"We should no longer exclude the Global Easts when talking about the African continent."

Čarna Brković is Professor of Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz and held a presentation titled "The willing suspension of disbelief: the work of imagination in sustaining moral projects" as part of the Anthropological Colloquium 2023 at the Iwalewahaus in Bayreuth.

She published a book "Managing Ambiguity" on clientelism in Bosnia and Herzegovina and is currently writing another one titled "Realigning Humanitarianism: Worldmaking from Yugoslav Socialism to Neoliberal Capitalism in the Balkans".

In this interview Prof. Brković talks about how her personal migration background has influenced her scope of research and teaching on activism, political imagination, refugees and clientelism, provides insights into her methodological approach and its challenges and presents her thoughts on how the concept of "Reconfiguring African Studies" by UBT's Cluster of Excellence - Africa Multiple could be implemented into epistemological processes in non-African contexts.

You are currently working on a book called "Realigning Humanitarianism".
Can you say a few more words about the transcript? What can the reader expect?

The full title of the book is "Realigning Humanitarianism: Worldmaking from Yugoslav Socialism to Neoliberal Capitalism in the Balkans".
In the book, I look at how the work of the local humanitarian organizations, such as the Red Cross, changed between the 1970s and the 2010s in Montenegro. I try to see what humanitarianism meant during Yugoslav socialism and how this has changed with the introduction of the neoliberal democracy.

You are working on several projects in the moment. One is the book you've just mentioned. But you also have published a book already which is called "Managing Ambiguity". And there is multi-party research project called ReDigIm. Are all these projects, despite being in different areas intertwined with one another?

I would say that these research projects are intertwined, because the broad question that I'm interested in is how people help one another. All these different projects are about different ways in which people relate to one another and help one another. My doctoral research, which led to the book "Managing Ambiguity", looked at how people who were in need in a border town in Bosnia-Herzegovina generated help that they needed. If you would need, for example, surgery abroad in Vienna and you did not have the money to pay for it, what kind of networks would you generate to raise enough money to go abroad, to get the medical aid you or your child needed. In the ReDigIm project, we explore ideas about who should be helped, why and how in different European countries. Who ought to receive financial aid and from whom, and how these ideas are being reconfigured today.

Very broadly speaking, I am interested in how a political community comes to be through the acts of sharing, help, being, exchanging.

Where is your interest, especially for these kinds of topics in this particular area coming from. Is there a connection you with your personal background or is it something that you just found to be the most interesting?

That is a very good question! I was born in Serbia and then had to move with my family to Montenegro in 1992 when the wars in Yugoslavia had started. I grew up in Montenegro while Yugoslavia was falling apart. I was very much influenced by this experience. I read a lot on nationalism, war violence, genocide studies and so on. When I started studying cultural anthropology, I felt saturated with some of these topics. I wanted to understand what happens when people in different kinds of political communities try to help one another. I think I wanted to understand the flip side, the other facet of the events that were taking place in front of my eyes at the time.

Because of the media focussing on the violent aspects of the war and not on the site that you've mentioned? As well as the awareness within the society being rather on the negative things? Did that play a role?
Or let me phrase it in a different way. Would you consider that being a positive thing; helping one another?
What happened with Yugoslav countries in the 1990s was not just the fragmentation of one larger state into several smaller ones. It was also the transformation of one political collective – of one idea of how people should relate – to another. It was violent transformation of an existing political collective into something different, into another idea of what a political collective should be. This transformation was partly achieved through violence, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. Violence was part of this story of social transformation. Another part was this major transformation of relationality, of how people relate to one another.

Let me put it in the form of a metaphor. Let's say we are weaving. Can you imagine a cloth being woven in one way and then violently ripped apart and then rewoven in another way? I was interested in how this process of weaving the cloth back, but differently, took place in former Yugoslav countries.

What's your methodological approach and how do you access the situation, e.g., in a refugee camp? You have mentioned the Red Cross as an organization, that potentially can provide an access to certain groups. Apart from that, how do you think you having a personal relationship helps? That you can use your language for example? How do you get that done?

I usually do long-term participant observation. For my Ph.D. I lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in a border town, for 12 months. Since I already spoke the language, I didn't need language preparation.

For my second book, I conducted long-term participant observation, as well as historical research on the work of the Red Cross in the 1970s in the archives in Montenegro, in Geneva, and in Belgrade. I did participant observation in a refugee camp near Podgorica. I went back and forth between the town of Podgorica and this refugee camp, and I worked with the local humanitarians who were running the refugee camps. The refugees were Roma and Balkan Egyptians from Kosovo, who had been living there for almost 20 years in the same camp.

I decided not to focus on them for various reasons, but instead to write about the local humanitarians. The experience of the refugees from this camp is not at the focus of my book.

What were those "certain reasons"? Would you like to mention them?

I was interested in understanding how this moral project of humanitarianism was transformed with the fall of socialism. For that I had to conduct a study of the local humanitarians.

