

Interview – Kristina Mani

Written by E-International Relations

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Kristina Mani has a PhD in Political Science from Columbia University and is currently Associate Professor of Politics and Chair of the Latin American Studies Program at Oberlin College. Her research is in Latin American regional security issues, civil-military relations and the political economy of the military. A particular interest is the impact of democratization on elite political learning and on the historical memory of conflict and cooperation, which her book, *Democratization and Military Transformation in Argentina and Chile: Rethinking Rivalry*, explored in terms of changes to military thinking and behavior that reshaped security relations in the Southern Cone. Kristina's current research centers on how Latin American militaries have been influential actors in their national economies, in a variety of different ways that often have deep historical and strategic roots as well as important implications for military autonomy and professionalism. Her scholarly articles have been published in journals including *Armed Forces and Society*, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, and *Latin American Politics and Society*. She has consulted and produced papers for think tanks and nonprofit organizations including Transparency International, the United Nations Development Programme, Providing for Peacekeeping, RESDAL, and the Christian Michelsen Institute.

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

The globalization of IR theory is most exciting to me, because it creates new areas of attention and brings new voices into debate. Let's face it, IR theory in the United States academy, where I'm based, was created and dominated for generations by a fairly narrow sector of society that built up the important Realist and Liberal schools around the significance of US national interests, but marginalized important counterarguments about the problems of inequality and dependent power relations, as Robert Vitalis eloquently shows in *White World Order, Black Power Politics*. Yet, increasingly, scholars from other regions are challenging mainstream IR theory and gaining space in scholarly journals, professional organizations and through online platforms (like this one). This is a function of power shifting away from the US and its reliance on an ever more militarized foreign policy, which is real and I believe rightly continues to get plenty of attention, not least from Realists and Liberals whose perspectives remain valid. But it's also the result of a quest to more effectively address *global* challenges that no single country or region can deal with in today's world – climate disruption, the uneven spread and control of information technologies, the acceleration of economic crises, human insecurity on a mass scale but in particular parts of regions. Those are the pressing transnational problems IR theories need to speak to now, and I think a variety of perspectives and approaches are necessary to do this.

We also need to theorize a more realistically inclusive world order that recognizes non-universal values in IR theory. So I think that the work of scholars like Amitav Acharya suggests the kind of insights we need, and collaborations across regions like those of Arlene Tickner and Ole Wæver show the progressive debates that are possible and exciting today. In addition, I think some of the most useful work recently has been on the "discovery" of earlier ideas and practices that have come from regions that didn't often get credit for them. This provides new perspective on how influence works in international politics. For instance, the region I study, Latin America, played an essential role in shaping the principles and legal institutions of international human rights organizations and law at the time of the UN's founding, as Kathryn Sikkink shows. Latin Americans have similarly played a significant role in setting precedents that led to the Justice Cascade, by pioneering mechanisms of transitional justice that included truth commissions and criminal trials based on the principle of universal jurisdiction.

Interview – Kristina Mani

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

Learning to look for the exceptions and the things that don't "follow" as expected has been most influential for me, and it has encouraged a healthy scepticism and humility in me as a political scientist. I did my Ph.D. at Columbia University and was able to work with phenomenal scholars and mentors like Jack Snyder and Alfred Stepan, whose work is, of course, known for pioneering new theories and concepts, often by digging into the weeds through sources like archival documents or individuals' views. They were influential in encouraging me to look closely for things that aren't immediately apparent. So that led me to field work, which has been a core component of my research for 20 + years.

In particular, interview-based field work has been essential to deepening my understanding of the institutions and individuals I study. I'm mainly interested in analysing how new international conditions impact the calculus of domestic political elites – particularly the military, which has been and remains a significant actor across Latin America, but also the government and civil society actors who often interact directly with the military – and how that in turn impacts their international behavior, often with important consequences for themselves, their countries, institutions, etc. Because the military is a fairly closed institution, I found that it was important to engage directly with its individuals, typically through structured interviews. Doing that brought some surprises that at times have transformed an original research project into something different and more interesting.

