

Jennifer Clements Interview 30/01/2017

PM: Thanks so much for agreeing to this. It's a short interview just about aspects of your experience of PEN, your views of its past, its future and those sorts of things. One thing that I know everybody involved in this project would like to know, from the get-go, is just a little bit about your own, the history of your relationship to PEN but, in particular, actually the topic that we've just been talking about more informally is the relationship for you between being a writer, a novelist, poet, memoirist and somebody who has now had these key roles of President of PEN in Mexico and now President of international PEN? Just how you see those two things fitting together and how that's worked out for you in terms of your experience and your sense of...

JC: That's rather a long story, so be prepared! So I joined PEN Mexico probably about twenty-five years ago. Mexico was one of the very first countries to join PEN after it was founded. Always in Mexican PEN, the great writers were always there and so, I had the very good fortune of being a friend of Octavio Paz's, he was in PEN, Ramon Xirau, a really dear great friend and who wrote the prologue to one of my books of poetry, he's a great Catalan philosopher and poet and great friend. In Mexico, there was always this great respect for PEN and, in fact, in order to be nominated for any of the national prizes, PEN can nominate as can, you know, important universities and important institutions and the fact that PEN has that kind of status, where you can nominate, is very special.

So at first when I became a member of PEN, I was invited along to this extraordinary mission which was the creation for the Cuban PEN centre in exile. So I went to Miami for that and I can't remember off-hand what year that was [1997]. That was an extraordinarily special experience because they were all men, men who had been jailed by Castro for twenty years, for twenty-two years, for nineteen years and it made a huge impression on me, their bravery, the suffering and even the humour. I remember one writer told me how he was jailed because he was going to kill Che Guevara and it was so funny he described how they were watching all of Che Guevara's movements to find out when was the good moment to kill him. And one of the things that Che Guevara used to do everyday was go visit his girlfriend at 4 o'clock. And a block before arriving there he would take off his shirt. So we were laughing about was he in a hurry or was he vain?! You know [there's] all this great PEN lore, PEN stories, so he admitted he had been in the plot to kill Che Guevara. And so, that was a very special moment for me going to the founding of that Center.

So then I continued to be in PEN and then PEN Mexico, I always talk about PEN because everyone works *pro bono* it means it's an organisation of great fragility and great strength. So you see this when you study the Centres, how they go up and down and up and down and some people get really anxious about this but I just really don't. I just feel that it's like the sea, that's just the way it moves. So Mexico went through a very fragile time, I would say a corrupt time, where PEN was being used to kind of uphold a politician and all the important writers, left the Centre. This has happened historically in PEN centres, I mean, the famous one is the German Centre, under the Nazis. That's the really famous, iconic one, but that sort of thing has happened in small ways all over the world, at different moments. So in Mexico we had our little bad moment and then several people came to me and said, you know, would you consider being President, and when I decided to be president of PEN Mexico we were already in this devastating thing of journalists. As I said in Turkey just now, you know you have 151 journalists in jail, I have 151 journalists in graves. I mean we kill journalists in Mexico, we don't jail them. So

to me I felt like it was such a critical time, so I agreed to be President of PEN [Mexico] and the decision I made was, one, that I had to get back the prestige of the Centre, re-build it, because it had gone through this bad moment, then I also wanted to bring, create, a campaign of shame, that was very clear in my mind. That was so clear in my mind because I had seen a documentary on how the Thames had been cleaned and how it had all been a campaign of shame and I just thought it's now my turn to have the campaign of shame. So I had all that really in mind, to do it like that.

So I had an event in New York with American journalists, with Mexican journalists, it was a very crucial time. It was one of the most extraordinary moments in this sort of fifteen years of violence, the idea that the Juárez, which is this newspaper on the border with the United States, they had just had the assassination of two photo-journalists, who had just started and they were young kids of sort of nineteen, twenty-one and they had been shot in the car sitting outside the newspaper. And the newspaper decided to put on the cover, just, it just said 'What Do You Want From Us?' and this went all over the world. That they addressed the cartels. So it was in this climate that I organised the event in New York, and then went on to create this event called *PEN Protesta*, PEN Protests. And all these PEN people came from all over the world and all the greatest Mexican writers and we had this protest event, I have the video that I can show you, it's very short. Then we went to the Senate and we spoke to politicians and we spoke to all kinds of people and we did this huge thing in the newspaper and again, this was my decision that it be addressed from all the writers of the world to the writers of Mexico, not the politicians, like a solidarity with the writers. So it was a very powerful message and the thing about PEN that always astonishes me to this day, having just come back from Turkey, is how you can have this intense intellectual gravitas behind you. If you need it you just have to call, and it's there so immediately. When I said we have to do something, that creates shame on the Mexican government, I had all the Swedish academy, all the Nobel Prizewinners, all the Presidents of all the Centres, just like that. In a second. No organisation in the world has that. Can do that, can work like that. And it's a tremendous force.

