**Round Table: Is the common ground between pragmatism and critical realism more important than the differences?**

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One theme of this special issue is an incitement to reconsider the relationship between pragmatism and critical realism. While their advocates sometimes come into conflict, there are also clearly borrowings and overlaps between the traditions, and we therefore invited scholars with feet in either or indeed both camps to discuss their relationship. The discussion was conducted virtually, with participants submitting initial contributions, reviewing each other’s submissions, and then responding to each other in their second round of contributions.

# Douglas Porpora: Critical Realism Versus Pragmatism

Is the common ground between pragmatism and critical realism (CR) more important than the differences? That is the question before us. Given our word restriction, I am particularly grateful to Dave Elder-Vass (2022) for so helpfully collecting across the variety of pragmatisms their most salient commitments. In what follows, I will have space to enumerate and respond only to some of them, considering also additional thoughts from what Patrick Baert (2005) and Filipe Carreira da Silva (Baert and Carreira da Silva 2010) identify as their vision of pragmatism.

**Presuppositional analysis**. According to Baert (2005: 152), “Pragmatists conceive of presuppositions as the sine qua non to any form of inquiry. As such they assume that researchers must reflect on the nature of their presuppositions.” Great. From a CR perspective, I say something similar (Porpora 2015: 1ff.).

**Anti-philosophy, anti-metaphysics, anti-theory**. Here we go. As Elder-Vass (2022: 4) relates to us, Dewey “argues that ‘the chief characteristic trait of the pragmatic notion of reality is precisely that no theory of Reality in general . . . is possible or needed.’” Rorty similarly denies that pragmatists “’require either a metaphysics or an epistemology’” (Elder-Vass 2022: 5). Really? As Elder-Vass notes, Rorty himself makes all sorts of metaphysical and epistemological claims. Even his denial bears metaphysical and epistemological baggage.

More fundamentally, if pragmatists consider presuppositional analysis the sine qua non of inquiry, where do pragmatists think that ultimately leads? It leads to fundamental questions about what science is, what human actors are, what causality is, what knowledge is. If we are committed to presuppositional analysis, metaphysics and epistemology are where we end up. As a critical realist, I simply cannot see how ontological and epistemological commitments can be avoided. Baert (2005: 151-152) seems to consider bankrupt any empirical attempt to map or represent social reality as it putatively is. Right or wrong, this position is grounded in metaphysical and epistemological judgments. How does pragmatism propose to dialogue on its own presuppositions without entering those waters?

**Truth**. As I have argued (Porpora 2015) and now Elder-Vass (2022: 5) with me, pragmatists “have taken a variety of conflicting views on truth.” At best, as with Peirce, they adopt what Alston (1997) calls an epistemic understanding of truth, in Peirce’s case, some ultimate consensus. Such epistemic accounts stand in opposition to the correspondence theory of truth adopted by many of us critical realists. This view of truth Alston describes as ontological: What makes a belief or claim true is not some epistemic state like individual certainty or group consensus but that what is proposed actually does match objective reality.

In contrast, many pragmatists are phobic about truth, Rorty notoriously so. Baert and Carreira da Silva (2010: 300) comment that pragmatists “prefer to speak of persuasiveness rather than truth. . .to emphasize how decisions of this kind are both provisional and socially negotiated.” We critical realists agree that all truth claims are provisional, but not objective reality itself. So, the foregoing comment troubles me. First, in this context, I do not know what something would be persuasive of other than truth. In my account of CR, I come close to pragmatism in denying any foundationalist approach to truth (Porpora 2015: 77-92). Instead, I expressly argue I think in line with pragmatism that truth is determined rhetorically by open dialogue and debate.

But I go on to observe that there is the rhetoric of the sophists and the rhetoric of Aristotle. Aristotle understood rhetoric as the way to determine the objective truth in situations where formal proof is lacking. In Aristotle’s sense, determination means something like discovery. The sophists in contrast understood determination to mean something closer to production: That we produce the truth by our discussion of it, which amounts to collective idealism. To speak of socially negotiating the truth sounds like the truth is up to us. Let us negotiate whether there is climate change or whether the last U.S. presidential election was stolen. In negotiation as in a Congressional bill, we give and take in a spirit of compromise. In truth determination, we should yield only what is warranted. Truth seems particularly important in disputes of a moral nature. It seems to matter to charges of systemic racism or sexism, for example, that the charges actually be true.

