Interview – Xymena Kurowska

Xymena Kurowska is Associate Professor of International Relations at Central European University in Vienna and Budapest. She received her doctorate in political and social sciences from European University Institute (EUI) in Florence. She works within international political sociology, with particular focus on security theory, psychosocial and anthropological approaches in the study of politics, relational and interpretive methodologies, and the ethics of academic practice. She also practices interpretive policy analysis and has recently served as a rapporteur for a cyber diplomacy project, EU Cyber Direct.

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

We do not have 'grand debates' anymore and I find it liberating. In the past, grand debates, at a disciplinary level, were too often conducted within pre-determined hegemonic parameters, and in the end very few were eligible to speak. The downside to this may be fragmentation and polarization, the infamous camp-structure of IR, and some inwardness of scholarly engagement. It is gratifying to speak to those with whom one shares a worldview.

I am most interested these days in the "necessary fictions" that hold international society together, in normative subversion and in relationality, including how we produce knowledge about them. Research on stigma by Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, for example, shows the coercive character of norms but without reverting to the simple version of realism as we might know it from some introductory texts to IR. Maria Mälksoo develops on the concept of normative threat to contextualise the return of the entrenched trope of Central Europe as being somehow subversive of the western European subjectivity. Such discussions see norms as a form of politics and confront the self-flattering liberal narrative of multilateralism and global governance, without valorising grievances and resentments which pervade illiberal rhetoric. I am drawn to these scholars' appreciation of tensions and ambiguities, although a certain risk remains that the analytical category of stigma may reduce actors to unidimensional types. Cynthia Weber, for example, points out how the stigma lens singularizes what are always plural subjects ('plural' in the sense of accommodating apparently contradictory logics of behaviour, not in the liberal sense of pacific accommodation of differences). The emerging research agenda on rituals goes towards a pluriversal approach in world politics that I am keen to explore in this context. In a collective article that we just published in *Critical Studies on Security*, we think about ritual in conjunction with image as simultaneously ordering and involving potential disruption. The ritual angle confounds logocentric and mono-normative frameworks of analysis and engages the simultaneity of the concrete, situational and affective in world politics.

Another conversation I am drawn into, and part of my own research focus, is the question of what it means to think relationally in IR. Relationality is not a new question in IR but it is undergoing radical reconfigurations. These reconfigurations come from two directions in my view, posthumanism and narrative IR. As Milja Kurki argues in her recent book, IR's ontology of relations tends to privilege the study of 'things,' such as types of actors, against 'backgrounds,' such as material resources or environment, thus reducing relations to interactions. It also favours humans. Kurki proposes instead to think of relations as 'thoroughgoing', as 'shooting through' constellations of more-than-human enmeshment. Enmeshment radicalises the constructivist idea of mutual constitution, because here entities do not pre-exist as such but materialize in intra-action. This is a challenge to intersubjectivity understood in terms of public, transparent and discursively formulated relations which can be examined for regularity of patterns. Posthumanist understandings also reconfigure the standing concepts of international politics in the era of

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digitalisation. In AI and machine learning, for example, rationality, strategy, leadership, diplomacy, etc. both crumble and unleash renewed efforts to discipline and govern.

What for me brings together the posthumanist and narrative relationality is attunement to affect, that is, to the embodied and pre-discursive. Such relationality both decentres and embeds the human that cannot easily unmask the relations that produce her, which injects interpretive humility. In contrast to IR approaches that understood narrative as an analytical tool that renders the world more intelligible and thus epistemically controllable, here narrative is an affective mode of expression that interweaves personal experience with structural conditions. It becomes a site for thinking through the workings of power, knowledge, and ideological formations while acknowledging limits to knowledge and critique. Narrative confronts dissonance, disavowal, and irreducible conflict at the core of any personal and social project. This understanding of narrative helped me probe and express the implication of the critical academic subject in neoliberal conditions of possibility and the ambiguities of knowledge production in fieldwork. The papers appeared in two new journals, *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences (PARISS)* and *Journal of Narrative Politics* edited by Elizabeth Dauphinee at York University, both exceptional venues for rethinking modes of expression in IR.