P: If I can just chip in there - do you think there's another side to this history? PEN was founded in 1921, we can talk a little bit about that past history in a moment, but in some ways, if somebody had to look at this from a more jaundiced point of view, it would be that the status and authority and gravitas of writers, today, is not what it was in the 1920s, maybe not even what it was in the 1970s and 1980s? Do you have any sense of that that you are contending also with a sense in which yes, you can mobilise all that gravitas, but that the meaning of all that gravitas is potentially changing?

JC: No, I disagree. I think that we're in the time of celebrity. So I think that these writers have even greater celebrity status. In fact, one of the things that I proposed in Turkey because we had this great meeting of 'what can we do?' and what looks clear from examining what is going on now is that Turkey is really going into the dark ages and that if this referendum passes, that's it, it's going to be a totalitarian dictatorship. So in this meeting that we had, and I've had this idea for a while but I've never really been able to, I brought it up one regarding Mexico, but I really brought it up forcefully this time, because thinking of, if it becomes the total dark ages, people can't leave, they can't enter, there are all these journalists and writers in jail, you know, what can we do? What is the future plan for this? And my idea was exactly an idea of celebrity. If you're a writer in Turkey and you're in jail and you become JK Rowling's writer, Turkish writer, that gives you celebrity status. So, imagine the *Guardian*, if something happens to you, would say 'JK Rowling's Turkish writer has not been heard of in a week and people are worried because

he's a diabetic' or whatever. And so that would give that journalist or writer a great celebrity status and it would mean that the newspapers and the world would listen. And it would also be I think a great comfort to the writer in jail to know that out in the world he or she was being represented by a writer who had standing in the world. So I would say the opposite, to what you're saying.

PM: Ok, That's great. The other thing I wanted to ask you about again, is just sort of thinking historically but again keying into your experience, but another way in which you can think about the way in which the world is a little bit more complicated now for an organisation like PEN than it was in the 1920s, if you think, it is one of the oldest NGOs effectively, International, Non-governmental..

JC: We're older now than countries, than nations...

PM: Exactly, an extraordinary history that it's had and emerging after the First World War and all the ways that that shaped its founding in the 1920s and now there is of course an explosion of NGOs, or there has for the last 50 years there's been a proliferation of NGOs, dealing with issues that are PEN-related, Article 19, Index on Censorship

JC: CPJ..

PM: In India in South Africa, the Freedom of Expression Institute, there's all sorts of bodies all over the world dealing with these things. Again, if we put that negatively, which I'm doing deliberately, PEN's prestige and status is being eroded by the competition but is there a way in which you can see it [PEN] still having a unique positive possibilities, what do you think that is? What makes it different from, say, Article 19, which is dealing with fundamental freedom of expression issues, whereas PEN comes at it differently. What is that difference and what does it mean today?

JC: I think the erosion has to do more with fundraising. I the competition for all of us, not just for PEN, for everybody in the pool trying to get money and funding is really, really hard. But that, you know, is a separate issue. But in terms of the voice on the stage of human rights, I still believe strongly, I mean one thing that's happening right now, and I'm just so filled with admiration, is that if you study right now what PEN America is doing vis-a-vis what Trump is doing, I mean, wow! I mean, they've really stepped up to the plate. And for me, it's fantastic. I just don't even have to think about it. They're doing such an incredible job and it is the strongest centre in the world by far, the richest, as well.

And I think very important debates have occurred in recent times [in PEN] that you can't, that you would never see in Amnesty International or in Article 19, that profound debate. So I think that the most recent one would be the Charlie Hebdo debate in the America Center. I mean, that was a really important debate, where is freedom of speech? Where is hate speech? What do we feel about all of this? And I think it does trickle out into the rest of the world, how PEN is dealing with this. And you have someone like Rushdie, who obviously, all he cares about is freedom of expression, that's, for him, that's the most important thing. And then you have other people who feel that other parts of the Charter, good will and understanding and not ever being an instrument of hate speech or any kind of thing like that. So, no, I think that the debate that PEN brings to the world is still incredibly relevant and important. And we haven't talked about literature yet. Literature's important [laughs]

PM: Just to come back to that because that's in a sense where, again, speaking from your experience, what's the relationship between your Presidential activist self and your writerly...