I have room for one last issue. **Social ontology**. I am pleased to have Emily Barman (2002) join me (e.g., Porpora 2015: 100) in treating competition not just as a behavior but as a prior, consequential, social structural relation, but I am not sure how that treatment comports with pragmatism. Pragmatists, Elder-Vass observes, are reticent about social structure. Certainly, anything like social structure is absent from Neil Gross’s (2009) account of pragmatism, and as far as I can see from Baert’s as well. I consider pragmatism’s demurral from structure very serious. What does one make of systemic racism without it? Finally, although pragmatism understands itself to be humanistic, I think, as I have argued, its tendency to overemphasize unconscious habits threatens to reduce humans to zombies.

Where does this leave us? Is the common ground between pragmatism and CR more important than the differences? I remain grateful for our commonalities, but the differences seem important, and on them I believe the pragmatist positions untenable. I look forward to hearing how my belief might be wrong, i.e., I think, untrue.

# Emily Barman: Pragmatism, Critical Realism, and the Lens of Materiality

What are some of the commonalities and differences between Pragmatism and Critical Realism? Examining their engagement with the issue of materiality is one way to address this question. *Materiality* isthe claim that “matter matters” (Miller 2005) for understanding social action. As found in a diverse range of literatures (Latour 2005; Leonardi 2012; Orlikowski 2010) and going by a range of nomenclatures (materiality, socio-materiality, and socio-technical systems), the claim of materiality posits that the “physical characteristics of objects [such as such as cultural artifacts, technologies, and calculative devices, among others] act upon people to influence action and meaning-making” (Griswold, Mangione, and McDonnell 2013:346). I propose that Critical Realism and Pragmatism share a relative disregard for materiality while diverging in ways that reflect broader differences between the two theories.

As has been discussed by others (Elder-Vass 2008; Mutch 2013), Critical Realism acknowledges the material capacity of objects: matter can possess “causal powers that make a vital contribution to the causation of social events” (Elder-Vass 2008:471). However, this recognition is limited due the ontological tenets of the perspective. Critical Realists seek to identify the causal mechanisms that underlie events and regularities, as generated out of the dynamic of structure and agency. In result, Critical Realists views objects as part of the social world but attribute the causal power of “things” to macro-level social factors. This leads to two possible lines of research on materiality, although scholarship to date for either has been minimal. Critical Realism could involve investigation of how and why aspects of social structure are inscribed into physical objects, or it could entail consideration of how matter can constrain or afford social action, emphasizing that the object’s effect on actors is contextually situated in social structure and mechanisms.

Albeit for different reasons and perhaps to its detriment, Pragmatism’s engagement with the concept of materiality has been minimal, both theoretically and empirically. As with Critical Realism, Pragmatism brings the social to the fore. Pragmatists delineate how social action for individuals is situationally located, with actors drawing from habits and scripts and modifying their perceptions and actions based on outcomes. Knowledge and reality are socially constructed out of individuals’ experiences. The premises of Pragmatism have resulted in a potentially fruitful but currently limited engagement with materiality. This perspective has proved valuable for scholars who seek to understand how a focal object are pragmatically constructed by actors given their habits and social contexts. In my own work, I have employed a pragmatist perspective to show how calculative devices – as material objects – are generated out of actors’ struggles to generate stakeholder support for a new field (Barman 2015). Yet, Pragmatism otherwise has not engaged with the concept of materiality. While Pragmatism recognizes that individuals may face recalcitrance in their effort to pursue a line of action, the role of objects – or “non-human resources” (Gross 2009:307) – has either not been prioritized or has mattered only in socially constrained, micro-level ways. Objects can generate constraints and affordances to actors in a situation but only in is as much individuals imbue them with such meaning – thus individual agency mediates between the physical characteristics of an object and its effects. Research has followed along this line. Barley (1986), for example, examined the introduction of the CT scanner as a new form of medical imaging device. While this new technology led to a restructuring of roles, Barley emphasizes the micro-level social dynamics, rather than the material characteristics of the CT scanner, that accounted for this outcome. Beyond such two strands of research, Pragmatism has not further engaged in the concept of materiality. In consequence, Pragmatism, unlike Critical Realism, fails to take seriously materiality’s insistence that the physical characteristics of objects can shape social outcomes in ways not attributable solely to actors’ understandings.

