Interview – Julia Leser

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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 early career scholars.

Julia Leser is a political anthropologist/ethnographer and a Postdoctoral Researcher on the project "Challenging Populist Truth-Making in Europe" (CHAPTER), which is based at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and co-speaker of the German Political Science Association's working group "Political Ethnography". Her research is concerned with the role of emotions in knowledge production processes, particularly in political realms. Julia's fields of interest include political anthropology, political ethnography, and affect studies, as well as national security and migration control, nationalism, populism, and political theory. Since 2018, she has been conducting ethnographic research at populist parties' meetings in Germany, focusing on the functions of affects in political practices and in producing 'truths.' Her recent publications include the co-authored monograph with Rebecca Pates, *The Wolves Are Coming Back: The Politics of Fear in Eastern Germany* (Manchester University Press, 2021).

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

I was trained in the field of political theory—a field I chose because I was very interested in what happens when people are living together, making rules, and creating systems of governance, such as states. Yet our political theory curriculum was kind of orthodox. Naturally, we read Hegel, Hobbes, and Weber. But only later, when I started working on my dissertation, I learned that what I enjoyed most of all was deriving theories and hypotheses from lived experience. I understood that theory has many meanings and that there are many ways in which theory can be practised. In my dissertation, theory was something that I wanted to *do*. I was always interested in the state, and how it worked. Because of that interest, I decided to study the state from the ground up and to do an ethnographic study on the police. However, doing political theory from the ground up was, to some of my professors, an endeavour that was almost unimaginable. One time during a PhD seminar, a professor said to me: '*Grounded* theory is not *really* what we're doing here in Political Theory'. In this regard, my supervisor Rebecca Pates always encouraged me to pursue my interests. And very soon, I extended my reading beyond the predominantly white, male theory curriculum, starting with Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, and from there, Karen Barad and Londa Schiebinger, Mary Douglas, Lorraine Daston, and Annemarie Mol—who all inspired me to think about the performative nature of concepts and theories, about the politics of positioning, and the power dynamics inherent to scientific endeavour. Only much later was it that I discovered theorists engaging with the politics of affects, such as Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, Sianne Ngai, and Ann Cvetkovich. All of them are amazing and inspiring theorists. I never had that much fun with political theory reading and interacting with their books. I absorbed their language and their vocabulary, and I developed a form of thinking that was more of my own.

Your research explores the role of affect in knowledge production processes in political realms, for instance in the making of the nation, far-right politics, and the policing of sex workers. What does affect mean to you and how does it help us to better understand processes of knowledge production?

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Thinking about politics through the lens of affects can challenge a lot of the assumptions we bring with us into this field of inquiry. The traditional, deliberative understanding of democracy, for example, assumes the existence of a public sphere free of passions. On the one hand, political decision-making and the functioning of state bureaucracies are assumed to be *rational*; anti-democratic, populist politics on the other hand are assumed to be *irrational*. Yet through close ethnographic observation, I came to understand that affects are an important part of every dimension of the political. Eva Illouz and Sara Ahmed, for example, have shown how affects work in the political sphere and argued that affects are not irrational, but functional. I understand affects as situated and embedded in socio-political settings, and I show in my research that affects and rationalities cannot be clearly separated, but that affects have particular logics that we can explore. This becomes clear when we understand affects as a quality that is performed and practised for a specific reason. In regard to the rise of the political right, Wendy Brown recently gave a talk titled "Populism, Authoritarianism, and Making Fascism Fun Again", in which she argued that right-wing political agents have been particularly successful in associating racist and populist sentiments with freedom and fun, while blaming the left as repressive and prohibitive. These efforts are subtle and unspectacular, yet they have gradually and persistently advanced the normalisation and social acceptability of far-right attitudes.

A large part of your work revolves around an ethnography of the state. Can you briefly explain what such an ethnography entails and how it helps us to deconstruct the notion of the rational state?

If we understand 'the state' not as a monolithic entity, but rather as performed assemblages or as effects of practices, as Timothy Mitchell has argued, for example, new avenues of inquiry are opening up, including the role of affects in state practices. To understand how 'a state' is being practised, we can explore the manifold parts and particles that the state is made of and research the practices and relations through which the act of governing is realised. According to Michael Lipsky, it is not national legislations and public policies but rather 'the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures [that] effectively *become* the public policies they carry out' (p.xii). A state ethnographic approach thus focuses on the interactions of different agents, the dynamics of their decision-making, and their engagement with different strategies, technologies, and artefacts they use and produce in order to interpret and translate legal categories into local practices. The focus on practices also enables the researcher to understand the state not exclusively as a composition of rules and rationally acting bureaucratic agents, but to grasp the affective constellations of state work. In my dissertation, I have shown how police officers approach the issue of trafficking first and foremost in the form of knowledge practices that sedimented into routine procedures of categorisation and classification of women in sex work. These classification procedures may seem routinised and standardised, but the outcome of a police officer's classification also depends on their framing of the issue, their motivation, and most importantly, on the dynamics of the interaction between the classifier and the classified. In a broader context, the micropolitics of a police officer's practice of classification, for example, reflect and reciprocate particular performances of 'the state' that are, in the case of policing human trafficking, intertwined with different conceptualisations of the law, morality, order, and authority.