JC: In PEN Mexico, going back to my history, PEN Mexico was always a Centre that only was literary, I mean we would have poetry readings, we would get together and have, you know, either drinks or tea and coffee and read poetry. Or people before my time had a little literary publication, where the PEN members could publish and where a lot of writers from the Soviet Union could publish, and spaces for writes in exile or writers in prison, because the Writers in Prison Committee has always been a very strong committee in PEN. But very much, sort of, a literary perspective of publishing their works and all of that. So actually I changed that as President of PEN Mexico, I was the first President who had to really go deeply into the Freedom of Expression side of the Charter within my country. I mean, that had never happened before, so, in my case, it was just a response to the time and also because it is *pro bono* work you have to decide - I have to earn a living, I have to write my work, which often do not mean the same thing! Where's the space and time! I mean everybody in PEN is always putting their own money into everything, because otherwise nothing ever happens. You are always paying for things. So, you have to make a decision, can I do both? In my case, I had to make the decision that I could definitely not do both, that I just had to concentrate, that I only had the energy and resources to deal with the killing of journalists. So, I think that, in general, right now, in terms of PEN International, we feel quite strongly that, perhaps a bit the literary side, right now, has been compromised and it's hard because, again, there is so much going on in the world and it just seems to be getting worse by the day, that seems to be taking over a little bit.

PM: So a greater shift toward literary activism, rather than legislative activism. But in some ways that does bring me back to another question that I wanted to ask, because in a way you've said that there was the strength and the fragility side of it, just in terms of the organisation, and we can all probably speculate about what it means to bring writers together in a shared organisational way and get them to agree on anything, that can be a challenge for anyone. It's easy to imagine. It's bad enough with academics. But the other way in a sense is just to think about the modalities of the strength side and so far what you've spoken about is that this is really questions about the efficacies of PEN and one of the things that you've said quite clearly is that you can mobilise intellectual gravitas, link now to celebrity status and have incredible impact in terms of visibility, raising visibility, raising awareness about certain things, but there's another side of the activist side of PEN as an organisation, which is specifically to do with legislation, how the terms of certain forms of convention and international understanding are articulated and described. So I wondered if you could just talk about that side of it, where the strength is not simply in terms of mobilisation of opinion and gravitas and celebrity but actually changing law, if you put it in those terms, whether nationally or internationally, and what your experience of that is?

JC: Well I had a personal experience with that, because in Mexico, if a journalist was killed it fell under state law, it was a state crime...

PM: State as opposed to Federal in the Mexican case?

JC: Yeah absolutely. So it meant that many, many times what was happening was the criminal was investigating his own crime because it was very clear – we could even do analysis of the stories the journals it was covering so it would be a Mayor or a Senator, or a Governor, or

Governors who were business men, so it was all kind of...very corrupt. Even though the change of the law has not really brought fruit, symbolically it's a huge thing - so we changed the law, so now to kill a journalist is a federal crime. And I can say that even though Amnesty was working on it and Article 19 and CPJ, it really was the involvement of PEN that really made it happen. It was extraordinary to see what that campaign of shame and having all this intellectual power...

PM: And it was conducted nationally and internationally that campaign or it was mainly nationally?

JC: Well it was nationally, but I brought all these people from outside to the protest. The letter that was signed by all the important writers of the world, we had events in New York that were reported in Mexico, I also created the PEN Mexico prizes which were really careful to detect, you know, which people were in the conversation and doing interesting work, to raise their profile. So there was a lot of actions around it. So I mean, I went through it personally. And then in terms of PEN International we have Sarah Clarke who is head of all of our advocacy programmes and right now she has been in Salzburg with the Council of Europe, because what we do now is that we do work with these other NGOs so, for example, the action on Turkey, there's several actions. So there's the action of Sarah going there and having the letter signed by all these NGOs, including ourselves, and being there with the Article 19 people and Amnesty people. All of them pushing, or failing - it didn't go so well - to get the Council of Europe to go back to monitoring Turkey and their human rights. So that was work that we did in advocacy with other groups and we also lobby at the European Union so we have that part of PEN that does that...

PM: And lobby at the UN level, isn't it? Because you've been involved in a big issue at the UN, race and blasphemy was a recent big issue...