People who lived in this refugee camp where I did fieldwork were very vulnerable. They did not have a clear legal status. They could not access anything outside of this camp without the help of the humanitarians. They had no right to work, to public health care, to education. So, they were in a very specific kind of situation, very vulnerable. Doing ethnographic research with them would have been ethically problematic in many ways.

I found other ways to express my solidarity with them. Ethnographic research is not the only way to express solidarity with people in vulnerable conditions. Ethnographic research is something we do for our careers. I didn't want to study a very vulnerable group of people and just to produce a book on them. That would have advanced my career, but not necessarily contributed to improving their situation. Focusing on the local humanitarians who were Montenegrin citizens, like me, and whose moral project I wanted to understand, made more sense.

That's something that was handled very differently in the history of social and cultural anthropology. If we go back in time and look at certain monographs whose authors did not take that moral aspect into consideration. Would you say that your personal relations helped to better understand their situation and be more compassionate compared to someone who is lacking that linkage to their background?

Decolonizing solidarity does not necessarily mean trying to establish a close relation to people who are in vulnerable positions, who are racialized in particular ways.
Decolonizing solidarity also means being aware of the boundaries and seeing the structures that keep us separate from one another. For example, the structures that kept this group of refugees in the refugee camp without the clear legal status for twenty years. Decolonizing solidarity also means reflecting on this, and not trying to make yourself feel better about it by forging friendships with the members of this vulnerable group. Some friendships did emerge in the course of my fieldwork with people who lived in this refugee camp. However, this happened spontaneously. Ethnography means wilfully and intentionally chasing up people, trying to get people to talk with you, to become your friends, to become your collaborators and so on. This wasn't something I wanted to do with people who were so clearly in a structurally different position from me. It felt inappropriate to kind of invade their private boundaries for this purpose. For the purpose of something that I need for my own career and my own research and my own life. That felt inappropriate.

You wrote that you're very critical towards the hegemonic version of Eastern Europe and that you always try to develop and test new research strategies. Do you have an example from your own research related to that?

This was a strategy that was developed by an anthropologist called Claire Land. Land was engaged in anti-racist work in Australia. She has this beautiful book called "Decolonizing Solidarity", where she puts forward this argument that friendship shouldn't be the aim of people who are trying to do solidary works as white allies in racialized fields. She suggests that we should just sit down and listen, rather than try to force friendships.

How would you consider morality being linked to religion? The genocide that happened during the Bosnian war was highly related to religious issues. Is that something that you take into consideration? It can be very subjective matter what one considers being morally right or wrong and it changes completely in a religious context.

In the anthropological studies of morality and ethics, people have been studying precisely those kinds of questions, for a very long time. The idea there is that religion is one of the moral

repertoires that people might use to craft themselves into a particular kind of a good person, a moral person. They might do something else; this moral repertoire doesn't have to be a religion. They might pursue activism, for instance. Or humanitarianism. Activism and humanitarianism are also very powerful moral repertoires for crafting oneself into a particular kind of a vision of a good person. Still, very often people who study morality and ethics in anthropology, conduct research of various kinds of religious frameworks.

What I'm interested there is the question of what happens with these moral frameworks during a major social transformation. So, what happens, for example, with local humanitarians who are trying to help the refugees, when the whole world around them has been changing? What happens with the moral project of local humanitarians during this major ideological transformation from Yugoslav socialism to neoliberal capitalism? How do the local humanitarians continue this work of crafting themselves into a moral person in the midst of a social transformation?

It might be easier to understand how this crafting of the moral self might happen when there is a relatively stable framework of meaning, a particular kind of a religious school that is very strict in various kinds of ways. Moral reasoning is murkier and more ambivalent in the moment when the whole world is changing, the economy, politics, the society, values... What happens with moral projects in that moment?

Have you already found answers to that question? Or is it still work in progress?

Yes and No. There is a beautiful German term; Jein. *(laughing)*

I think imagination is really important there. People who find themselves in this situation of moral change have to make an effort to explain to themselves what's going on. What I have found during my research is that this interpretive labour – how we imagine and explain things to ourselves and others – depends a lot on where we are positioned relative to other people. Our practices of imagination will not necessarily be the same if we are people in positions of relative privilege, or if we are refugees with an unclear legal status. I will talk about this in more detail during the seminar.

What is the core message you want to convey in the Anthropological Colloquium?

For the fellow anthropologists who are reading the anthropology of morality, my message would be that we have to pay attention to how this interpretive labour shapes moral projects.

For everybody else, the key point I would like to put forward is that imagination is a very ambivalent thing. It can both help us to imagine an alternative world, and it can also be a means through which we tune out what's going on around us.

In your book "Managing Ambiguity" you took a deeper look into the subject of personal connections You state that: "Instead, favours enabled the insertion of personal compassion into the heart of the organization of welfare."
Would you endorse a certain level of clientelism in politics or maybe even in general to achieve one's goal or goals for the greater good?

No, no, this is not what I mean. What I tried to do in that book is to show why the need to rely on someone's personal compassion in matters of healthcare and wellbeing creates problems. My interlocutors believed that if you or your child are sick, you should not depend on someone's goodwill, or on your personal (in)ability to generate €10,000 to cover medical expenses. You need predictable, stable forms of help. You need to know that there is a set of steps that you can

take to access the health care that you need.

