

Interview - Kate Ferguson

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr Kate Ferguson is co-founder and co-Executive Director of Protection Approaches, a UK-based NGO that works to prevent identity-based violence, from hate crime to violent extremism and genocide. Dr Ferguson is also the first Chair of Policy at the European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, Honorary Research Fellow at the University of East Anglia, and until 2018 was Editor of *Refugee History*. She received her BA and PhD from the University of East Anglia and has an MPhil in Russian and East European Studies from the University of Oxford. Her current research interests include UK atrocity prevention policy, irregular armed groups, and how to predict identity-based violence. Her first book, *Architectures of Violence; The Command Structures of Modern Mass Atrocities* will be published by Hurst and OUP in late 2019.

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

Clearly the values of internationalism and principles that underpin the whole international human rights agenda are in a state of flux. We increasingly hear the post-1945 human rights order is facing its greatest test while closer to home mobilisation of antipathy towards human rights helped secure the vote to leave the European Union. But I do wonder if this swelling crisis also offers opportunities to redress some massive imbalances embedded in the history and practice of human rights. The daily public assault on rights and the increasingly joined-up efforts to undermine international solidarity and responsibility can feel overwhelming but there are other cultural shifts opening up previously closed or privileged spaces that address both the intersectionality and contradictions of our identity – and of our privilege. We're thinking more not only about gender, geography and history but age, belief, expertise, and what identity means. These ideas, emotions, and struggles are playing out across the world in ways that are both connected and parallel to the struggles for rights and internationalism. This is forcing those working in, or writing about, human rights to confront our own hypocrisies, identities and assumptions as well as promoting far broader cultural shifts.

Unsurprisingly, young people feel more international than older people but our research suggests this hasn't displaced or diluted national identity. Quite what impact this generational shift will have as the UK and other democracies navigate this choppy period of international relations is unclear. But unlike the surge of internationalist positioning in the US and UK during the late-1990s, this isn't a liberal or elite vision; it looks much more like a future status quo that transcends traditional left-right political polarity. This is what I find exciting. During the decades of so-called socio-political stability in Western democracies, the power imbalance both at home, and between donor states and developing states, grew rather than narrowed. Some of that might now be changing. The struggle will be to ensure those hard-fought milestones that have raised human rights standards and protections, and encouraged a rules-based accountable global system, are defended and not undermined by should-be allies, and are built upon rather than wholly re-conceived.

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

In 2012 and 2013 I became increasingly frustrated by the lack of UK civil society mobilisation in response to the unfolding crisis in Syria, particularly from some whose work included the prevention of genocide or crimes against humanity. It felt like my generation's Bosnia, so I tried to put the crisis on peoples' agendas. I was infuriated by the

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unconscious bias so confidently expressed by colleagues I respected but who thought it inappropriate to compare Syria to the atrocities of the 1990s. I couldn't shake the hypocrisy. It's an anger that's never really left me.

I then spent a year in Rwanda doing some consultancy work for an NGO and finishing my PhD. In April 2014, I was in the Amahoro Stadium in Kigali for the twentieth commemoration of the genocide. It was a profoundly affecting moment. A few rows in front of me were the world's leaders bowing their heads. As the UN Secretary General delivered his address, survivors and their families in the stands expressed cries of agony that spread around the stadium. Ban Ki Moon paid tribute during his address to the ongoing suffering in Syria and I completely broke down. That evening, Andy Fearn and I sat on a porch and agreed when we got back to London to do something ourselves that would seek to fill the gap in UK civil society between commitments to 'never again' and implementing effective prevention. We didn't know it but that was the beginning of Protection Approaches.

Meeting and working with Andy has helped to clarify how I think about the world, but we share a very similar outlook. We have always been baffled by the way the prevention of atrocities and the preservation of peace are treated as work that is only needed in certain parts of the world. We couldn't understand why it wasn't also being done at home in our own dividing, unequal communities. It's why our prevention work addresses all forms of identity-based violence, whether that's hate crime in London or atrocity risks in Burundi.