JC: Yes, and the whole woman's thing, I even went to the UN and spoke. So in fact, some of those things that I learned at the UN I've brought for making the Woman's Manifesto, this whole thing of religion, tradition, culture as justification for harm, because we know what harm is. That's easy to identify. So we do this advocacy but then we do, for example, the reason I bring up the Council of Europe is because in the same week that we had our advocacy person doing that, that very same week, we had all these writers in Turkey protesting outside a jail, so it's like both things were happening at the same time.

PM: And do you try to do those things in concert sometimes or was it by chance?

JC: No! This was like a miracle chance! It just happened and it was like, how can it be! It all came together! It was quite sort of serendipitous.

PM: The one thing that you've been, you did mention the Woman's Manifesto, but one thing we haven't mentioned yet is that you are the first woman President of PEN which is extraordinary as well, given that it's what? A three year post, isn't it? So going back to 1921 there have been plenty of three year posts but you are the first. To what extent has that been key to you in terms of what you feel you can do?

JC: It never crossed my mind this. It never ever crossed my mind. I finished my Mexican PEN Presidency and I thought, well, that's that...

PM: By the way were you the first woman President of Mexican PEN?

JC: No, no I wasn't. But I just, it wasn't even on my radar and I hadn't even thought about it. It was really nothing I had ever thought about. And then, suddenly I was nominated, so it was a complete surprise to me. I had no idea. I think the organisation was, felt very strongly that it was time for a woman. I think because there was this sense and so they were looking around the panorama to see which woman might fit the profile. So what happened was that I ran against two other women, the three candidates were women and the men who were interested realised that they would probably lose because there was such as great, you know, this can't be again... So it was interesting. Anybody who would have won, we would have had a woman President. So I won.

PM: That's great and transformative for them. But also there is a sense in which there is another level of advocacy which you have translated into action as well because you also have advocacy within PEN itself. So the two things are at least related to gender issues, the woman's manifesto and changing the Charter, even more. Can you give us some sense of that?

JC: I want to be more than a symbol. So I want to make real change for women. And I'd always looked at and read that Charter and thought, hmmm. It says we'll do everything to...

PM: It's combat hatred, in terms of race, class and nation....

JC: Yeah, these war words, combat hatreds of race, class and nationality.

PM: Which is from the original wording, isn't it? From the 1920s?

JC: From 1926. Article 3 has not been changed at all since 1926, other, the first Article 1 has had changes I think in 1946, especially after the Second World War there were some adjustments, to do with things to do with propaganda which is very important today, here we are again, in a time of propaganda. So, I had been very aware of that always and since I had been in the Women's Committee in Mexico and there is a Women's Committee in PEN International, there was always this feeling that the women weren't happy. They weren't happy with the Charter, they felt like second-class citizens, for many reasons, I mean, there was this great photograph, just before I was elected that one woman took of the main table, with the President, the Vice President, the Treasurer, the this, the that, they were all men, you know? And she wrote 'The Last Stand'!

[laughs]

JC: So there was a feeling in PEN, the women didn't feel, you know, that they were being treated exactly right. So there are these things that I want to do, so that being the first women President is also honoured, in a real way.

PM: Can you give us just some sense of how you want the Charter to change? What sort of direction would you want to see it go, how that wording would be adjusted?

JC: Well I tried to change it last year but it didn't pass and actually, at the time, I was disappointed but now I realise it was a good thing it didn't pass. Because these kinds of changes

do take time to get it right and I don't think we had it right and I don't think the list is the right thing.

PM: So by the list you mean just simply augmenting...

JC: Yes, last year we presented it, it became you know, race, class, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, religion...And even then there's this feeling of this could be the endless list that never ends and we could just tag on everything. And I think that a lot of the arguments that people made were really good and in fact, for presenting it this year, I've attached all those arguments, which you'll find interesting, to the document so that we remember what we were thinking about it. So I feel good, I think that it's good it didn't pass, I think now and even after last night, being here, doing this, this morning Margie [Orford] and I have five cups of coffee and we've taken out 'women and men'. And we already sent the letter to the whole board to see if they'd ok it. So we've made it even more universal and have decided that the women's thing will be addressed in the Women's Manifesto but not in the Charter and it makes it more universal. That young men who stood up and talked about, you know, what about transgender? That argument won't happen now...

PM: Are you talking about this debate and a discussion with Timothy Garton Ash's FreeSpeechDebate Organisation or group at Oxford, that's what you're referring to?

JC: Yes, that's good, you're putting it in the historical context...So we went back, because this is not about winning or losing, it's about getting it right. So I think that the point is that argument was going to come up and it's a completely valid argument and it would be best to find a solution, that could have some, where everybody is included., but also that can withstand the test of time. So that we're not, we can't be changing the Charter constantly, so this way it's sort of protected, at least until Martians land on the earth, then we'll have to put the Maritain in...