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

My doctoral years at EUI were no doubt transformative. First, and quite literally, I acquired a conceptual and academic imagination; second, EUI is a site of unique exposure where all sorts of characters cross paths. Unaware of the rules and rituals of the academic world, I did not back then understand how lucky I was in this respect and how much this contingency structured my trajectory. My advisor, Fritz Kratochwil, has a way of thinking about the social that marked these beginnings. I was socialized into "IR" through what Tanja Aalberts, with reference to Fritz, calls "counter-disciplinarity as interdisciplinarity proper." She defines it, *inter alia*, as non-imperialist cross-disciplinary encounters without a roadmap, and this sounds like an uncannily apt description of my academic journey. With no roadmaps indeed, and fewer words than one would expect from a prolific writer, Fritz instigates an attitude rather than setting up a framework to be further developed, undermined, or emancipated from to acquire one's own voice. The hallmark of this attitude, the way I absorbed it, is a disposition towards a ruthlessly critical (self-)engagement, actually rarely an asset in the neoliberal academia, and a very complicated relationship with theory. Kratochwil is known as a grand theorist of International Relations but he has also been busy subverting that discipline by confronting its fantasy of theory. And yet those uninterested in social theory will find his writing alienating. From among peers at EUI, I have the strongest and most long-lasting bond with Patryk Pawlak who chose the path of praxis and policy analysis and helped me make sense of that minefield with nuance and a critical edge, remaining ever vigilant, so to say.

Dvora Yanow must be credited with introducing me to interpretive research, which happened at the precarious moment of connecting dots between theory and field. Not only did I get an introduction to interpretive data generation and analysis, something that back then nobody taught IR doctoral students, but she also introduced me to Cecelia Lynch whose work has shaped my engagement with interpretive IR ever since. These early career encounters were happening thanks to the openings in the aftermath of the EU enlargement (and my home country, Poland, joining the EU) but also in its obscure shadows. I am currently trying to make sense of the latter in a current book project on liberal affect in the semi-periphery for which I develop a psychosocial approach inspired by relational psychoanalysis. Recently, a research fellowship at the Department of International Relations at Aberystwyth was an important reinvigoration. It made me (re-)discover IR as counterdisciplinary, thanks in no small way to the diverse early career research community there and the creativity of Milja Kurki and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara. Milja and Berit helped me revitalise my research, ethical academic practice, and mode of expression, even if I cannot fully reform anymore.

Much of your writing is of an interdisciplinary nature. How does this influence the way you research and write articles?

I came to think of it as a position of an embedded situationist. Inspiration comes from a situation and I build on that in substance and style, while minding that the event is part of a larger social formation. The situation may involve

myself. An interlocutor's joke, a wink, can instigate a lengthy deliberation on 'post-enlargement' subjectivity, for example. Empirically, this somewhat resembles Lee Ann Fujii's 'accidental ethnography,' although I don't claim to be an ethnographer and I reach out instead to psychosocial studies. In both our approaches, however, one cannot plan or engineer insight. It comes in unexpected ways while fleeting moments and seemingly subjective impressions contain traces of social practice. Thinking from a situation does not necessarily involve direct participation. In a recent piece on trickstery and Russia as a trickster, written with Anatoly Reshetnikov, we analyse two situations that happened in autumn 2018: an interview on the pro-Kremlin TV channel RT with the alleged poisoners of the former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, and Russia's bid in a UN General Assembly committee for a new UN resolution on responsible state behaviour in cyberspace. Engaging thinkers from anthropology, semiotics, and the study of religion, we piece together what trickstery may mean in contemporary international society. The research strategy, if I may call it like this, is to work 'in the midst of things' and take rather seriously glimpses and slippages. Writing is then a process of searching at length, counter disciplinarily, for a vocabulary to convey what I think I have learned. The above is perhaps a slightly metaphorical description in lieu of saying that I neither test IR theories nor transpose the thought of any one social theorist to elucidate an IR problem. There is a downside to it: If one does not follow stylistic templates and conceptual conventions of any one way of theorising, one is seen as lacking a coherent research agenda or politics, somewhere between being wooly, contrarian, and co-opted.

How does International Political Sociology benefit our understanding of International Relations?

This is a subject that many in IPS have debated and I would not be able to do justice to these debates here. I think that IPS has changed (critical) IR, fractured it, as many IPS scholars may prefer to call it, opened it up. This helped see critical research as a legitimate way of studying global politics in unorthodox ways. It made many hidden hierarchies come to the fore, broke through more than a few orthodoxies, and made it less taboo to speak of who gets to say what that is agenda-setting and 'professional.' IPS integrated the margins, in other words. The latter can of course be seen as taming radical critique and showing IPS's own pursuit of social capital and status (see a recent contribution). But I prefer to see the long way IPS has gone legitimating the kind of work that previously struggled to be accepted, including that counterdisciplinary disposition which I would not know where to take otherwise. IPS is also an ever-vigorous space of a relative freedom of style and of transversality, the concept which I find most productive.

A component of IPS is its emphasis on decentering the dominant modes of knowledge production. Why this is important?

The normative and epistemological come together in the purpose to decentre. Decentering gets us closer to what some have called pluriversality. To be centred on something is to be fixed, rigid and detached. It is, in effect, a sort of "flight from reality". Undermining this fixedness not only adds dynamism but it also makes possible complex plural engagement; plural understood in the way I signalled before, that is, not as merely tolerating an apparent difference but as able to bear contradictions and incommensurability. Such engagement will always be porous and fragmented and for this very reason unsatisfactory but, I would claim, less prone to fantasy and dogmatism. This is also how I see the link between IPS sensibility and practice, even policy practice, although many IPS scholars reject such direct linkages as uncritical when policy practice pulls to re-centre and control.

