

Hazel Chowcat (nee Downing), interviewed by Kieran Connell, 20 May 2013

Respondent: Okay, this was..., I think they did it my second and third years, they had a weekend away in the Forest of Dean and it was to enable the new students coming in to get to know the old students, because there was a lot of, you'll see on the 'On Contradictions' paper there was a lot of concern about whether, especially with the new students coming in to existing sub-groups did they have a say in the work of the group, or were they expected simply to sort of, you know, do what the existing group was doing? So there were all these tensions, so I think the idea was that if we'd had a weekend away, an away day or an away weekend then it would sort of break down some of the sort of barriers and enable the new people to get to know the older people, or old people. So this particular weekend, Neil Grant, Dan Finn and me were at a CSE conference in Birmingham, I think it was on education.

So we drove down to the Forest of Dean after everybody else and when we got down there they'd all been, someone had done some cooking and we got there just at the end of the meal, so there were some sort of vague leftovers in this pot. It was like this barn with this long kitchen, I don't remember all, the names of everybody who was there but we just ate the leftovers, it was quite disgusting food. I don't know what it was, it was some sort of stodge in a saucepan and when we finished eating I said, "Okay we're going down to the pub then." There was silence. No one said anything. I said, "Have I said the wrong thing? What's going on here?" Someone said, "The children." And I said, "What children?" And apparently someone, I think it was Rebecca O'Rourke, she was living in a house with someone, was it Tricia Davis? I can't remember, it was someone called Tricia, who had children and Rebecca had decided that we should all learn to take responsibility for other people's children.

So she brought these children with her and then we were all expected to look after them. At the time I was just absolutely dumbfounded that anyone should do this, should use children in this way. I thought it was an appalling way to deal with it, but it was this whole, it was against the background of the whole sort of feminist debate within the centre.

Interviewer: So how did that manifest itself then over the course of the weekend?

Respondent: Well, I personally was quite upset by this because I had a nephew and niece who were living in Surrey and I used to go and collect them, I used to drive down and bring them up to Birmingham for weekends to give my sister and brother-in-law a weekend off. I thought, "Well nobody knows I do this." All my close friends knew that I did it but it wasn't, I wouldn't impose those children, I wouldn't sort of deliberately set out to bring them along just to make a point, because it was about making a point and I thought, "I'm not having this." For me I was at a loss, I

mean I was never the sort of person to sort of take things like that lying down, I thought, "No, I'm not having this." I said to Neil and Dan, I said, "Right, I don't know about you but I'm going down the pub. I'm not putting up with this." The three of us left and we said does anyone want a lift? Then we got to the pub, it wasn't very far and then gradually more and more people came in. I mean it caused a lot of tension, I think, I guess it was a bit shocking that I, as a woman was challenging this, because I really thought this was inappropriate behaviour, childish and you know, it had nothing to do with the children.

Interviewer: How did that go down with the others?

Respondent: I don't know, I don't think they appreciated it really. I don't know, I mean there was never any great hostility, but it was like all that issue about not wanting to be supervised by a man, that whole debate there. I felt there was quite a strong class basis to this because I felt that the majority of the women there, I mean not people like Dorothy Hobson and Mary Lanning(?), but the majority of people there were from middle class backgrounds. I was from a working class background and I kind of, for me the battle was on several fronts, and I used to be quite..., it was the first time I'd ever come across middle class women who wore clothes from jumble sales. This was just not something that I ever did, I mean having, for me I wore make-up and I think that was frowned upon, and I just, that was who I was and I've not changed particularly since then. But, I think there was a class thing there and so I was a feminist, I was a socialist feminist but I didn't necessarily see men as the enemy, because I saw the world in class terms and I still do. So there was this..., I never felt this ambiguity or this hostility to being supervised by a man, but I... Paul (Willis) was great; you know I always got on extremely well with Paul.

