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## Pushing at the Boundaries of the Discipline: politics, personal life and the psychosocial

### Sasha Roseneil in conversation with Katherine Twamley

To be published in “Sociologists’ Tales” edited by Mark Doidge and Katherine (Policy Press)

**Katherine:** Okay, so the first question, as well as the obvious question is: how did you come to be a sociologist? How did you come to be in the situation you are in now?

**Sasha:** I think one can always tell a lot of different stories in answer to a question like that, but one of the defining moments was when I was doing history A-Level and we were studying mercantilism in early modern Europe, and I remember asking a question in class about why capitalism had developed as it did, in the West, in Europe. And my history teacher said, “That’s not really the sort of question that we deal with. It’s not a relevant question.” And somehow, and I don’t know quite how, I came to realise that it was exactly the sort of question that sociology asked. When it came to applying for university, I had been very, very keen on history at school, but I was also politically active and socially concerned in a way that it was hard not to be during Thatcherism, and I came to the realisation that I wanted to do something that was, kind of, sociological and political.

I applied to Cambridge, under quite a lot of pressure from school, and that meant having to study something else first because, at that point, you couldn’t do social and political sciences straightaway at Cambridge. So I applied to do History Part 1, and Social and Political Sciences Part II, and I got a place. But then, after taking the Cambridge entrance exams, and one term into the second year of the 6<sup>th</sup> form, I left school and went to live at Greenham Common. I had been involved in various anarchist, peace and animal rights groups in Northampton, and the world felt as if it were on the eve of destruction, and going to Cambridge really didn’t seem very relevant. So, I left school – well, I was “asked to leave”, because I had been spending more and more time not at school, but on anti-nuclear demos and at Greenham. And so I went to live at Greenham. And after I had spent over a year living at Greenham, being part of this incredible social movement, living outside normality in so many ways, the idea of going to Cambridge just didn’t compute. I couldn’t go from all that to Cambridge. And also, I really didn’t want to do history. I was quite clear by that point that I wanted to do sociology. So I applied to LSE, because I could carry on doing all

the politics I was doing, which by that time was in London, and I could do sociology straight away.

Sociology has always felt like the right place for me, but it has also always never quite seemed like enough. So those parts of me that are interested in history and that are interested in politics have always been there; I've always been interested in the intersections with other disciplines. And I somehow made the right decision in going to LSE where they had the BSc(Econ) degree, which was a broad-based degree that required to you to study across the social sciences. My "special subject" was sociology but I got to do quite a lot of history, and I did courses in government, law, the history of European ideas, and German.

I went on straight away to do a PhD after my undergraduate degree. I stayed at LSE, because I wanted to continue living in London, and I had realised that that no one had really written anything about Greenham, and I really felt it needed to be written about and I thought, in the Greenham spirit of taking personal responsibility for what needed to be done, well, I should do it then. So I applied for an ESRC scholarship, and as a back-up plan I applied for a law conversion course, and thought that if I didn't get a scholarship I would become a barrister – which was also clearly related to my experiences with the legal system at Greenham. But I did get funding, and so I wrote my PhD about Greenham, in order to try and make sense of this incredibly important, world-changing, life-changing instance of feminist political action. And during my PhD I read a lot of international relations, and politics and history. It was the end of the '80s and there wasn't much gender studies, or women's studies, around – it was a question of finding the bits that you could in different disciplines. I was very interested in questions of identity and subjectivity and there was a literature starting to emerge, a post-structuralist literature in psychology, and so I was piecing things together for my PhD from different places, and drawing especially on feminist theory, particularly American feminist theory, and the beginnings of queer theory, which emerged just as I was finishing my PhD.

And that mixture of all these different components is my academic world, my formation. It's not mainstream sociology, but it's the sociology I do. And over the past ten or fifteen years I became more and more interested in that space that is now psychosocial studies – the intersection between sociology and psychology, that really challenges the 19<sup>th</sup> century disciplinary structures that work against understanding all sorts of complex social phenomena and human experiences.