There were also people who were able to manage this ambiguity between welfare as a civic right and as a personal gift. In that book, I look at how one woman became an influential politician by helping many, many different people. By 'getting things done' for others in her municipality, she accumulated political power and became an official politician who was very influential. She then went on to climb to the higher political hierarchies. So, I looked at the gendered links between care, help, and political power.

Do you bring in your own perception of what is right or wrong? Which could lead to a never-ending cycle of reflecting your own perception, because you see certain things as good or bad, because of what has happened or because people told you or what you were witnessing in your research.

For me, this is not necessarily about morality, but about political imagination. The question of how people imagine what should be done is related to the moral conundrums – what ought to be done to help whom, why, and on what grounds? Where are the boundaries of my responsibility to others?

However, I'm not interested in evaluating other people's moral projects, in prescribing what we as anthropologists ought to support and what not, because this is incredibly individualistic. I am interested in how these ideas speak about how people imagine and work towards creating particular kinds of political communities. How do they decide on the boundaries of their responsibility to others? Who is included in their political community and who is excluded? Where are the boundaries of this political community? How are the relationships between people in this political community forged? These are the questions that I'm interested in. I'm always trying to suspend my personal moral and ethical evaluation and judgment during research, in order to be able to understand how people I study imagine relationships of responsibility between them.

Speaking of critical thought and the reflection of used research methods: The University of Bayreuth through its Cluster of Excellence "Africa Multiple" wants to reconfigure African Studies.
How do you perceive that approach, and do you see similarities that can be implemented into anthropological research in a non-African context, e.g., your field in Eastern Europe?

The discussions about how to recentre Africa as a place of knowledge production and how to think from it are incredibly important.

One thing that these discussions have flagged up for me and others is the absence of theorizing of the position of the so-called "Global Easts" in the stories about global solidarities. Studies of humanitarianism, for example, are very often studies of the relationship between the West and the South. What is the position of the East(s) in this long history of solidarity and humanitarianism? There is an increasing number of scholars who are now looking into this, inspired by these kinds of conversations.

By the "Global Easts" I understand countries that have tried to develop their own versions of modernity. Think here of socialist modernity, or nonaligned reinterpretations of modernity. The alternative modernities were not an antithesis to liberal modernity. They were different, but not radically different. Teasing out this complex, partial, and ambivalent difference is, I think, important for understanding the global histories of solidarity, and also for making our political imaginations richer.

From a student's perspective I can say that the Global East rarely plays a role when looking at the African continent. Although it obviously had and still has its relationship with the African continent and influences the perception of how we see the Global East today.
Would you agree if I say: If someone is trying to reconfigure African studies, you can't really do that without considering the Global East. The approach is too narrow if you neglect the Global East entirely.

Yes, I believe this is a productive conversation to have. There are many researchers today uncovering the links between the Global Easts and the Global South(s). Hopefully there will be more and more intersections between these discussions. There are also many researchers studying the Nonaligned movement and everyday racism in former Yugoslavia. This everyday racism took place simultaneously with the formal rhetoric of state institutions that was often profoundly anti-racist. This ambivalence, this complexity is something that many people are now trying to understand. I believe we need new analytical vocabulary to understand this complexity and how to think it anew. Any kind of an institutional synergy that can come out of these kinds of conversations would be amazing!

Do you have any advice for researchers and students?

I would give advice to fellow professors to work as much as possible on creating better working conditions in universities for their staff (post-docs, doctoral students). This would improve the conditions for the students as well. In academia, this issue of precarity of the academic staff who are not on tenure track or in tenured positions is a major problem. It also affects the quality of studies for BA and MA students. I would advise to work actively and willingly and intentionally on creating better working conditions in academia, because this will improve the quality of our academic organizations as well.

For those who are still in the process of education, I would advise to listen to your research intuition and to always ask questions you personally find interesting, questions you genuinely do not already know answers to.

What were findings that struck or touched you the most during your academic career?

I keep chasing those *aha!* moments. *(laughing).* This is why I do research.

One *aha!* moment that might the easiest to describe happened during fieldwork when I listened to two people conversing, discussing their own moral dilemma. This was an iteration of a dilemma from a short story written by a Bosnian writer. In this short story, he describes a moral dilemma, which was again an iteration of a dilemma that could be found in philosophy textbooks. In this moment, I could see literature, philosophical moral theory, and ethnographic conversations all coexisting. It was really interesting and got me thinking.

Links:

Additional information on Prof. Brković' projects can be found here:

University of Mainz: https://kultur.ftmk.uni-mainz.de/personen/prof-dr-carna-brkovic/
Her personal blog: https://carnabrkovic.net/
Her book "Managing Ambiguity": https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/BrkovicManaging
Research project ReDigIm: https://chanse.org/redigim/

For more information on the Cluster of Excellence click here:
https://www.africamultiple.uni-bayreuth.de/en/index.html

The interview was done by Jonas Kuhnhardt (B.A. Student - Kultur und Gesellschaft Afrikas)