I think when you've been in the real world of work and having to deal with those sorts of relationships, somehow that sort of pussyfooting around and that kind of oversensitivity it just seems completely, it just seems off the wall. So, when this whole thing was going on about not wanting to be supervised by a man, they would only go into a supervision session with another woman present, what was this about being chaperoned? What were they protecting themselves from? Were they likely to be attacked physically? Sexually abused? What was going on there? You'd have to talk to one of the people who was advocating it really to find out why it was the case. But I never, ever..., and that's why I sent the article to Stuart (Hall), because I was really, I was so excited that I thought, "I've broken through this. There is a way of trying to understand, trying to think through the labour process from a Marxist-feminist perspective. It is possible to do it and Stuart agreed with me and I was so pleased because I valued him. I thought, intellectual he was streets ahead of everybody else. He had a way of being able to sum up situations, speak very clearly about quite heavily theoretical stuff. I think it was the case that when I first went there, there was a sense that the heavy theoretical stuff was something that the men did. It was almost their preserve and that women did women's things.

That's probably a crude portrayal but I'll give you an example, that first paper that I showed you, the one I wrote, my first presentation in November, it was all my initial thoughts about my thesis, and I distributed it and on my in to the centre I was stopped by several people who said, "Oh I really enjoyed your paper, I could see sit down and read it and enjoy a cup of coffee." And I thought, "Is this an insult; that they didn't have to struggle to read it? So it's not theoretical and it's not heavy and it's not full of words that no one can understand." I mean, I was very new there and I was really disturbed by people saying that to me, "How stupid is that? Someone says to you, someone says it's a really good piece that they've enjoyed and you're feeling it's an insult.

Interviewer: Was that to do with a sense of a competitiveness at the Centre?

Respondent: Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: How did that manifest itself?

Respondent: Well yeah and I think I certainly had the sense all the time that if I wasn't using heavily theoretical language and often, as I said to you earlier, there's all this Althusserian stuff about base superstructure and determination in the last instance, all this kind of stuff. If you weren't using that language then you weren't serious or you weren't theoretically competent. Actually, that's why I was so pleased when Braverman then came along, Braverman almost became my Bible, we all loved it. It was just so wonderfully theoretical about our area of work, the work area and so it didn't bother me then. I've still got my copy upstairs, it's falling apart. It's held together with sellotape actually. It was very new and it was just at the right time, it came just at the right time for me because it just focused on the labour process as a site of struggle. When you read it, it talks about the social office at some stage but you find yourself, well I find myself, having to rethink using it but challenging it to this whole notion of patriarchy into it. That was really exciting being able to do that, so I wasn't then bothered about..., I had my little area of, my theoretical area which was fascinating and it gave me room to work with. So I didn't need to worry about whether or not I was competing. I wasn't competing any longer. I didn't feel the need to compete with that heavy theoretical stuff.

Interviewer: I wanted to ask you about joining the Centre in 1977. What brought you there?

Respondent: I was working in Geneva and I got involved in the women's movement, and I started to think much more politically than I had ever before and it made me want to go to university. I wanted to go to university to read the books. My boss at the time described himself as a Marxist and he was very encouraging of me, of my political development. I saw him as a friend rather than

as a boss and he encouraged me as well to go to university. So because I was living in Geneva I had no idea about what was available in the university system and I ended up going to the..., there's an international school in Geneva and I went there and I asked if I could look through the university prospectuses, and it was really dependent on what university prospectuses they had, this is before the internet, this was like how did we manage before the internet? So I looked through and I found this really strange course at Bradford University which was interdisciplinary. It was the four disciplines of sociology, psychology, politics and literature and I thought that sounds like what I, you know that will give me four years, or three years rather to read. Because I didn't know what I wanted to study that was ideal for me. I just wanted a broad range, so I went to Bradford and I did my degree, I got a 2:1 and I realised I was still only eligible to be a secretary. I mean there were loads of women in Geneva when I was working there who had degrees.

So, I was going out with this guy at the time and he suggested to me I should do a PhD, and I thought, "Wow, me? PhD?" I was the first person in my family ever to go anywhere near an institute of higher education let alone do a PhD. He knew about the centre, he knew about CCCS, I didn't, I'd not heard of it before and he said, "Why don't you try?" So I applied to the centre and applied to Warwick to do, I think it was a PhD at Warwick in the sociology department. I was interviewed for both and as you know the centre, the interviews are done by the students...?

Interviewer: Who was on your panel?