But I don't think I fully felt the urgency at home until 16th June 2016. That day a video had emerged of English football fans in Marseille throwing coins at Syrian child refugees shouting at them to 'go home.' Nigel Farage had unveiled his anti-immigration billboard campaign reminiscent of Nazi propaganda that was immediately reported to the police. And it was the day that Jo Cox was murdered by a man who shouted 'Britain First' as he attacked her. That evening I sat with colleagues feeling utterly powerless; I know many others felt the same. I had worked with Jo in the year before her death; she had been Protection Approaches' first champion in Parliament and I'd found her both an inspiration and a kindred spirit. I remember thinking that day that something had changed and that politics in Britain was going to get nastier. I think of Jo a lot and when do I feel that urgency – and I remember what is at stake if we fail.

Your NGO Protection Approaches aims to defend the rights of people worldwide who are targeted because of their identity. How does the organisation go about this?

We want to show that what are too often seen as unrelated problems are in fact part of the same shared global challenge. This is why we developed the very term *identity-based violence*. We were the first to do so. Our definition of identity-based violence is a self-explanatory non-legal, politically neutral term encompassing hate crime, violent extremism, and identity-based atrocities. It highlights the commonality that exists between attacks against individuals and communities by states, militia groups, terrorist organisations, or prejudiced thugs. While we work primarily to improve British contributions to predicting, preventing and responding to identity-based violence, we are proud to have 'exported' the concept around the world. It is incredible to see the uptake of the term and growing conceptualisation of it as a connected challenge, particularly in the United States. And it's not surprising. People in the UK and the US – and many other places around the world – are faced with the public resurgence of domestic division and inequality; even if a lot is not new, it seems more visible.

Our goal will always be strong, resilient, inclusive, caring, and questioning societies but how communities get there will likely differ considerably. And so our work is not about changing language but advocating our collective responsibility to protect those at risk of violence because of who they are and providing an evidence base for what works. We work in and with local communities, civil society, academics, and policy makers to enhance their own contributions to prevention and to gather examples of best practice that can be replicated or scaled. We're an odd hybrid of a grassroots organisation, a research centre, and a thinktank.

What lessons can be drawn from the identity-based violence of the Yugoslavian wars? Do these help us when dealing with identity-based violence and civilian protection strategies today?

Everyone who wants to understand risk-factors of identity-based violence and mass atrocities should study 1980s

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Yugoslavia. Many risk assessments and horizon scanning methodologies still continue to exclude processes related to cultural and social shifts, attitudes towards other, and perceptions of grievance. One reason may be that they are more difficult to quantitatively measure – but they're not impossible. Patterns of information consumption and of media content production are increasingly becoming a focus of attention but there is still a temptation to view extremist content as a new phenomenon. The atrocities in former Yugoslavia overturn too-commonly-held assumptions about what causes extreme political and social polarisation, and what leads to identity-based mass violence.

From another perspective, looking at how the international community responded to the atrocities of the 1990s highlights the progress that has been made since. This is evident not only here in the UK but also throughout the multilateral systems of the UN and the EU regarding international responsibilities, demonstrated through raising political standards and impact on the ground. More specifically, here's a plug for the book I'm finishing off that is an historical reflection of how irregular combatants operate in modern mass atrocity situations but told through the examples of Bosnia and Croatia. It traces the very often covert networks of irregular combatants, political leaderships, local communities and international organized crime on all sides of the crises, and discusses how these relationships were talked about by the international community at the time compared to the reality we know today. It makes the argument that current state-centric approaches to protection and prosecution encourage perpetrating states to devolve responsibility for violence against civilians to proxy actors while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of any non-state combatants operating to defend or protect civilians. I think these lessons from Bosnia could, at the very least, have better informed reading of the Syrian crisis.

