science could inform how we approach research. One of the main arguments was that we need to think hard about how we conceptualise our objects before we get onto 'methods'. Methods have to be appropriate to their objects and the kind of questions we ask of them, so the first question is to interrogate the nature of our objects. So yes, I wanted to get away from the all-purpose toolkit approach to method. I also wanted to liberate students from the restrictions of positivist informed approaches that confused explanation with the search for regularities, and from the demand that their findings should somehow be 'representative' (in a statistical sense) of some larger population, as if society were reducible to an aggregate of externally-related individuals – like a bowl of differently coloured balls.

From the responses I've received, the distinction – adapted from Rom Harré – between 'extensive research' concerned with questions of extent (patterns, regularities and frequency in empirical data) and 'intensive research' concerned with tracing the causal connections that support and issue from an object of interest, was particularly useful for researchers. Once we recognize that society contains structures and networks of causal relations, as well as accidental associations, then it becomes possible to see that intensive studies of particular objects (e.g. a certain neighbourhood or an institution), in which we trace their internal and external causal connections and their use of wider discourses, can provide a window onto a bigger scene. So while case studies' findings are not 'representative' in the statistical sense, they are not merely of parochial interest.

JM: Matters that Wendy Olsen also takes up, though she finds more value in analytical statistics (as well as a host of different quantitative techniques). Following from what you have said, you might think it redundant to quote at length the underpinning commitments of the book, especially in a journal devoted to realism, but it seems worth doing so, since rarely have the claims been better phrased and the point of this interview is not just to appeal to existing realists. In the book you provide an eight point introduction to realism in the context of method (Sayer 1992: 5-6):

1. The world exists independently of our knowledge of it.
2. Our concepts of that world are fallible and theory-laden. Concepts of truth and falsity fail to provide a coherent view of the relationship between knowledge and its object [disagreement persists]. Nevertheless, knowledge is not immune to empirical check, and its effectiveness in informing and explaining successful material practice is not mere accident.
3. Knowledge develops neither wholly continuously, as the steady accumulation of facts within a stable conceptual framework, nor wholly discontinuously, through simultaneous and universal changes in concepts.
4. There is necessity in the world; objects – whether natural or social – necessarily have particular causal powers or ways of acting and particular susceptibilities.

5. The world is differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of events, but objects, including structures which have powers and liabilities, capable of generating events. These structures may be present where, as in the social world and much of the natural world, they do not generate regular patterns of events.
6. Social phenomena such as actions, texts and institutions, are concept-dependent. We therefore have not only to explain their production and material effects but to understand, read or interpret what they mean. Although they have to be interpreted by starting from the researcher's own frames of meaning, by and large they exist regardless of researcher's interpretations of them. A qualified version of 1 therefore still applies to the social world. In view of 4-6, the methods of social science and natural science have both differences and similarities.
7. Science or the production of any other knowledge is a social practice. For better or worse (not just worse), the conditions and social relations of the production of knowledge influence its content. Knowledge is also largely – though not exclusively – linguistic, and the nature of language and the way we communicate are not incidental to what is known and communicated. Awareness of these relationships is vital in evaluating knowledge.
8. Social science must be critical of its objects. In order to be able to explain and understand social phenomena we have to evaluate them critically.

How well do you think this list has stood up?

AS: Pretty well, except that now, I'd immediately qualify the first point (as I did later in *Realism and Social Science*) in order to block social constructionist reactions, so it would be 'The world exists largely independently of a particular observer's understanding of it.' Of the others, point 2 and 6 seem worthy of comment.

Regarding point 2 – the question of truth and practical adequacy, I would say that the latter should not be interpreted in instrumentalist fashion as simply that which is 'useful' to believe, as if it were a matter of convenience, but as what appears to be the case, based on the fullest and most rigorously assembled evidence, the best arguments we can find, and the best practical tests we can conduct. To use a common example, I believe it is true to say that approximately six million were murdered in the Holocaust because the evidence and arguments provided by historians and witnesses put it beyond reasonable doubt as the most adequate description of what happened. Of course, we could seek *more* practically adequate or true accounts – ones that give fuller, richer accounts than can be given in a single sentence. This might involve re-assessing both concepts and evidence.

Point 6 raises the issue of the place of hermeneutics in social science. This is often underplayed in accounts of critical realism, as if we just need to add the qualification that reasons and discourse more generally can be causes. We still need to take seriously the problem of understanding meaning in everyday life. Explaining material processes and relations, such as uneven economic development, lends itself more readily to a critical realist approach than understanding, say, changing views of race in popular culture. Even though meanings or understandings in society can be causes they can't be *understood* through causal analysis. Hence, while ethnography is an important method in social science, it is often overlooked in critical realism. The paper I co-authored with Norman Fairclough and Bob Jessop on critical realism and semiosis was in part an attempt to say more about this (Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer, 2002).

JM: And of the others, has any proved controversial?

AS: One key point in *Method in Social Science* relating to point 4 was controversial: the distinction between necessity and contingency and the associated distinction between internal and external relations. Particularly in geography, a common reaction to this distinction, was 'are things always that clear? Aren't there many situations where the relation between A and B is such that while A might not need B to exist, the absence of B would make a non-trivial difference to A? Indeed, might there not be a range from conditions which had no effect on A, through those with minor effects, to those with major effects?'

In response I would say that 1) we need to define what is central or essential for A to exist as such; and 2) in cases where it's not clear cut what is necessary and what is not for A, trying to answer questions of the sort 'can A exist without B' forces us to think harder about relations of influence and dependence, so we might conclude, that without B, A will differ in the following ways, x, y and z from A with B.

In coming to such conclusions, we are clarifying the pattern of necessity and contingency, and learning more about the conditions of existence of A, and indeed what kind of thing A is. To take an example: can capitalism exist without free wage labour? (The latter is often seen as a defining feature of capitalism). The answer is yes, it can function and has functioned with slave or other forms of unfree labour. Is it still capitalism in that case? Yes, I would say, because capital accumulation could still take place. If we accept this, as I think we must, we need to ensure that definitions of the key features of capitalism acknowledge this.¹⁷

Later on, in the 1990s, the issue returned in relation to critiques of 'essentialism' in social theory. Particularly in feminism, 'anti-essentialism' became a major theme. The main reason for its popularity was the claim that gender does not have an essence. In my view this is correct, but it doesn't follow from this that nothing has an essence.¹⁸ It's always an empirical question whether anything has a stable set of characteristics which make it that kind of thing. (Of course it may also have additional, contingent features).

JM: Although stable characteristics may be an empirical issue, there is also a potential conceptual problem in the form of 'associational thinking' (e.g. Sayer 2000b), perhaps you might clarify what this means...

