Interview - Angelika Rettberg

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Angelika Rettberg is a full professor at the Political Science Department at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, where she leads the Research Program on Armed Conflict and Peacebuilding. This year she became the Co-Director of the Transformation and Empowerment Stream of the LSE-led and UKRI-funded Hub on Gender, Justice, and Security. She is also a Global Fellow at the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO). In 2018 she served as a negotiator for the Colombian government in the peace talks with the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). Her research has focused on the private sector as a political actor and, specifically, on business behavior in contexts of armed conflict and peacebuilding. She has also been involved in research about other aspects of the political economy of armed conflict and peacebuilding, such as the relationship between legal resources, armed conflict, and crime as well as the dynamics of transitional justice and reconciliation. Her most recent publications are *From War-Torn to Peace-Torn? Mapping Business Strategies in Transition from Conflict to Peace in Colombia* (with Jason Miklian), *Golden Opportunity, or a New Twist on the Resource–Conflict Relationship: Links Between the Drug Trade and Illegal Gold Mining in Colombia* (with Juan Felipe Ortiz-Riomalo), *Varieties of Reconciliation in Violent Contexts: Lessons from Colombia* (with Anika Oettler), *Reconciliation: A comprehensive framework for empirical analysis* (with Juan Esteban Ugarriza), *Understanding the relation between war economies and post-war crime* (with Sabine Kurtenbach), and *¿Diferentes recursos, conflictos diferentes? La economía política regional del conflicto armado y la criminalidad en Colombia* (co-edited with Ralf Leiteritz, Carlo Nasi, and Juan Diego Prieto).

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

I am very enthusiastic about the so-called 'local turn' in peace studies, which is crucial to understand the realities and opportunities for peacebuilding based on the experience of specific communities. For example, with my work on how, depending on legal resources dominating local economies, armed conflict and crime have differed across Colombian regions, both in intensity as well as in form, I have learned that the paths connecting resources and conflict are varied and need to be better understood. This will serve to improve our understanding as well as to provide better policy advice (see more here, soon to be published in English). I am also very interested to understand to what extent concepts that have been developed for conflict-related transitional contexts can travel to—and hold value in—other contexts. For example, in this paper with Anika Oettler we lay out a framework to study reconciliation in violent contexts, not only conflict contexts. Finally, I am increasingly interested in the ethical and methodological challenges of conducting research in conflict and transitional contexts. As a scholar located in the South, I feel I have a privileged perspective of what it means to tackle various challenges, including questions about data validity, access to communities, triangulation among sources, and safety concerns, while addressing controversial issues.

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

I am a comparativist by training and by heart. I have had a bicultural upbringing, as a child of German parents growing up in Colombia, and I lived in the US for seven years. Also, I am a scholar located in the so-called 'Global South', which has given me a unique and privileged perspective on the field I work in. As a result, I appreciate the value of particular experiences as well as of universally shared processes. The more I learn about politics, in general, and peace-related tensions and dilemmas, in particular, the more I recognize similarities among countries and people. This has protected me from concentrating too much on specific domestic dynamics and has motivated me to

always ask how similar issues have been dealt with or experienced elsewhere.

Recently you presented an operative multidimensional typology for the concept of reconciliation that could be used to better understand how people in post-conflict societies perceive reconciliation. Can you describe your main findings?

Our two main findings in this research are that people understand very different things when asked about the meaning of 'reconciliation' and that, overall, people's ideas and expectations clash with the institutional offer derived from transitional justice discourse or practice. In my ongoing research projects, I am therefore interested in better understanding what reconciliation means for people with different life stories – especially with different positionality in terms of income, education, and conflict experience – and how this travels to different conflict contexts and beyond. Civil society, and how it embarks on reconciliation processes, which we define as the (re)building of social relations, is therefore crucial for lasting peace. Ultimately, my goal is to identify and challenge untested assumptions about what facilitates or hinders reconciliation, and to bring more social science to the study and analysis of transitional justice processes.

Can you outline the key elements of your forthcoming book *War Economies and Post-war Crime* (co-authored with Sabine Kurtenbach)?

