Interview - Emma Mc Cluskey

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Emma Mc Cluskey is a Research Associate at the Department of War Studies, King's College London and a Teaching Fellow in International Relations. She is also a member of the Research Centre in International Relations (RCIR). She holds a PhD in International Relations from King's College London. Her research interests include refugees and migrants in the European Union, International Relations theory (particularly the notion of the 'everyday' in IR), International Political Sociology and ethnographic approaches to Critical Security Studies. She is author of 'From Righteousness to Far Right; An Anthropological Rethinking of Critical Security Studies' (McGill-Queens University Press; 2019) and is currently working on the FP7 funded project; SOURCE, Societal Security Network.

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

There's so many exciting debates; I couldn't possibly narrow it down. I think the most important work however, though perhaps not exciting, is taking place around the increasing de-humanisation of migrants, minorities, refugees and generally people on the move. This is obviously a huge problem which has firmly placed itself into everyone's imagination within the last three or four years. Related to this, the work on surveillance and its effect on democracy seems to be crucially important at this point in time. Especially if one looks to general societal acceptance to both of these sets of practices. So transdisciplinary or collective work on these topics is certainly of significant value right now, in my opinion.

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

I hope I don't have a settled view of the world yet; I don't want to turn into an ideologue! I hope that the way I understand the world will carry on changing throughout my life. Feeling uncomfortable and destabilised is all part of the fun. But so far, there have been so many experiences, so many people that have prompted these shifts and discomfort. Before I got into International Relations as an academic field, I was lucky enough to spend a few years travelling around the Middle East and Asia. These trips were often big overland journeys starting in northern Europe and ending somewhere in South-East Asia, picking up precarious jobs along the way. So 'International Relations' for me as a lived experience was always more about transversal lines and fragmentation than neat, monolithic narratives about levels of analysis, geopolitics or even globalisation as homogenisation. Arriving with my Irish passport, for example, on the Turkey-Iran border to be warmly greeted by an Iranian official with exclamations of 'Bobby Sands, good man!' was a strange yet striking example of some attempt at transversal solidarity. It was the first time I'd ever heard of the IRA prisoner who'd died on hunger strike. Even more odd was the burger joint named after him in downtown Tehran and a conversation with the owner about the value of martyrdom. The disdain of a German backpacker in a dorm in Lhasa when he saw I was blow-drying my hair ("You brought a hairdryer *here*?! To Tibet?!") is also an encounter I remember well. This showed me the pervasiveness of orientalist imaginaries and gender politics long before I'd read Said, Fanon or Butler.

In that vein, Arjan Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* struck a chord. The way that he conceives of the world as a series of '-scapes' and privileges the role of imagination in conceptualising these -scapes is extremely close to how I see an IPS reading of the world (below). I still remember the exact chair I was sitting on in the library when I read that book. Other books which lit a fuse were Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, Detienne and Vernant's *Cunning*

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Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society, Campbell's *Writing Security* and Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. As a mentor, Didier Bigo was and is exceptional in helping me to think sociologically and relationally; how to objectivise and the value of reflexivity. Working with Didier is like living life in technicolour.

Your research is broadly situated within International Political Sociology (IPS). Can you briefly explain what IPS is and how it relates to IR more broadly?

IPS for me works as this very methodologically pragmatic approach towards particular research questions or "problematiques" (see Bilgin and Guillaume), analysing specific practices, their strategies of justifications and their implications, particularly in terms of how they empower or disempower certain actors or groups of people. Engaging with the idea of the "international" in this sense (or even the global or the transnational) isn't through viewing it as an objective category of analysis as many traditions in IR which are shaped within political science tend to do, but instead as a specific "problem". What I think has been so effective in IPS is that it has brought together scholars from so many different disciplinary traditions; political sociology, political theory, geography, criminology, anthropology and law- specifically in a way which challenges disciplinary boundaries, borders and entrenched categorisations, thinking transversally instead about important topics of research like (in)security, migration, surveillance and development for example. IPS in this sense has been really helpful in framing these problems much more in terms of process, relations and flow whilst bringing reflexivity about one's own discipline and all its baggage- to the fore.