AS: 'Associational thinking' is common in social science. It simply assumes that things that are widely found together, and fuse and interact, can therefore only exist in such relations i.e., it fails to distinguish necessary from contingent relations, or more simply *must* from *can*. So 'can' is assumed to mean 'must'.

For example, it's no surprise that capitalist businesses in England use English as their language, but it doesn't follow that using English is a necessary condition of being a capitalist business. If we don't know an entity's conditions of existence, we don't know much about it. Failure to distinguish 'can' from 'must' is particularly common in radical social science interested in 'bads' like race, class and gender: to be sure they commonly intersect, often in ways that reinforce one another, but it is still important to ask if these combinations are necessary ones; for example, can class inequalities exist in the absence of inequalities of race? Clearly they can (though not vice versa).

JM: To avoid misinterpretation you might want to explain 'not vice versa' here.

AS: Where race becomes an accepted basis for unequal treatment of people this inevitably involves unequal economic power and thus class inequalities – racialised class inequalities. Each source of inequality needs to be examined to see how it differs from other sources, and whether it is a necessary or sufficient condition for any of them. There is a danger in radical research that in wanting to show what is problematic about some situation, researchers are tempted to claim that its component parts all *necessarily* depend on one another, as this seems grander and more radical than an account which says there are several bads, some of which do or could exist separately. This is far from an academic point of no practical import: if the former is the case, then nothing can be changed until everything is changed: if the latter, change is easier.

JM: This strikes me as an important (no irony intended) general point relevant to many circumstances and issues in a world subject to quite as many crises as our current one, so perhaps we can return to this later. We are,

¹⁷ Note from Jamie: there has been quite a lively debate over the last twenty years concerning this issue of how to conceptualize slavery in a capitalist-dominated world – is it merely a residual (found in areas where traditional bonded labour etc. persists) or is it in fact compatible with and encouraged by some aspects of modern capitalism? The answer has tended to be, yes it is compatible and encouraged, but there has been continual confusion regarding the terms of debate, which to some degree parallels a lack of agreement in the social sciences re the nature of essence and relational dynamics. See Morgan and Olsen (2014).

¹⁸ Note from Jamie: for a fascinating realist book on the subject see Gunnarsson (2014).

however (for the purpose of ensuring balance in the impression conveyed regarding aspects of your work) currently discussing the genesis and significance of your work on general social theory and critical realism, so let's turn briefly to *Realism and Social Science* (Sayer 2000a). How did this collection come about?

AS: Towards the end of the 1980s poststructuralist and postmodern influences were emerging in social science, and so I wrote a few pieces critiquing the resulting shift away from realism. When I moved to Lancaster in 1993 it soon became clear that their influence, particularly through the work of Foucault, was much stronger there than at Sussex, so that was a challenge. Frankly, I was alarmed at the anti-realist and often relativist character of much poststructuralist and postmodernist social science, and its ignorance of what realism is. ('Realist' was often reduced to a sneer term in postmodernism). Much of *Realism and Social Science* was aimed at responding to these tendencies.

JM: As you put it in the introduction, you wanted to reject 'a defeatist strain of postmodernism which assumes that the absence of certainty, regularity and closure, means that hopes of reliable knowledge claims and scientific progress must be rejected' (Sayer 2000a: 3).

AS: In retrospect, what was particularly strange was the apparent *celebration* of the abandonment of truth-seeking – 'post-truth' *avant la lettre*.¹⁹ But in addition to critiquing postmodernism, I wanted to develop earlier arguments about space, and about 'the narrative turn' that was fashionable in the 1980s.

JM: You've already mentioned the growing influence of Foucault and his work has been a particular focus of critique, but also constructive engagement and development for realists. For example, Bob Jessop in cultural political economy and Jonathan Joseph on governmentality. However, the terms of that engagement begin from recognition of key points you make in Chapter 2 of *Realism and Social Science*, 'Realism for Sceptics'. This creates scope (though clearly does not all relate to Foucault) for the later essays in the book, addressing the 'impasse' as you call it in the introduction to Part IV (the final chapters of the book), the loss of confidence of the left (with the collapse of grand narratives, and the challenge posed by new thinking on gender etc.), the rise of the right, and postmodern 'suspicion and rejection of normative thinking' (Sayer 2000: 156). What is your take on Foucault?

AS: I always found Foucault's work frustrating to read. His empirical accounts are interesting and some of his concepts fruitful – disciplinary power, capillary power, surveillance, technologies of the self, the entrepreneur of the self, for example – and he was prescient about neoliberalism, but his theoretical reasoning is often confused. His attempts to define power, and his unacknowledged slippage between different concepts of truth in *The History of Sexuality Part I* are examples (Foucault 1998 [1979], 1980). Eventually I realised that despite his scepticism about causality – or rather his ignorance of what it is – most of what he wrote about power concerned activated *causal* powers (Sayer 2012).²⁰ Power is everywhere because causal powers are everywhere.

But what particularly annoyed me about Foucault and his followers was what Habermas called their 'cryptonormative' approach (see Lecture X of his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*; Habermas 1987: 282). Foucault's accounts of the social world have a generally ominous tone, but they fail to identify *what* is bad and *why*, so one is left wanting to write 'so what?' in the margin. Thus, sociologists of health sciences inspired by him would often describe certain practices as involving the 'medicalization' of certain conditions without saying whether this was appropriate or inappropriate, or good or bad, and why. If we don't know whether people are harmed or benefitted by a practice, then we don't know much about it; cryptonormative accounts of social life are also deficient as descriptions.

¹⁹ Note from Andrew: there have been various invidious consequences. Later, as Andreas Malm's critique of Latour has shown, this legitimized scepticism about climate change (Malm 2018).

²⁰ Note from Andrew: Actor-network theory and science studies were also popular at Lancaster - John Law was a colleague - and again these were irrealist in many respects. Dave Elder-Vass has done an excellent job in critiquing ANT (Elder-Vass 2008).

Actually, the problem goes beyond Foucault: self-styled critical social science has often failed to explore in any depth the normative issues concerning what is bad about the objects of its critiques, as if it could rely on readers reading between the lines in the desired way. This was an effect of the unhappy divorce of positive and normative thought in social science. Tellingly, Foucault invoked the is-ought framework to defend his refusal of normativity, saying that it was not his job to tell people what to do, as if normativity were primarily about instructions rather than evaluations. While post-structuralism did provide novel insights, the combination of its resistance to normativity (as reducible to the limitation of possibilities through ‘normalising’) and its anti-humanism (‘humanist’ became another sneer term) also made social science *less* critical.

