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Interview - Katarina Kušić

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Dr Katarina Kušić is currently an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University. She earned her PhD at the University of Aberystwyth and before returning to the Department she spent nine months as a Senior Teaching Associate at the University of Bristol. In her research, Katarina uses ethnographic methods to explore how those 'being improved' by development, statebuilding, and peacebuilding efforts experience these processes and what their experiences can tell us about international politics. She is particularly interested in fieldwork-based methods, conversations between studies of South East Europe and postcolonial and decolonial thought, and liberalism as politics of improvement.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I think 'influence' is always a combination of different factors brought together in particular places, in this case institutions: supervisors, teachers, and colleagues. I came to social sciences and IR during my MA at Central European University. (The non-exciting reason for me being there was that I wanted to study social science, and after undergraduate studies in economics and business, I thought international politics are my best bet for a scholarship.) While at CEU, my MA supervisor, Emel Akçali, encouraged me to study what I would now call 'social transformations'—this gave me the vocabulary for a critique of (South-)East European 'transition' that I only intuited until then. Moreover, she convinced me to travel and do fieldwork, something that has shaped all my future work. At CEU, I was also exposed to a particular—I would say critical or heterodox—reading of the discipline through both IR theory and statebuilding courses taught by Xymena Kurowska. This kind of introduction was quite a privilege: it ensured that I rarely felt like I have to conform to 'mainstream' IR, and it made me curious, rather than defensive.

At Aberystwyth University, and the UK in general, I was exposed to more sustained study of postcolonialism and then decolonial thought. I think this shaped not only my research, but also my teaching and 'doing academia' in general. For this, I really have my colleagues at the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University to thank—we had a great PhD community and they both challenged and expanded my way of thinking. Of course, this was combined with extremely supportive supervision by Milja Kurki who pushed me to connect my empirical work to 'big' questions, and this thinking 'across scales' is something that I always hope to capture in writing.

In terms of authors and particular works, there are truly too many within and outside of IR to note. My thinking around intervention and governmentality has been shaped by Meera Sabaratnam's *Decolonising Intervention* and Tania Murray Li's *The Will to Improve*. I discovered *The Will to Improve* through an anthropologist friend at CEU and it helped me both understand why I am attracted to concepts like governmentality and intervention, but also what their limitations can be—or that they can *have* limitations in the first place. I read *Decolonising Intervention* while it was still a PhD thesis—I analysed it for an assignment in the first year of my PhD and it provided the crucial scaffolding for a methodology that centres on the subjects of intervention. And once I started thinking about 'doing' methodology, I found Allaine Cerwonka and Lisa H. Malkki's *Improvising Theory* extremely helpful in managing expectations and research during fieldwork. Alongside these, articles on governmentality and ethnography by Wanda Vrašti are pieces

that I constantly revisit. And then there are the dozens of authors working on/in the Balkans without whose work my research would be impossible.

In your thesis you argue for a reorientation of the concepts of international intervention and liberal governmentality. Why is this necessary and how should it be reoriented?

I think that we are trained to treat concepts with much caution. At times, it seemed to me that as PhD students we have to learn about them in-depth in order to 'apply' them. I know this is the feeling that I had while I studied agriculture as a statebuilding intervention—who are the actors? Where does the money come from? Why and how does it 'count' as intervention? And I was similarly worried as I read heated debates on the uses and abuses of governmentality—what did Foucault *really* think? Is it materialist or not? Are you 'allowed' to research it through fieldwork? The big 'aha' in my research happened when I stopped worrying about what I owe these concepts and what I must do to remain faithful to them, and started asking what they can do for me.