Respondent: Eve was on it, Eve Brooke and I don't remember who else. I knew Eve beforehand, I knew her in Bradford, which is where she did her first degree. When I was in Bradford University I was involved in the women's stuff there and that's how I got to know her. So it was a big surprise, I didn't know she was at the centre, so it was a big surprise when I got to the interview and there she was. I think she was chairing, so it was a nice surprise. So I was offered places at both Warwick and CCCS, but I chose CCCS because they gave me a grant, and the year I went there were four grants from the SSRC, there were quota places. I don't know whether they still call them that, but...they offered me one. I was amazed, I was absolutely amazed because the decision was taken by the centre, it's their decision.

Interviewer: That must have been quite a boost for you.

Respondent: Huge. Absolutely, absolutely, I mean I just, I was staggered. I think even without a grant I would have gone there, because it was just such an exciting place.

Interviewer: In what way did it seem exciting?

Respondent: Well the fact that the students were interviewing you. I mean that was, you know I'd been to this interview at Warwick and I was interviewed by a couple of academics and it was very formal and I just thought the one at the centre was just..., it was fairly formal but because it was like a group of students I felt more comfortable. I thought, "Well this is the place to be." The guy I was going out with at the time, he gave me a copy of whichever the latest working papers was as a congratulations. I'll dig it out in a minute and I'll show you what he wrote. It was something about, you know 'on your entry into the intellectual Marxist womb' (laughter) or something like that, something really strange. He was impressed that I got in. I was impressed; I was staggered not only to be offered a place but also to be offered money, so that was something.

Interviewer: So what was the atmosphere at the Centre like when you arrived?

Respondent: Well, I think my first impressions, there was this day conference that I think was about a week before term started and it was on the latest working papers. I can never remember the titles; I can give it to you afterwards. But, there was a one day conference around that and it coincided with the publication of Julian Gould Report, now Julian Gould I think was the professor of sociology at Nottingham University and he published this paper which listed, it was basically a list of lefty academics and everyone at this conference was up in arms but that was because they were being named. Those who had been named were expressing outrage but you knew that if they hadn't been named they'd be even more outraged. So the day was kind of dominated by that and it was quite exciting because there were a lot of people whose names I'd heard of that were leading academics who were at the conference, and that felt quite exciting.

When term started, it was like..., I can't explain. I mean you're frightened when you start something new because you've got to make new friends and you don't know whether you're accommodation, I think I had a room in someone's house to start with. It's a new city, everything's new, so it was all a bit scary, but it was also so exciting and I think my confidence was boosted by having been given one of the grants. So that was great. I loved it, I just loved being there, I loved the Monday morning meetings because you never knew what was going to happen, it was Monday mornings wasn't it? The CGM, yeah centre general meeting.

Interviewer: Yeah then the Tuesday ones were the theoretical meetings, is that right?

Respondent: Right, yeah, I can't remember much about the Tuesday ones.

Interviewer: So what were the Monday ones like then?

Respondent: They were just general meetings where we would discuss whatever was on the agenda. I mean, if you wanted to put something on the agenda..., one individual would have to take responsibility each week for putting together the agenda and doing the minutes, issuing those in pigeon hole. They varied, I think I was telling you about the typing skills, pretty appalling most of the time, and we discussed whatever was on the agenda. I remember in 1977 it was the fire fighter strike, I think it was '77, yeah and we had a collection every Monday for the FBU, there was a fire station on the Bristol Road. So we would have a collection, we were students and we'd still have a collection. I was amazed, people were very happy to sort of put their money in their pockets and someone would take it down to the fire station and that would be our, you know, every Monday morning until the strike ended. I can't remember much else about those Monday morning meetings.

Interviewer: Can you remember anything more generally about what the process was like working in a group like that and doing group work? Because, obviously the ethos at the centre was to work collaboratively so how did that work out in practice?

Respondent: Yeah I remember the Women and Fascism paper that we wrote, we met and decided the content and then allocated different bits to different people and we'd go away and do our bit and bring it back to the group. Then we'd all comment on it and then it would just get melted in. I don't know how, it was quite..., I mean that paper, the women and Fascism paper, 'Women in the National Front' I think they called it, it's a very good..., have you read it recently? I think it's a really good paper, I think it's a really good paper, I think it's brilliant, I don't know how we managed to write it because traditionally it's impossible to write things by committee. But, actually that's how we did it and it would be, I think the workgroups we would, the subgroups like the work group we would use to present our own work. So you'd carry on working on your thesis if you were going to do it and then we would agree who was going to present a paper, you'd agree a timetable or the programme for the year and, I'm sure that how it worked.