The last two chapters of *Realism and Social Science* then, made a case for a critical social science that examined its normative critical standpoints and went beyond identifying false beliefs in society and practices based upon them to address suffering and flourishing. As you say, there is more to this than engagement with Foucault. In any case, this was the start of a line of argument about values and normativity that eventually led to *Why Things Matter to People*.

JM: So, your work in the twenty-first century developed out of interests you acquired in the 1990s? Both a development of and reaction to your writing on ontology and social theory? As I noted earlier, some of it went back to the 1970s and 1980s.

AS: While I continued these realist critiques included in *Realism and Social Science*, I wanted to concentrate on doing something more constructive. From the late 1990s onwards, I became interested in the possibilities of developing new approaches to social theory and political economy in which the main influences were neo-Aristotelian philosophy, particularly the work of Martha Nussbaum, the ethic of care literature, Adam Smith, and Pierre Bourdieu – along with all my old influences. As I saw it, all of these, and others, could be modified and synthesized in a way that was consistent with critical realism, particularly in the work of Margaret Archer and Andrew Collier.

JM: OK, with that in mind, let’s turn to *The Moral Significance of Class* (Sayer 2005a) and *Why Things Matter to People* (Sayer 2011a).

AS: Actually, these were both digressions from what I had intended to be my main project – the development of ‘moral economy’. They emerged from my concerns in the late 1990s about the nature and scope of critique in social science. Here I felt Bhaskar’s defence of critical social science was too limited, and failed to address critiques of suffering and restrictions on flourishing – aspects which were much more adequately dealt with by neo-Aristotelians – and by Smith. The feminist ethic of care literature – surely the most important development in moral philosophy for a very long time²¹ – was crucial in countering the tendency of philosophers to ignore vulnerability and dependence on others as part of the human condition.

JM: Since *The Moral Significance of Class* engages extensively with his work, this seems an appropriate place to return to Bourdieu.

AS: I was highly impressed by Bourdieu. Reading *Distinction* was a lightbulb moment in many ways, in naming what had been widely felt but unacknowledged – especially habitus and the way class was embodied, and identifying soft power and symbolic domination. To be sure he tended towards determinism, but I felt that that could be corrected (Bourdieu 1984). Exaggeration is the besetting sin of social theory, so if we correct his exaggerations of the ‘degree of fit’ between dispositions and social position and acknowledge the role of reflexivity in people’s lives (evident in the interviews of *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu 1999), then I would argue it makes more sense to regard his theory as a realist one. His concept of field is equivalent to structure,

²¹ Note from Andrew: see especially Joan Tronto’s seminal work (Tronto 1994).

and actors' responses to the field can be seen as a mix of fast responses based on acquired dispositions and slow conscious thought. The dispositions of the habitus are causal powers which can be activated according to context including placement within the social field, but reflexivity gives some 'oversight' of these and the context. I think some accounts in virtue ethics of the dual importance of acquired dispositions (virtues) and reflexivity provide a good corrective, though philosophers tend not to notice the importance of social fields and individuals' positioning within them. So we need not interpret Bourdieu as a 'central conflationist', to use Margaret Archer's term, even though some of his exaggerated claims for the 'ontological complicity' of habitus and habitus, disposition and social position, invite such a categorization.

JM: Though one might perhaps suggest you are not just 'interpreting' Bourdieu here, you are drawing on but rewriting a realist version, while Archer prefers to systematise in her own terms. As I noted earlier Bourdieu has become something of a dividing line for critical realists, and in this sense, between those who would interpret and reconcile and those who see less value in this. As the early chapters of *The Moral Significance of Class* indicate though you got a lot out of engagement with Bourdieu. For example, using his work as a point of departure to explore seven points in Chapter Two, 'From the habitus to ethical dispositions' (Sayer 2005a:26-50):

- The feel for different kinds of game.
- The habitus and conscious deliberation.
- Mundane reflexivity: internal conversations.
- The alleged complicity of habits and habitus: the necessity of resistance.
- Emotions.
- Commitments and investments.
- Ethical dispositions.

And you draw on Archer in the sense that...

AS: I certainly did modify Bourdieu's approach quite extensively (I think many academics are too deferential towards major theorists). Margaret's emphasis on our nature as 'evaluative beings' also provides a corrective to Bourdieu's strangely 'flat' view of people's responses to the world; he largely ignores their evaluative and emotional character, so that it seems that we accommodate to oppression and hostility as easily as we do to respect; no wonder he could explain resistance only by reference to mismatches between habitus and field (for example, as a result of social mobility) or access to powerful counter-discourses. In particular, moral sentiments such as shame and resentment of injustice are ignored. If we take emotions seriously and analyse them as authors such as Smith, Nussbaum and Collier have done – as more than 'merely subjective' – we can appreciate their cognitive content and understand what they reveal of individuals' experiences and objective situation. *The Moral Significance of Class* attempted to use this approach to understand how class is lived, and how recognition and misrecognition are related to distribution. I should add that the existence of ethnographies of class such as those by Diane Reay and Bev Skeggs that attended to people's emotional and evaluative responses to their situation were also crucial in enabling me to connect the philosophical analyses to the experience of living with inequality (Reay, 1998; Skeggs, 1997).

JM: There are numerous ways in which the work you undertake here are continued in *Why Things Matter to People* (Sayer 2011a). For example, emotions as 'not merely subjective' evokes the statement from Chapter One:

Well-being and ill-being are indeed states of being, not merely subjective value-judgements. . . . The very assumption that judgements of value and objectivity don't mix – an assumption that is sometimes built into the definition of 'objectivity' – is a misconception. . . . How people can live together is not merely a matter

of coordination of the actions of different individuals by means of conventions, like deciding which side of the road to drive on, but a matter of considering people's capacities for flourishing and susceptibilities to harm and suffering. . . As social scientific spectators we tend to talk about behaviour in terms of what *explains* it, but as participants we tend to *justify* what we do, and implicitly invite others to accept or reject our justifications. (Sayer 2011a: 7-13)

As well as the 'family of dualisms' you set out in Chapter Two (Sayer 2011a: 30):

fact-value
is-ought
reason-emotion
science-ideology
science-ethics
positive-normative
objectivity-subjectivity
mind-body

How did the book come about and what were you trying to achieve?

AS: *Why Things Matter to People*, was an attempt to develop the approach explored in *The Moral Significance of Class* in relation to social theory in general and our understanding of values in society. Much of the book is a thinly veiled critique of sociology and post-structuralism, particularly their often-demeaning view of individual agency and reflexivity, and their tendency to reduce morality to repressive norms. It is also a critique of the dominant view that fact and value, the positive and the normative, are radically different and in need of clear separation. Although radical social scientists often claim to reject such an idea, when they say – as one so often hears – 'I have my values of course, so I can't be objective', you know they are still prisoners of that very same dichotomy.