With intervention, the crucial question was then not *if* something is an intervention or not, nor whether it is a 'success', but what calling something an intervention does to the way we study it. In thinking about this, I realised that what attracted me to the concept was the specificity of practices that are both done across hierarchical difference, and that have as their pronounced goal improvement. But when you look at how the concept of intervention is used to study these things, you see that it does not help us make sense of that difference. On the contrary, it solidifies that difference in the formulation of local/international, it limits the practices that we see to those described in project proposals (instead of those needed to understand the processes themselves), and it limits our findings to saying liberalism works/does not work. So, when I say reorient, I think I mean looking at what the concept does and what it hits and misses, rather than staying within its parameters.

I similarly treated governmentality: it is a concept that can powerfully connect the psychosocial and subjective to the macro-political of neoliberalism, but that does not mean that it gives us a complete picture of the social world. In the thesis, I spend a lot of time showing that productive power that encourages us to do more and be better is always paired with more coercive techniques launched elsewhere. I am not the first to point this out, there have been many studies of both governmentality and (neo)liberalism that make the same point. But I also asked what this different understanding of liberalism does to how we study intervention. Are we then studying liberalism more broadly, rather than a bounded site? What can this do to the way we treat difference in IR?

Ultimately, I think we need to better theorise these connections between productive and coercive power now more than ever. When people are surprised by the increasingly overt authoritarianism we see around the world, I think the surprise—where did this come from? —emerges from failing to see the entwinement of productive and disciplining power that has always been there. Even though I deal with this in my research, I also notice it in teaching. My undergraduate students of development are very quick to condemn oppression and exploitation in the Global South, but it is much more difficult for them to either connect the exploitation 'there' with privileges 'here', or to see that similar techniques are used on specific populations of the Global North. These are the connections that I am interested in and that I think can be explored while rethinking governmentality and intervention.

Your research explores two fields of intervention in Serbia – agricultural governance and non-formal youth education. Why are these fields of interest and what do they tell us about the concept of intervention?

The first thing that I wanted to say by studying these two fields is that life happens in interventions. Behind technicalities and jargon (and here I mean both academic and those of practitioners), we have people navigating everyday problems and finding their place in the world. In the words of Meera Sabaratnam, it is this subjecthood that is missing from most accounts of intervention and I wanted to build my research from there.

Non-formal youth education—seminars, courses, and workshops that 'teach' everything from active citizenship to inclusion and human rights— was most obviously an entry point into the politics of civil society in Serbia. This is a huge topic in the region and it received a lot of attention in anthropology, with great books by Marek Mikuš and

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Theodora Vetta coming out recently. But hanging out in these workshops and seminars, I also noticed a spate of other things that are missing from discussions on civil society and intervention: youth navigating unemployment, expectations of a generation for whom the transition is the only social reference, economic migration, and a lot more. So the Foucauldian reading of these students being shaped into neoliberal subjects provides a very incomplete picture: some of them 'play the game' knowingly, some subvert it quietly, others reappropriate it for struggles against local expressions of neoliberalisation.

Within agriculture, I guess the unsurprising finding is that theory and practice run parallelly: EU membership is hailed as utopia when both national data and experiences of previous expansions point to the dangers of further marketisation. With regards to intervention, my work on agriculture and EU accession showed that to understand any project, we need to put it in conversation with the historical layering of different programmes of government. This is something that Li shows so well in *The Will to Improve*, and that I found extremely important in Serbia as well: any discussion of agricultural markets, land, and modernisation has to start from experiences of agricultural reforms in Yugoslavia. Besides this historical connection, I also particularly focused on land issues that underlie all discussion of modernisation but that are not addressed in the EU negotiations—this helped me argue that we have to look beyond the fields of visibility prescribed by the intervention itself, but it also led me to become interested in land issues more generally that I hope to explore in future projects.

You employed an ethnographic methodology to analyse policy areas in Serbia. What were the challenges and advantages to this methodological approach?

A lot has been written about promises and pitfalls of ethnography, generally and in IR. I think the biggest advantage that ethnography brought to my work has been being able to study the *effects*, rather than just rationalities, of particular government programmes. Critiquing NGOisation, individualisation, or neoliberalism is a very different thing if the starting points are the people who are engaged by them every day—people who often see them as opportunities to be pursued in contexts where there are not many opportunities available. Of course, this is at the same time a challenge: it's much easier to have the world divided in the good and the bad and write accordingly.