In some ways I was seduced, very early on, by the Comtean idea of sociology as Queen of the Social Sciences, and in fact I still think that sociologists should be able to think about psychic life, we should be able to think about history, we should be able to think about politics, and law, and policy, and about space. And not all the tools for this are in sociology already, but social relations and the social formation are made through all those things, and human experience is made through all those things, so it should be within our remit to seek to understand these aspects of social life and social reality. It might be a bit of an imperialist notion of sociology but I do hold on to the idea that what I do is sociology even though it's at all these edges of other disciplines.

**Katherine:** You talked briefly about being an activist and then obviously Greenham and going into that, although I actually don't know much about Greenham.

**Sasha:** That's an age thing!

**Katherine:** But actually, your narrative has mostly been about theory and ideas. Have they come together for you, or is it theory and ideas, and the "why?" questions that you were talking about earlier on, that have mostly mattered?

**Sasha:** For me, I suppose, the politics and the theory have always been completely enmeshed. The kind of theoretical questions that I was asking - that I've always asked - are, for me, also political questions. I mean, it is the old Marxist point that in order to change the world we have to understand it, but that it's not enough just to understand the world - the point is to change it. But I also don't think there's any simple relationship between understanding things and managing to change them.

Very early on when I started my PhD, I was very anxious that I would be expelled by my Greenham feminist community, where there was quite a lot of anti-intellectualism, quite a lot of hostility to academia, and to the students who had come to Greenham saying, "We are doing a dissertation. Will you answer my questions? I've got a questionnaire". And the response was always, "No, we won't fill out your questionnaire. If you want to understand what Greenham is about, come and live here and see what it's like. Be part of it. You can't understand it from the outside". And I was really concerned about what it would be like when I told people that I was doing research on Greenham. There was the fear that I would be accused of appropriating their experience and using it for my own advancement and ends - that I would fail to adequately represent the diversity and complexity of Greenham. Actually,

I ended up not really coming up against any hostility, which was probably to do with my insider status, although it may also be that it was there but not expressed to me.

But, having been so involved in politics, I always thought that it was a bit simplistic to think that feminist work in the academy would really change the world, as often seemed to be claimed in the early days of women's studies. I think it's politics and social movements that change the world, and the everyday actions of ordinary people. Academic work can make small in-roads into the project of trying to see things differently, but I think the grand claims made for feminist intellectual work are really overblown. There is a real difference between what we do when we write papers and books and go to conferences, and politics on the ground - which isn't to say that the academic work isn't political. It *is*. But we make a mistake if we think that somehow we really do political work in the academy.

So I think the relationship between theory and practice, between academia and the world of politics and social movements, is really complex. Dialogues across those divides can be difficult as well. I remember reading Alain Touraine's work when I was first starting my PhD and he had this, I thought, very grandiose idea of the sociologist taking sociology to the social movement, and with it bringing true understanding and reflexivity to the project of political change. I found that kind of sociological arrogance very uncomfortable. It went against my feminist politics, and the anti-hierarchical, anarchist politics that I had been involved in, and my distaste for this work, which was very important in the sociology of social movements in Europe at the time, actually fuelled my research on Greenham. I didn't think that I was going to offer great insight back to Greenham, or to feminist activism, about itself. What I thought I might offer was some understanding to the academy of how social movements, especially feminist movements, work, and of the difference that they make in the world, so that we might understand better how social and political change are brought about.

So, I think that what we might have to offer as sociologists to the world of practice is not straightforward. I think that we take from, and learn from, people's everyday lived lives, their politics and their struggles, and how much we have to give back is not clear, however much there is, at the moment, a discourse about "impact" and "knowledge transfer".

**Katherine:** As you're talking, you are referring to ideas you had when you started your PhD and to ideas you're having now, so is then your idea of sociology or your work as a social researcher, has it remained constant over the years?