For instance, my first book, *Democratization and Military Transformation in Argentina and Chile: Rethinking Rivalry*, examined how the experience of authoritarian rule shaped democratization in ways that promoted new confidence- and security-building strategies, enabling the resolution of historical rivalries and also the consolidation of civilian control. Those were major and unexpected achievements for these countries in the 1990s. I went into the project with the lens of "democratization and war" and looking for institutional factors, but after spending a year in Argentina and Chile and conducting nearly a hundred often lengthy interviews with military officers and civilian officials, I discovered that even more significant were the processes of political learning and rethinking of established practices these individuals had undergone as a result of having to engage with each other. So political learning became the driver for institution-building, and I became fascinated with how ideas gain or lose credence, how political openings impact the historical memory of conflict and cooperation. While I also draw from more conventional documentary sources when possible, I keep coming back to the importance of directly engaging with the people I'm trying to understand in my research.

Field work is challenging. You need to plan well and still be flexible, and you have to be persistent. It's also humbling because you're trying to interpret the culture, institutions and lives of others. No matter how much knowledge and understanding you bring to a situation that is not your own, it's a challenge to grasp the whole of it. On one research project in Central America, I met with senior military officials who admired the legacies of the counterinsurgency campaign of the 1980s, and later in the day met with human rights leaders whose perspectives told a very different story – that's not surprising, but it can be pretty jarring and you have to stay on track in finding patterns, assessing new information, and maintaining scholarly objectivity.

Your current research focuses on how Latin American militaries have been influential actors in their national economies. What similarities and differences have you found across the region?

It's become more common to see media accounts of the economic privileges and positions some militaries hold in their nations' economies – Cuba, Egypt and Venezuela come to mind – but when I first started looking at the history of the military's role in the economy about 10 years ago, it wasn't as well-known. In my current research on what I call military entrepreneurs, I look cross-regionally in Latin America and find that there are several different modes of the military's involvement in economic interests, depending on the historical and development context and military strategic priorities. So, by the 1940s and 1950s, in some cases the military was playing a leading role in developing the industrial sector in the larger more advanced economies of South America, particularly in Argentina and Brazil. Although this was rolled back after the debt crisis of the 1980s; in the 1960s and 1970s it was taking a leading role in advancing national development in an anti-oligarchical mode, in contexts as different as Cuba and Ecuador. In the

Interview – Kristina Mani

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neoliberal period, some of the post-civil war economies of Central America (which never accomplished either deep industrial development or a lasting counter-oligarchical formula) moved into a pretty egregious rentier mode of investing in formerly state-owned enterprises through the military's pension funds.

What they all have in common is a well-intentioned beginning (even in the Central American cases) that aims to support the military's institutional interests, and often national interests, in uncertain times. But in most cases, the privilege that results skews the military's position within the state, giving it access to state resources, special contracts, and riches that accrue to the officer-managers of military-run enterprises, holding back economic development and innovation. While it certainly isn't the case in all countries, military entrepreneurship has continued in most of the countries I mentioned earlier, where forms of social and economic power were able to replace the formal political power the military held until the democratization wave in the 1980s. It's also a global phenomenon beyond Latin America, as I've written about previously, and there is some great comparative work on it by my colleague Zeinab Abul-Magd and others who have studied the military in different regions.

What role has the Colombian military played in the recent political developments in the country?

The military in Colombia is interesting in that it has not formally held political power since the 1950s, but it has significantly shaped the political opportunities available to both the state and the insurgent rebels since the mid 2000s. Under Plan Colombia funding from the United States, the Colombian military was able to take the offensive vis-à-vis the FARC guerrillas for the first time in decades, which forced the group to the bargaining table and led to the historic peace agreement between the government and FARC in 2016. The peace is an amazing achievement, because the agreement is one of the most comprehensive in terms of addressing virtually all the major pressing problems that followed from the 50-year insurgency: the need for land reform, a formula for political inclusion of the insurgent left, victim reparations, as well as a pathway for transitional justice that emphasizes non-repetition and reparation over punishment to address the war crimes and atrocities committed by all the armed actors. I wouldn't say the military is proud of enabling the specifics of the peace agreement, but they surely are proud of the ability to have nearly defeated the FARC on the battlefield. The problem is that the current Duque government has been deeply critical of the peace agreement and has shown little interest in fulfilling its terms.