JM: The book makes the case, while leading to seven concluding 'implications' for social science (Sayer 2011a: 246-252), for 'qualified ethical naturalism'. Perhaps you might briefly explain the term?

AS: While I think values and ethics require naturalistic explanations, they must also take account of the fact that we have what I called 'differently cultivated natures'. The starting point is that we can't expect to say much about morality and ethics unless we pay more attention than most philosophy does to the kind of beings that we are. As Mary Midgley said, 'you can't have a plant or animal without certain things being good or bad for it' (Midgley 2003: 54). Life itself is normative: we survive by being evaluative beings, attempting to avoid or escape from suffering and to flourish. Our relation to the world is one of concern in the sense that we care about certain things – our well-being and that of our key attachments and commitments. This is a direct challenge to the alienated and alienating accounts of life that one finds where social scientists restrict themselves to a spectators' view of social life; we need to understand why things *matter* to people in a first person sense. Ethical naturalism is qualified firstly by acknowledging that different cultures can differ in their conceptions of what constitutes suffering and flourishing (though these conceptions are fallible), and secondly by acknowledging that different cultural practices offer different *forms* of suffering and flourishing.

Of course, there are some uncertainties about what constitutes suffering and flourishing in practice, but that is not a reason for ignoring what we do know about it; we must beware of the 'all or nothing' fallacy. My strategy of argumentation was to counter conventionalist and relativist views of ethics and morality that are dominant in much social science, where excessive fear of being ethnocentric or simply making claims about what is good or bad has undermined any basis for critiques of avoidable suffering and restricted flourishing.

JM: This seems a far more fruitful way of thinking about realism and ethics than the somewhat arid debate regarding whether ethics are something we discover or invent – a quite restrictive way of posing matters of realism and ethics. It seems to provide a more insightful way to think about what to do, rather than merely the status of rules of conduct – are they deontological, instrumental etc. And clearly harks back to a point you made earlier in discussing *Method in Social Science*, i.e., how to construe ‘is ‘useful’ to believe’, as more than a ‘matter of convenience, but as what appears to be the case, based on the fullest and most rigorously assembled evidence, the best arguments we can find, and the best practical tests we can conduct’, since this can be extended to how we treat each other and the systems of structured relations we create that encourage some kinds of treatment more than others – cultivation of situated selves, harm and flourishing.

AS: Thanks - you put the point about ‘moral realism’ very well. I’ve never been able to get over the strangeness of saying that something is a ‘moral fact’. I find it much more fruitful to think about what is good or bad for us in relation to our capacities for flourishing and our vulnerabilities. And it’s disastrous to reduce human nature to its supposedly unique feature – the capacity for reason and decision – and to ignore our inherent ‘patiency’ or vulnerability and dependence on others. Critique in social science can’t be limited to exposing false ideas and falsely-based practices; it has also to address suffering or flourishing, which can’t be reduced to the absence or presence of ‘freedom’. Again, the ethic of care, developed in feminism, is important: contrary to Bhaskar, the baby’s primal scream is not a cry for freedom or autonomy²² but a cry to be held, protected and fed in a relation of deep attachment to its primary carers. And it can’t choose these ‘wanted determinations’; not all of our relations of dependence can be chosen ones.

JM: And Christian Smith’s *What is a Person?* (Smith 2010) was published around the same time as *Why Things Matter to People*, do you see any overlap here or in his *To Flourish or Destruct?* (Smith 2015).

AS: I haven’t seen the latter book, but there is certainly some overlap with the former, as one would expect from our common critical realist backgrounds, and like me, Christian Smith is partly reacting to the alienated accounts of how our lives are lived that dominate social science. My book is more influenced by virtue ethics and focuses on values and ethical life rather than personhood. I give more attention to emotions, and unlike Smith I give as much emphasis to human vulnerability and dependence as to capacities. While I discuss specific forms of suffering and flourishing I do not go as far as positing a human telos, and my account is wholly secular, and more wary of human(ist) exceptionalism. While we both have chapters on dignity, I’m more interested in the ‘dance of dignity’ in everyday social interactions than in the abstract idea of dignity as inherent in human being, which Smith emphasizes. I think dignity is better seen as a potential - a state whose achievement can be precarious, depending on the quality of the individual’s relations to others, and what she is expected or allowed to do.

JM: A complicated matter, which is also explored (albeit somewhat differently) by Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer in terms of ‘relational goods’. Clearly, the subject involves numerous potential lines of inquiry. For example, notions of status (and its anxieties?), seeking recognition, achieving the ‘praise of the praiseworthy’, the nature of respect, our need to be loved and to love, and the many inflections that term carries. And various others have oriented on similar issues. For example, Alison Assiter in her book drawing on Kierkegaard to explore the notion of an embodied self, contrasted with a liberal disembodied being (Assiter 2009). Given this complexity and the somewhat open-ended nature of inquiry, is there anything you might add since writing *Why Things Matter to People* regarding your take on normativity and naturalism?

AS: Since writing *Why Things Matter to People*, I have pushed further in a naturalistic direction, having become interested in research in neuroscience and psychology on how our biological nature relates to our socialized,

²² Note from Andrew: Bhaskar (1993: 264).

cultural nature. Normativity has a biological basis in the sense that as living beings our bodies have homeostatic systems that tend to regulate internal states and external flows in ways that avoid harm and seek out benefits. They respond (fallibly, but generally effectively) to what is good or bad for us. Generally, I think *Why Things Matter* said more about *how* things matter to people than why.

JM: So, our bodies are biochemically complex regulating systems and equally are built around emergent structures? Here, one might point to research on cortisol and anxiety, oxytocin and dependency and the amygdala and psychopathy. Clearly, however, one must be careful regarding reduction and related problems. I take it you don't intend to imply anything reductive?

AS: No. While the explanation of why we care about anything is at base biological, this capacity is extraordinarily elaborated and augmented by emergence. Several different ontological strata are involved in our behaviour; there is both emergence and downward causation. Antonio Damasio's work has been particularly useful in advancing a non-reductionist understanding of the relation between emotion and reason, of how experience involves appraisal, and much more (Damasio 2000, 2006, 2018).