**Sasha:** Oh gosh no. I'm sure it's changed enormously in all sorts of ways. I mean, I started my PhD in 1988 and at that point, there wasn't much feminist scholarship. There was *some*, I'd read bits. There were bits on the syllabus at LSE. I also did a wonderful course, which I didn't fully really understand the importance of at the time in my third year. It was called "Women and the Law", which sounds really boring and old-fashioned now, but actually, it was a really powerfully post-structuralist course that was really quite cutting-edge. I think it was over the heads of most of us at the time, but it was one of those courses that, kind of, settled, that grew on me and made more sense over the years. Right at the end of my undergraduate studies I had this feminist introduction to post-structuralism, to Foucault, and Donzelot, and so on. Now, I've never been a card-carrying Foucaultian or post-structuralist – I've been too much of an anarchist to carry a card – but I was very much shaped by those ideas, and they have been very important to me.

But the first journal article I published, which was an article in British Journal of Sociology that came out in 1995 – it was all much slower then, there was much less pressure to publish early in your career - was a set of critical reflections on the impact of post-structuralism on feminist sociology. I was trying to grapple with the cultural turn, and I was basically saying that we need to focus on both culture *and* materiality, we need to analyse discourse *and* practice. It does perhaps seem like a perfectly obvious argument now, but it was a moment when post-structuralism was in the ascendant, particularly within feminism, and I felt it was important that sociology held on to material lived practice, everyday life and experience. And so my work has always tried to attend to both everyday lived practices and material conditions of existence *and* to subjective experience, identity and meaning-making.

What is more recent is my interest in psychoanalysis, which was not at all part of my training in sociology, or in any discipline, at LSE, and which was strongly repudiated in the feminism in which I was schooled in the '80s and '90s. Psychoanalysis was really outside the boundaries of what was considered acceptable sociology, especially by feminist sociologists. And there is still a lot of hostility amongst feminist sociologists to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is seen through a rather narrow reading of Freud as the ultimate patriarch, that I think doesn't hold up, and doesn't do justice to the complexities in Freud's thinking, and certainly doesn't take into account the radical, feminist, critical and relational developments in psychoanalysis that have taken place since the 1940s.

I was really lucky to be part of an ESRC Research Group when I was at Leeds, CAVA – Care, Values and the Future of Welfare. We got funding from the ESRC for a 5 year feminist project that was asking a set of questions about the future of welfare in relation to changing practices of parenting and partnering, changing practices of intimate life. What sort of forms of welfare do we need, given the radical changes that have gone on in family relations and personal relationships since the founding of the welfare state? What the ESRC funding for CAVA gave us, which was incredibly precious for me, I think, at that point in my career, was some time to talk and think, and to engage in a collective research process. I'd been on this early career treadmill. When I started my lectureship, there was no let up, no allowance made for new lecturers. You had more work than anyone else, rather than less and it was really gruelling and grinding. Then we got this research money, and built into it, there was time for seminars. We had these regular monthly seminars where we sat around on Fridays and we spent the whole day talking.

One of my two projects in CAVA was about practices of care and intimacy outside conventional families and I was particularly interested in friendship, which came very much from my own experience. I was quite a bit younger than most of the people in the project and living, I felt, a bit of a different life that wasn't being recognised in this project. It was very much framed around changes in families - motherhood and employment, the breakup of heterosexual couples, and how they dealt with care afterwards, grand-parenting and extended kin, and so on. My project was about people who don't live with a partner, people who are single and people in LAT relationships (living apart together relationships), including lesbians and gay men, and I had this hunch that friendship was really important for this group of people living outside conventional couples.

And so I'd been doing these pilot interviews, piloting a fairly traditional, semi-structured interview, and what I was getting were these answers that sounded really like people were parroting the theme tune of 'Friends', which was really big at the time: "my friends are always there for me, through good times and bad times, they'll look after me. I can turn to them when things are tough".

