

In Conversation with Dr Alina-Sandra Cucu: On Interdisciplinarity, History, and Difficult Legacies

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Abstract

Dr Alina-Sandra Cucu is an interdisciplinary scholar in the field of global labour studies and currently a research fellow at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry in Berlin. Her research has addressed Eastern and Central European labour relations, socialism and the post-1990 transformations in the former Soviet bloc, knowledge production in industrial settings, and histories of planning. In this wide-ranging interview Alina discusses her academic formation at the Central European University, the challenges of doing interdisciplinary research, and the role of history in her work, amongst other topics.

Keywords

interdisciplinarity, history, ethnography, global labour studies, Romania

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Introduction

Interdisciplinarity at the margins of disciplines. Historicising concepts as a vital sociological task. Recovering a robust professional identity. On a Friday afternoon in early December, Alina-Sandra Cucu joined *New Sociological Perspectives* as our latest featured interviewee. As a journal of sociology, we were eager to engage with a scholar whose work is fundamentally interdisciplinary and “profoundly historical”.

Alina discusses her transition from classical music to academia, her contrasting experiences at Oxford and the Central European University, and her devastation at the attack of the Orbán government on the latter. She tells us about the challenges and excitement of studying the until recently unexplored topic of labour relations in socialist Romania, a country now populated by the ‘ghosts’ of anti-communism. Her reflections on the difficulties and possibilities of inter-disciplinarity—and the troublesome tendency towards cherry-picking—are enlightening and thought-provoking.

For Alina, research must always have a specific time and place. Accordingly, her discussion of both historical and ethnographic approaches is incredibly insightful for researchers who share this commitment. Her work is ‘never not historical’, she says. For her, this is not about the past and it is not about genealogical reconstructions, but rather about unpacking historical configurations, to see how the social phenomena she wants to study are caught in broader historical processes.

The interview concludes with Alina’s recognition that our disciplines are “not clean and we have to face it” but with a powerful call to recover a strong sense of professional identity and trust in what we do. The interview is captivating reading for sociologists concerned with questions of interdisciplinarity, history, and the difficult legacies of our disciplines.

Interview

Rodrigo

Our first question is a very general one: how did you become an academic? Is this something that you always wanted to do? Or what made you encounter this career, this way of life?

Alina

I started by being a classical musician and I actually played the flute, and I went to the conservatory and to one of these musical high schools in Romania in the old Soviet style of musical education. So, I was somehow prepared to become a musician. And then, after I got my BA in classical music, in performance, then I was playing in an orchestra in my hometown as a collaborator and I started to teach flute and I really felt somehow that I needed to do something with my head. I was actually searching for a hobby. And then my mum told me, you don’t need a hobby, you need to go back to school. You are never as happy as you are when you are a student. I didn’t want to be an academic, I wanted to be a student again. And I was as naive... I wanted to go to anthropology because I was watching some very interesting documentaries, I would be very critical about them now.

I was fascinated, and said, “no, I’m going to anthropology”. And then when I went to register, the secretaries there told me, “So, you went for music as your first undergrad and now you want to go for anthropology? No, you at least go for sociology, because some people have heard about that profession. Nobody hears about anthropology, so you don’t go there. You can take classes there, but you don’t go there”. So, from the beginning I was split between sociology and anthropology and then I was still teaching. I did my undergrad and I was still working quite a lot as a flute teacher during my undergrad studies. And then in the final year I had to make a decision and I just realised that I deeply liked what I was doing. And to be honest, I was better as a sociologist or at least as a student than I was as a musician. I felt better than as a student of music. So, I decided to apply for the

master's programme at CEU [Central European University] and that's where it started. I think I don't even know how to answer the question of when I decided and how I decided to become an academic, because with my second profession, I don't think it happened as a decision.

I think, in Eastern European education, if you are the best or among the best students, then your professors kind of talk to you as if this was the normal course of your life. If you are a good student, then you'll be a good academic, which after supervising master's students, I understood that it's not actually the case at all. But yes, at some point I went to do the master's and then I had this weird obsession with trying to get into Oxford for my PhD. And I did, and I left after one year and then I went back to CEU. I think that's about it. Since then, I thought about myself in these terms. And in some ways, I think I'm one of those extremely lucky people who do this because they like it and not because they like the idea of the career. I think this is what got clarified very early when I was in Oxford and when everybody told me I was crazy that I was leaving, because 'an Oxford degree is an Oxford degree'. Maybe they were right, but somehow, I felt that this profession is not worth doing if you don't do what you want to do with it, if you don't follow your own intellectual projects, and if you don't surround yourself with people who understand what you do and who are supportive of your work.