Interviewer: How were the sub-groups established? Were they already in place when you arrived?

Respondent: No, I think we started it actually.

Interviewer: You started it.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did that take a lot of commitment?

Respondent: Well, Paul (Willis) was involved you see, and Paul is a member of staff, so and it was his area of work as well, about kids working, and he was my supervisor. So it was, well it was a collaborative thing. I mean it wasn't any one individual's responsibility. But, I remember we would have visiting speakers, not necessarily just to the work group but we'd have visiting speakers to the centre. So a normal week might involve not coming in for several days or coming in on Monday and perhaps Tuesday and there might be a visiting speaker like when E P Thompson came. I can't remember who else, I think Judy Bloomfield came and presented some of her work at some stage, but I didn't go in every day. I don't think I went into the centre every day, I don't think I needed to. But, we did, I have to say there was one thing I was thinking of recently, we did feel cut off from the rest of the university. I never really felt that I was part of the university because the only place I saw was inside the Muirhead tower. I may have used the library occasionally, but the library didn't really, there weren't that many books in my area because it was so brand new that I could use the library for.

Interviewer: Was it like sort of like a siege mentality?

Respondent: I think it was really, yes. Yeah, I think it was. We did these things, I think I put some of papers in there, I'm not sure. We did these interfaculty studies, have you come across that?

Interviewer: I haven't.

Respondent: Right, we did some interfaculty studies teaching sociology students. So some of us did some teaching and that was odd, it was like coming out of the womb.

Interviewer: How did that work?

Respondent: Well we only ever did one each or there might have been a group of us doing it but I think there was only ever one each. So we didn't run a whole course. I got the impression that they were voluntary, the students and it was all about our areas of work. It must have been quite interesting for them actually because we were very productive in terms of the range of stuff that we

did, so it must have been interesting for them to see that but I'm not sure that undergraduates would have understood the significance of what we were up to.

Interviewer: Were you ever active in negotiating with university management?

Respondent: No, we were a cocoon. Do you know, the only time I remember having anything whatsoever to do with the rest of the university was when there was a university women's group that we were involved with because it was mainly under-graduates, but they organised a picket of the medical students, the Birmingham Medical School, they were organising some event where they had strippers and so we picketed it. I think a lot of women from the centre decided to go and support this and we picketed it on the grounds that do you really want to be treated by a doctor, you know these are medical students; that is their attitude towards women. I mean I still feel the same about that now. But, that was really the only time that I ever remember getting involved in the rest of the university. We were very much cut off.

Interviewer: You mentioned external speakers, speakers who were not from the university but from other universities or outside of Birmingham, like Thompson. Can you remember anything about the Thompson talk or other external speakers?

Respondent: Only the thing I was talking to you about Thompson. I thought he was fascinating. I loved *The Making of the English Working Class*, I thought it was a brilliant book, but apparently at the time his work was considered to be far too empirical and not adequately theoretical which I thought was quite unfair because..., his book contributed so much to our understanding of working class history. You know; the making of the English working class. I think it was just a brilliant book and I was not part of that debate so it struck me as somehow, I don't know; just pure academicism. I could not really understand why people were so exercised about it. I'm sure if I had been a historian perhaps I might have been.

Interviewer: Does that fit into what you were saying a bit before about like you came from a working class background having had experience of working in the real world and then coming to a highly theoretical institution. Did you have a perspective on things that not many other people at the centre had?

Respondent: I think that's precisely it. I mean I have to say I always felt very ambiguous about my feelings about academic work and I suppose that's why I never, I didn't stay in it. I mean; a lot of people I was at the centre with ended up teaching and staying within academia. I was excited doing my PhD, I adored doing it, I loved the coming to grips with sort of different theoretical concepts and I

think what I produced was good in the end. I re-read chunks of my PhD recently. I thought, "My god did I actually write this? This sounds quite good." Because, at the time that I was writing I thought I can't write. I thought, no given my background there's no way that I can string a sentence together. When I started the PhD I thought, "How am I going to be able to write anything?" I really had no confidence in my ability to do it. So while I really enjoyed that I found academicism, I found it dry in the end and it didn't really..., I wanted to be more practical which was why I ended up as a trade union official, and I suppose in a sense that it was great being at university and having the time to read and to develop theoretical perspectives and to debate with other people. Buy, actually, I didn't really like academia. I wouldn't have been able to stay there. It was just, I don't know, I would not have felt comfortable, I never really felt comfortable.