You have spoken about the annual rise of mass-atrocities since 2012. What do you think international organisations can do to halt this worrying increase?

The majority of today's refugees have fled situations of atrocity or identity-based violence while the majority of people displaced from their homes have been uprooted by consequences of climate change. Add to this rising identity-based polarisation in many parts of the world and forecasts look bleak. It is likely that identity-based violence, including the perpetration of atrocities, will become the defining challenge of the next political generation if current leaderships do not prioritise prevention.

Prevention is a difficult thing to sell to current leaderships, whether of governments or the big humanitarian organisations that occupy so much of the human rights space. The temptation to firefight is understandable but it's not working. Effective prevention of identity-based violence focuses attention back on the tenets of community-building and social cohesion. However, it also requires, from state, civil society and private sector stakeholders, the consistent integration of an assessment of how their actions increase or mitigate risk into their decision-making. This means building prevention into existing strategies, bureaucracies, and thinking. We mustn't stop treating the problem, but we do need to prioritise inoculation and resilience.

What is the UK doing to prevent mass atrocities and protect civilians? Do you think Brexit will have an impact on Britain's policy?

After a long period of not much movement at all, we're seeing new interest and energy. Following our repeated recommendation, in 2018 the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee undertook an inquiry into the UK's Responsibility to Protect, including its approach to atrocity prevention. The Committee, to which I gave oral testimony, made its central recommendation for the Government to set out a cross-departmental atrocity prevention strategy and to do so in consultation with civil society. While the Government's initial response was to reject this important call, the inquiry catalysed debate in Parliament, energised civil society activity, and has secured demonstrable steps forward in how the UK Government approaches atrocity prevention, identity-based violence, and engages with civil society. Jeremy Hunt has personally committed to 'doing more' within the current FCO budget on atrocity prevention, drawing direct reference to the Foreign Affairs Committee report, and Lord Ahmad was confirmed as the Minister responsible for the UK's Atrocity Prevention policy. The Government now talks about a cross-departmental approach to atrocity prevention, which also "includes the prediction and prevention of identity-based violence." There is also a promise to review the current protection of civilians' strategy, which offers an opportunity to

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look at how the UK could more effectively contribute to protection from atrocities. More specifically, I'm hopeful that the Government will shortly be publishing its cross-cutting approach to atrocity prevention. These are modest but important steps forward. They improve national accountability, direct scrutiny, and create the opportunity for leadership.

Brexit, of course, is impacting everything. Almost all internationally-facing policy can (and should) contribute to atrocity prevention. As the UK seeks to negotiate trade deals, as the Government prepares for a new approach to sanctions, and as the minority of anti-development voices get louder, UK contributions to the prevention of atrocities will inevitably be impacted. However, what will really determine the direction of the UK's approach to atrocity prevention and human rights more broadly, whether that is through international development or its protection of civilians, will be changes of national leadership.

It has been over ten years since the Responsibility to Protect commitment was adopted by the UN. How successful do you think this has been?

Despite the collective nature of the Responsibility to Protect, how the norm itself is upheld remains disjointed and disconnected. This is largely because most R2P architecture exists at the multilateral level and has not yet filtered down. I am interested in exploring how the concept of a shared responsibility to protect populations from atrocities can be pluralised, democratised even, in addition to and beyond its existence as a norm and principle within the United Nations system. The challenges that so often characterise assessment of R2P's success highlight the disconnect between high-level efforts and the reality of what is felt on the ground by the communities affected by the atrocities we all wish to prevent. Thus, it is common to talk about the need to narrow gaps between the conceptualisation of R2P and its implementation, between the early warnings of atrocities and early actions to prevent, or the imbalance between words and deeds. This is why the UN Secretary General's 2017 annual report called on states to strengthen their own accountability to atrocity prevention.