And it was all very uplifting. It was nice, because this is what I thought I might find, but it also felt like there was something really missing from that discourse, something about the less positive aspects of living outside conventional couples, about pain and disappointment, about friends *not* always being there for you. It was interesting, because it said something

about the relationship between culturally available discourses and people's ways of speaking about their lives – perhaps how “Friends” offered a language that made sense to a certain group of people. And I talked about all this in the CAVA Friday seminar, and about my sense of dissatisfaction with the data that the interviews were producing, and Wendy Hollway, who was a member of the research group, and who is a critical psychologist, said, “Oh, I’ve just sent this book to the publisher. You can have a look at the proofs. It’s about the problem of discourse and about how the way we ask questions in interviews produces certain discursive formations and doesn’t get at the more ambivalent, conflicted, complex aspects of human experience and subjectivity.”

Anyway, I read this manuscript [*Doing Qualitative Research Differently*] and it changed the way that I then went ahead and did that project. I used a version of what she and Tony [Jefferson] called ‘the free association narrative interview’. I must have been open to this form of psychosocial thinking that she was developing, and I found it really exciting, really challenging and it did radically change how I then went ahead with that project.

And it marked a real shift in my work because that was the point at which I thought, “Actually, I do need to get to grips somehow with psychoanalysis”. And the more I realised how much there was to read and learn, the more I realised that I was effectively taking on another training. And I did eventually undertake a formal training – I trained as a group analyst. I thought, “how do I develop a really deep understanding of this, of psychoanalysis, of human subjectivity and experience, and its complexity?” And I decided that I wanted to develop a clinical practice-based understanding as well. So I looked around for quite a while to see what sort of training I wanted to do. Did I want to do a classical psychoanalytic training or a psychoanalytic psychotherapy training? And I stumbled across group analysis, partly because of the work of Ian Craib, who was a sociologist at Essex, who has since, sadly, died. He had written a wonderful book called, *The Importance of Disappointment*, which I read about this time, at about the time Wendy gave me her book.

So I picked up this book by Ian Craib - somehow the title must have spoken to me. He was a well-known social theorist; he had written a lot on classical social theory but he had also trained as a group analyst and he wrote this book about disappointment, and about psychoanalysis and about why some sociology needed to take both seriously. He was also making some very interesting interventions around the nascent sociology of emotions that was happening around that time. He was arguing against what he was saw as the tyranny of a



very strong social constructionism, and the way it obliterated psychic life, and the complexity of psychic life: if everything's socially constructed, then what about internal conflict? What about the experience that people have of their inner worlds not matching the social world that they exist in?

All this made a lot of sense because a lot of my work, particularly my PhD, had been about identity and subjectivity, and the struggles that women experienced when they were changing, and the complexity of desire, but I hadn't had any access to a psychoanalytical way of thinking at that point, and I didn't really need it for what I was doing then. But for this work that I was going on to do, which was about personal life and intimate relationships, then ways of understanding ambivalence, and conflict, and thinking about being torn between love and hate, especially when caring for someone who is dependent, and who conjures our own vulnerabilities, for that I began to see that I needed psychoanalysis.

Anyway, Ian Craib's work was important to me at this time. I noticed on the back of his book or somewhere that he was a group analyst so I had a look into what this was. And the way that group analysis thinks of itself is that it's the meeting point of psychoanalysis and sociology, and that really appealed to me, and the idea that it was an analytic way of working in groups was also really attractive, as I've always been interested in groups. My whole engagement in feminist and anarchist politics, and a lot of what I was interested in about social movements and particularly Greenham, was about how small groups work. How does the small group, the political group, relate to the larger group, the wider society? How can it produce change in the larger group? How do we deal with power conflicts within small groups? How do we negotiate and mediate difference within groups? These were all sorts of things that group analysis was dealing with. And it was also, I found, a very powerful medium for personal change – for encountering the self and others, and for producing better understandings and new ways of being. So I embarked on my training in group analysis, which was very long. I started it in 2006 and finally qualified as a group analyst in 2013.

