

Interview - Ida Danewid

Written by E-International Relations

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Interview - Ida Danewid

<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/03/13/interview-ida-danewid/>

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MAR 13 2018

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.

Ida Danewid is a final year PhD candidate in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her work focuses on post/decolonial theory, racial capitalism, and the politics of solidarity. She was the editor of *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 45, which includes the special issue on “Racialized Realities in World Politics.” She was the recipient of the 2017 Edward Said Award for her article ‘White innocence in the Black Mediterranean: hospitality and the erasure of history’. Ida is currently a visiting PhD student in the Ethnic Studies Department at UC Berkeley.

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

One of the most dramatic shifts in my thinking happened in 2009 when I spent a summer working as an intern for the Grameen Bank in Dhaka in Bangladesh. I was a privileged white girl from Sweden studying for an undergraduate degree in economics at the LSE – desperately keen to land a job with the UN and help make the world a better place. Then I went to Dhaka.

During the summer I spent there I encountered extreme poverty, vulnerability, and sheer desperation – which, as time went by, I began to suspect was *because* and not *despite* the notable Western presence in the city. A strange revelation for someone who was well-versed in neoclassical economics but had never heard of dependency theory! One memory has particularly stuck with me: late one night I was on my way back home and happened to drive through an area where I’d never been before, home to the garment industries and foreign companies such as H&M and Gap. Despite the late hour, the factories were fully operating: thousands of workers crammed into dangerously run-down buildings sewing buttons onto shirts. I felt nauseous from what I had seen and hurried to get back. Once home I decided to go straight to bed and started changing into my pyjamas. As I took off my T-shirt I suddenly had an idea and looked at the label: “Made in Bangladesh.”

In hindsight, those weeks in Dhaka brought me face-to-face with the injustices of global capitalism, the ongoing legacies of empire and colonialism, the problems of the aid-industrial complex, and my own complicity in sustaining a system built on the violent exploitation and dispossession of (racialized) others. After that trip I began to read outside of my classes, and soon found my way into anti-colonial thought, Marxism, and feminism. My PhD is in many ways grappling with questions that I began to ask that summer: questions about race, the international division of labour, and the possibilities for solidarity.

Your PhD thesis aims to rethink internationalism and the politics of solidarity through a focus on the co-constitution of race and capital. How do your conclusions help us reconceive radical politics?

My thesis is framed as an intervention into debates about cosmopolitanism and the ethics and politics of solidarity. More specifically, it interrogates the absence of questions of race, colonialism, and their contemporary legacies in the philosophical literature on global justice. What are the ethical, political, and material consequences of these

Interview - Ida Danewid

Written by E-International Relations

“unspeakable things unspoken”, and what would it mean for cosmopolitanism to take seriously the problem of the global colour line?

To answer these questions, I draw on theories of racial capitalism and activist-intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Cedric Robinson, Claudia Jones, Angela Davis, and the Combahee River Collective; thinkers who in different ways held Marxism and Black radicalism in uneasy yet productive tension. Where IR and political theory typically understand solidarity as a product of commonality—in short, as something that arises amongst people and groups that are alike—a focus on racial capitalism opens up space for a different kind of solidaristic politics centred on an analysis of interlocking forms of oppression. That is, racism, sexism, and classism are not separate forms of oppression that sometimes intersect, but an entangled and constitutive part of the modern/colonial world system. The categories of race *and* class *and* gender fail to capture this dynamic, because capitalism has always been racial (patriarchal) capitalism. While such a focus does not deny the uniqueness and specificity of local struggles, it does emphasise their transnational character and points to the importance of connecting—but *not* unifying—different struggles, projects, and trajectories.

Such a reformulation of solidarity has important implications for radical politics—especially in the contemporary era where the “white working class” frequently is juxtaposed with “immigrants”, and identity politics blamed for the demise of the organised Left. Where dominant narratives often imply that Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populist political parties are best countered by centre-staging the needs of the white working class “left behind” by neoliberal globalisation, my thesis asks: what might it mean to read neoliberalism and fascism as two sides of the same coin, to insist on a radicalised and decolonised emancipatory project, and to hold on to questions of total critique and transformation without invoking Eurocentric ideas of progress and teleology?

You are the recipient of the 2017 Edward Said Award for your article ‘White innocence in the Black Mediterranean: hospitality and the erasure of history’. In this article you look at the problematic role of grief in the context of pro-refugee activism. Can you elaborate on why this is the case?

The main motivation behind this article was to interrogate how recent forms of European pro-refugee activism often end up reproducing some of the foundational assumptions of the far right. While many of these interventions are driven by a desire to challenge the xenophobia and white nationalism that underwrite the deadly logic of the European border regime, they often resort to humanist discourses based on compassion, affective identification, and empathy: in short, they seek to move those in a hegemonic position of power to tears.