Our emotions are, as Archer says, *bodily* commentaries on our concerns, which may be physical, like our health, or social and cultural, like attachments and commitments. Emotions like guilt or resentment at injustice tend to impress themselves on our internal conversations so we reflect upon what they might be about, and what we should do, if anything, about them. In the process, the emotions may be modified, heightened or calmed. Or consider the example of a musician with performance anxiety: being able to play music well – a highly skilled physical accomplishment – in public matters to her greatly, but negative thoughts about her ability to keep calm and concentrate and the possibility of public humiliation stimulate and are stimulated by lower brain responses in the amygdala, resulting in a release of cortisol (a stress hormone) and a shift of the body into fight or flight mode so that her heart rate goes up and blood is sent to the major muscle groups rather than the fingers, so the fine motor skills involved in playing an instrument are compromised. Awareness of these physiological responses may amplify them, and trying to suppress them may be less effective in subduing them than accepting them. So social behaviour is multi-level.

JM: This is a fascinating subject but one that has not attracted, as far as I am aware, much interest in either critical realism or social science in general – though there is, of course, a strand of experimental psychology. The embodied self has been an attractive concept, but few social scientists I expect have the background to come to grips with the research on the biochemistry of the body and more specifically, while many are interested in emergence and consciousness, this has often not advanced that far, since talk of neuroscience tends not only to evoke research on brain states and mapping functional locations, but also work on IQ, and other normative claims about links between nature and nurture – territory few want to venture into... I take it you mean something quite different in referring to neuroscience?²³ It was you, for example, who recommended I read *The Master and his Emissary* (McGilchrist 2009).

AS: Neuroscience helps us to answer the realist question – what is it about humans that enables them to be socialized or acculturated in so many different ways? (You can't socialise a cloud or stone or frog.) It is thanks to our extraordinary 'neuroplasticity' that our innate dispositions can be socially modified and developed in diverse ways, allowing different cultural practices and objects of concern that can recruit particular emotions through downward causation. Neuroplasticity doesn't mean we are blank slates, as in the old sociological trope; experiences impact us very differently according to their relation to bodily responses, with results ranging from the benign to the traumatic. The 'paradox of neuroplasticity' is that it can also allow the development of durable neural circuits and hence dispositions that are difficult to change (Doidge 2007).

²³ Note from Jamie: there is, however, discussion by Margaret Archer on related issues in regard of the nature of the person in her recent essays.

JM: This seems intuitively plausible, when one considers extreme cases of suffering of different kinds that self-evidently no one would wish on themselves: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive compulsion of various kinds...

AS: PTSD is an example of the acquisition of neural pathways that are resistant to change, and it's interesting that for some such conditions talking cures are less successful than therapies involving bodily movement, such as dramatherapy or gardening.

JM: And one might note research on the 'uncanny valley' problem. This is the experimental finding that the more a robot is designed to and comes to physically resemble a human, *without* doing so, the less successful it becomes at putting us at our ease (a background unsettling sense of 'wrongness' is triggered). This is one reason why robots used in social care currently take the form they do (humanoid white blobs).

AS: The scholastic bias in philosophy and social science towards explanations of behaviour as involving reason alone leads us to underestimate the role of subconscious body language in interaction. As Stephen Porges shows, interpersonal interactions are significantly affected by facial responses; newborn babies are intensely interested in faces and can distinguish not only friendly from hostile expressions but genuine smiles from 'plastic' ones, which makes sense in terms of their need to distinguish safety from danger (Porges 2011). Our physiological systems are much more involved in social behaviour than social science realises. We also need to challenge the assumption common in western medicine that the physiological and the psychological are separate, so that various conditions must involve either one or the other, not both in interaction. There is huge scope for postdisciplinary research here. One of the implications is that philosophers and social theorists need to take child development much more seriously instead of considering only adults. I've only written one article on this so far (Sayer 2019), but I hope to do more one day. I may do a second edition of *Why Things Matter* that develops this point.

JM: Before we turn to *Why We Can't Afford the Rich* (Sayer 2015a), let's first turn to some prosaic issues. You were President of IACR 2003 to 2006, how did that come about?

AS: Quite simply, I was asked. I did wonder whether I should because I've always felt that it's important to be open to other philosophical themes and read outside critical realism too, so we engage with good philosophical arguments from anywhere rather than just promoting those of critical realism. But I guessed that lots of other members of IACR felt the same anyway, so I accepted. It wasn't particularly onerous or eventful.

JM: OK, as a somewhat tenuous segue, Alan Norrie, who followed you as President, is a major proponent of Bhaskar's dialectics and quite a few others have advocated variations on Bhaskar's later work (e.g. Seo 2014). Given how his work has loomed over critical realism, I expect some readers will be interested in your opinion on Bhaskar's later work, especially as you don't engage much with *Dialectic* (Bhaskar 1993) or with *Plato Etc.* (Bhaskar 1994) and are sceptical regarding Bhaskar's transition to work on spirituality as a way to develop the concept of the agent and emancipatory potential.

AS: I seem to have shocked some fellow realists with my exasperation with Bhaskar's 'niagara of neologisms' (Sayer 2000a: 170) – and often peculiar ones at that; e.g. why 'first moment', 'second edge' (what was the first edge?), 'third level', and 'fourth dimension'? Why not just 4 steps? I am certainly indebted to Bhaskar, but I do think academics have a responsibility to think of their readers and make their arguments as accessible as possible, especially if they consider themselves egalitarians. Andrew Collier, Alex Callinicos and Sean Creaven made similar complaints about his near 'private language'.²⁴

²⁴ Note from Andrew: Collier (1995); Creaven (2002); Callinicos cited in Creaven, *ibid*, compared Bhaskar's prose to a private language.

Critical theory literature in general has suffered from elitism. Extreme abstraction, obscurity and disdain for explaining things accessibly and giving empirical examples function in combination as a display of elite ‘distance from necessity’ (and from the reader), as Bourdieu noted in his critique of symbolic domination, though I’m sure it was unintended in Bhaskar’s case. However, as you note, others have offered helpful interpretations of his work, such as Alan Norrie’s book on Bhaskar’s *Dialectic*, and your own exposition and critique of Meta-Reality (Norrie 2010; Morgan 2003).²⁵ It always bothered me too that he rarely published anything in philosophy journals after the first few years of his career, as one wonders what specialist philosophers who know the literature that he drew upon would have made of it.

JM: Perhaps, though one might also note that the barriers to publishing in journals central to disciplines is not itself indicative of lack of quality of material they might be reluctant to publish – if it were then lack of ambition to publish in *American Economic Review* would render Tony Lawson’s work of little value, and as the quote from the Radical Philosophy movement from the beginning of our conversation indicates, trends in philosophy have often been antithetical to radical thought. Still, *Synthese*, does seem to have quite an open-minded publishing ethos these days (if we are talking about journals for professional philosophers) and, of course, there are various outlets where one could expect an expert eye in regard of political philosophy, Hegel, dialectics and such.