**Katherine:** Gosh!

**Sasha:** The training involved seeing individual patients as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, as well as running a long-term clinical group and a more applied shorter-term group. The training has been very demanding of my time and energy, but incredibly enriching. I did my clinical work in an inner London NHS psychotherapy department, so I've had this new

experience of working in the NHS, with an incredibly diverse patient population, which has been very interesting.

I've been carrying on with my sociological research on one hand and I've been doing this training and seeing individual patients and running groups on the other hand. Having got to the end of the training, I've started to think, "Well, how do I bring these two together?" because I've still got quite a lot of career ahead of me and they somehow have to come together because they came out of the same set of interests and concerns. Undoubtedly, that training has fed into the work I've been doing using biographical narrative interview methods and developing psychosocial methodologies and ways of understanding the world. But I also feel like there's twenty years work ahead, trying to see what to do with those two things now.

I think one thing I would say to academics at a certain point in their career is that it's really good to be student again, you know, to reconnect with what it's like to be a student after you've not been a student for quite a while. And it's not very nice, quite a lot of it. You get off your pedestal, off the podium, and you're put in the position of a learner, explicitly, structurally: being assessed, and on a clinical training you are being constantly surveilled. One of the best things about finishing the training is that I've stopped being almost constantly in supervision. I was in supervision on my training course. I was in clinical supervision in the NHS. I was in supervision for my work with individual patients with an individual supervisor. So there was this constant Foucaultian sense of being surveilled, and being assessed, with no one ever quite telling you whether you're doing it well, or okay, or even if you were doing terrible damage to people. I mean, I hope I wasn't, but actually being put back in touch with that kind of anxiety, which is the real experience of PhD students sometimes, quite a lot of the time probably - there was something good about doing that. I think it is good to be a student again and to remember what it's like to not really know whether you're doing things right and whether your work is good enough. It's probably made me a bit more of a sensitive supervisor. I hope.

**Katherine:** That, sort of, brings me on to my next question, which is, would you advise somebody now to study sociology if you met yourself when you were 18 or if you met somebody else who was 18 or a person just starting at university or something?

**Sasha:** Well, I suppose, I have now done enough of psychoanalytic training not to *advise* anyone much about anything, but rather I would try to hear from them about who they are,

explore what they want and, kind of, let them unpick and think about their desires, their hopes, their dreams, and from there, talk with them about all of this. If I met someone who is a bit like I was at 18 - I had had very powerful ideas about changing the world and about injustices of all sorts, and I perhaps tended to see the world in rather straight forward binary terms, good and bad, black and white - then I probably would think that sociology was a good thing, a good trajectory, for them.

Because hopefully, at its best, what sociology will do is allow you to follow those interests and politically-inspired concerns about social justice and making the world better, but also it's about developing the capacity to see the complexities of those positions and the difficulties that there are in actually realising those goals of a more just society, and all the things that get in the way. I wouldn't want anyone who I've talked to in that way to come out of our discussions thinking sociology would give them the answers to the problems they see in the world, but rather that it might help them to see how complex it all is. That's what I think a sociology degree should do. It should help people to see how complex the world is and in the process not make them so depressed that they think it's impossible to change, because actually, sociology is, or should be, full of examples of the world changing and of people bringing about change for the better. At the same time, it is also full of examples of things sliding back, and things not turning out as we'd hoped. "Unintended consequences" was one of the first concepts that was introduced on my undergraduate sociology degree, and I still think it is a key concept.

If the young person I was talking to was primarily concerned about having a career, you know, fitting easily into the world as it's structured at the moment, then I'd probably not think sociology was the right thing for them. They'd be better off going straight away to study accountancy or law. It's not the right thing for everyone, by any means, and I think it really does require a capacity to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity and not everyone is up for that. Actually, not all academic sociologists are up for it either, but I think the best sociology is able to really live with the ambiguities of things.

The 18 year old who spoke politically and passionately might not be very keen on ambiguity, but they may develop that. It's not a bad place for a sociology student to start – with a set of passions about changing the world.

**Katherine:** What about when sociology students get a bit older and now they're doing their PhD or finishing their PhD or doing their first postdoc or first teaching position. What advice would you give to them if they've already decided they want to have a career in sociology?