# Mark Carrigan

I found it difficult to draft an opening contribution to this roundtable. In part this was because the question is close to my heart, as someone who came to critical realism through pragmatism without acceptance of the former necessarily ever exhaustively expunging the latter from my thought. As a frustrated student of analytical philosophy, my encounter with pragmatism in its Rortyean variety was an intoxicating experience in which what had been taught to me as the parameters of philosophical inquiry melted away, leaving me face-to-face with a world which had felt frustratingly out of reach while I remained lodged within the intellectual edifice of the analytical tradition. What Rorty referred to as his quietism, placing him squarely within a tradition which was new to me as a student but had a long history, felt like intellectual freedom. It was not a rejection of the philosophical conversation but rather an insistence that it not be built around the search for 'skyhooks' through which we might elevate ourselves beyond contingency and finitude (Kraugerud and Ramberg 2010). This was heady stuff for a postgraduate student who keenly felt the limits of philosophical reason, not least of all because it suggested a relationship between philosophical study and the activism which was the other primary concern for me at that stage of my life.

In one sense an enthusiasm for "the creation of ever more various and multicoloured artefacts", as the project which remains if we were to dispense with the idea that philosophy might elevate us beyond contingency, failed to survive my encounter with critical realism (Rorty 2001: 54). The realisation that epistemic relativity did not in fact entail judgemental relativity led me in a very different direction, exploring personal reflexivity in relation to topics such as sexual identity, digital devices, social media and student decision making. In another sense though, the influence of Rorty has stayed with me as something like a sensibility, shaping how I relate to theorising as an undertaking in a way which is irreducible to the theoretical positions I find myself taking. The functions served by theorising seem obviously indispensable to me: clarifying the terms we admit into our explanations, generating novel descriptions for emerging phenomena and interrogating the philosophical issues encountered in social research etc. I remain overly sensitive perhaps to the limits of these undertakings, their lack of capacity to police their own elaboration, in a way which has left me prone to periodic bouts of frustration with critical realism, particularly the tendency identified by Lizardo (2013) towards a default of 'arguing against positions' in which the realist position is presented as a 'grand package'. To express this frustration isn’t to deny these differences matter, as much as to suggest that accounting *why* and *how* they matter should invite responses in a range of registers (conceptual, methodological, empirical) rather than the philosophical reasoning that tends to predominate within an intellectual community where such under-labouring remains the highest status activity in which one can engage.

The reason I'm sharing this intellectual biography is not because I see it as inherently interesting in its own terms but rather because it suggests something about the question which we've been asked to address. If we recognise philosophical traditions as things we encounter at certain points in our life, with a salience (or lack-thereof) which reflects this biographical context, how does this shape how we ascribe importance to the commonalities or differences between different traditions? How in turn might we understand the role of our intellectual communities in shaping our theoretical sensibilities, in the sense of the questions we’re drawn to and the kind of answers we’re inclined to give to them? As Preston (2009: 1) observes in a reflection on intellectual biography, "our starting points are accidental, our early moves untutored, they are not informed by a systematic professional knowledge of the available territory, rather they flow from curiosity; we read what strikes us as interesting, we discard what seems dull".

