Imagining a critical theory of change: making an impact on real world problems

Andy Brookes

1. Introduction

The number of crises faced by contemporary society demonstrates that the approaches being taken to address the most urgent and pressing problems are failing to bring about meaningful change at sufficient scale and speed (Hale et al., 2013). This failure to address the world's most pressing problems comes at a huge cost in terms of the catastrophic harm and destruction caused to humans and the natural environment. On climate change, there has been 50 years of failure since the warning of *Limits to Growth: a report to the club of Rome* (Meadows et al., 1972) and this is resulting in a climate breakdown that represents an existential threat to human civilisation. Change failure perpetuates an already unjust state of affairs because the costs of these unsolved social problems fall disproportionately on the poorest and less powerful (Davidson, 2022). For example, climate change impacts on low income countries at a significantly greater level than the wealthy countries in the Global North (Ciplet et al., 2022). This inability to bring about positive social change can be seen across all levels of society, not just at the level of the global grand challenges. For example, the crisis of work related mental-illness, in sectors such as higher education and healthcare, is another example of a social problem that is not being effectively addressed (Jayman et al., 2022; House of Commons, 2021).

Although there are numerous pressing problems to deal with across society, the 'grand problem', or overarching 'meta-problem', is society's inability to find more effective approaches to bring about the change required to materially reduce suffering, harm and destruction. Antonio Guterres (2022), secretary-general of the United Nations, describes this as "the global problem-solving paradox". The progressive agenda, which aims to achieve human and environmental flourishing through a just transition, has so far failed or at least is falling far short of achieving its aims. This is a collective failure of all the main societal actors including: policy makers, organisational leaders/decision-makers, knowledge-makers, practitioners and citizens. It is clear that the existing theory of progressive social change, and the practices based upon it, are flawed and inadequate. Therefore, there is still a gap in the knowledge about how to realise positive, long term social change.

The phenomenon we are seeking to make sense of is contemporary society's inability to achieve strategic progressive social change at a sufficient scale and speed to avert harm, crisis and existential threat. This paper argues that the strategies required to bring about progressive social change have to be based on a better, deeper understanding of the complex nature of social problems and the complex nature of social change. One of the issues is that many of the failing approaches are overly practical, under-theorised and under-socialised (Collins, 1998).

Currently deployed policies, programmes and interventions do not take sufficient account of human and social complexity. A more effective approach will require a critical analysis of societal problems and the underlying, structural flaws that create these problems. This critical theorising explicitly makes the link between social problems and the underlying systemic drivers. A critical approach also emphasises the political and economic drivers that generate and perpetuate our urgent social problems, such as the current era of neoliberal capitalism. This critical theorising requires the adoption of what Mills described as a sociological imagination or "an adequate view of a total society and of its components" (Mills, 2000, p. 211). The paper illustrates how this can be achieved by outlining a meta-theory of why social change is so difficult to accomplish. The meta-theory is then used as an analytical frame to critique the shortcomings of the current failing approaches for delivering progressive social change. The paper presents a critique of the implicit change theory that underpins the currently failing approaches to bring about progressive social change. Although the critique encompasses social change failure in its totality, the argument is framed from the perspective of progressive social scientists and their particular theory of change as it relates to their knowledge-making. Finally, it sketches out, or imagines, what a critical theory of change, or a critically informed approach to change, could look like.

2. Problematising progressive social change – a meta-theory

A central proposition within this paper is that an effective strategy or approach to change needs to be grounded upon a deeper understanding of the problematic nature and complexity of social change. It therefore necessitates a critical theorising of the problematic phenomenon that is the focus of this enquiry i.e. social change failure. This meta-argument or explanation for social change failure is grounded upon the concept of complexity. It will be argued that social change is difficult to accomplish because of the complex and multifaceted nature of social problems and the complex, multi-layered and interconnected nature of human society. Therefore, contemporary attempts to deal with the world's most pressing and urgent problems are failing because they are based on a set of assumptions that do not sufficiently encompass the complexity of social problems and human society. A meaningful critical theorising of the problem of social change can only be accomplished by utilising a multi-perspective, multi-disciplinary analytical frame. This deeper mode of theorising seeks to make sense of the problem of social change within a broad conceptualisation of the nature of society. This critical theorising can also be pragmatic because it can enable a better-informed, 'wiser', evidence-based action that increases the likelihood that progressive social change interventions will be successful. It is important to emphasize that we are seeking to understand why progressive, and just, social change is difficult to accomplish. Clearly, not all types of social change are the same. Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes have been very successful at bringing about repressive and unjust social change, but this is clearly different to the progressive and just form of change that we are interested in generating knowledge about here. This meta argument for progressive social change failure is built around 4 main propositions. We will argue that progressive social change fails, or is difficult to accomplish, because of:

<ol type="i">
The complex nature of social problems
The complexity of human nature
The complexity of collective human behaviour
The complexity of the broader societal context: structures, systems and institutions