More generally, I think a big challenge for ethnography in IR are the efforts to reduce it to empiricism and data collection. In ethics approval applications, data management and sharing plans, and sometimes even in training, the relationships and reflexivity that ethnography depends on are reduced to interview transcriptions and data. On the one hand, this is to be expected as ethnography becomes more common in IR, but it also requires us to be quite careful in the way we both do and teach ethnography as a methodology. This challenge is captured in a really entertaining manner in Timothy Pachirat's *Among Wolves*. The book is an excellent reflection on interpretive ethnography, but it's written as a play about the trial of Alice Goffman's *On the Run*, with some of the most famous ethnographers appearing as characters.

One of the accusations against Alice Goffman is that of data fabrication: there are inconsistencies in her timeline and she famously destroyed all her field notes. In presenting the accusation, the prosecutor highlights the importance of sharing our data with others. But the defence team (Anna Tsing), uses the fact that ethnographers are now required to make their data available to other researchers to make a wider point of what we consider 'data'. She asks: why stop there? Wouldn't it then be better to equip the ethnographer with recording equipment ('24-hour 360-degree Visual and Audio Recording Technology') that would hold continuous record of the ethnographer's field experience—this can then be deposited as 'data'. The play makes it clear that even if we really had this equipment, it still would not allow others to access the 'raw data' of ethnography. In asking for 'raw data', we assume that there is data that precedes relations, that there is knowledge that is not intersubjective—and this is what interpretive ethnography rejects. Ethnography is about relations—of the most various kinds—and relations cannot be easily transcribed or photographed. This is an old discussion within interpretive ethnography, but I think it will have to be very carefully navigated as ethnography becomes more popular.

How can decolonial thought help us understand the politics of Southeast Europe?

To be completely honest, I think no one really knows the answer to this question yet and this is what makes this

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research agenda so exciting. We tried to sum-up some of the different fields that are opening in the Introduction to a Special Issue of dVersia Magazine (co-edited with Polina Manolova and Philp Lottholz) that was published earlier this year. There, we talk about the importance of thinking about the Balkans as coeval—shaped and shaping global coloniality, and the contributions to the issue show the variety of potential: from Zhivka Valiavicharska exploration of 1960 and 1970 socialist Bulgaria through tracing Angela Davis' visit to Bulgaria, to Manuela Boatcă's excavation of occidentalist underpinnings of citizenship.

If I am to simplify, I would say that I see the importance of thinking about the Balkans with global coloniality as an attempt to engage with the complexity of its subjects. There are a few stories about the Balkans that we are usually presented with: the downtrodden region bravely struggling against the oppression of different empires, the lucky contestant on the path to membership in liberal modernity, or the unsalvageable site of ethnic hatreds and genocide. The truth, as always, is much more complicated and requires us to think more carefully about the myriad relations that make any particular position. This is why I find those works that think about the Balkans globally to be both interesting and inspiring: this is Catherine Baker's work on race in Yugoslavia, Špela Drnovšek Zorko's work on Yugoslav migrants in the UK and ways they make sense of shifting differences, Piro Rexhepi's work on Islam in the region, and many others (who do not always use decolonial thought) that make this eclectic and growing field. I'm also very happy to see the *Dialoguing 'Between the Posts'* network growing—the second meeting was organised this year in Belgrade and there are many researchers from both the region and abroad participating so I think there are more exciting things to come.

Of course, the danger here is treating decolonial thought as another 'theory' to be applied or reducing decolonisation to a metaphor. I do not really have an answer to these big questions other than a commitment to tread carefully and being open to learning. But despite these dangers, I am optimistic about this encounter between different literatures, not least because it offers possibilities for political as well as analytical solidarities.