Your particular contribution to IPS is focused on the everyday and anthropological approaches to the study of the international. What insights can we gain from such an approach?

For me, the 'everyday' is conceived as a specific ethnographic way of knowing and of producing knowledge whereby ontological primacy is placed on lived experiences, in all their glorious mess and complexity. If we start from the everyday as lived experience, this can give us huge insight for example on security as a practice and phenomenon, by objectivising the sets of relations within which people are embedded which make them feel (in)secure. (In)security is thus always seen as something contingent, emergent and positioned in relation to something else. Diana Fox's work in Jamaica is exemplary in this regard for detailing how parents, reacting to a plan to abolish corporal punishment in schools, mobilised to frame this as an issue of national security, arguing their country is at risk as children will grow up to be gunmen and prostitutes if teacher's are no longer allowed to hit them. So what many would see as an uncontroversial issue on children's rights, when examined with an ethnographic lens- is conceived of as a security issue.

For my particular problematisation – security and mobility, an approach grounded in anthropology can show how a securitarian politics can travel and circulate, not from the 'top down' but spreading transversally, through the micro-practices of actors we wouldn't normally consider significant in International Relations. As well as adding teeth and texture to these questions of normalisation and societal acceptance of many of these security practices, a keen ethnographic ear also has the potential to shed some kind of light on the sets of relations in which those who are trapped, blocked, surveilled or even received and integrated, are embedded. As an art of writing, a focus on lived experiences has the possibility of re-humanising people who have been homogenised, flattened, funnelled and de-humanised in so many ways.

So the 'everyday' for me is not about going 'local', romanticising the everyday or looking at an individual level of analysis, but about recognising that the so-called national and international will always simultaneously be a form of local. And placing absolute primacy on these lived experiences has the possibility of telling us so much more about IR than many dominant IR positions which write humans out of their accounts.

Your forthcoming book *From Righteousness to Far Right: An Anthropological Re-thinking of Critical Security Studies* is based on ethnographic work in Sweden, complicating the myth of Sweden as a poster child for welcoming and integrating refugees. Can you tell us more about your experience in the field and how this informs your intervention in Critical Security Studies?

My book follows the story of nineteen months of ethnographic fieldwork as a translator with a grassroots in a small

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Swedish village which sprung up when about one hundred refugees were settled there. This was officially before the so-called 'refugee crisis' but at a time when Sweden made the unilateral decision to grant permanent asylum to all Syrians arriving at the border, which propelled the nation into the position of moral superpower once again. Like most ethnographic studies, my question shifted throughout my fieldwork. I had absolutely no intention of engaging with the Swedish 'Far Right' or anything related to that, in my imagination these were far removed thuggish types with shaved heads and big dogs. But as my fieldwork progressed, it became clear that a new way of thinking was emerging whereby it was becoming increasingly legitimate to openly speak of the refugees as undeserving and undesirable, and to act to ensure that the generosity of Sweden was not being abused in the context of the crisis of solidarity taking place at the EU level. Discourses and practices which the people in the village themselves had once labelled 'far right' and 'frightening' were becoming ordinary parlance. Positions that were once considered taboo came, instead, to be owned and performed by the very same people who had contributed to making them a taboo in the first place. It was completely destabilising.

I used Scott's idea of hidden and public transcripts to try to illuminate the mechanisms at play which permitted behaviours which were strictly policed and kept beneath surface to break through. If we think of security as a strategy of justification which sets limits; limits on solidarity, limits on the legal right to asylum and limits on democratic practice more broadly, I tried to engage with how these limits shifted further and further into everyday life, attaching themselves to seemingly far-removed discourses and practices around gender equality, children's rights, hospitality and even solidarity.