2.1. The complex nature of social problems

Social problems are difficult to understand and address because they are highly ambiguous, ontologically complex entities. The material, embodied component, that is the human suffering and ecological destruction, clearly provides the primary ethical driver or motivation for seeking to address or resolve social problems. However, according to Blumer, although these social problems do have an objective dimension nevertheless, they are primarily socially constructed phenomena which are "products of a process of collective definition" (Blumer, 1971, p. 301). This process of collective definition is a highly political process because it determines which issues become recognised in the first place as problems to be dealt with, and of course it means they can be highly contested. This is illustrated by the 'playbook' (Thacker, 2022) deployed by tobacco and fossil fuel industries in order to disrupt and undermine the collective understanding of the dangers of tobacco smoking and the harmful effects of carbon emissions on the climate. This action by the fossil fuel industry has been highly effective and by casting doubt on the science it was able to delay or curb activities aimed at reducing or eliminating carbon emissions. The most pressing, urgent social problems are highly difficult to resolve, they are often intractable or seemingly insoluble. Complex social problems are sometimes described as being 'wicked', drawing on the typology of problems developed by Rittel and Webber (1973). Rittel and Webber's typology builds on this notion of social construction and they argue that understanding the problem is a primary stage in addressing the problem.

Social problems should not be considered as existing independently, they are products of, and are deeply embedded and entangled within, the socio economic systems of our contemporary society (Davidson, 2022; Sayer, 1999). According to Pawson (2016, p. 137) social problems are "created in society and by the way it is organized". So a diagnosis of these problems requires a deeper understanding of the social pathologies that generate the problems. Social problems also have a temporal dimension in that they are outcomes of longstanding historical processes (Dello Buono, 2015). Social problems emerge from the unfolding of human history and are therefore deeply embedded within complex causal networks (Wong et al., 2012; Nicolini, 2012; Flyvbjerg, 1998). For example, the root cause of many contemporary social problems (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or health inequalities in the UK) can be traced back to British colonial history. Social problems are also complex in the sense that they are interconnected and cut across social, environmental and economic domains. Critical theorising deliberately seeks to critique human society and highlights the structural and systemic factors (e.g. wealth inequality) that are the primary causes of most of the world's contemporary problems.

2.2. The complexity of human behaviour

Social problems, and the problem of social change, are also deeply rooted in the complexity of human behaviour. Evolved, universal human drivers motivate behaviour that is directed towards safeguarding our biological and psychological well-being. These drivers and behaviours are 'hard-wired' into us from our evolutionary development, as primates and more recently over the last 150,000 years as modern human beings (Trinkaus, 2005). Although these evolved drivers have a clear function in terms of providing selective and reproductive advantage, they are problematic within a complex, modern society. For example the consumer-capitalist system relies on deliberately exploiting some of these innate behaviours in order to generate profit. Marketeers deliberately exploit our acquisitive behaviour as consumers – leading to resource exploitation, waste, pollution etc. McClelland's describes three universal human social needs (Rothmann & Cooper, 2008) for power, achievement and affiliation, all of which can drive behaviour that can be the cause of social problems (e.g. conflict, domination, exploitation, accumulation, etc.). Adams (1963) identified another important inbuilt human need for fairness and equity which serves to explains our strong emotional response to perceived unfairness. Recent studies have shown that countries with lower levels of inequality also exhibit higher levels of human well-being (Buttrick et al., 2017). This sense of injustice and unfairness is an important driver of social change, but the competing universal drivers of autonomy, control, achievement and competition provide a countervailing force. Our fundamentally complex human nature, as illustrated in the concept of universal drivers, can therefore be seen as a generator of social problems as well as both a promotor and inhibitor of social change.

Complex human psychology is also a significant factor that explains both the generation of social problems and the phenomenon of social change failure. Our behaviour and decision making is rarely rational and predictable because we are highly emotional animals, rather than rational calculating machines. For example, the powerful emotion of fear is an inbuilt response to external threats but in a complex contemporary society it is also the root of many social problems that are generated by "a landscape of fear" (Christie et al., 2008, p. 2301). Modern anti-progressive social phenomena, such as right-wing populism, can be understood by recognising the powerful emotional attraction of belief systems that are, at least on the surface, entirely irrational. Human decision making, especially collective decision making, is also a highly complex and often apparently irrational process. Kahneman (2011), in Thinking, fast and slow, argues that most of our decision-making occurs subconsciously, thereby challenging assumptions about rational and deliberate choice making. The complexity and uncertainty of human decision making is problematic for achieving social change through collective action. The collective decisions necessary to address complex social problems and bring about social change are particularly difficult to accomplish and this represents a major factor inhibiting social change.

2.3. Complexity of collective human behaviour

Humans are highly social animals and our survival, as well as our rapid growth as a species, is a result of this highly social and cooperative behaviour. Group and collective behaviour adds a

further level of complexity, not only in explaining some of the root causes of many social problems, but group behaviour is also a factor that serves to inhibit social change. Our need for affiliation and security exerts a strong influence on our individual behaviour and decision-making. Loyalty, group conformity and partisanship, can override the sense of needing to act responsibly for the community or common good. This can be observed in the way governments and political parties operate, where short-term party and ideological allegiances take precedence over legislating for the benefits of wider society. This propensity for social and collective behaviour results in the establishment of shared norms, or a form of 'collective consciousness' (Ormrod, 2003) that becomes deeply embedded and institutionalised through habitualisation. Habitualised behaviour is a major inhibitor of individual and wider social change because it serves to perpetuate the status quo. Our way of interpreting the world, our 'mindset', is predominantly shaped by our socialisation into a particular culture by 'accident of birth'. Social change inevitably involves the changing of mindsets but where these are deeply internalised then this is highly problematic and difficult to accomplish. As products of our culture we human beings are therefore constrained in our "habits of mind and action" (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 313) many of which can again be seen as the cause of wider social problems or inhibitors of social change.