In conveying my starting points, I’ve tried to offer a sense of why I find the question we’ve been posed an enticing one which I nonetheless find difficult to approach in a straightforward fashion. For example, as someone who is currently trying to insert a realist conception of agency into the field of platform studies, which tends to reduce agents to users of a platform, the commonalities between pragmatism and critical realism are more important than the differences. I’ve found a lot of inspiration in Dewey’s thought for analysing the role of platforms in self-formation, particularly with regards to how these emerging influences co-exist with the more familiar factors we tend to designate as educational. Given what I’m trying to do the undeniable disjunctures fade into the background in a way unlikely to be the case if I were addressing an issue which, say, foregrounded structural inequalities. To end this contribution by saying ‘it depends’ risks being platitudinous but there’s an obvious sense in which this is nonetheless the case. To unpack how and why this is so involves reference to non-trivial considerations too often relegated to the periphery when we approach theorising in terms of the overlap (or lack thereof) between theoretical positions.

# Douglas Porpora’s response

I appreciated reading the initial statements on critical realism (CR) and pragmatism of Emily Barman and Mark Carrigan. My initial contribution was the odd one out in not following a biographical exposition. So, this round, I offer one.

Speaking as a sociologist, Barman situates her comparison between CR and pragmatism in the context of her own research. That approach makes sense. I actually think the issue is less whether or not one identifies with CR than how one actually approaches one’s research, and I am glad that Barman is one of those who acknowledge both human agency and social structure.

Mark Carrigan speaks of beginning as a frustrated student of analytic philosophy. My own story is the reverse. Those who know me sometimes complain (justly) about how linear I am, which actually served me well toward my undergraduate degree in abstract mathematics. We began with premises and deduced all truths from there.

I tend to approach everything the same way. How should we act? Well, first we need a comprehensive meaning of life from which we can deduce what we should do. It took my own research on this topic (Porpora 2003) to discover that most people do not think this way, that again, it turns out, I am quite odd.

Not only am I linear, I have also learned that I am quite obsessive. Put the linearity and obsessiveness together and you get someone who balks at embarking on empirical research before getting one’s premises correct: What are we assuming about agency? What are we assuming about truth? The discipline of sociology certainly has dominant premises on which it operates.

As I say in my own initial statement, those sociological premises constitute our disciplinary presuppositions. Do those presuppositions make sense? We sociologists complain that non-sociologists do little critical thinking about their presuppositions, but we do little ourselves. I suggested that my starting point was rooted in personal peculiarities, which it was, but those peculiarities opened my eyes to much that all sociologists really ought to consider.

Back in 1975, when I entered graduate study in sociology, the time too was peculiar. Parsonsian functionalism had crumbled. In its wake was a Durkheimian structural holism searching for the lawlike relations among social facts associated with axiomatic theory and the covering law model of causal explanation. While it might seem that this approach would appeal to my mathematical background, quite the opposite. I found it all appallingly deterministic. Even before I had ever heard of CR, I was turning to philosophy to work through a different understanding of causality.

The time was peculiar in yet another way. It was a brief moment when Marx held a special regard in the academy – a regard very soon to be eclipsed by poststructuralism. The Marxists told me that my Catholicism was bourgeois; that behaviorism (then still dominant in psychology) had done away with bourgeois mentalism; and that all behavior was determined by class position. I found this Marxist account equally appalling.

Yet, the Marxists were my cohort mates and among my favorite professors. So I argued with them. I eventually discerned that while I disputed their Marxist metaphysics, I was quite on board with Marx’s critique of capitalism, which required reductionist metaphysics not at all. I accordingly became a Marxist myself and still regard myself as one.

Central to Marx and it turns out to an un-American, un-subjectivized reading of Bourdieu (see Bourdieu 1996, p. 205) is an understanding of social structure not à la Durkheim as something over the heads of actors but as connecting relations in their midst, non-deterministically constraining, enabling, and motivating their actions. This conception of structure not only stayed with me, its wider acceptance became my mission. Among the Americans, that mission has gone virtually nowhere. Like Nietzsche’s madman, my time is not yet. Thus, again, I am grateful to find Barman, even if independent of me, sharing kindred understanding.

Together with CR’s departure from the covering law model in favor of a powers and mechanisms view of causality, the concept of structure I describe above is, as I say, no longer deterministic. Along with structure, we must preserve a vibrant understanding of agency, which CR does. In contrast, as I have argued (Porpora 2015), the pragmatist understanding of agency is not agentic enough. With their predilection toward unconscious habit, the pragmatists prefer not humans but shambling zombies.