PM: So in a sense the strategy now is to remove the kind-of period piece element of the 1920s Charter...

JC: Bringing it into the twenty-first century...

PM: But in a sense, your approach to that revision is to take things away, rather than add things, because that is just going to make it murkier...Interesting. One of the other things that you mentioned just beforehand is another aspect of what you wanted to do in your role as President of International PEN was to try to get Centres opened in other parts of the world. Any particular areas that you wanted to target, either in real terms or in some dream world, where would you like to have PEN Centres where there aren't at the moment?

JC: Well, we need at the moment, we need a PEN Centre in Israel and we need one in Pakistan. It was closed down, I believe three years ago...

PM: It was closed down in Israel?

JC: Because it had become very sort of affiliated with the government and the government line and not living up to the Charter. The Charter exists for a reason and we can point to centres that are not following that. And that was the case with the Israeli Centre, so I hope that before my term is over that we will have an Israeli Centre and a Pakistani Centre, although the Pakistani

Centre may have to be in exile, I'm not sure. But we have a great tradition of centres in exile, I mean it's not a problem. It's not the best solution but it works.

PM: Great, well this has been incredibly useful. The one thing, the last thing that I wanted to ask you about, was really looking a little bit to the future but also to the future anchored in where we are now, because there's all sorts of reasons why, and a lot of commentators now looking at the world and responding to Brexit, Trump and various things, with perfectly good reason saying that populist nationalism is on the rise again. And in many ways PEN in the 1920s was founded at a moment when there was a similar anxiety, just because, for so many of the people, the intellectuals of that time, was what was going on in the 1920s the League of Nations and so on, of nationalism being the issue behind the First World War, that was the biggest issue to deal with. So that form of internationalism arose at that point, again, do you have some sense that we're now at a unique moment again or at a key turning point again in terms of these sorts of debates where something like PEN is going to take on a new life?

JC: PEN has always addressed its time and I think that the big story of our time is displaced people, which has given rise to xenophobia, to nationalism, to protectionism. I think it's a reaction, I mean, we've never had more displaced people ever in the history of the planet. It's something horrific like one out of every twelve. So PEN will be getting involved in this huge, difficult painful theme.

PM: Just one other thing, thinking about the future, and again partly because of thinking historically, I mean in the past, there as a real sense in which in its founding PEN was an International organisation that was also particularly targeting governments. It was worried about the state threat to freedom of expression and to writers, that was the key thing. And in many ways we do now, that is still the case, in all sorts of ways, it's definitely not gone away. But we do live in a new world now where in terms of the digital landscape in particular, where, for all sorts of reasons, massive corporate power, sort of private, ostensibly and in some cases non-state actors are proving to be as much of an issue. And in some ways, actually, when you think about it in terms of censorship now, I think it would be completely wrong to say that the state has just become a positive player or just become a problem. It can become a positive player in regard to freedom of expression, but we do now, in at least two ways, one is the digital issue and corporate power in that way, but also the censorship and the silencing of public speech of all kinds, that non-state actors, just in terms of, for instance, small groups or individuals using the threat of violence, have also become vital issues in these sorts of ways, that go beyond the way in which the founding moment of PEN thought about free expression as an issue primarily to do with states. Do you have any sense or have you thought about the world of PEN in the world of non-state threats to freedom of expression in terms of how the organisation might be addressing that?

JC: It's already addressing it. We can't help it, I mean. Bangladesh we have a huge programme, where non-state actors are killing in the street with machetes bloggers and creating, it's not the state that's creating it, it's these non-state that are creating this tremendous censorship and they are more powerful. I mean they are so powerful now that they are our, half our ICORN [International Cities of Refuge Network] are bloggers from Bangladesh. And that is being driven by non-state actors, completely. Yeah, it's a very strange time. And the whole technology side is, I think, yet to be fully understood.

PM: But is PEN in some way engaging with Google, Twitter, Facebook at all on these sorts of issues or is the advocacy still?

JC: We have been doing it in the most sort of common kind of way, of having a Facebook page and a Twitter account, this has yet to be seen, is to try to take it to a different level. But I don't really understand all of that terribly well. To me it's still such mysterious territory. So we need to get experts to understand that and we're working on this. But it's not really my area of expertise, in fact, I'm not on Facebook, I don't have a Twitter account, I run as fast as I can from all of that to a library full of warm books.

PM: Yeah, brilliant! Jennifer, thanks for taking the time for this!

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