AS: You have a point there but part of the problem, particularly with Bhaskar’s later work, is the use of what Callinicos called ‘quick kill’ arguments and moves that most authors would take whole chapters to defend. Of course, there are some insights in *Dialectic*, for example, concerning four planar being, constellations and ethics, but there is much that I either don’t ‘get’, or doubt - in particular, the arguments about absence and change.²⁶

In any case, there is much that seems pointlessly speculative, taking abstraction beyond the point of usefulness. Thus, regarding his later work on Meta-Reality, the enormous leap from the phenomenon of being absorbed in the here and now in some practice, like meditation, cycling or watching a film, without any awareness of a distinction between self and objects, to the inference of a ‘ground state’ based on a ‘cosmic envelope’, is an example.²⁷ These so-called ‘non-dual’ experiences may indeed be therapeutic – I find some of them so myself – but I don’t see that they presuppose such a state or envelope – or offer a path to emancipation. We need the natural and social sciences to help us understand ourselves (particularly our needs, vulnerabilities and capacities), how economies work, the powers and susceptibilities of other species and our functioning within ecosystems, and so on.

JM: Though to be fair, Bhaskar was also interested in those and worked with Petter Naess, Leigh Price and others on ecological matters etc. The claim that in the end you either engage and participate to constructively change the world or you don’t, was for him energised by his advocacy of Meta-Reality... though I like you found the spirituality aspect of his later thinking curious.

AS: I haven’t seen that work on ecology. Again I find ‘freedom’ is too thin a concept to cover the elements of flourishing. In ethics we need to talk about specific forms of suffering and flourishing, such as rejection, humiliation and exploitation or feeling loved and fulfilled, and their physical, psychological and social aspects. Further, in thinking about human society and its possibilities we will no doubt encounter inconvenient truths; the case of the infeasibility of democratically-determined planning of a modern economy is an example. Bhaskar identifies commodification as a form of ill-being: in many ways it is, but markets and money have also allowed the development of a global social division of labour that can support remarkable improvements in our standard

²⁵ Note from Jamie: Alan discusses his difference with Andrew in his interview (Norrie and Morgan 2021: 105).

²⁶ Note from Andrew: see, for example, Collier's and Creavens' reviews of *Dialectic* (Collier 1995; Creaven 2002).

²⁷ Note from Jamie: few seem aware that a lot of this language actually comes from physics, ‘fine structure’ refers to the energy layer differentiations for clustering of electrons within an atom and the ‘ground state’ refers to the lowest energy level (nearest the nucleus).

of living. As I see it, these problems point, as Creaven and Callinicos argued, to the overextension of philosophical reason, going beyond the role of underlabourer or occasional midwife for science, to one that bypasses science and practice (Creaven 2002).

In thinking about how to achieve a better world I do not find it useful to see it in terms of ‘absenting absences’. This may sometimes lead to dilemmas and regression; absenting one set of unwanted determinations may enable a worse set of unwanted determinations. Progress cannot be reduced to the removal of unwanted determinations, and their replacement with wanted determinations is a fraught process of experimentation in constructing new social arrangements and relations to nature, in which failure is always possible. Again, we need substantive research to anticipate such possibilities and to construct feasible and desirable alternatives. For these reasons, I still feel that in his later work Bhaskar tried to pull global salvation out of the critical realist hat. Yes, we can have a sense of wonder and enchantment, but turning to ‘spiritualism’ always seems a way of evading the limits of our knowledge, so we try to claim more than can be claimed about the world. I suspect a reason why so many people regard themselves as ‘spiritual’ is that the word has become a near-synonym of ‘deep’ and ‘reflective’, so that to refuse the description seems like an admission of shallowness.

JM: Perhaps, but the work also covers the ontological argument for religion and faith that has also been a notable strand of critical realism of late, espoused by Andrew Collier and Doug Porpora (both Marxists), Margaret Archer (a former social science advisor to the Pope) and others. I am curious here, I am an atheist, as I take it are you. But I am every now and then struck by the fundamental experiential dissonance of ‘why there is anything at all’, and then following that how there can be something to reflect on that ‘anything’ – emergence may categorise explanation but this is analytically different than whether it explains ‘how’ and ‘what for’ (and if this is even a relevant question) that space-time comes into being and that quarks-become-atoms-become-molecules-become-life, able to breathe consciousness into the world and ask questions about why there is anything at all. *Why Things Matter to People* does not address itself to such questions and concerns itself with how to make a difference and yet this experience does matter to us... cognitive dissonance for some, numinous wonder for others. It is inconvenient for critical realism as social science and perhaps awkward for normative critical social science...

AS: Enchantment, awe and wonder enrich the quality of our lives. We should savour them. They probably involve special physiological, affective and mental processes, but beyond what we already know about them we should acknowledge our ignorance. Religion and spirituality have never made any sense to me or had any appeal - quite the opposite. As regards questions like ‘why is there anything at all?’ or about the origins of space-time etc., my answer is I don’t know, and not being a physicist, I’m not sure how to think about the latter question. Although some people may find such questions intriguing, they don’t ‘matter’ to us in the same way that economic security, health, recognition, friendship and love, justice, politics, or beauty – or the survival of the planet – do, as things that affect our well-being.

JM: Analytically it is more a question that there is being and thus that we have being – and that realizing that, somehow, is not something we can dwell upon without disturbing our capacity to carry on according to quotidian behaviour. But I take your point. In any case, the question does not lead to an interventionist God in any self-evident sense nor to any necessary inference regarding the meaning of being or what we should do – though to be fair, that is not how critical realist proponents typically use it, rather it creates speculative space regarding belief and modes of evidence...

AS: You might need to elaborate that last point, but I have to admit, it doesn’t interest me. Of course, many things that matter involve acquired commitments or concerns, and as I argued in *Why Things Matter*, our well-being can come to depend on them as well as on more basic things like health. Thus, religion may come to matter to some people, such that denying them the possibility of practising their religion would be a genuine harm, an affront to their autonomy and dignity. So I take a standard Millian liberal line on religion and spirituality: so

long as they are open to critique and don't harm anyone, they are an option for those who find it of value to them.

Overall, I think too much can be expected from ontology, and not only regarding religion.

JM: OK, given that lengthy discussion of this would seem to divert attention from what has mattered to you, let's move on and turn to *Why We Can't Afford the Rich* and then what you have been up to most recently.