To add further to this notion of the complexity of collective human behaviour there is also the recognition that contemporary human societies are hierarchically structured. This is again hard-wired into what it means to be human, and a primate, but it inevitably leads to unequal and exploitative relationships exacerbated by a human propensity to be obedient to authority, as demonstrated in the classic, albeit somewhat controversial, experiment by Stanley Milgram (1960). Our propensity to conform, to be deferential to authority and accept our position in the hierarchy, is also one of the reasons for social change failure. Unequal power relationships inevitably result in abuses of power and social problems such as domestic violence and sexual abuse in religious organisations such as the Catholic Church (Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, 2022). Abuse of power is the cause of many social problems but is also the reason why change is so often stifled, to protect the powerful. Paolo Freire (1968) recognised the emancipatory aspect of social change and that knowledge was required to overcome the barriers of subservience and deference. In other words we have to have knowledge and be aware of our exploitation if we are to resist it.

2.4. Complexity and influence of social context

Wider social structures exert a powerful influence over our ability, or our agency, to act to bring about progressive social change. Anthony Giddens (1984) developed a theory of 'structuration' that explained how we live within an architecture of social systems and structures that constrain human agency. These structures, which we are largely unaware of in our daily lives, are themselves a product of ongoing human agency and interaction. Rittel and Webber (1973) observed that social problems cannot be understood in isolation but rather they are entangled within 'open systems' or the wider social structures. Cultural norms and belief systems that arise over time from interpersonal and collective behaviour over time become institutionalised in complex networks of tangible and intangible institutions (Scott, 2006).

These institutions such as democracy, justice, parenthood, education, the law, etc. serve to fundamentally constrain our ability to realise meaningful social change. These institutions, such as patronage, can be the causes of social problems but their deeply embedded and relatively stable nature means that they also inhibit change and perpetuate harm and injustice. MacIntyre (1999) argues that these societal institutions shape our thinking to the extent that they threaten our ability to act in moral and responsible ways, especially in order to address social injustice. Although we clearly cannot change the fundamental nature of human beings nevertheless humanly-constructed institutions do represent the primary site for bringing about social change.

Social structures are also systems of power, where inequalities have become deeply embedded into the architecture of our contemporary society. Fundamental systems such as capitalism and class exert a major influence on the way that society is organised. Fraser & Jaeggi (2018, p. 52) go further to suggest that capitalism should be understood as being more than an economic system and more as an "institutionalized social order, on a par with feudalism". Fuchs (2017) argues that conventional, mainstream discourse about social change, for example the transition to sustainability, often ignores the extent to which capitalism and class are the key drivers of social problems and a primary barrier to social change. Control of wealth and the decision-making process is largely determined by a "capitalist class" rather than the "ordinary people" (Fuchs, 2017, p. 445) and this inevitably leads to the protection of privilege, self-interest and the retention of the status quo. Asymmetries, perpetuated by capitalism's drive for wealth accumulation, at both the global, local and organisational level, inevitably lead to ongoing exploitation and subjugation (Patnaik, 2012; Adler, 2016). Social problems that result from present-day unequal, unjust social structures are also a direct product of human history. The 500 years of western modernity and colonialism (Mignolo, 2007) is an overwhelmingly powerful causal factor and an 'open sore' at the heart of society's unequal structures and injustices. The institutions, both formal and informal, that make up our contemporary society are also products of this history and continue to shape current thinking and behaviour. The deeply embedded institutions of racism, misogyny, patriarchy etc. all serve to serve perpetuate injustices and inequalities at a great cost to society and the environment.

3. Critiques of currently employed theories of change

3.1. Conventional approaches to change

There is no shortage of activity aimed at addressing social problems, with significant resources and effort committed to bringing about social change. A myriad of initiatives, policies, programmes, projects occur at multiple levels from the global to the local but despite these often well-intentioned and sincere efforts there is often minimal impact on addressing the fundamental problem or genuine alleviation of harm and suffering. At a global level the initiatives to address social problems, or 'global grand challenges', through for example the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have failed to bring about the required level of change. This is acknowledged by UN Secretary General Guterres who has stated that "we are seriously off-track" (2019). Policy making at national government level is also failing to make a sufficient impact on society's most pressing problems. For example, despite a decade of UK

government policy to reduce poverty the most recent report by Sir Michael Marmot (Marmot, 2020) showed that levels of poverty have increased over this period. At an organisational and institutional level there are also numerous examples of change failure when it comes to dealing with social problems, such as the failed attempts to eliminate racism and misogyny in the Metropolitan Police force in the UK despite numerous policy interventions and change initiatives (Turner, 2022). There are specific contextual and individual reasons for failure in all of these examples, but I will argue that there are common features or aspects of the way institutionalised or conventional approaches to change are carried out. The approaches are grounded upon some misconceptions and flawed assumptions about the nature of social problems and the problematic nature of social change. The critical theorising of social change, developed in the earlier section, will now be used to analyse these conventional approaches to change and identify the limitations and sources of failure.