What are you currently working on?

I'm currently working on turning my PhD thesis into one or two articles: one on dislocating intervention as a limiting concept, and another on the uses of the 'Balkan subject' in statebuilding literature. I am also hoping to develop my work on agriculture into a new project that investigates land politics in the Balkans. I am happy to say that these projects will be supported by the ESRC post-doctoral fellowship for a year from October 2019. The same grants will also allow me to spend some time in Serbia to try to both share my findings with interested people and receive feedback from those I worked with during my fieldwork.

Besides this, I am also co-editing (with Jakub Zahora) a collection *Fieldwork as Failure* that will come out with E-IR later this year. This is something that Jakub and I, and I think also the authors of the chapters, are very happy to contribute to. The starting point of the project was asking why most people perceive their fieldwork as failure even though most of us earn our degrees and hopefully publish from the collected material. And importantly, why are these failures—big and small—almost never discussed in writing? This led into thinking about failure in academia more generally: where do expectations of success come from? How do they shape our experiences and wider politics of our institutions and disciplines? Why don't we talk about this (especially as early career/precariously employed researchers) when it clearly shapes both our knowledge practices and our affective states? This also interestingly connects to my more general interest in improvement as a technique of government.

So the book is an attempt to both intervene in the discipline itself, and a series of reflections that might help PhD students process their own expectations and fieldwork experiences. The project started at an EISA Early Career Researchers' Workshop in Prague with a lot of support from Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Xymena Kurowska. I think in the end the book is and unlikely voice of early career scholars navigating a highly competitive field with stories of failures. The book ends with a contribution by Berit and Xymena on the continuity of failure in academic production generally, and fieldwork specifically. The whole collection then is an attempt at creating an atmosphere more conducive to conversation, rather than a methodological recipe—we wrote it with PhD students in mind so we hope that it might help navigating practicalities and expectations of projects that depend on fieldwork-based methods.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early-career scholars?

I'm not sure if this is really advice, but definitely a project that I see worth investing in: building communities within academia. First, there are research communities that transcend disciplinary and other borders: they help us stay excited about what we do and provide those unexpected turns that make interesting research. And second, working communities on different scales. Anyone going through submission of the PhD or the first round of application knows the importance of support and guidance from peers. I think I recently saw a public Slack channel for supporting people through the next round of job applications advertised on Twitter: different things work for different people. A friend recently referred to this as 'subversive networking': instead of trying to create 'contacts' that would help our CVs or increase the number of Twitter followers, let's work towards building relationships of care.

But more than providing support, I think these communities also need to find ways to resist the further neoliberalisation of academia that makes the support necessary in the first place. A lot has been said about the proliferation of short-term contracts: the most recent UCU study reveals that 70% of researchers are on fixed-term contracts in the UK. We are also starting to see research on the hyper-mobility, competitiveness, and costs of chasing those short-term contracts—the same UCU study found 71% of respondents believed their mental health had suffered working on insecure contracts, and 43% that their physical health was also damaged. This does not only come at a personal cost, but also prevents us from being effective researchers and teachers. Importantly, many of these problems do not really disappear later in the career even for those who do gain more secure employment. These things are then amplified by intersections of race, gender, class, ability—all taken together, it does not make academia accessible or enjoyable.

Fighting against any of these things on our own is impossible: we might be able to occasionally negotiate a better contract or file a complaint, but the sad truth is that if we refuse to move, work on the weekend, or take on unreasonable workloads, there are many others who will. This is why this is both a labour problem, and a collective problem. In the UK, the first step towards change might be joining UCU (with its new general secretary who is outspoken on issues of precarity and the intersecting oppressions that feed into it). But it also means calling out exploitative practices in our institutions and warning our friends and ourselves when we notice behaviours that are feeding the beast. It's a tricky road to navigate in a profession so closely related to our politics and identities—even trickier while you are still a PhD student, but I think it needs urgent attention if we want to continue to do what we do.