AS: *Why We Can't Afford the Rich* was another return to political/moral economy. I had been reading a lot of analyses of the 2008 financial crisis, from both journalists and academics; the former were dominated by superficial narratives of how the development of esoteric financial instruments became unsustainable, and of the main individuals and organizations involved; the academics tended to present 'engineering' analyses (as Sen put it) of these financial instruments and how the crisis came about – that is, they explained how the instruments worked and which parts of the economic 'machine' had broken down, and they were implicitly or explicitly critical of its contradictions and irrationality. Neither the journalists nor the political economists presented much in the way of a *moral* critique of the system as unjust and unfair, beyond expressions of amazement and disgust that the plutocrats had got away with it.

Few commentators looked at the economy in terms of social relations. It seemed to me that the crisis was primarily one of a rapid expansion of various sources of unearned income based on control of assets at the expense of those dependent on earned income, and that this could be shown to be blatantly unjust.

JM: There is, of course, a lot of work focused on 'financialization' and while quite a lot of it in the UK (notably the work from the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change or CRESC) draws on cultural political economy themes and concepts from across the range of post-structuralist thinkers and new materialism and method (assemblage, mess as method etc.), there is also a significant critical strand questioning finance and 'social purpose' (notably Andrew Baker). But as you say, little of this focuses on moral economy in the sense you introduced the concept earlier in our discussion:

an approach to economic life which not only seeks to explain its structure and how it works but examines and evaluates the normative justifications for its practises, including their constituent norms (for example, regarding property relations), and their consequences. To do this it acknowledges that all economies are moral economies in the sense that they depend on the acceptance of certain norms regarding what people are expected and allowed to do in economic matters, and that moral beliefs both influence and are influenced by economic practices.

As you note at the beginning of *Why We Can't Afford the Rich*:

[T]his is not about the politics of envy... but the *politics of injustice*... The argument is directed not at particular individuals but at the *sources* of their wealth and power and the ways in which they are justified... focusing just on individuals actually lets the causes off the hook – the rules, institutions and situations that they are allowed to take advantage of... [the purpose, rather, is to] question the *legitimacy* of their wealth. (Sayer 2015a: 2 and 9).

Is there another aspect of your long-term postdisciplinary approach evident here?

AS: Very much so. It connects back to the critique of the fragmentation of social science into separate disciplines: the lack of moral economic critiques was a product of the divorce of political economy from political theory, which allowed the former largely to abandon normative thinking, and the latter to focus on it, but mainly via 'ideal theories of justice' such as that of Rawls, in abstraction from actually-existing economic arrangements and their many *injustices*. (See also Young 1990 and Sen 2009). When I studied the crisis, I was struck by how

often practices which were dysfunctional from an ‘engineering’ point of view, and were also unjust from an ethical or moral economic point of view, though this need not always be the case. I also found the best moral economic critiques were to be found in classical political economy and Marx, plus some early twentieth century political economists like J. A. Hobson and R. H. Tawney.

Their analyses were in many respects both *simpler and more fundamental* than those offered by the engineering political economists and could be explained in an accessible way; the 2008 crisis was a consequence of the rise of a degenerate, rentier form of capitalism based on the expansion of economic rent increasingly disconnected from wealth creation. Once I had come up with the title *Why We Can't Afford the Rich* it occurred to me that here was an opportunity to try and reach beyond the usual, small academic audience to a wider one of ‘concerned citizens’. And after many years of trying to elaborate for an academic audience what moral economy could offer, I realised half-way through writing the book that in effect this was what I was doing for a wider audience.

JM: So more of a public intellectual engagement if that doesn't sound too pretentious, but one that still has roots in critical realism?

AS: That does sound too pretentious! The book is realist in arguing that we need to get ‘below’ the surface patterns of exchange-value and income and wealth inequalities to address the structures and mechanisms producing these. A lot of research and argument about economic inequality pays little attention to these and focuses just on the outcomes in terms of income distribution, as if this was the only thing that mattered. In its recommendations it therefore prioritises *redistribution*, ignoring the prior issue of what some have called ‘pre-distribution’ – governed in particular by ownership of property and economic power based upon this and scarcity.

JM: There is, of course, work on or that speaks to pre-distribution and structures and mechanisms – the models of post Keynesian's on wage-led versus profit-led economies (though these often struggle in terms of critiques of modelling along Tony Lawson's lines) as well as the work of the new left in the US, much of it built around modern monetary theory (for example, Stephanie Kelton's book *The Deficit Myth*, discusses pre-distribution). But your point is that...

AS: In order to explain pre-distribution we have to go into the social relations which make up an economy (e.g. producer-user/consumer; capitalist-worker; landlord-tenant; creditor-debtor, etc.) and the mechanisms by which people get incomes within these relations. And we need to consider what people contribute, as well as what they get in terms of distribution, and what constrains and enables what they contribute and get. Socialists often focus overwhelmingly on the second part of the slogan ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their need’, but the first part is important because it implies an obligation to contribute what we can to economic provisioning, and not to free-ride on the labour of others if we can avoid it. And without the first part we can't understand what's just or unjust about economic exploitation.

JM: And this is realist in the sense that...

AS: Critical realists know that the same effect (a particular income distribution) can be the product of quite different causal mechanisms. One could imagine an economy where incomes were roughly equalised but in which those who owned spare assets needed by others (‘improperty’ in J.A. Hobson's terms) could use them to extract unearned income from those who were working and lacked those assets. The incomes received by both might be equal, but it would be an *unfair* economy because the asset owners would be free-riding on the workers' labour. (Of course, many people are too young, old, or infirm to work for their income, but they have a clear justification for being supported by others.)

The wider moral economic implication is that we need to evaluate economies not only in terms of exchange-value outcomes (income, wealth, prices), as utilitarians do, but in terms of the fairness or otherwise of the constituent processes/practices and social relations which produce those outcomes. Inequalities are not always unfair, so we need to do more than merely point them out as if they were self-evidently unjust; we need to show what is unjust about them in both their generation and their consequences.

JM: And there are numerous other contributory factors here which maintain or reproduce a system? A focus made famous over recent years by Thomas Piketty, though his is by no means the only interesting work on the subject of inequality. Danny Dorling etc.?

AS: Piketty's book only came out in English as I was finishing off my own, but the superb World Top Incomes Database that he and colleagues had established earlier was invaluable. Danny Dorling's interesting analyses of inequality data were useful but lacked theoretical explanation and critique. Others like Anthony Atkinson offered more social democratic accounts that lacked the critical edge of the likes of Marx or Tawney. Explaining and critiquing the return of the rich also requires examination of many further mechanisms that were involved, such as the rising influence of corporate lobbyists in politics, the restructuring of the ruling class in favour of rentier interests, and the domination of the media by the super-rich, and more. But it was also clear that the return of the rich needed setting within a bigger and far more important frame, that of the relation of economic life to our environment. So while we have to focus down on the mechanisms producing inequality we have also to broaden out our view to address the destruction of the biosphere.