Conventional approaches to change are inadequate because they are grounded upon a rather superficial and simplistic conception of social problems and society. This naïve theory of change entirely fails to address the complexity of social change because change is treated as unproblematic and something that can be managed if the 'right' tools and approaches are applied. Mainstream approaches are largely practice-oriented (Collins, 2005) and this is underpinned by a widely held assumption that a universal set of utopian prescriptions, change tools and techniques can be successfully deployed to address any social problem (Sturdy & Grey, 2003; Jansson, 2013; Flyvbjerg, 1998,). These conventionally applied change practices treat social problems as if they were tame and manageable rather than address their complex and 'wicked' nature. Conventional approaches also assume that human behaviour is predominantly rational and can be explained through a *homo economicus* conception of human nature (Urbina & Ruiz-Villaverde, 2019).

The failed approaches that have conventionally been deployed for dealing with complex social problems are undersocialised (Collins, 2005), or asociological (Alvesson, 1984), and are grounded in tools and techniques that were never intended to be deployed for 'wicked' social problems. Change practices that were originally intended for managing projects in fields such as IT, construction, industrial management, the military etc. and are entirely unsuited to addressing the particularly problematic nature of social problems, particularly those at a wider global scale. These conventional approaches are highly rational and linear, and thereby fail to address the complexity that was highlighted and theorised in the critical framework developed above. Prescriptive, functional, non-sceptical and uncritical approaches lack a sufficient degree of the 'sociological imagination' that C. Wright Mills argued was essential (Watson, 2010). There is often an emphasis on using planning to minimise uncertainty and eliminate risk, but this only serves to stifle imagination and creativity and therefore is wholly unsuited to addressing wicked, ambiguous, unfolding social problems. The failure to bring about change is exacerbated by overly bureaucratic and managerial approaches that characterise the way social change is conventionally approached, particularly by governments and other public bodies who seek to address complex social problems using the same managerial tools and techniques that would be deployed for managing much simpler, tame, operational problems. The strategy and approach used by policy makers and organisational decision makers is often

driven top down through the hierarchy, and the decisions about the change strategy are usually controlled by a small number of powerful players, with a particular interest. The bureaucratic, top down nature of conventional change approaches means that it inevitably serves to meet the objectives of powerful vested interests, and usually leaves their interests and position largely unchallenged.

Conventional mainstream approaches to change are also fundamentally conservative in nature and they fail in part because they do not involve a sufficiently radical or critical exploration of the underlying drivers of social problems. Problem analysis and solution development occur entirely within the paradigm of the status quo without questioning the fundamentally unequal structures, systems and practices that are the root cause and primary drivers of the majority of social problems. It is evident that continuing to seek to address social problems through the lens of current, mainstream logics and paradigms is one of the main reasons why society is largely failing in its quest to meaningfully to address social problems. Orthodox, mainstream change approaches also overlook the historical and political dimensions of social problems and social change thereby presenting a sanitised, apolitical and ahistorical view of the social world that avoids surfacing uncomfortable truths and taboos.

3.2. Conventional social science approach to change

Progressive social scientists have a responsibility to play a role in advancing a positive social agenda that realises a fairer, more sustainable world. Despite at least 2 million academic papers being published every year this knowledge is demonstrably not making a sufficiently significant impact on solving the world's most pressing problems (Pacchioni, 2018). Although progressively oriented social scientists are undoubtedly sincere about wanting their knowledge to make an impact, the failure of society to deal with its most urgent and pressing challenges is evidence that academics from the social sciences are not making a significant impact with their work. Progressive social scientists have an ethical duty to address this problem of lack of impact and to engage in rethinking or reconceptualising their theory of change beyond a sole reliance on knowledge production. The underlying assumption in the current approach is that the production of knowledge is sufficient *in itself* to bring about social change.

The separation of knowledge and practice has become institutionalised in social science knowledge production (Flybjerk, 1998) and as a result the importance of phronesis, or practical wisdom (Jansson, 2013), has tended to be overlooked. Nicolini (2012) also makes the case for practical knowledge when they state that "the aim of science is not that of producing theoretical knowledge but more of obtaining practical mastery of the world in order to satisfy the practical needs of mankind" (p.32). So a commitment to knowledge informed practice, or praxis, is necessary in order to genuinely transform the world. Separating the production of knowledge from the application of knowledge underestimates the complex nature of problem solving and overlooks the extent to which knowledge is produced within, and emerges from, practical application. It requires creating knowledge about the application of knowledge!