In the article I interrogate what these critical humanist interventions produce and make possible—and crucially, what they foreclose and hide from view. Building on what a growing group of scholars have begun to call the “Black Mediterranean”, I argue that this focus on abstract—as opposed to historical—humanity contributes to an ideological formation that disconnects connected histories and turns questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality. The result is a framework which shares the starting premise of white nationalism: namely, that migrants are “strangers”, “charitable subjects”, and “uninvited guests.” A more historically grounded reading of the migrant crisis—which would mean placing the ongoing tragedy in the context of Europe’s constitutive history of empire, colonial conquest, and transatlantic slavery—would disrupt these assumptions, and unveil the umbilical cord that links Europe to the migrants washed up on its shores. In the absence of this, this type of activism inadvertently helps reproduce a colonial and patronising fantasy of the white man’s burden which ultimately does little to challenge established interpretations that see Europe as the bastion of democracy, liberty, and universal rights. If the migrant crisis, as Zygmunt Bauman has suggested, “is humanity’s crisis”, we might need to ask whose humanity is at stake and, indeed, for what purposes?

You have also been involved in projects on diversifying and decolonising the academy, and recently published a blog article on the gender citation gap with Kirsten Ainley and Joanne Yao. Why is it important to address this and how can it be challenged?

The modern university is built around a mythical narrative of academia as a pristine haven of objective, impartial, and scientific knowledge-production. In reality, the history of higher education is deeply entangled with empire, slavery,

Interview - Ida Danewid

Written by E-International Relations

and colonialism; academic “research” has historically been a dirty word for the majority of Indigenous peoples and persons of colour, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us. From Europe to Australia to North America, the academy developed alongside a world economy built on the enslavement of Africans and the colonisation of Indigenous lands. As Craig Steven Wilder has shown, in the United States this connection was so strong that “human slavery was the precondition for the rise of higher education.” The plantation economies funded colleges, built campuses, and swelled college trusts – not just in the United States, but also in Britain where the spectacular Codrington Library in Oxford was built with funds generated from slave labour in the West Indies. As recent student campaigns such as Decolonising SOAS, Why Is My Curriculum White?, and Rhodes Must Fall Oxford have shown, this past is not dead but very much continues to structure the modern university. The afterlives of slavery and colonialism are visible in the underrepresentation of Black and female professors, in the everyday discrimination suffered by BME students, and in the institutional architecture of research and teaching which validates and celebrates certain forms of knowledge-production while writing off others as subjective and unscientific.

How can such structures be challenged? While recent years have seen a lot of exciting activism within this area – spearheaded by student movements from Cape Town to Missouri to Cambridge – I’ve become increasingly worried that the drive for greater inclusion and diversity might help depoliticise and naturalise, rather than dismantle and transform, the racialized, classed, and gendered structures on which the academy was built and continues to depend. Terms such as “diversity” are easily commodified, and often function as marketing tools for universities keen to attract a greater pool of consumer-students. More problematically, and as Robin D.G. Kelley has argued, the underlying assumption which sustains some of these initiatives actually converge with that of their strongest opponents: namely, that universities are *supposed* to be spaces of enlightenment. But to what extent are we right in thinking that the academy is perfectible, and that it can serve as an engine of social transformation? While I don’t have answers to these questions, I think it’s important that we recognise that the struggle to transform higher education will be superficial at best unless it also cracks open a larger set of questions about racialized, classed, and gendered inequality beyond the walls of the university.

What are you currently working on?

I’m currently writing an article which looks at the Grenfell Tower fire through the dual lens of race and empire. Drawing on the Black radical tradition, I’m interested in how the rise of global cities such as London, New York, and Paris are predicated on the production of racialized space – both within the imperial metropole *and* the colonial periphery. While the majority of post-Grenfell discussions have focused on Britain’s widening class inequality under neoliberalism, I think it’s crucial that we also situate our analysis within the context of Prevent, Brexit, stop-and-search, and a host of other racialized policies and practices meant to “clean up the streets” of the global city, as well as the neocolonial violence inflicted on what Mike Davis has called the planet of slums.

Another project, which I’m just starting, is tentatively entitled “Stuart Hall in Cologne: Race and Rape in Contemporary Europe” and develops a conjunctural analysis of the New Year’s Eve sexual assaults in Germany. Drawing on *Policing the Crisis* and Hall’s work on crime and moral panics, the project will examine the discourse of the so called European “rape epidemic” as reflective of an underlying crisis in state hegemony, in which the current social order struggles to reproduce itself. In the words of Antonio Gramsci, “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

What advice would you give to young scholars?

Organise! Graduate students make up a substantial part of the low-paid, casual, and precarious labour force on which the corporate university depends. Join the union and mobilise your course mates—together you can pressure your department to provide more decent contracts. “We owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to give the lie to our own determination.”

—

This interview was conducted by Alvina Hoffmann. Alvina is an Associate Features Editor for E-IR.

Interview - Ida Danewid

Written by E-International Relations