So when I left I did get an academic job. I worked as a research fellow at Southampton University. But, that was interesting doing research, that was different from the kind of work that I was doing at the centre, a different kind of work the centre did, but I left for reasons that I don't really need to go into. It had to do with the fact that they sent the, the people who were managing my project were allowing BT, which was... I was working on a project looking at the impact of new technology on telephone engineers and my bosses agreed to give BT the final veto of my report which was entirely against the idea of both academic freedom and the idea of us doing objective research and it being an objective piece of research. So I left and eventually ended up working in the trade union movement where I was happiest.

Interviewer: Because you got that job in Southampton because your work at Southampton was on micro-processing.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: As you progressed and developed your ideas at the Centre, how were they received by people?

Respondent: Well see the earlier stuff, that paper that people told me they were reading over coffee, what I was interested in, that paper itself dealt with, from memory, dealt with things about the sort of anecdotal, well it is a bit anecdotal, about the nature of secretarial work. About what it's like, about the fact that it's women doing it and about how women can resist, it's about the personal relations. Then that became crucial to my PhD really, crucial to my thesis because what I was trying to explore in the thesis is why is word processing being introduced now? Why, when women have been in office work since the 1870s, various attempts have been made over the years to increase productivity, looking at typists and secretaries to increase their productivity, various methods were employed. Either having counters on the typewriters or controlling women in typing pools, but

never, ever..., office workers always as remained until then, until the mid-'70s remained very much an area of work which could not be completely tailorised or controlled as factory work is controlled.

I felt that the reason for that was because office workers are controlled not just as workers but as women. That the whole nature of women's work, especially office work is that it's imbued with patriarchal relations, and it enables there to be a Braverman term, porosity, in the working day, lots of holes in the working day that will be taken up in personal relations. In either women talking together or men and women talking or women doing jobs that are not strictly speaking secretarial. Like going out and buying presents for the boss's wife, all those little things, and they exist because they are women. I felt that for the first time they now have a handle on using technology to control those relations and to stop the porosity, just squeeze out the holes from the working day. I was really excited by that because that's what enabled me to develop a Marxist feminist theory, to think through the fact that..., I don't think it had ever been done before, the fact that women are controlled as women and that patriarchy works, that capitalism uses patriarchy when it suits itself in work, in the labour process. And, that women actually, over the years, deliberately consciously or not have used those patriarchal relations in order to squeeze out some semblance of human..., given their work a human touch so that women have used it. It's complex really because women have used it so they've actually connived, if you like, in their own repression by joining in the way that they're being controlled because they've used it in order to stop working, to find some respite from the constant typing, or constant whatever else it is that they're doing.

So, for instance you'll get... men will come into the office with jobs for them to do, because it usually was men, I mean there are more women bosses now. Men would come in and not only will they had them over a piece of work to do, a tape or some hand written scrawl to turn into typescript, but they'll stand and have a chat. The women very often surround themselves with pictures of their children or with personalised things, always personalise their desks, right. So it gives an opening for someone who's coming into their office to make small talk. I used to find this fascinating. When I was at the centre during the summer holidays and Easter holidays and Christmas I'd go temp in offices in Birmingham and that is weird, going from the Centre, to that.

Interviewer: Back to the world that you used to inhabit...

Respondent: Absolutely, it was staggering. It kept me on my feet actually, or kept me down to earth I think, and because I was writing, thinking through this stuff theoretically, I was looking at the office and the office work with completely different eyes. So I'd look for things or I'd look at things and think, "Why is that happening like that?" And it would give me a hugely useful angle on my thesis. So I'd watch people, I'd watch the way that they would engage with each other and how much time was wasted on these inter-personal relations. So that then, I think when I started work that one out it went in the Braverman stuff, that then I think gave me a great deal more confidence than I had when I wrote that initial paper, because I thought, "This is theory."

Interviewer: Theory combined with practice.