Social science knowledge production has also become institutionalised as an elite or specialist activity, separated from policy makers, organisational decision makers, practitioners or citizens

more generally. This can be seen in the way that the output of progressive social science knowledge makers is mostly read by an audience of other academics. This is further demonstrated in the practice of knowledge transfer, where expert-produced knowledge is simply passed across to the practitioners for implementation. The role of practitioners or citizens more widely as co-producers of knowledge is largely overlooked (Huttenen et al., 2022). However, as it was argued above, complex problems can only be understood in a meaningful way by deploying multiple lenses or perspectives. Yet in reality, social scientific knowledge is still often produced from within narrow disciplinary silos. Progressive social scientists rarely break out to move beyond the university in order to build links and collaborations with other key players who would be vital for solving the social problem. The knowledge-making of progressive social scientists also tends to be informed by a very narrow knowledge base, grounded on a western canon of theory that overlooks indigenous and other forms of knowledge.

Knowledge production in progressive social science is still a predominantly disengaged process where problems are critiqued from the side-lines. Progressive social scientists seeking to apply their knowledge for social good have also tended to underestimate the political struggle required to bring about social change (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Social scientists reside in a relatively powerless position, unable or unwilling to get their 'hands dirty' to influence the change process. This is exacerbated by simply not being 'in the room' when solutions are developed and policy decisions made. The application of knowledge in real world contexts is problematic and requires a political struggle to influence decisions and policy, yet the current emphasis remains on theoretical knowledge production, over the messy political reality of knowledge application. Current approaches are also not sufficiently strategic in imagining the way that change could happen. It does not address the key questions of: What would have to change?

4. A critical theory of change for progressive social science

In this section I will outline a critical theory of change that sketches out, or imagines, an alternative approach for tackling societal problems and bringing about social change. It is framed from the perspective of social scientists and aims to stimulate progressive social science knowledge-makers to re-think and reconceptualise their role and approach. Although the critical theory of change is described from the perspective of social scientists it could equally be framed in a way that applied to the other key players required for social change. As progressive social scientists we cannot idealistically assume that once people have encountered our progressive knowledge then their values and behaviour will change. This argument is framed as a set of principles, or a new methodology, for progressive social scientists.

a) Aim to create new social realities.

To make a difference with the knowledge we are producing we have to reset the purpose of our projects so that real world impact becomes the primary goal, with publication becoming a means to an end or a secondary objective. The goal of progressive social science is to create new social realities that are fair, just and sustainable (Kahane, 2010). At the outset of our

research projects perhaps we should be asking *what knowledge does the world need?* or *does the world need this knowledge?* To move the progressive agenda forward we need to be asking and exploring questions that are relevant and address the urgent priorities (Gibson & Lawson, 2015). A more critically informed social scientific mode of enquiry also seeks to explore, and generate knowledge about, the range of contemporary phenomena that are antipathetic to progressive change e.g. authoritarianism, populism, neoliberalism, religious fundamentalism (Davidson, 2012; Ricci, 2020). The overall objective has to be to make a contribution to addressing and resolving the most pressing and urgent societal problems and this necessitates a move away from equating research with publishing. As Fraser argues (in Fraser and Naples, 2004, p. 1106) our role is "*both* to interpret *and* to change the world".

b) Create methodologies that combine knowledge production and application.

In the design of a research project aimed at addressing social problems it will be necessary to create a bespoke methodology both for the knowledge production, which we already do, but also a methodology for the application of knowledge which has the same depth and rigour. In the field of social change it is vital that knowledge production and knowledge application are not treated as discrete or separate processes but rather knowledge unfolds during application or implementation of an intervention. Theory building and theory application are interdependent, concomitant processes. This requires an alternative conceptualisation of where social scientific knowledge for social change is generated and this is primarily at the site of social change. This critical theory of change involves the design of a bespoke change methodology rather than pursuing panaceas or simply deploying universalistic, off-the-shelf solutions. Theory building and theory in/of practice are two interdependent components of the knowledge production process. Each wicked problem is unique and is embedded in a particular cultural, economic, geographic and temporal context, which necessitates a unique, bespoke change approach or design (Ricci, 2020).

c) Critical problematization and theorization of social problems.

A critical theory of change is based on a theorising of social problems and social change that deliberately seeks out the underlying drivers of social problems. It adopts a Critical Theory orientation, based on ideas generated by the Frankfurt School, that critically analyses society in order to expose its systemic and structural flaws. Critically informed social change projects therefore need to engage in deep problematization, drawing on a range of analytical tools and on a complex multidisciplinary framework as illustrated in the meta-theory described in the earlier section. Genuine strategic social change requires that problems are considered within the broadest possible societal context (Mills, 2000) and to achieve this, according to Rittel and Webber (1973), "one should try to settle the problem on as high a level as possible" (p.165). Otherwise changes can only be superficial, remaining at the level of incremental or 'quick wins', and the underlying causal mechanisms remain unaddressed. In particular, the critical theorising of social problems recognises the unsustainability of the current neoliberal capitalist system that is grounded upon consumption, growth, extension of markets, resource exploitation and fossil fuel burning. This economisation of the world, where wealth and power accumulation are prioritised over human and ecological well-being, represents an overarching

and fundamental cause of contemporary social problems. Part of this critical problematisation also has to recognise the existence of immensely powerful and well-organised anti-progressive project. Proponents of libertarian and free market values have deliberately, and very successfully, been able to constrain and inhibit the advance of a progressive social agenda (Doreian & Mrvar, 2021).