How does using an interpretive approach enhance our understanding of EU foreign policy?

Briefly, I think about it as sorting out the narratives that actors, here EU foreign policy actors, tell themselves and each other in their political projects, as part of broader and conflicting structures of signification. The (EU foreign policy) 'practitioner' is, in this respect, a subject beyond being an individual but she is not a mere mechanical throughput of a structure working behind her back. An interpretive approach can start in controversies by asking what frameworks (narratives) the practitioner uses to make sense of her situation. She is a site of many influences that she tries to reconcile in her narratives, and interpretivists have means to observe such struggles. The purchase of an interpretive approach is that it can analyse tensions in lived political phenomena rather than resolving them by a theoretical or political fiat. There is scepticism there about any claims to consistency and transparency, and attunement to pluriversality of meaning despite seeming equivalence of language. Joe Soss's chapter in the volume

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Interpretation and Method edited by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwarz-Shea offers an excellent conceptual and methodological elucidation of this analytical purchase.

The narrative of the EU as a 'normative power,' as worn-out as it may seem, is a deep well for interpretive analysis. It is a term that refuses to die and travels across policy areas in different reiterations. Currently, it is being repurposed in the cyber domain in connection with the EU as a global (normative) leader in data protection regulation. EU (foreign policy) actors attach different meanings to it in different contexts, they are both dismissive and protective of it, with slippages that signify interesting entanglements. Try announcing that the EU is not a beacon of progressive norms in global politics on a panel on EU foreign policy supported by EU-affiliated institutes. Despite all the jaded criticism of incoherence, lack of political will and capacities, etc. it has an effect similar to the use of the ethnomethodological method of committing a social blunder in order to understand the local social rules. You do get to see them operate, at a significant social cost. The interpretive approach has worked for me in the study of policy because it is both wary of claims to competency by others and sees research as learning from others. In the realm of eloquent EU diplomats and bureaucrats, that analytical attitude is useful to maintain suspicion towards "being-in-the-know" by any party.

What are the pedagogical challenges to teaching interpretivist methods? How can these be overcome?

I have been confronted with this question ever since I started teaching methods in 2010. Interpretive methods are anti-foundational, cross-disciplinary, holistic, and thus counterintuitive and initially frustrating at least in three respects: First, disciplines come with discipline-specific methods. In an IR classroom, we often teach with examples from across social sciences and humanities and this raises the question how such examples can be useful for IR problems. This bafflement grows exponentially as students are still mostly expected to perform disciplinarily in their research papers. We seem to end up telling them 'do as I say, not as I do.' A way forward could be to teach with IR examples only, but this reinforces disciplinarity and the pattern to borrow from elsewhere and IRise.

Second, participants in methods classes expect a procedure to follow, a template how to reproduce neatly delineated steps that lead to a methodologically rigorous research paper, that is, to science. The lack of interpretive template is exasperating. The misconstrual of technical instructions as systematicity, certainly not only in the classroom, does not help. This is a long discussion on the conflation of science and neoliberal measures that I cannot go into here, except to signal that the engagement with Science and Technology Studies has added much nuance to this debate in IR. Crucial, I think, is not to fantasize from the successful experiment, so to say, but to confront the organized hypocrisy of research design, as we ponder with Berit Bliesemann de Guevara in our chapter for E-IR's *Fieldwork as Failure: Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations*, a volume edited by Katarina Kušić and Jakub Záhora which has much to say about interpretive sensibility.

Third, and connected, interpretive methods are seen as subjective, a misunderstanding in my view, and thus often felt as uncomfortable at the personal level and with respect to being scientific. Indeed, in the interpretive approach, the researcher is asked to engage with her own position in order to make sense of where she speaks from: Claims to objectivity and epistemic superiority are scrutinized as political claims since we always speak from somewhere. While we cannot fully grasp the complexity of our own implication, and interpretivists are modest about the extent of their penetrating gaze, we nevertheless ought to continue probing. Cecelia Lynch conveys most lucidly how the researcher is part of the hermeneutical circle and research questions emerge within particular socio-political conditions. Asking why we decide to pursue a particular problem is then part of the picture. This must not be conflated with confession and I am careful discussing positionality in research projects. We are incompletely embedded in ideologies and hierarchies and there is no automaticity to what positionalities mean. For example, "I was born and raised in Poland in a particular historical period and in a particular social and cultural milieu and therefore…" may be factually true but it does not in and of itself settles my positionality. It may be a statement off the mark, a deflection, as well as manipulation of cultural intimacy. Further, we must not demand confessions; not only because they can masquerade for reflection but also because we never know what trauma we are stepping on. In this context, the interpretive method and task is not only epistemic but also normative and thus never fully realizable in a vulnerable environment of a classroom. The acknowledgment that a template for analysis does not work in practice is insufficient, however. The pedagogical challenge is to convey that the biggest weakness of interpretivism

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is also its major source of productivity. Specifically, systematicity comes from engagement not detachment, one learns from being together with others and from confronting one's urge to instruct and control, not from being taught. How to approach it in a methods course, with looming deadlines for paper submission? Not easily and with effects mostly after the submission.