Respondent: I thought, "This is it, this is exciting." Then I did stuff outside the centre, I was involved in CSE as I mentioned before. Not just the education group; that was just something I was interested in. I joined the CSE micro electronics group. We wrote a book called *Micro Electronics*, oh god it's upstairs, I'll show it to you. We wrote a book and Jane and I, Jane Barker who was at Centre. She knew nothing about secretarial work but we talked through a load of this stuff about patriarchy and she found it really exciting. So we wrote this piece together. We wrote a chapter for the book and then we wrote this more extended version that went into CSE capital and class number 10, in 1979. So that for me, that was crucial for me, my work with CSE and it gave me, it was a balance really with the centre. It was a counterbalance, it kept me grounded, yeah, that's the word, yeah, grounded. So I think one of the things, now I'm thinking about it, people although they were involved in the groups did their own thing at the Centre. I remember Bill Schwarz, I always felt Bill Schwarz was doing his own thing, it was stuff on the State wasn't it and Mary Langan, I shared a flat with her in Birmingham and she was working on stuff to do with the state, the welfare state.

John Clarke and Mary did a lot of work together on the state. People did, I mean people did really do their own thing. So it didn't feel, I mean it was, on Monday mornings we were a group. Monday mornings we were the centre and we'd have our centre general meeting. I think people did go off work individually.

Interviewer: The Centre has a commitment to moving beyond the binary between staff and students – but what was the influence would you say of like the members of staff when you were there? I mean you touched on it a little bit when we talked about Stuart, how influential was Stuart and what was the relationship, in your experience between the students and the staff members?

Respondent: Well there was all that stuff about the women, a lot of the women found it difficult the fact they were all male members of staff. I have to say I don't think it bothered me particularly, I really don't think it bothered me. I think I've said before I valued Stuart enormously, I found him really intellectual stimulating. Of all the members of staff I guess I had more to do with Paul (Willis), because he was my supervisor and Richard (Johnson) to a smaller extent, much less so Michael Green, I didn't have much to do with Michael, he was English. I think, so it was Paul and Richard and to a lesser extent Stuart although I always enjoy talking to Stuart. I find him immensely, what's the word, approachable. And I know that a lot of the women didn't and I can never, ever understand why. I really, I really did find him approachable. I think it's true to say that it was different being a post-graduate than being an under-graduate, the relationship with staff was very different. I think when you're an under-graduate the staff are up there on a pedestal and it didn't feel like that in the centre. I felt that we were all, there was a much greater level of equality between the staff and the students and it was because the centre was run by the students.

Interviewer: Can you remember there being any crisis or traumas whilst you were there?

Respondent: On Contradictions.

Interviewer: On Contradictions?

Respondent: On Contradictions yeah.

Interviewer: What was that?

Respondent: Well I hate to say it was only re-reading it I realised..., I was trying to figure out where it came from, and I don't know where it came from because there's a long paper written by Richard on On Contradictions and it goes into huge detail and it seems really agonised, just agonised. There's a reference at one point between male, aggressive, working class and feminist middle class, and I'm thinking to myself when I read this again, "Where do I fit into that?" You know, because there were women there who were, like me, from working class backgrounds who didn't fit into either of those models. Where were we? I remember years ago, interestingly enough reading Richard Hoggart's book, this is when I was working as a secretary, *The Uses of Literacy*.

Absolutely fabulous book, really amazing, that book really turned me on and I think it was quite interesting that I ended up at the centre that he'd established. But, I remember reading that book and it's all about grammar school boys, working class boys who become grammar school boys and about the split between having one foot in the working class and the other in the middle class environment being at a grammar school, and the tensions that that caused. I read this and I thought, "But what about the tensions cause when you have working class girls who go to grammar school?" Because that was the tension in my family, my dad was a bus driver and then when I went to university, when I graduated from Bradford University, my parents came to my graduation ceremony but my father wouldn't..., the school, the department had a sort of wine and cheese party for students and parents and my father sat in the car outside, he wouldn't come in. Because, he'd never, ever been in a university before, he didn't even know what universities were about, but I think, as I said to you earlier I was the first one in the family. So that's my background you see, so to end up there, it's just staggering. So I, I felt that that sort of class, that thing about working class girls was never really explored in the centre, it was never really understood and that's why I finished my PhD when I did, because I just was going round with a big chip on my shoulder.

Interviewer: You were the first woman to finish your PhD?

Respondent: Yeah, yeah I'm staggered by that, I really am staggered. So I think a lot of my experience at the centre was informed by that, I felt that there were, that the On Contradictions paper was exploring all the contradictions within the centre, but that was one it didn't explore.

