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Interview - Daniela DeBono

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Both in anthropology, as well as in the interdisciplinary field of migration studies, there is an increased interest in understanding the state, the irregular migrant, borders and boundaries, and globalisation. This is in response to contemporary socio-cultural and political developments. In anthropology these are being approached from well-established perspectives as well as new perspectives such as critical moral anthropology and the anthropology of human rights.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

More clearly than ever before I now view immigration issues as part of the broader framework of social and global injustice. And indeed, I believe that therein lie some of the solutions we desperately need to address immigration situations where people risk violations of their human rights.

This is the result of both my academic trajectory and my interest in political cultures, but also of my engagement over the years with different local, national and international fields of community action. These range from children, youth, disabled and elderly people in Malta, to young workers' issues in Europe, to peace and conflict transformation initiatives in the Mediterranean and irregular migrants in southern European countries and the Nordics. So although my research has focused on irregular migration, and to a lesser degree on children's rights, I am aware of, and very sensitive towards, the issues faced by different groups in society.

My academic grounding in anthropology gave me the platform to pursue paths of inquiry into different political and socio-cultural issues using a formidable pool of knowledge generated through inductive work. Looking back, the list of scholars whose works have contributed to the formation of my approach includes people from within and outside the orthodoxy of the anthropological discipline. I have in mind people such as Clifford Geertz, Hannah Arendt, Seyla Benhabib, Etienne Balibar, Didier Fassin, Benedict Anderson and Arjun Appadurai.

It is well acknowledged that doing ethnography can have a transformative impact on the researcher itself – something which I have always been aware of and open to. Ethnography allows you to produce fine multi-layered descriptions of situations by bringing you intimately close to research subjects in the field. So in answering the question about who prompted the most significant shifts in my thinking, I would also include some key people I met in the field during the different projects I have worked on, who shared their time and their life experience with me, and

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who challenged my understanding of the world.

Your main research interest lies in the migration-human rights nexus. How would you explain this concept?

The migration-human rights nexus is a focus on the human rights of migrants. Migrants all over the world are a vulnerable/disadvantaged category of people. If by migrants we understand people who have a different legal and political status – that is, they are non-citizens of the state they are living in – they are vulnerable for this reason. But of course, there is also the popular, less accurate, highly fluid and loose term of 'migrant' that is used to refer to people that are 'different' due to their ethnicity, language, traditions, religion – and that might have little to do with actual personal migration experience, but can refer to those we describe as second or third generation immigrants, who are the children or grandchildren of immigrants into a state. These categories and definitions are often, but not always, dependent on socio-economic status. The picture is multi-faceted, because economic capital often brings with it a higher degree of social and cultural capital too. Refugees are just 3 per cent of the world's international migrants. The vast majority of migrants are labour migrants – and just think of the complexity and the risks of labour migration: new country, new culture, new laws, new politics, new work culture, the list can go on and on! Think of the advantage of an educated labour migrant who has the means or the skills to understand the implications of a contract for work in a new country, and has the economic and political means to go back to their country of origin should things go wrong. Contrast that with a labour migrant, who takes on a job in a new country, sells his land in order to pay for his flight and does not know enough about the new country to assess whether the job and the earnings will enable him to lead a respectable life – in this case, the migrant is more susceptible to be conned.

Migrants falling in the legal-technical definition, but also in the popular definition, are often vulnerable for different reasons on one or more accounts in the societies they live in. They ought to be recognised as vulnerable people.

The migration-human rights nexus is built on a recognition of the vulnerability inherent in the migrant category, and on the fact that migrants, like all other people, ought to be treated with respect and this includes establishing protective measures to ensure that their human rights are not violated.

What do you understand by human rights culture, or a cultural approach to human rights?

Culture constitutes our activities, reactions and behaviour on a daily basis. Culture is not a static concept, but is continually re-constituted by people everywhere. The definitions of culture used in anthropology incorporate Franz Boas' definition of a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts which members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and which are transmitted from generation to generation through learning.