When you studied anti-trafficking efforts by the German police, you noticed that the police officers did not actually find any trafficking victims — although they knew that the victims had to be somewhere. What political work did the figure of the victim do?

I spent about a year with a specialized police unit in a midsized German city, observed their practices, and accompanied the officers on their raids in the red-light district. In none of the raids I observed, however, did they actually find a victim of trafficking. This struck me as a paradox. How are the police supposed to fight human trafficking if no victims are being found? How is an absent victim supposed to be rescued? Although the officers did not find any victims of trafficking during their raids, they legitimised the raid practice as a means of combating trafficking. Hence the raid as such can be better grasped as a governmental technique aimed at the policing and control of migrant women engaged in sex work. It includes practices of identification, registration, and classification of 'problematic' subjects, and draws on particular logics of performing control, maintaining order, of data acquisition and knowledge production in order to make those subjects of control more manageable. In these practices, the 'victim of trafficking' is enacted as a relational object of knowledge that helps to reproduce 'the state' in a particular way: in being burdened with the task of upholding the social order, police officers identify, not the victim, but what is

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deemed normal, deviant, order-less or morally questionable, in short: what sort of problems require a response by the state.

In the recently published monograph *The Wolves Are Coming Back*, you and Rebecca Pates trace the re-emergence of radical right parties in Eastern Germany through the return of the wolf to the region. How do 'wolf politics' help to explain the rising nationalism and radical right-wing politics?

In our ethnographic exploration of the wolf issue in Eastern Germany's rural areas, we used a micropolitical approach to analyse how far-right populist parties such as *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) framed the 'wolf debate' in their campaigning efforts in 2019, and how these framings resonated with people in Eastern German rural areas the AfD sought to address with these framings. In these far-right political campaigns, the wolf serves as a figure to construe a particular rural population as vulnerable to predators who have been 'invited in by urban dwellers' who remain far removed from the consequences of their decisions. Wolf politics is one example of how the far-right mobilises political narratives, and how this challenges our democracy. Telling the story of returning wolves in this manner, populist parties organized numerous campaigning events in Eastern German rural areas, enacting themselves as those who take the local population's worries seriously, as the ones who come and listen. What these parties offer to, for example, agitated farmers whose sheep were killed or who were at least afraid this could happen, is recognition of their worries, not judging them as irrational, and a valorisation of their emotional interests—it is a promise of being taken seriously, of not being ashamed of one's own fears and worries, and of being listened to. It is through these promises and emotional overtures that populist rhetoric and performance work best.

You are currently researching how museums can challenge populist truth-making in Europe. What distinguishes populist truth claims from other knowledge claims, and what role do museums play in unmasking them?

In our transnational research project, we are investigating populist truth-making as a political practice that is distinguished by its performance and politicisation of 'the people', 'the elite' and 'the Other'. We think that many questions that are frequently asked about populism are not very helpful, for example: Is it populist? Is this kind of politics irrational, or more emotional than 'normal' politics? Is it fake or untrue? To us, it seems more analytically beneficial to ask: *How does it work?* Populist politics are often assumed to work by bringing particular political identities and subjectivities into the world. We therefore ask whether and how they do that in interacting with museums and the narratives that are brought into the world respectively by these institutions. We understand populist truth-making as a political epistemology: as a way of knowing the world (politically), and in addition—integrating the performative dimension—as a way of making political worlds. Situated practices of populist truth-making can be empirically researched—with a strong focus on the normative references of these politics, because here we can assert what renders these practices populist: think of populist truth-making as a way of weaving the social fabric of populist imagined orders and worlds, as world-making. Conceiving populist truth-making as world-making takes into account affective dynamics, narrative world-building mechanisms, the performative production of places, times, and socio-political entities. In the realm of museums and heritage, we can see that populist politics aims at (re)producing particular national narratives, for example through the mobilization of a more secure and 'great, Imperial' past, and an ethnonationalist world dominated by the white West.

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

Most of our institutes, our curricula, and our books are still predominantly populated by the thoughts and theories of old white men. We should challenge these restrictions to our imaginations and creativity as much and as often as we can. This is not easy, because academia can be toxic. Most of us have learnt that the hard way. For me, it is most important to seek out and establish working environments in which you find support and people who encourage you to go your own way, to take your time, and who give good and honest feedback. Keep in touch with people you work well with and look for mentors who truly support you. Having a supportive network—across academic disciplines—made me realize that most of the challenges I was dealing with were not only experienced by me, but by many of my colleagues. Realizing that the toxicity in academia is systemic should push all of us to fight (more) for better working conditions in which we and our research can thrive.

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