Back when I was in graduate school, my Durkheimian structuralist professors told me that culture was a residual category, not really anything at all. I remember blanching at that position. Of course, subsequently, the so-called cultural turn would get its revenge, swallowing up first structure, and then with the adjunct of practice theory, agency as well.

I remain today as against such reductive ontologies as when I began, whether those reductions be materialist or idealist. Therefore, I think Archer (2013) and CR continue to get it right. We must defend three distinct ontological categories of social phenomena: Structure; (vibrant) agency; and culture, what together Archer terms SAC.

# Emily Barman’s response

Thanks to the organizers for putting together this important and valuable discussion. In my experience as a sociologist who has drawn from pragmatism in their research and who is sympathetic to critical realism but who is not a “theorist,” I appreciated the opportunity to address the assigned questions and to have now the chance to reflect further based on the other first-round contributions.

My first piece reflected a decision on my part to answer these questions not in the abstract but instead in terms of how they have been employed in research in an arena that I study – that of materiality. In consequence, there was very little that reflected my own personal assessment of the assigned questions. This turns out to have been quite a different approach than that taken by my co-contributors. Recall that we were asked: “Is the common ground between pragmatism and critical realism (CR) more important than the differences?” and “What are the implications for research?” Porpora ably takes up the first question from a conceptual perspective: his piece concisely outlines the similarities and differences between pragmatism and critical realism in terms of the building blocks of each as a philosophy of social science. He also provides his personal evaluation of the “validity” of the two approaches along the way. He omits consideration of the second question: the implications for research. In contrast, Carrigan proposes that determining whether common ground is more important than differences should not be answered solely via “theorizing:” by drawing from his intellectual biography, he shows how the taking of a position on the importance of commonality and difference between pragmatism and critical realism may be a personal project for a social scientist.

I see the strengths of both approaches. I agree, for example, despite using a pragmatist approach in some research, with many of Porpora’s assessments of the viability of each of the key commitments of critical realism versus pragmatism. I find it difficult as a sociologist – given my understanding of our discipline’s premises and what drew me to sociology as an undergraduate student – to be sympathetic to pragmatism’s distancing from any claim of an ontological reality to social structure. In contrast, Carrigan’s conclusion made me realize why I had been hesitant to grapple with the first evaluative question posed and why I instead had chosen to address the “implications for research.” Reading Carrigan helped me to realize that my answer – like his – to the first question is: it depends. It depends on one’s research.

This is so for a number of reasons. For one, it depends on a scholar’s decision regarding the relationship of theory and data. If it is recognized that some sociologists do not seek to engage in induction or deduction but instead to engage in an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2014), then it becomes possible to see that analytical position-taking in research often is not driven by the prior selection of a theory but instead is contextually determined. With abductive analysis, the choice of philosophy is based on what one’s findings allows one to claim related to existing frameworks in order to say something “new.”

In addition, while critical realism and pragmatism are two important philosophies in the social sciences, they are not the only philosophies out there. Oher philosophies also consist of some combination of stances on what Abbott (2004) calls “basic social science debates,” including individualism and emergentism, realism and constructionism. Some of these other theories hold positions that align with some parts of critical realism and/or pragmatism, while others diverge entirely. So, for example, to take the position that social structure is ontologically “real” does not necessarily mean that one is a critical realist; there are other theoretical frames out there that also insist on this position.

For me, answering the question of whether the common ground or differences is more important cannot be answered definitively: any attempt to answer it must situationally consider the specifics of research. For most of my career, for example, I have studied what I broadly call “pro-social behavior,” looking at instances where actors (purport to) orient their behavior towards the well-being of others. Much of the scholarship on this topic explains such behavior by reference to culture, defined as values and norms, which then socializes and so directs actors to engage in other-oriented action.