The success and development of human rights – as is the humanist goals of human rights – cannot be properly assessed without looking at how human rights law and principles are lived out, and how they influence and condition behaviour on a daily basis in a particular community. For too long the human rights movement has focused almost exclusively on developing international human rights laws, the transposition of these international laws into national laws, and monitoring their implementation. This resulted in human rights being reduced to mere law and legal instruments. But we need to first ask: why do we have human rights laws in the first place? And one of the answers I subscribe to is that human rights constitute a powerful tool that enables peoples of different cultures, religions, historical traditions and so on to come together and take collective action against state treatment that falls beneath minimal standards agreed to as respectful of human dignity. In order to do this, people need to meet, dialogue, share their experiences, debate and contrast their opinions. And human rights offer both a common language as well as different international, national and local fore for enabling this, through the work of intergovernmental or state institutions, and a vast array of non-state organisations working at different levels. Human rights are therefore one tool in a movement to ensure social and global justice. Human rights should breed solidarity with people and disadvantaged groups in our own communities and societies, but also in other countries.

For this to happen, human rights cannot be reduced simply to laws, and their implementation cannot just take the

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form of enactments by state institutions. Human rights are political and moral concepts, and the measure of their 'success' goes beyond considerations about whether a state has correctly transposed a particular convention or whether it has set up implementing institutions. These are important means towards achieving a far greater purpose, which is that of enabling dialogue and nurturing humanist values within societies in order to advance social and global justice. This is what a 'human rights culture' would constitute – not top-down legalistic imposition, but rather an inductive, bottom-up culture of respect among peoples coming together in solidarity over global, national or local issues.

In your on-going project, you examine the current 'first reception' of irregular maritime migrants arriving in Italy and Malta and you are also thinking of including Greece, with the aim of producing ethnographic descriptions of the everyday implementation of the reception activities. What do the actors say about the situation?

I am still in the midst of fieldwork. In many ways, first reception lies at the interface of the border and the asylum system. The diversity of actors on the ground involved in 'first reception', and the complexity of the system(s) are surely striking. As a result there is a plurality of voices of actors looking at the situation from different, and at times rather limited, perspectives. For example, a manager of a first reception centre will approach 'first reception' in a very different way to an Immigration Police Officer or an NGO offering medical services. So although there is a general narrative of emergency and crisis, beneath it lies a plurality of voices fuelled by some very diverse interests.

How can the rights of irregular migrants be protected?

From the state's point of view, the human rights of irregular migrants should be safeguarded in the same manner as those of everyone else. This implies the classic three-pronged approach: a) by enacting laws and setting up institutions, b) ensuring that there is an operational space for non-state actors to engage, take action and voice their concerns, and c) by empowering irregular immigrants.

The difference between the realisation of the human rights of citizens and those of migrants, who are non-citizens, is that the political and institutional structures need to carry an additional sensitivity to the unique barriers that migrants, and in particular irregular migrants, face in accessing human rights. They have to grapple with key, entrenched tenets of contemporary political systems, most notably: the practical and exclusionary potential of legal citizenship, the nation-state's reliance on territorial sovereignty and its investment in maintaining borders and the potent force of ethno-nationalism.

Why do human rights still not apply within irregular migration?

Human rights certainly apply to irregular migrants! But as non-citizens, and with the irregular nature of their status, they have a politically and legally difficult relationship with the state, which makes it easier for states to feel that they have less of an obligation towards them and that they are justified in violating their human rights. This is made worse by the fact that many citizens buy into this rhetoric without questioning, forgo solidarity with irregular migrants and often become perpetrators of hate (with the additional power that in a democratic society an electorate has). It is often seen as legitimate for states to afford a different and worse treatment to migrants who travel irregularly or have an irregular legal status, as though they were less deserving of being treated according to the basic minimum (human rights) standards that are acceptable for emancipated citizens.

Does a particularly inspiring memory from your fieldwork still stick with you?

It is difficult for me to single out one memory. But if I had to identify an inspiring theme from my current fieldwork it is the resilience of people who have been through physical and institutional violence. I have witnessed this resilience often, but it never fails to surprise me.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

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Migration is a social and global phenomenon that is challenging our contemporary societies to re-think basic social and political values. For us as scholars, migration provides a further opportunity to question key assumptions in theory. My advice to scholars is to not be scared of delving deeper and of immersing yourself into the debate. More engagement with these issues is needed in the academic, policy and everyday spheres.

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This interview was conducted by Ana Carolina Sarmiento. Ana is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.