Interviewer: A crucial one for you as well.

Respondent: Well for me, absolutely. So I felt that this was like naval gazing. A lot of this was naval gazing. I could understand where it was coming from, what were we supposed to be about? Were we supposed to be a political...? You know, what were we supposed to do with our politics? Were we supposed to use our politics as intellectuals to form the labour movement or were we supposed to be engaged with the labour movement and use our engagement to inform our theoretical work? There was this whole..., there is anti-intellectualism within the labour movement in this country which I think everyone struggled with. If you go to Germany or France there isn't that level of anti-intellectualism. That's one of the struggles with the On Contradictions paper. It is a real struggle, it's very real. I said to you earlier I felt more comfortable when I became a trade union official, I couldn't stay within academia because it felt too distant, too cut off from the real world, it felt very ivory tower-ish.

Interviewer: Even with... I guess the centre was different from most academic institutions in the sense that it was political, we talked about before the kind of melting pot of politics from across the left, the spectrum of the left, you know from SWP to Big Flame to the Labour Party I guess. So even with all that, that political engagement you still felt it was like naval gazing?

Respondent: Absolutely because it was, it was in the tower, you know. I remember, I mean you've spoken to Bob Findlay, I remember, I told you this because it's worth just reminding you of this because it was just hilarious. We did spend a lot of time deciding were we going to form ourselves into a mass party. What was that about? That, out of the On Contradictions paper there was loads of debates about this stuff and Bob sat in the centre and he said, "Well I give you warning, if you go and form yourselves into a party then I'm going to go off and start a tendency". It was, I mean looking back I just wonder really, whether people are still engaged in those sort so debates or was it because we were all so political? If we had not been avowedly political, an avowedly political centre, would we have been engaged in all that stuff? Because you said yes there were people there from IMG, SWP, Big Flame, I flirted with Big Flame, I wondered at one point, had a lot of friends in Big Flame, There were a lot of people involved in the troops out movement at the time. There was someone I think might have been involved in the RCP or even the RCG, the Revolutionary Communist Group or Tendency, I don't think there were any WRP people there. I don't recall anyone in the Labour Party, there might have been. I think we were all so critical of the Labour Party because the Labour Party was in power at the time. So I think you'd have had to have been a brave

soul to admit to being a member. There may have been. I mean, I actually joined the party in '79, I joined when Margaret Thatcher came to power. It was a big decision to take really, but I suppose it was one that was informed by all those debates in the centre really.

Interviewer: Was that quite a big jump?

Respondent: It was, and the reason why..., I mean I told you earlier I lived in Moseley, at about 9.30pm every night we'd sort of make our way round to the Prince of Wales and in the Prince of Wales at the time you'd have the IMG in one corner, the SWP in another corner, and in another corner and locals in the other probably. Or probably the Salvation Army, but it was just so symptomatic of that time, that pub was just like a microcosm of what life was like in the '70s. In the end, I mean I flirted with, I had friends in the IMG, I had friends in the SWP, I had friends across that spectrum and I decided in '79, the Labour Party is where the class is, the fringe groups that's where middle class intellectuals and fighters are. But, this was where the class was, this was where I wanted to be. I did like Big Flame, I liked Big Flame's politics, I liked the... there's a certain libertarianism there, it was a much easier group to be around as a woman, as a socialist feminist. I thought IMG paid lip service and SWP saw the women's movement as a petty bourgeois deviation at the time. I just found that quite difficult, I couldn't have been part of that sort of organisation. Do you know something else has just occurred to me, the National Front, the National Front were active at the time.

Interviewer: Yes, and the Anti-Nazi League, and Rock against Racism as well.

Respondent: It was yeah, Rock Against Racism, yeah. There was a club in Birmingham called Barbarellas that operated a race bar, did you know about that?

Interviewer: I know Barbarellas, yeah.

Respondent: We used to go down and picket, yeah it was quite heavy at the time, quite nasty. They couldn't get away with it now, just staggering. So there was a lot going on, there was a lot going on and then I just parted.

Interviewer: That kind of like hits on my final two questions – firstly, what were the structures or conditions that made that blossoming, if you like, for want of a better word, of radical politics in the centre possible? Why was it so, why did it come about then? Then the second question I was going to ask is you obviously ended up in a trade union politics, did your experience at the Centre influence that trajectory?