d) Adopt an emergent and dynamic approach to research project design and delivery

As social scientists it is important to conceive of ourselves as creating knowledge by doing social change, through the involvement in social change projects and interventions. Perhaps the most important element of knowledge is actually produced in the context dependent, practical situation itself. This approach will necessarily generate pragmatic knowledge that has the power to inform and enable action (Watson, 2010). Progressive social change requires a dynamic, unfolding change design because for complex problems the solutions are unknown at the outset, and therefore the change process is about creating solutions as well as implementing them. This is an ongoing process of collective definition as the plan unfolds during implementation (Blumer, 1971). As Blumer suggests the official plan is "modified, twisted and reshaped" (Blumer, 1971, p. 304) as the implementation or intervention proceeds. Change interventions are themselves embedded in a series of contexts from micro to macro (Pawson, 2016) and the designed change methodology must account for this contextual complexity. This interaction of conceptual theoretical knowledge with the reality of the particular context will inevitably generate new and emergent problematic phenomenon that will then also need to be understood and explained. The outcomes of an intervention are ultimately the product of the intervention itself and the particular context (Pawson, 2006) and our conceptualisation of the knowledge process needs to encompass this aspect.

e) Co-produce knowledge through collaboration and engagement.

Social change of a progressive kind has to be envisaged as a collaborative social activity, not simply the domain of experts or academics but involving citizens, practitioners and other stakeholders. This requires genuine co-production of knowledge rather than treating it as a simple knowledge transfer or exchange. The organisational mode required for achieving progressive social change, and the transition to a fairer more sustainable society, has to be collaborative rather than competitive. This necessitates the transition to a new way of creating knowledge that increases public understanding through the engagement of citizens in the knowledge production process (Huttunen, 2022). A progressive change methodology also needs to engage with politicians, policymakers, managers, business owners etc. in a genuine co-production of knowledge. Academic specialisms (e.g. work and organisational psychology, anthropology, political science etc.) cannot change the world – or at least not on their own! It requires the establishment of multidisciplinary projects and collaborations with other academic disciplines. Progressive social scientific knowledge has to be produced in these collaborative arenas, even though this introduces further problems and complexities because genuine

collaboration is difficult to accomplish, let alone sustain (Goodyear, 2022).

f) Engage politically and strategically to realise change and achieve impact.

Knowledge application must involve an engagement with power because social change is an inherently political process. Progressive social scientists therefore have to find ways to influence actual policy making and decision-making processes. Initiative such as the Brussels Declaration (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2017) have sought to establish some new principles that would enable knowledge makers to have great influence and involvement in public policy making. However, this does not sit easily within the institutionalised view of the objective politically neutral scholar. As we have seen knowledge-making needs to occur primarily at the site of social change and therefore this requires the social scientists to engage politically if they are to make an impact. Successful progressive social change involves resistance and struggle (Fylybjerg, 1998) and the design of the bespoke methodology must account for this. At the heart of an effective approach for dealing with social problems and bringing about progressive social change is the recognition of the highly political nature of this activity and the importance of building influence and alliances. This is demonstrated in the history of social change (e.g. abolition of slavery, women's suffrage etc) that occurs as a result of "a ground-swell of actors who gradually form a social movement" (Spicer & Levay, 2012, p. 284).

Those engaged in forwarding a progressive agenda or bringing about positive change also need to be both strategic and pragmatic. This requires imagining and creating road maps by which knowledge application and real transitions could actually occur. This involves identifying the actually existing institutions, practises and processes that will need to be changed, or even dismantled, if the progressive agenda is to succeed and human and environmental flourishing achieved. Progressive social scientists also need to adopt a more strategic approach to their projects, including learning from how successful societal change was achieved by the neoliberal project. This neoliberal project has demonstrated how radical social change, albeit a marketisation of society, can be achieved by adopting a long term strategic approach. The project has been 70 years in the making, from its initial ideas with key academic thinkers through to the last 40 years of neoliberal policies and neoliberalised governments (MacLean, 2018). The neoliberal project recognised that it needed to change more than hearts and minds, it also sought to change actually existing institutions and establish networks and resources to enable its project to move forward. This long term strategy achieved real influence by establishing educational institutions, think tanks and lobbyists in order to institutionalise its ideas and values. In this way the conservative, 'anti-progressive' project has been able to influence and reshape some of the key institutions in society, particularly the law. Doreian and Mrvar (2021) suggest that progressive forces also need to find "strategies and tactics to neutralise destructive efforts opposed to reform" (p.325).

5. Conclusion

The motivation for seeking to find better ways of bringing about change is driven by an ethical concern to reduce human harm suffering and ecological destruction. Progressive social

scientists are 'moved' to act from a desire or compulsion to right injustices and contribute to human and environmental flourishing. This requires an ongoing reflection about role and purpose, looking beyond narrow self-interest and career concerns to consider the wider responsibility for contributing to the social good. Knowledge-makers have a privileged position in society, but along with this comes a duty to act as responsible social actors whose role is "both to interpret and to change the world" (Fraser & Naples, 2004, p. 1106). The most pressing social problems (for instance climate change, modern slavery etc) can only be addressed by changing society and the way it organises and is organised. Social scientists should be instrumental in conceptualising and realising the new realities that will achieve a just transition. This will require a pragmatic and realistic mindset that is ultimately focused on addressing social problems and enabling human and ecological flourishing.