In 2014 you wrote about Russia's contestation of liberal norms and its self-perceived responsibility to contain Western dominance. Has this changed in the age of Trump and an increasingly fragmented liberal world order?

One may expect that if the world order has become less liberal, Russia's protestations against it could also lessen. The opposite seems to be the case. So, one may entertain a conclusion that it has been pure *realpolitik* all along and the substance of a particular ideology does not matter, beyond providing convenient parameters to perform rivalry. This does not seem accurate either, in the sense that ideological differentiations matter. The role of individual rights and social dialogue have different currencies in different contexts, for example. The paradox is that the contestation has intensified and Russia's position and image have strengthened without Russia becoming stronger, which in my view can be seen against the background of the mythology of the liberal world order. Not to diminish the implications of Russia's conduct in global politics, the reaction to this conduct reveals the failure of liberal democracies to live up to the liberal ideal globally. In this context, Russia's contestation of liberal norms is useful for the purposes of highlighting the dangers to the rules-based international order and confounding the irony that liberal democracies try to prosecute by law and sanctions, or govern by global institutions what is, in essence, a political problem. Crucially, this is not only the issue of self-subversion and hypocrisy over hierarchy in international society. It also relates to the historical observation that the successful liberalisation at the global level undermines liberalism itself, as Beate Jahn writes most lucidly.

Your recent research has focused on cyber diplomacy and Russia. How does this fit into Russia's broader foreign policy?

Cyberspace has become a central geopolitical arena where Russia enjoys an overblown status. Russia has been active in cyber matters not only as a troll, hacker and curtailer of Internet freedoms, but also through diplomatic efforts at global regulation of the Internet that it initiated in the late 1990s. There are distinct continuities of Russia's foreign policy tropes in its cyber posture. Russia's initial proposal to regulate the Internet was modelled on the nuclear weapons non-proliferation regime. This was partly because Russia sees information as a weapon, a position which is reflected in its narrative of information security promoted at the regional and global level. The regulation initiative was from the outset geared towards containing the US dominance in the cyber domain, importantly through curbing global business registered in the US for which non-regulation was a source of significant profit. The main controversy in cyber diplomacy nowadays surrounds the question of a separate cyber treaty or treaties. Russia is advocating in favour, arguing that this would keep in check the exploitation of the cyber domain by Western states, a rather familiar trope of 'democratization' which in practice resembles a pursuit of the balance of power between US-Russia-China. The majority of Western democracies argue against a treaty and try to specify how the existing international law applies to cyber space to prevent treaty negotiations. Russia is portrayed in this process as a spoiler that obstructs "governance by cyber norms" and the rules-based international order more broadly. This is a fascinating clash of narratives. What gets under the analytical radar is that Russia and liberal democracies operate with different meanings of global norms and the role of international law in ordering international society, as I try to explain in my recent chapter on Russia's cyber diplomacy.

What is the most important advice that you would give to early career scholars studying international relations?

Above all, I'd say that one needs the minds of others to think and one can only grow with and through others, minding not to make this process extractive. The reciprocity is about the time and attention you give to others and their work. This does not necessarily equate with harmony and may be ridden with conflict and disappointment. In other words, my one piece of advice is: Find yourself a community, or (overlapping) communities, or a changing constellation of a few people who will read your work with loving ruthlessness, including in editorial terms, who will get you unstuck or

send you into (in the long run) productive turmoil, sometimes by saying two words or making a face, and sometimes by making you restructure your abstract so that you finally figure out what your paper is about. You will forge better ties with some in that community while some will misconstrue you completely, in your interpretation, although you hoped desperately to pick their minds. Some will think that you pick on them, and perhaps you do. Those that do not seem to understand you may be very important as they occasionally connect the dots you did not know existed. Finding this sustenance (feedback) and being able to use it productively is paramount and most difficult, because of the neoliberal pressures that structure academia, clashing personalities, and our own and others' follies. But it is worth it. Finding your thinking mates is not the same as networking, however, which is another advice that I should give from pragmatic positions. Networking can help get a job, if the stars and the departmental politics align, which is also sustenance of course. It may be necessary for finding your thinking mates, too, but it will not necessarily make your thinking thrive.