**Sasha:** Okay, if they really want to do it, they're going to have to be able and willing to work very hard. The demands, I think, have got greater and greater. You know, it felt really hard when I started my first job in 1991 at Leeds and there were no structural concessions to the early career lecturer but at the same time, there were not the same pressures to publish. No one ever told me I needed to publish. I mean, I somehow realised it, but I didn't do it very quickly and I didn't do it very much, whereas young academics now know right from the outset that they've got to publish and they've got to get at least four papers in their first full REF cycle.

There's a lot more pressure around research and publishing, around earning grants and if anyone is embarking on a career as an academic sociologist, they need to see the academic world realistically. It is no ivory tower. At the same time, I was advised...I remember going and talking to my third year personal tutor at LSE about this idea I had for doing a PhD, and Ian Roxborough said, "You're crazy! You don't want to do a PhD." He left LSE soon afterwards for a job in the States. This was in 1987. There hadn't been any jobs in academia for years and in sociology there weren't really any jobs during the eighties. There was, for a while, a lot of talk about this lost generation of sociologists who didn't get jobs during that period. When I got my job in Leeds, there had been one new appointment in the previous five years and one in the five years previous to that. There had been hardly anyone appointed between the mid 70s and me getting appointed in the early 90s but I was pig-headed enough to just want to go ahead and try, to apply for this ESRC studentship to write my PhD about Greenham. And I went ahead with it and I've never regretted that. The job is stressful. I mean, I feel the responsibilities of the job very strongly, but I'm not in court every day, as I would have been if I'd become a barrister. At the end of the day, no one's life, no one's incarceration, hangs on whether I have written those emails or finished that paper, so in spite of all the pressures on academics now, it's still a very privileged life in lots of ways, compared to other things, and that's why so many people want to do it.

It's still very appealing, the life of the mind, the chance during the summer to organise your days in the way you want. Yes, there's a lot of pressure to get stuff written, but this summer I could go out for a run first thing in the morning, or have a swim, and then have a leisurely

coffee and then work late in the evening. There is a lot of freedom. But the cost of that is, there's this expectation on us to be producing that has increased and is ever increasing, that the young academic needs to develop the resources to deal with. I think that those resources have to be individual, personal, but they also have to be collective and relational. It's really important to have networks of colleagues who are friends. I think that is important to make connections with other academics. But I also think it's really, really important to have some friends who aren't academics as well, and see what other people's lives are like and keep connected to other worlds. I think it's important to take care of your mind and body, and that can go quite easily by the board at particular points. I mean, there are times when it really needs to, like the last few months of writing a PhD - that's fine, but they have to be short periods. The problem is, an academic career could, if you let it, become like always trying to finish a PhD. That pressure can be felt so intensely. And developing the ability to say no and to set your own boundaries, that's the constant struggle, I think, because no one else is going to do it for you. Pretty much no academic has a manager who is going to look after them and protect them from over-work. You are just going to be pushed further and further, and not just external pressures from the university but your internal pressures about what you think you should be doing. I don't have any magical solution for that but I think that developing good habits early on, and having time off is so important. Work-life balance has been constructed as if it was an issue just for women with children of a certain age, but it's an issue for everyone, especially for academics.

Apart from all those sort of issues - the psychic life of contemporary academia - I would say it's really important to do the research that you want to do. Of course, we don't all get to do that all of the time, especially if you're a research fellow on someone else's project. I have had quite a lot of researchers work with me on projects, *for me* really, and it has been really important to appoint people to those jobs who were really interested in the work, and it felt important to try and give them a bit of space to shape the research, but at the same time, I had to hold on to what the project was about and what the funding was for. I think, once people have hopefully passed the position of working on other people's projects and are able to shape their own work, I would encourage them to try to work on the things they really want to work on, and not to just follow intellectual fashion or just to follow the funding. Of course, we can't escape fashion and we can't escape the exigencies of funding, but to find the issues that really motivate you and to pursue those, even if they're not fashionable. To have confidence that people will be interested in *your* issues, to believe that you can make them

interesting. I think that's really important, because what will sustain an academic life is doing the work that matters to you.