When I began this research agenda, as with Porpora, I assessed the “tenability” of a functionalist, values-based explanation of pro-social behavior and found it wanting to make sense of the data and given my view of society. I was also expected, as a junior scholar in the American academic system, to produce new contributions. To that end, my research has demonstrated how pro-social behavior does not follow from actors’ values but instead results from the social organization of altruism: specifically, the work of intermediaries who – constrained by meso-level forces – pursue their own self-interest in ways that end up defining and delimiting what gets to count as “pro-social behavior.”

So, while pragmatism and CR are characterized by oppositions in many regards (see Porpora), they share an emphasis, contra a values-based approach, on viewing actors as possessing agency and seeing that agency as constrained and shaped by social context (of course, the two philosophies disagree on what constitutes social context). Thus, for much of my scholarship, points of difference between pragmatism and critical realism have been less salient compared to their commonalities vis-à-vis the framework that has dominated scholarship on pro-social behavior.

Similarly, my choice of theory to frame my findings has been situationally determined. When I posit that individual actors are constrained by social context, I have sometimes drawn from pragmatism (when my unit of analysis is individuals) and other times (when I seek to show the effects of social structure on organizational action) drawn from field theory and not critical realism. This latter choice has been because I am an organizational sociologist who has sought to publish in U.S. sociology journals. In this regard, the differences between critical realism and pragmatism – while significant and important in the abstract – have been rendered inconsequential given the theoretical and/or professional benefits that I accrue by employing another philosophy.

Thus, while the roundtable began with the questions of “Is the common ground between pragmatism and critical realism more important than the differences?” and “What are the implications for research?,” I am proposing – inspired by Carrigan – that an equally productive approach might be to ask how research shapes one’s evaluation of whether the common ground between pragmatism and critical realism is more important than the differences.

# Mark Carrigan’s response

This exchange has left me preoccupied by the reflexivity we enact when we do theoretical work. It’s an issue I understand in explicitly realist terms, even if it leaves me with a position which might strike some readers as orthogonal to CR. I share Porpora’s conviction that a general account of reality is unavoidable while feeling the need to underscore the fact it is a conviction which, to use Sayer’s (2011) evocative phrase, *matters* to us. In my case this is because CR has enabled me to roam across disciplines, immerse myself in unfamiliar fields and ‘fuzz up’ boundaries in a way that Rorty’s vague invocations simply didn’t support in any practical manner. It has equipped me with a framework within which I can understand what is at stake in different kinds of investigations and how these can be put into dialogue with each other.

In contrast to Porpora I think in a deeply non-linear way, circling around my concerns in a manner which makes it surprising that I ever finish projects. I suspect the intellectual coherence of CR plays a large part in ensuring there’s at least some accumulation to this otherwise undisciplined process of what Bacevic (2016) has memorably described as foraging. In this sense ontology is important to me and I believe the categories of CR correspond more adequately to the nature of the social world than the alternatives I’ve encountered. My preference is to describe this relationship in terms of explanatory gain in the sense of enabling us to explain aspects of the world which would otherwise elude us. The reason why they matter to me however is less their truth than the uses to which I can put them, though I realise it’s the former which goes some way to explaining the latter.

What frustrates me is when ontology operates as what Rorty (1994) called a *conversation stopper*. I’m reminded of two occasions in which enjoyable dialogues were derailed by someone’s refusal to accept my use of the category of ‘human’, leading them to pivot into tedious exposition of the things which I needed to read in order to correct my mistake. The possibility I might have read those authors and still found myself in disagreement with them seemingly hadn’t occurred to my thwarted interlocutors. Obviously, I believe they were wrong in the assumptions they brought to these frustrating interactions, but the unhelpfulness of their conduct troubled me more than their erroneous starting points. To keep a rewarding conversation going in spite of a reciprocal belief in the mistakenness of the other's position shouldn't be regarded as an achievement yet in my experience it often is in theoretical circles, with those occasions when it dramatically breaks down helping illuminate the dynamics which are in play even when it appears to be proceeding smoothly.