This paper engaged in a critical theorising of strategic change that sought to make sense of the costly and catastrophic failure to address the most pressing problems facing contemporary society. The paper made the case for a critical theory of social change that could inform a change practice that would be more likely to succeed in addressing social problems. This orientation to theorising social problems and social change, is critical in a number of respects. Firstly it is grounded upon the assumption that social change is complex, ambiguous and uncertain - it is a messy and 'grubby' endeavour. Secondly, it recognises the systemic or structural drivers of the most pressing social problems drawing on thinking that emerged from the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School. Finally, it is critical in the sense that social change is essentially a political activity and any change to the underlying systemic drivers involves a redistribution of power that cannot be achieved through a purely technical-managerial approach to change.

Change practice that is grounded upon a critical theorising of social problem change cannot be reduced to a set of rational practices, tools, techniques or prescriptions. Rather, it is a broad methodology, or orientation to change, that is informed by a set of principles and assumptions aligned a critical theorising of change. This approach does not seek to provide the comfort of a detailed road map, instead it provides a philosophy or methodology to inform about how the change journey should be embarked upon in order to increase the likelihood of success. Critically oriented problem solving adopts an iterative and adaptive approach that proceeds in a series of knowledge-production and learning cycles. Knowledge is thereby produced in vivo and this ongoing knowledge production is essential for informing the unfolding iteration and adaption. This approach is critical, pragmatic and realistic in the sense that it recognises the need to change concrete practices, institutions and structures. Such change inevitably results in conflict and reveals the essentially political nature of knowledge production and progressive social change. Political and strategic engagement is therefore essential in order to make a genuine impact on the most pressing problems. This approach to bringing about social change is not about proposing panaceas or universal solutions, rather it recognises that false starts and failures are an essential and inevitable feature of iterative and adaptive social change. However, the overall case has being made here is that a critically-informed methodology will at least increase the likelihood of meaningful progress being made in tackling the world's most 'thorny' problems.

The critical theorising of change failure and the critically informed approach to change practice is relevant to all players involved in addressing social problems. This paper has focused in particular on the role of progressive social scientists and has called for a revaluation or rethinking of our roles as progressive knowledge makers. As reflective practitioners it is important to consider our practice in terms of what we do, how we do it and how we can make a genuine impact. It is also useful to think about the place, or site, of our knowledge making activity. Rather than sitting in the ivory tower of the academy, a critically informed change methodology conceptualises the processes of knowledge production and knowledge application as occurring concurrently. Knowledge is therefore produced in the act of bringing about social change. The methodology approach contains a degree of humility, recognising that as individuals, or as specialist disciplines, we cannot change the world on our own. Realising impactful change can only be achieved by engaging in a genuine co-production and collaboration where progressive social scientists use using their specialist knowledge to contribute to the broader project or movement for change.

References

Adams, J. S. (1963). Towards an understanding of inequity. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology,* 67(5), 422-436.

Adler, P. S. (2016). Alternative economic futures: A research agenda for progressive management scholarship. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 30(2), 123-128.

Alvesson, M. (1984). Questioning rationality and ideology: on critical organization theory. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 14(1), 61-79.

American Association for the Advancement of Science. (2017). The Brussels Declaration on Ethics and Principles for Science and Society Policy-making. *EuroScientist Journal.*

Blumer, H. (1971). Social problems as collective behaviour. *Social problems,* 18(3), 298-306.

Buttrick, N. R., Heintzelman, S. J., & Oishi, S. (2017). Inequality and well-being. *Current Opinion in Psychology,* 18, 15-20.

Brooks, I. (2018). *Organisational behaviour: individuals, groups and organisation* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Christie, H., Smith, S. J., & Munro, M. (2008). The emotional economy of housing. *Environment and Planning A*, 40(10), 2296-2312.

Ciplet, D., Falzon, D., Uri, I., Robinson, S. A., Weikmans, R., & Roberts, J. T. (2022). The unequal geographies of climate finance: Climate injustice and dependency in the world system. *Political Geography*, 99, 102769.

Collins, D. (2005). *Organisational change: sociological perspectives.* Routledge.

Davidson, D. J. (2022). Climate change sociology: Past contributions and future research

needs. *PLOS Climate*, 1(7), 1-3. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pclm.0000055

Dello Buono, R. A. (2015). Reimagining social problems: moving beyond social constructionism. *Social Problems,* 62, 331-342.

Doreian, P., & Mrvar, A. (2022). Public issues, policy proposals, social movements, and the interests of the Koch Brothers network of allies. *Quality & Quantity*, 56(1), 305-332.

Meadows, D. H., Randers, J., & Behrens III, W. W. (1972). *The Limits to growth; a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*. Universe Books.