In framing my argument in terms of the shift from righteousness to far right, I really tried to illuminate the conditions of possibility of a particular type of exclusionary and securitarian politics, one that is on the rise, and to really add a great deal of texture and nuance to this picture. I call this an anthropological 'rethinking' because I wanted to open up to the plasticity and fluidity of boundaries around far right politics and the manner in which these boundaries crystallize. This is different to an analysis based around media and public opinion or public policies and party politics, which one sees a lot of within Critical Security Studies. These types of research are of course very useful, but I'm also worried that they can also have a de-politicizing effect in rendering far right politics as something neatly demarcated and "over there," nothing really to do with us as academics and lefty-liberal people. In contrast, this anthropological approach aims to understand how these positions become normalized, how seemingly unexpected people can "own" this type of politics, and how we are all implicated in these sets of relations.

Based on your ethnographic work, you have developed what you call "radical reflexivity" as a research disposition. How does it shape your research?

There are many approaches to reflexivity and I'm really happy that it's something that's being spoken about with far more depth and care than it has been in the past in our discipline, especially with so many scholars in International Relations now doing fieldwork of some kind. My approach to reflexivity is still evolving and developing with each encounter and conversation I undertake with research subjects, and with every transdisciplinary conversation I'm engaged in. I think this quite sociological idea of reflexivity; objectivising relations and building reflexive analysis into every step of the research process itself can be extremely useful (see Jeandesboz). It often helps to avoid self-flagellation and the essentialisation of particular facets of one's identity; with a systemic and attentive ethnographic sensibility, we can trace the activation of positional relations that perhaps hadn't been expected for example. This can provide fascinating insight into how the research encounter is shaped and this approach was crucial for how I wrote my Swedish story.

After my latest fieldwork in Morocco, which I found particularly difficult and where I was confronted with much more visceral suffering and violence however, I became a little less sure that one can avoid self-flagellation so much, and systemizing reflexivity felt like a cop-out in some respects. Reflexivity should never be a substitute for accountability or ethnographic responsibility, which in that instance I felt it was. So here, I was more inclined to veer towards a more auto-ethnographic and introspective perspective (Kurowska and Tallis; Dauphinee). I don't think that these two approaches to reflexivity are mutually exclusive and that there are in fact a lot of overlaps in which the two can complement each other. So perhaps 'radical reflexivity' is being reflexive about reflexivity!

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Together with Didier Bigo, you propose a P.A.R.I.S. approach to the study of (In)securitisation, dessentialising the notions of different "schools" in critical security studies. Can you explain this research agenda?

We found this idea of different 'schools' of Critical Security very culturalist and unhelpful, especially when teaching students. So we argued that, if we are to be called a 'Paris' school, this could be reconfigured as an acronym for Political Anthropological Research for International Sociology. The acronym was Bigo's idea, but the impetus came from many long discussions about re-inscribing the idea of reflexivity and the 'collective intellectual' once again, some decade or so after the CASE collective was published.

In terms of a research agenda, it's really based on the idea of transversality, disrupting hegemonies within academia and opening up to a plurality of ways of thinking and arts of writing. The paper we published was relating to an IPS-PARIS problematisation of (in)security. Here, we put forward different moves, all based on this idea of a very de-essentialised notion of both security *and* insecurity. The first was to analyse the modalities of veridiction or truth claims, and their competition, to construct a research question around a topic labelled 'security'. These could be truth claims coming from different academic disciplines or various 'experts'. But just illuminating the practices of justifications and the mechanisms through which these claims stuck is extremely important. This also relates to examining these struggles in a socio-historical way, through more socio-genesis types of studies looking at which actors had the capacity to impose specific meanings at certain periods, and the dynamics that construct change in the long run. In our Schengen project that we're working on with a broad group of scholars at the moment for example, the Schengen archives really complicate this idea that 'compensatory measures' were some kind of common sense solution to the supposed insecurity of freedom of movement.

The final move of PARIS was to ground these analyses in the lived experiences of people affected by the practices of those who claim they can decide what security and insecurity looks like. So, this is not simply looking at bureaucratic or elite discourses, but also the targets of (in)security practices, perhaps amateurs of security or what IR calls 'civil society'. So, I suppose it's a logic of zooming in and zooming out, not to build a holistic picture but to really objectify the sets of relations and everyday practices which brings (in)security into being.