The military's operational successes have won it unprecedented levels of prestige, both inside Colombia and in the wider region, where Colombian military and police are invited to train other forces in the lessons learned in counter-insurgency and counterdrug work. Their successes also encourage the military to see itself as the new foundation for the state, and the practical implication is that it doesn't want to downsize or lose resources, as would normally be the case with the end of a war. In addition, there is the firm view held by state leaders, which Manuela Nilsson has documented, that state policies must consolidate rather than separate development with security strategies. But the larger problem is that Colombia's conflict has never been "normal" (what conflict really is?) and violence and insecurity were never fully quashed (rebels including the ELN and dissident FARC groups don't recognize the peace agreement, and a slew of organized criminal groups, which morphed out of the old cartels and paramilitaries of the 1990s, continue to hold power and territory in several parts of the country). In addition, the continuing Venezuela crisis creates a real possibility for a militarized conflict arising at the border, which deflects any remaining arguments that the state should demilitarize. Ultimately, what's most important here is that there's no possibility for a real debate and consideration of what a post-militarized Colombia could look like. In that context, the military doesn't need to have a loud voice – circumstances set a militarized agenda for them.

In a recent article you stated that Argentina is the Latin American country which has made the most progress in establishing civilian control of the military. Why is this?

The two most important factors are that reforms curtailing military autonomy were instituted very soon after the transition to democracy, and that the country has one of the most clear-eyed and assertive human rights communities in the region. Because the military was so clearly discredited at the end of its rule in 1983 (having carried out atrocious human rights violations, gross economic mismanagement, and a failed war against Margaret Thatcher's UK), the first governments of Alfonsín and Menem had the opportunity to institute reforms that would otherwise not have been politically feasible. It would have made Argentina more like most of its neighbors where reform was

Interview – Kristina Mani

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slowed because the military was able to pact its way out of rule (Uruguay, even Brazil) or set new constitutional standards that protected its influence and civilian political allies (Chile).

Instead, Alfonsín assumed the role of commander-in-chief, cut military budgets and manpower, and most importantly started a process that led to the public court trials – in civilian courts, not military! – of the Junta leaders for crimes of state. Those prosecutions led to convictions of former state leaders that were unprecedented at that time in the history of transitional justice. Although later military rebellions led to a roll-back in justice initiatives, the clear and public evidence of a repressive state system initiated through the military – killing or “disappearing” an estimated 10,000-30,000 people – could not be erased. Under Menem, the government turned to more pragmatic policies that succeeded in reorienting military institutional interests toward external defense, regional security cooperation, and international peacekeeping missions, all of which brought new credibility to a new generation in the military. Still, the stigma of the past remained, as did authoritarian beliefs on the civilian political hard right. So, what I address in that article is how more than 20 years after the transition, a third wave of reforms is instituted that seeks to create “citizen soldiers” – forces that are first citizens and secondarily military professionals. I argued this was the beginning of a culture shift via reforms to education (human rights training), law (abolition of the death penalty that until then had persisted only within military code law), and norms (gender-equalizing policies to protect the rights of women and LGBT soldiers) that were established by the early 2010s under the Fernandez government. At every turn, civilian defense ministers and legislation set the terms for these innovations, so that civilian political control has become quite solid.

All along the way, the Argentine human rights community – which is diverse and has strong legalist as well as grass-roots wings – has pushed for accountability for past criminal behavior and persistently calls upon political leaders to hold the military to account in all aspects of its roles. Even the Macri government, which sought to expand military roles to “better” address domestic threats by organized crime, has had to resort to highly criticized and limited decree moves, as under national law since the late 1980s, the military is limited to the role of external defense except in very limited circumstances. Although they are perhaps pitied by other militaries for their limited resources and autonomy, the military knows that Argentina’s reforms have helped to keep it out of the domestic policing roles that once brought it infamy, and that have corrupted other forces, most notably in Mexico.