In my work with Sabine Kurtenbach (GIGA), we seek to bridge the gap between conflict and postconflict studies, suggesting that there are links between what shapes conflict and what shapes post-conflict crime. Too often, conflict scholars do not relate to peace studies, nor do either of these groups engage in dialogue with criminology. Our work seeks to bring these fields together with a comparison of over thirty conflict-torn countries that have been making strides towards peace. Specifically, in the book we document variation in post-war crime and violence. In some countries, violence effectively decreases, in others it increases, or it remains constant. Unfortunately, the literature is dominated by the traumatic post-war experience of very few countries. However, violence and crime assume different forms and combinations. For example, a decline in conflict-related homicides, massacres, and kidnappings, may coincide with a rise in street crime and thefts, illicit markets, corruption, sexual, and domestic violence, or environmental crime. The different chapters in the book explore cases such as Sri Lanka, Liberia, and Colombia, which offer quite different experiences and perspectives on these topics. This will allow us to provide context-specific insights on how to mitigate the impact of war economies and post-war crime on peacebuilding.

In what way has gold mining affected the Colombian conflict in terms of intensity and duration?

Illicit crops have played a central role in fueling the Colombian armed conflict, in explaining its long duration and its many transformations. This has, however, overshadowed the impact of legal resources on conflict dynamics, such as gold. In the past fifteen years, there was a significant backlash against illicit crops, which coincided with a hike in the price of gold. As a result, illegal armed actors actively engaged in controlling and fostering illegal gold mining. My co-author Juan Felipe Ortiz-Riomalo and I refer to this as 'resource portfolios', or the fact that armed actors tend to seek income from more than one source, depending on security concerns and financial viability. The problem has not been specifically addressed in the peace process with FARC or the ELN.

How were illicit crops and gold mining dealt with in the peace agreement?

The main resource explaining the duration, transformation, and spatial distribution of the Colombian armed conflict is illicit crops. This was acknowledged in the peace agreement in a whole chapter dedicated to stemming peasant involvement in illicit crop growing by offering alternative sources of income as well as rural development plans. This is actually fairly rare in comparison with other peace agreements, which tend to emphasize political change and demobilization yet fail to address the underlying war economy with similar interest. The fact of FARC involvement in the drug trade has been at the heart of the current debate regarding whether engaging in the drug trade was an activity connected and functional in the armed struggle (as a means to a political end) and therefore part of the transitional justice scheme, or whether the FARC were plain drug traffickers, without political motives, and thus subject of ordinary justice. Given the centrality of illicit crops and the drug trade in Colombia's armed conflict, gold

was not included in the agreement. Given overall state failures in regulating gold production and trade, this continues to be a resource fueling competition over territories among remaining illegal groups, environmental degradation, corruption, violence, and legal and economic instability in the mining sector.

In 2018, you worked as a plenipotentiary member of the Colombian national government staff responsible for conducting dialogues with the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). What was your involvement in the negotiations and what insights did you gain from the experience?

I was involved in the negotiations as a member of the government delegation. This was a new and unique experience as it required me to leave behind my academic comfort zone and think in terms of how to best interpret and actually represent the interests of the Colombian state in dialogue with a group that has for decades questioned and resisted the authority of this very same state. Often the discussions were not about arguments and better evidence, but about positions. The context in which these negotiations took place was very difficult. The government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010 – 2014, 2014 – 2018) was in its final stages, the electoral campaign was under way, and there were lots of criticisms about the Colombian state's inability to keep the promises of the peace agreement with FARC, the other guerrilla group that had recently been demobilized. In addition, there was increased tension with neighboring Venezuela, in part due to accusations that Venezuela was safeguarding ELN commanders. Illicit crops—which have historically fueled crime and conflict in Colombia—were also on the rise, adding to a complex negotiation environment. Given this difficult context, it was hardly surprising that the talks were unsuccessful. The main insight I got from my participation in these talks is that the processes with FARC and ELN should have been conducted simultaneously, as originally planned. In addition, I learned that many factors—including the international, domestic, social, and economic environment—need to be aligned in order for negotiations to prosper, that as little as possible should be left for improvisation, and that the more clarity there is about all possible scenarios, the least surprises there will be.

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

Be informed about and understand the work of others, build and nurture networks, cultivate the ability to put yourself in others' shoes, and never loose curiosity about the world that surrounds you.