JM: Yes, there is an important issue here regarding 'rich in what sense and in relation to what'? This brings us to a main theme in *Why We Can't Afford the Rich?* The sources of a 'double crisis' and how to respond to it. You, along with John O'Neill, Clive Spash and various others make the case for system transition and 'degrowth' (a term referring both to a specific movement and a broader commitment that does not reduce to that movement). Perhaps you might briefly explain what this 'double crisis' is and how you approach the problem in the book and then we might extend the discussion to the continuation of that crisis after the publication of the book and in the context of Covid and other matters...

AS: Taken in isolation, the capitalist solution to the crisis of 2008 appeared to be the resumption of growth, and the solution to the concentration of income and wealth at the top that had occurred under neoliberalism appeared to be downward redistribution of income. But growth plus redistribution to those who had a much higher propensity to spend their income than the rich would have accelerated CO₂ emissions, given their strong correlation with aggregate consumption, thereby worsening the climate crisis. On the other side, cessation of growth in order to stop and reverse CO₂ emissions would precipitate a major capitalist crisis. So growth was the solution for the financial crisis, while growth was the problem for the climate crisis, at least for rich countries: hence the diabolical double crisis.

Looking back, I would want to add that particularly in light of the climate crisis, political economy needs to consider and assess use-values and the environment, not merely exchange value. Like most contemporary radical political economy *Why We Can't the Rich* addresses the flows and distribution of exchange value, and generally refrains from proposing *what* we should or shouldn't produce, perhaps because it seems illiberal to do so. Yet the dangers of runaway climate change and ecological degradation are so serious that key sectors have to be prioritised and damaging ones stopped. So the qualitative matter of *what* should be produced and consumed is inescapable.

It's therefore encouraging to see the rise of the Foundational Economy movement in this context, as it prioritizes those sectors, like health, care, food, and housing, which most directly meet basic needs, and formulates ways of making them affordable and effective for users and workers (Foundational Economy Collective 2018). Now the movement is taking on board the environmental implications of foundational sectors too. It's notable that some people have argued that the global climate and ecological crises require the type of

response used in wartime economies, where decisions on what use-values should or should not be produced are made, instead of leaving this overwhelmingly to the market and worrying about balancing the macro-economic books.

Again, the crisis reminds us of social science's complicity in the dismissal of nature, as something to be 'overcome' so that reason and freedom can reign. The ignorance of ordinary people and social scientists regarding ecology is alarming. At the same time, some physical scientists seem to assume that when it comes to the human/social implications of things like global heating, they don't need to know anything about social science, so their policy recommendations are often naive. The fragmentation of knowledge must again be countered.

JM: Yes, there has been over the years, for example, a remarkable discontinuity between the modelling of climate change and ecological breakdown from Earth sciences and the acknowledgement that the issue is *anthropogenic* and so turns on inducing system and behavioural change. A lot of this in the social sciences, as you know, has turned on economics and its Integrated Assessment Models (IAMs), which have been influential on IPCC modelling pathways for 'sustainable futures'. The lack of realism in these IAMs is now well documented.

More generally, The Alliance of World Scientists has been organized and declared 'climate emergency' and is starting to address the fragmentation you speak of. Ideally this would take the form of critical natural and critical-normative social science (combining themes you explore in *Method in Social Science*, the end of *Realism in Social Science* and *Why We Can't Afford the Rich*)... which is not to make grandiose claims for your work, but rather to note that you have over an academic lifetime explored and advocated themes that have only become more relevant as time has passed and problems have accumulated.

In any case, climate science is something we all have an obligation to get to grips with these days. But given the nature of 'climate emergency', the politics of system change have also become a matter we all need to be informed about. I take it you have the same feeling of frustration over the COP process as most other observers?

AS: Yes as regards COP, though my expectations were low. What is clear to me is that economic evaluation of what we need to do in terms of provisioning – the very *point* of economic activity – must be prepared to ignore the spurious kind of valuation provided by market prices, and worry more about use-values and mobilising real resources, in particular labour. Saving the planet has to be the priority, but as my friend Kevin Morgan put it, if we are to do so we need to bridge the gap between those who worry about the future of the planet and those who worry about the end of the month.

JM: Yes, otherwise one confronts the 'yellow vest/jacket problem' (the countermovement in France induced by, but not restricted to, rising fuel prices)... Mainstream policy and economics really hasn't come to grips yet with its own created central problem – how to price carbon to rapidly price it out of a market economy... what mechanisms to use to prevent obvious harms to those dependent on and vulnerable to this fundamental cost in a contemporary energy and transport system. Politics that has for decades exploited scope for greenwashing hasn't as yet got very far with the rhetoric of 'just transitions' or its implications... Ted Benton, John O'Neill and Clive Spash should really be read by more people.

By way of drawing this interview to a close, you recently 'retired', insofar as academics ever do, and partly in order to mark your retirement Gideon Calder and Balihar Sanghera have organized a Festschrift, forthcoming in 2022, and John is a contributor I think (as are numerous other well-known names).²⁸ I expect you found this enormously gratifying (if a little embarrassing), but perhaps also somewhat poignant. Not that I am consigning you to history, but how would you reflect on your lifetime in academia?

²⁸ Note from Jamie, visit: <https://www.routledge.com/Ethics-Economy-and-Social-Science-Dialogues-with-Andrew-Sayer/Sanghera-Calder/p/book/9781032161617>

AS: I've already spent too much of my life sitting in front of a computer screen but I find it satisfying to spend at least some time writing. Being an academic author can be a lonely business, especially if one is going against the dominant academic currents, and one rarely gets much idea of how one's work is received and whether others have found it useful, so the Festschrift (and the online one organized by my department) was indeed a lovely surprise – and poignant and gratifying. So too was your invitation to do this interview, so thank you, Jamie, for your questions and taking the time to do this.

JM: And if you had any advice for someone just starting out?

AS: To be brief, three things and a final comment:

1. Don't be too much of an insider in relation to any intellectual movement, and (following from that);
2. It's more important to encourage good philosophical arguments in general than to promote just those of critical realism.
3. Forget disciplines and follow the connections wherever they lead.

Finally, to update something I said at the end of *Realism and Social Science* (Sayer 2000a: 186-187): currently positive social science and normative theory are mutually estranged, notwithstanding the popularity of 'critical' approaches, with normative theory failing to engage with the patterning of social life, and positive research weak at understanding the content and 'force' of everyday normativity. Given the climate and ecological crises, and the necessity of a just transition to a sustainable future, social science needs to overcome this divide, and take our relation to nature more seriously.

Notes on Contributors

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