Unlike Rorty I don’t think ‘keeping the conversation going’ is *intrinsically* a valuable thing. I do see an inherent value in what Boczkowski and Siles (2014) describe as intellectual cosmopolitanism: a curiosity about why others believe what they do as well as how enriching it *might* be to engage with them. The theorist who best embodies this in my mind has always been Nicos Mouzelis whose ‘bridge building’ approach to sociological theory sought to remove “obstacles that are a hindrance to open-ended communication between the differentiated subdisciplines or paradigms” (Mouzelis 2008: loc 350). His point is not that we should abolish boundaries but rather seek to transform them “from impregnable bulwarks to transmission belts facilitating interdisciplinary research” (Mouzelis 2008: loc 1233). Unlike Rorty for whom the conversation itself is what matters after we’ve dispensed with foundations, building these bridges is a recuperative exercise orientated towards a wider purpose. In this sense I agree with Lichterman (2017) that sociological theory is, or least should be, sociology's meta-conversation. It remains an empirical question whether this captures the self-concept of many theorists but even posing the question highlights the curiously underdeveloped nature of metatheory as trans-pragmatic and practically orientated rather than the familiar inter-paradigmatic trench warfare.

To consider theoretical dialogue in these terms raises questions of how we *organise* it rather than simply how we *conduct it.* This roundtable illustrates how different formats can provoke atypical exchanges which, at least for me, prove much more illuminating than the typical journal article[[1]](#footnote-1). A significant factor in my move away from theoretical work has ironically been an interest in the devices we use to organise theoretical conversations. I'm fascinated by how the media we use, as well as the cultural frameworks we build around them, change the nature of the dialogues we have and the contributions they make (or fail to make) to knowledge production. This can be as straightforward as offering us new insight into work we're familiar with by helping us better understand the motivations of the thinker doing that work. I’ve followed Porpora’s work closely since I was a student (with his *Landscapes of the Soul* being an inspiration for my doctoral project) but I hadn’t understood the relationship between his theoretical and political commitments. Nor how the intellectual context of his graduate study shaped their unfolding much as my appalled fascination with the dominance of Bauman, Beck and Giddens in the British Sociology of the 2000s determined my own trajectory (Carrigan 2014).

I was struck by parallels between Barman’s theoretical outlook and my own, even if I would locate myself more explicitly within the critical realist camp. I share her concern with how materiality is treated within CR[[2]](#footnote-2) particularly with regards to the computational mega-structures which choreograph so much of life within digital capitalism (Carrigan 2018 , Delic and Walker 2008). The problem I’ve been plagued by when searching fields such as STS and Media Theory in order to address these questions is how poorly agency tends to be treated within them. In the face of which I return to Archer’s (2000, 2003, 2007) reflexivity and more recently, Dewey’s developmental approach in a theoretical dialogue which I’m enjoying immensely and feels increasingly productive.

In this sense I share Barman’s feeling that the differences are less salient than the commonalities, at least for *me* at this *stage* in my research. Whereas if I’d been asked the question during my PhD when exploring how young adults began to craft an independent life for themselves while living away from the parental home for the first time, I would have undoubtedly responded that the differences between pragmatism and CR concerning the inner lives of subjects were extremely important given the focus of my investigation. After reading Barman’s contributions to this roundtable, I’m more confident than I initially was that we can answer a question like this with “it depends” without lapsing into platitudes. The potentially mundane question of how and why it depends can, if approached in the right way, open up important questions about theorising as a collective enterprise which too often get subsumed under the discursive weight of conceptual warfare.

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1. Another example can be seen in the interviews which Jamie Morgan has been conducting within this journal. A full list is available on the CR Network page (<https://criticalrealismnetwork.org/2021/04/05/interviews-with-critical-realists-and-fellow-travellers/>) itself an example of an initiative to organise theoretical exchange in proactive ways to achieve specific purposes, rather than falling back on routine ways of doing things.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Obvious exceptions to this include Dave Elder-Vass (2016), Clive Lawson (2017) and Alistair Mutch (2013) but their contributions have long felt to me like the starting points for a much wider conversation within CR about the materiality of the digital which has yet to develop. I’ve found huge value in Archer’s (2000) approach to material culture here for thinking about these questions from the perspective of agency. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)