You work as a Research Associate on the SOURCE project, which maps the professionals of societal security in Europe. As part of this project, your work has focused on the Schengen paradox. Can you tell us more about the project and this paradox?

KCL's part of this large, EU project really traces changing transformation of the provision of security in the area of justice, freedom and security and the implications of these transformations. We found the most effective way to speak about these transformations was to talk about a 'paradox' around freedom, technology and surveillance, which has been brought into being throughout the last 30 or so years of Schengen. Through transdisciplinary research, we also found that this paradox has been extended with the extension of the definition of 'security' by European agencies to increasingly characterise their function in terms of protecting societies and the increasing use of technology to frame relations between 'freedom' and 'security'.

So in the first step of this project, we investigated the early Schengen archives, confidential until very recently, allowing us insights into the ambiguities at the beginning of Schengen. We also looked at the construction of a focus on technologies of border controls as a solution to insecurity, and its extension beyond border controls by the aggregation of various different actors. We examined how the management of police and migration activities via the discourse of internal security has created specific ways of funding an industry of security technologies to compete with the US companies, which has extended its market to technologies of counter-terrorism and surveillance worldwide. Lastly we drew on more ethnographic types of interviews and encounters to examine these paradoxes at the human level; the effects of all these practices on third country nationals blocked from entering Europe. So we really look at how this Schengen 'paradox' manifests itself in all these different social universes and the implications of this.

You are also part of the interdisciplinary collaboration between sociolinguists and critical security

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studies scholars called "LIEP: Language, (In)Security and Everyday Practice". What are the aims of this project?

This is an interesting collaboration that came about very organically as IPS has moved more towards studying (in)security as an everyday practice within different milieus; the 'routine', the 'everyday', the 'vernacular', the 'lay' and so on. Sociolinguistics, the study of language and everyday communicative practice in changing social conditions, simultaneously started to attend to the increasing (in)securitisation of ordinary life, incorporating this within its traditional interest in the relationship of language to class, ethnicity, gender, etc. in communities, schools, workplaces, clinics and so forth. These lines of flight are now converging on (in)securitising discourses and institutions, on the practices of actors with different degrees of authority and influence, and on the lived experiences of people affected by fixed understandings.

So the aims of this project are to explore ways in which these two developments could be mutually enriching, generating perspectives on everyday (in)securitisation that they couldn't produce on their own. Sociolinguists and linguistic ethnographers take their 'data' extremely seriously; it's almost sacred. Placing ontological supremacy on the everyday lived experiences of research subjects is doxic for them, an approach which could enhance our understanding of processes of subjectification, normalisation and everyday appropriation immensely, particular related to questions of (in)security.

What is the most important advice you could give to young IR scholars?

I'm not sure that I'm best placed to give advice to young scholars; everyone's trajectory involves huge amounts of luck, including mine! Plus I've been accused by my undergrads of being a 'typical patronising millennial' in some failed attempts to stop them worrying so much about future plans. So I'd take everything I say with a good pinch of salt. But in terms of keeping happy and staying sane, I always tell my students that pursuing solidarity within academia is something extremely worthwhile, especially now in the publish or perish culture. Bourdieu's idea of the 'collective intellectual' isn't an empty dogma in this regard, it's a very effective strategy for critically intervening into important debates whilst also fostering reflexivity about the limits of the knowledge production of one's own discipline. There's no need to do all the intellectual heavy lifting on our own!

The other advice I give them is to research and write about whatever their 'beef' is. What in the world is making them lose sleep at night? Working on something that they're not that curious about just because they think it's serious or 'proper IR' usually doesn't produce all that interesting research. But most importantly, I tell my students to travel, to explore and to meet people, just for the fun of it. This is where I most get accused of being patronising, but I still maintain that it's worthwhile to have some kind of work/life balance and not to see every experience through the lens of how it can be exploited for research purposes or to boost a CV, even (especially) in today's hyper-competitive climate. Here I take my cue from the wonderful Appadurai again, who captures it perfectly: "Books aren't the world, they're about it".