Flyvbjerg, B (1998) 'Habermas and Foucault Thinkers for Civil Society', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 49(2), pp. 210–233.

Fraser, N., & Jaeggi, R. (2018). *Capitalism: A conversation in critical theory.* John Wiley & Sons.

Fraser, N., & Naples, N. A. (2004). To interpret the world and to change it: An interview with Nancy Fraser. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29(4), 1103-1124.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin Books.

Fuchs, C. (2017). Critical social theory and sustainable development: The role of class, capitalism and domination in a dialectical analysis of un/sustainability. *Sustainable Development*, 25(5), 443-458.

Gibson, M. A., & Lawson, D. W. (2015). Applying evolutionary anthropology. *Evolutionary Anthropology: Issues, News, and Reviews*, 24(1), 3-14.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of Society.* Polity Press.

Goodyear, P. (2022). Realising the Good University: Social Innovation, Care, Design Justice and Educational Infrastructure. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 4(1), 33-56.

Guterres, A. (2019, November 4). Progress toward sustainable development is seriously offtrack. Financial Times, p. 11.

Guterres, A. (2022, Feb 8). *The global problem-solving paradox.* UN Sustainable Development Group. https://unsdg.un.org/latest/blog/global-problem-solving-paradox

Hale, T., Held, D., & Young, K. (2013). *Gridlock: why global cooperation is failing when we need it most*. Polity.

House of Commons (May, 2021) *Workforce burnout and resilience in the NHS and social care.* https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6158/documents/68766/default/

Huttunen, S., Ojanen, M., Ott, A., & Saarikoski, H. (2022). What about citizens? A literature review of citizen engagement in sustainability transitions research. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 91, 102714.

Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse. (2022) *The Report of the Independent Inquiry into*

Child Sexual Abuse.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_d
ata/file/1112123/the-report-independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-october-2022.pdf

Jansson, N., 2013. Organizational change as practice *A critical analysis. Journal of organizational change management.* 26 (6) 1003-1019.

Jayman, M., Glazzard, J., & Rose, A. (2022). Tipping point: The staff wellbeing crisis in higher education. *In Frontiers in Education* (p. 590). https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.929335

Kahane, A. (2010) *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change.* Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Kahneman, D. (2012). Thinking, fast and slow. Penguin Books.

MacIntyre, A. (1999). Social structures and their threats to moral agency. *Philosophy*, 74(3), 311-329.

MacLean, N. (2018). *Democracy in chains: The deep history of the radical right's stealth plan for America.* Penguin.

Marmot, M. (2020). Health equity in England: The Marmot review 10 years on. *Bmj*, 368.

Mignolo, W. D. (2007). Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural studies*, 21(2-3), 449-514.

Mills, C. W. (2000). *The sociological imagination.* Oxford University Press.

Nicolini, D. (2012). *Practice theory, work, and organization: An introduction.* OUP Oxford.

Ormrod, S. (2003). Organisational culture in health service policy and research: 'third-way' political fad or policy development? *Policy & Politics*, 31(2), 227-237.

Pacchioni, G. (2018). *The overproduction of truth: Passion, competition, and integrity in modern science.* OUP Press.

Patnaik, U. (2012). Capitalism and the Production of Poverty. *Social Scientist*, 40(12), 3-20.

Pawson, R. (2006). *Evidence-based policy: a realist perspective.* Sage.

Pawson, R. (2016). Realist evaluation caricatured: a reply to Porter. *Nursing Philosophy*, 17(2), 132-139.

Ricci, D. M. (2020). *Political Science Manifesto for the Age of Populism.* Cambridge University Press.

Rittel, H. and Webber, M. (1973) Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning, *Policy Studies*, 4(2), 155-169.

Rothmann, S., & Cooper, C. L. (2008). *Organizational and work psychology.* Hodder

Education.

Sayer, A. (1999). Realism and social science. *Realism and Social Science*, 1-224.

Scott, J. (Ed.). (2006). *Sociology: The key concepts.* Routledge.

Spicer, A., & Levay, C. (2012). Critical theories of organizational change. In Boje, D. M., Burnes, B., & Hassard, J. (Eds.). *The Routledge companion to organizational change* (pp. 290-304). Routledge.

Sturdy, A., & Grey, C. (2003). Beneath and beyond organizational change management Exploring alternatives. *Organization*, 10(4), 651-662.

Thacker, P. D. (2022). Stealing from the tobacco playbook, fossil fuel companies pour money into elite American universities. bmj, 378.

Trinkaus, E. (2005). Early modern humans. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 34, 207.

Turner, A. (2022). Exploring police culture and reform strategies post Charing Cross: Insights from the literature. *The Police Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X221107588

Urbina, D. A., & Ruiz-Villaverde, A. (2019). A critical review of homo economicus from five approaches. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 78(1), 63-93.

Watson, T. J. (2010). Critical social science, pragmatism and the realities of HRM. *The International journal of human resource management*, 21(6), 915-931.

Wong, G., Greenhalgh, T., Westhorp, G., & Pawson, R. (2012). Realist methods in medical education research: what are they and what can they contribute? *Medical Education*, 46(1), 89-96.