Respondent: I don't think it did. I'll answer the second one first. I'm not sure that it did. My life has taken so many different turns, you know from working, then to going to university, then doing the PhD, then working in the university, then going to work for a trade union. I mean a huge zig-zag and I've changed countries three times and I've changed, I've moved around the country quite a lot. I just made the decision, I've taken a decision based on what seemed the best idea at the time. So I don't know whether I would have ended up as a trade union official if I'd not been to the centre, I can't tell you that. But I did know, I think what it did for me, it was an enormous privilege to go to the centre, I felt. So I had six years of academia in one fell swoop, but then at the end of it I'd had enough. I think I'd had enough. I think I wanted to get into the real world. I'm not sure that going to Southampton and working as a research fellow did it for me really. I was so appalled at the way that my bosses were allowing themselves to be manipulated by British Telecom, that was really appalling. It was my work that got me the job, it was because of the work I'd done on micro-processes that got me the job because not many people had done research into the impact of new technology, I was one of the few. So obviously that got me there, but it was my own politics which I think were in place before I went to the centre that pushed me into the trade union movement.

Interviewer: Did your experience at the centre kind of reaffirm this in a sense, your own politics because you didn't want to go over the academic route ... So your political formations were already in place but they were kind of sharpened in a sense by knowing that you didn't want to go down one particular route?

Respondent: Yeah, I mean the other thing I did..., I've just remembered actually. The other thing I did while I was at the centre I joined, as a post-graduate I joined ASTMS, because I wanted to be a member of a proper union. I was still a member of NUS but NUS never felt..., students' unions don't do a great deal for post-graduates, but I joined ASTMS, I wanted to be a member of a trade union and so I was involved in, I did quite a lot of political stuff outside. Through ASTMS I offered my services to do day schools on the impacts of new technology on women, I'd forgotten that. That grounded me enormously, working with trade union women, trade union members and I was an academic. They valued what I did. You've just reminded me actually because my great thing about, justification for my existence was to make my work available to the trade union movement.

Interviewer: Right, so that's where all those publications that you showed me...

Respondent: That's where it came from. How could I have forgotten that? While I was actually at the centre, when I started my PhD I wrote to all the clerical unions and I said, "My name is so and so, I am doing this research into new technology, are you interested?" So I was doing this, I was having

contact with trade unions about the work I was doing. They were interested and they put me in touch with other people and I was doing this stuff on (husband enters room). Do you remember all the stuff I used to do with ASTMS, John? All the day schools I did with ASTMS and I met quite a few, Terry Webb I met. That's what I did, I did loads of this stuff and it was wonderful. The other thing I did, through this was I started to think through the issues of health and safety, because these screens, VDUs that came with these new word processors were potentially dangerous because of ELF and VLF, very low frequency and extra low frequency radiation. So I got involved with the Birmingham Region Union Safety and Health Campaign, BRUSH that was based at Aston University. But there was trade union involvement and I think I got on to the Trades Council; I was involved with the Trades Council in Birmingham.

Interviewer: So a sense your trajectory was always kind of drifting anyway towards that, the academic stuff at the centre was kind of an interlude if you like, or it sounds like it anyway.

Respondent: It was really, yeah it was. Do you know it's a good job I started thinking about that because that really was, especially towards the end of my time at the centre, I found myself more and more involved and I was involved in CARF, Campaign Against Racism and Fascism. I was involved in Midland Red, which was..., I did loads of stuff, which was a theatre group. We put on these sort of plays about abortion and..., yeah I'm sure, it was good. We did loads of stuff. So I did that. I was always wanting to be out there.

Interviewer: Just finally, I wondered if you had any reflections on the structures that made the centre possible.

Respondent: I suppose it was all the people getting involved politically, the connection between..., I suppose there was a resurgence in the interest in Marx wasn't there, during that period, late '60s early '70s. So people coming through university during that period there was much teaching of Marx and if you were already politically engaged then there was the opportunity. So for me to go to a place that was called a Marxist, you know centre of excellence, that was just dynamite for me. I just, that was where I wanted to be, I felt at home, albeit with all the contradictions.

Interviewer: Thanks very much.

[End of Transcript]