I'm proud of the recent work Protection Approaches, the UK Civil Society Atrocity Prevention Working Group, and the UK Government have been doing to make progress in Britain – although of course there is still a long way to go. The enormous gap between multilateral commitments to R2P and local needs of protection requires joined up effort from Parliaments, civil society, the private sector and by local communities. It might take time but for it to become truly successful, but the responsibility to help protect people from the gravest crimes has to become seen as something that belongs to all of us; something we can all contribute to.

What is your assessment of the relationship between academic research in the area of international relations and policy-making? What could be done to strengthen this relationship?

I enjoy the space between the academy and policy but many don't. As a younger academic it was difficult to stand with confidence at the intersection between academic research, policy engagement, and activism. Now I think most of what I do is about facilitating the bridge between those who know more than I do and those who can change more than I can. I've recently been made Chair of Policy at the European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, based at the University of Leeds, as part of an exciting long-term partnership with Protection Approaches. We're taking a pioneering approach to research-to-policy collaboration, which is rooted in mutual respect for the sometimes complementary and sometimes diverging perspectives of the academy and of advocates. Most importantly, it's a relationship founded upon our mutual belief that those who study mass violence, atrocities and their prevention, have a responsibility to share their knowledge with those who engage in the day-to-day difficulties of seeking to implement policy to prevent these crimes; and that those who seek to advise on or implement policy have a responsibility to do so with the integrity of an evidenced understanding of what works.

Engaging with policy effectively is its own skill so requires considerable training and experience; universities and academic funding bodies either need to provide those resources to their students and staff or recognise the benefits of more creative solutions such as external partnerships, non-academic advisory structures, and allowing researchers to 'outsource'. Likewise, human rights funders need to better support the production of research and the creation of a useful evidence base. I think we'll see an increasingly creative approach to research-to-policy

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partnerships that provide the opportunity for knowledge exchange and cross-sector learning for both parties and other stakeholders through dialogue, teaching, training, producing and disseminating research, and engaging with those who make and shape decisions.

You were involved with Refugee History, an initiative that aims to enrich current debates about refugees by providing a historical and political context to solve the refugee crisis. Why is this important? How can this type of initiative make an impact?

Being involved with Refugee History was wonderful. It's a primarily online network looking at challenges related to human displacement, forced migration and refugee movement, via an evidence-based conversation that draws on expertise, research and experience. It was the brainchild of the brilliant Lyndsey Stonebridge and Becky Taylor. I was brought in as Editor to coordinate construction of the online platform, help build the network, and curate the first year or so of content. The concept was conceived at a time when domestic treatment of these issues were driven by emotion, opinion, politics, and fear. While the problematic discourse continues, in some spaces in ever more problematic terms than before, initiatives like Refugee History have injected substance and bolstered a culture of challenge that has emerged spontaneously across society in reaction to division, hatred, and misinformation.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars and those who would like to pursue a career in the NGO sector?

Research and policy roles are few and far between and competition is huge. The academic standard of applications we receive is staggering; everyone has at least one first class degree, sometimes three. But while academic proficiency is important – and I particularly look out for those who write well – it's not how we choose who to employ. Join twitter and find out who is doing what, follow who you're interested in and get a sense of the conversation. Map out who is doing the kind of work that you'd like to do then join their mailing lists, read their publications, go to their events. Then when the job comes up, you'll already be plugged in. If you get the interview be bold but also be humble. Don't tell us you have considerable advocacy experience because you signed a petition for your local Amnesty branch, or that you have an in-depth knowledge of R2P after writing an essay on Libya as an undergrad. Do tell us about what you think, how you'd like to make change, about your values, and about your work ethic. And work in a bar or restaurant! Once you can hold down a double shift and master the skill of returning a dropped plate of food to the kitchen in a way that ensures the unreasonably rude customer, the unreasonably furious chef, and the unreasonably hapless new waitstaff are all happy, the chances are you'll have the diplomacy skills and grit needed to mediate NGO and policy dialogue!