One of the things I always try to ascertain with prospective PhD students is their motivation for their research. "Why do you want to do this? Where's it coming from? Is this really the project that you want to do?" Quite often in interviews I find out that this isn't really the project the student wants to do, the one they've written their proposal for, it's the one they think is appropriate. And then quite quickly, in the discussion, they're coming up with something that's quite different. But I think it's hard to know what it is you want to work on - education in our society isn't really about encouraging people to develop their own interests and ask their own questions, and sometimes people only discover what they are really interested in after quite a long time. I think that there is a, kind of, process of becoming, as an academic, which is about finding out what it is you really want to work on.

So, yes, looking after yourself and your mental health, having good networks inside and outside academia, and finding the things to work on that really matter to you. Then there's a huge amount of luck. There's that sad truth that not everyone gets the job and not everyone will get the job they want.

And being prepared to move, I suppose, is another thing. I was in London for my undergraduate degree and my PhD, and then I got a job at Leeds, I moved to Leeds. I'd never been to Leeds, apart from for an interview at the university when I was 17, but as it turned out, it was a great place to get a first job. Leeds is a wonderful city. I was really happy there for sixteen years, not happy every moment of it, but it was a great place to work for sixteen years. I ended up having all sorts of opportunities to do things there and it was a really great city, and I completely fell in love with Yorkshire. So I was lucky. What would have happened if the only job I could have got was somewhere that really was unappealing to me? I don't know if I'd have stuck at academia. You know, I might then have gone and done that law conversion because I was quite picky about where I would live. And so there's an element of questioning how much does one want to be an academic? If you want it enough, you'll go and live anywhere, and in America, where it is a hugely competitive academic job market, people I know have moved to places that they've ended up hating, small college towns, where they don't fit in, as single or queer people, in a hugely family-orientated culture. They've been trained in the big cities in, San Francisco, in Chicago, or New York but then they have to get jobs in states they never dreamt of living in, and often with their partner

living a very long way away. And I know people who've then thought again about this after ten years and given it all up. I think being able to change direction and change gear are some of the best life skills, as academics.

**Katherine:** Okay and looking back on your career, is there something that you would have done differently now, looking back?

**Sasha:** Not really. I mean, I think I have been lucky. I was very lucky to get that job at Leeds. I hadn't finished my PhD. I didn't finish my PhD for quite a while after I got the job at Leeds because the job was so overwhelming, but I got a job at Leeds at a point where the department was going through a lot of change. Zygmunt Bauman had just retired, and Carol Smart had just been appointed. I was able to be part of this shifting, newly emerging department, in which sociology and social policy had been merged, right at the beginning of my career. That was a huge opportunity for me and actually, the university was quite open and I was able to kick-start and get together a gender studies centre, the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies. It was a great university to have my first job at, and it was so good that I was able to stay there. I went on a one year contract and I stayed for sixteen years.

It was also good to leave. I do remember in my first year or two seeing people who were probably only the age I am now, or younger, who I thought were completely entrenched, impossible to change, who just moaned all the time about everything and I thought, "God, I never want to stay here long enough that I become like that." I think I just moved in time, maybe not quite in time! It was really good to be able to come and be somewhere very different, and Birkbeck is very different from Leeds. It's in the centre of London. It's got a very different constituency. We do our teaching in the evening. We teach very different sorts of students, mature students, whereas Leeds was largely 18-21 year olds. Birkbeck's really different. It's a much smaller place. It's very critical and politically-engaged and it's exciting to be working in London and, again, I think what I've been able to do at Birkbeck is be part of building a new institute for social research, the BISR [Birkbeck Institute for Social Research], and being part of a new department of psychosocial studies. And it's been really good to be able to situate my research in a context where there are lots of people interested in new, critical forms of psychoanalysis.