What are the primary transnational issues that currently face the region?

The number one issue everywhere is climate change, but specifically for Latin America I also see three other transnational challenges: the growing leverage of China in the region, the stagnation in effective regional cooperation, and the erosion of global anti-impunity norms.

First, China’s trade and investment ties with Latin America have grown over the last decade and have helped the region weather global economic uncertainties – it’s been both a reliable export market through the last recession wave that hit Latin America’s other leading trade partners, the US and Europe, and a significant source of capital and investment. To date, economic ties with China have also come with fewer strings attached than Latin America has often faced in dealings with the US or international financial institutions. But Latin Americans have no guarantee that this will persist, and US policies on trade with China are pressing the region into a false choice between the two global powers.

To address that, I think that Latin American countries would do well to better coordinate their strategies vis-à-vis China and the US, which relates to the second challenge, of advancing cooperation within the region. Yet historically, this has been hard – already in the import substitution industrialization (ISI)-development period of the 1950s and 1960s comprehensive regional integration was a challenge, and it remains that way due to different sectoral dynamics in economies and ideological dynamics in current governments. If the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) is now a failed effort at regional coordination of foreign and defense policies, the turn toward a region-wide integration formula remains even further away.

The third challenge is the global expansion of impunity practices – from corruption to human rights violations and growth of citizen insecurity – that characterize a new breed of leadership in states across the globe. There’s even a

Interview – Kristina Mani

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new Impunity Index to measure this. In the Americas, leaders like Bolsonaro, Maduro and Trump routinely flout rule-of-law conventions, disparage minority rights and seek to eviscerate policies for enhancing social equity. That model is attractive to some of the recently elected leaders in the region (Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay come to mind) who won on nostalgic, anti-progressive policies that have endorsed outright impunity and achieved mandates on a trend of declining voter turnout. None of this bodes well for efforts to enhance citizenship rights (which depend on the protection of human rights) and it has crisis level implications for sustainable development and migration outcomes.

The use of a range of media such as film and documentary is a feature of your work. How do you incorporate these into your teaching and what are the benefits?

When I started teaching, I primarily used academic articles and books. My students did read them diligently, but they were often more excited by the occasional visual source like a film clip or video essay. I started to see that film too can be considered as text – after all, films have a structure and arc of development, and often an underlying argument about how the world works. They can complement the theoretical frames we apply to a topic and perhaps make them more accessible. Because visuals can be gripping, the act of sharing the experience of watching something together helps to create community in response to it. When we see a film, we want to talk about it afterward, so one benefit is that the material naturally opens discussions. The other major benefit is that the visual element of film can highlight the lived experience of people, which I think must be studied along with the concepts and methods we typically engage. I think that's particularly important when we're studying people in different regions.

I incorporate some element of documentary film into most of my courses, and I also created a course that's based entirely around feature and documentary films that illuminate contemporary Latin American politics. That course runs in the second half of a semester and is open to students who have some prior or concurrent study of the region, so that they have a leg up on some of the history and issues in the films we screen. It's also narrowly focused in time and place – post-dictatorship era films from Argentina and Chile that address issues of justice, whether related to historical memory, economic or social justice. I think that – just as with written texts – it's essential to carefully curate the films and also to connect them thematically. It took me a few years to figure out what works best in that course, at least for now. Film also can provide particular insights and arguments profoundly, and sometimes viscerally. For instance, if you want insight into the kind of “non-political man” who was likely to succeed in Pinochet's dictatorship, look at the main character in Pablo Larraín's *Post Mortem*. To better understand the challenges of adapting to neoliberal times in Argentina, see Pablo Trapero's *Mundo Grúa*.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of Latin American studies and the social sciences more broadly?

First, identify mentors – both inside and outside of your home institution – and seek out their advice. Second, be protective of your time – keep at least one day a week reserved for your most important project and move it forward; learn to say “no” to extra work that isn't super-fascinating to you, as it will still be there when you turn around to it later. Finally, seek engagement with people, sources, and methods outside of your discipline as often as you can – it will help you to maintain a healthy intellectual balance and give you a clearer perspective on the importance of your own work.