I think since then I've never gone for the career path, which partly explains why my CV is so patchy and weird and all over the place. And probably it also partly explains why it's going to be pretty difficult to find a permanent position. But I'm still very happy with my decision back then.

Will

Could you tell us a little bit about your interdisciplinarity? We're all grounded in sociology but we all, in different ways, draw from other disciplines, try to speak to other disciplines, and that's something we all admired about your work. You have a relationship to a Sociology and Anthropology department. You're grounded in global labour studies, but you work with political economy and historical anthropology as well. How do you see your interdisciplinarity, and how do these disciplines relate together in your work?

Alina

Okay, we could do the interview only on this, because that's pretty crucial. And there is, first, a very personal answer. There are days when I love it and it's basically the only way I can go forward, because that's how I build my research objects and that's how I learned how to build my research objects. And there are days when I hate it. Because there are three big problems with interdisciplinarity. One of them is that while at postdoc level and at PhD level, everybody will be somehow fascinated with your work and find something to relate to, and theoretically everybody will relate to your work, so it's very profitable for a grant application. It's not necessarily great for permanent positions after that, because when a selection committee looks at your application, they look for someone who can teach certain things, and teaching is still very disciplinary, and they also want a colleague in a department that's rarely as interdisciplinary as a grant career or grant trajectory makes it look like. This is the first - it's a biographical, professional trajectory complication. So, when it's application season, I generally hate it.

But this is less important than the other two difficulties. There is a difficulty with interdisciplinarity, because if you want to do this thing seriously, then basically it's not enough, in my opinion, to just cherry pick concepts and methods, and you actually need to master vocabularies from different disciplines, but also to understand the history and the trajectory of those vocabularies in those respective disciplines, the debates around them. You need to see if they come together in a coherent frame and in a way that doesn't hurt your epistemological sensitivity. I see many people doing the cherry-picking theory and sometimes the texts produced are pretty spectacular because they sound really good, they sound really appealing. But I'm actually pretty cautious with borrowing stuff that cannot

fit really well with, let's call it, broadly speaking, the historical materialist framework that I use in my work. Not everything goes for me, and this is a struggle, because sometimes you need something that really isn't there in ways that you use it, but then everybody tells you it's there, and you feel like you can't truly adopt it and adapt it into your own framework. If you start thinking seriously about it, then you remember some of the advantages disciplinary work has.

You remember that discipline also comes from the idea of disciplining your mind, from the certain ways in which certain fields work, and the ways in which the field somehow knows and disciplines the ways in which knowledge is produced, for better and for worse.

So, there are advantages and disadvantages. I can't do work otherwise. I was socialised at CEU, which I don't know how it is now, but when I was a master's student, and a PhD student, it was not only an interdisciplinary and a transdisciplinary department, but it was also at some level a non-disciplinary department in the sense that when I went to my PhD coordinator with the idea for my thesis, he didn't even think in terms of interdisciplinarity. He just said, 'Yeah, it's a very good idea'. And everybody was convinced I was doing anthropology, although I was not doing fieldwork. I was doing archival research on the Romanian fifties and everybody in my department was absolutely convinced that "yes, this is anthropology". Nobody outside my department was convinced about that when I finished. But I think I was well educated in this sense, in the sense of always doing work that is historical, historical in the sense that even if I'm talking about today, I'm trying to understand the historical dynamics and the broader historical logic in which today is caught.

So, for me, anthropology is never anthropology but always historical anthropology, and sociology is always historical sociology, but not in the old tradition of historical sociology. I think this is the most important thing in my work and it's something that probably will come with me forever. I also find that the most difficult dialogues I have in my career are with scholars who don't understand the fundamental need for historicizing our concepts, the way in which we do research, and the way we look at the world. It's a much more fundamental divide than the one between, I don't know, post-structuralist and Marxist anthropology, or between sociology and different topics. You can have a very nice dialogue with a biologist if they understand the necessity of historicizing their concepts, but you can't otherwise. So, at least for me, this proved to be the constant and something that's always there, and historians always think I'm historian when they start talking to me. I think it's the highest praise somehow. Nobody would hire me in history because I don't have a PhD in history, that's another story, of course. But in general, I'm recognised as one of them.

Will

It's really interesting. Could you tell us a bit more about your experiences at CEU? Our colleague Carla studied there as well, and that seems really important in your formation.

Carla

Yes, could you maybe tell us a bit more about why you think that CEU combines both sociologists and anthropologists and how this has influenced your work? To what extent your combination of political economy and historical anthropology is a result of the sociological and anthropological approach at CEU?

Alina

For me, CEU was really fundamental and I'm still a bit emotional when I think about it because of what happened to the university. I think for older generations of PhDs who studied there, the whole move to Vienna and the whole attack of the Orbán government against the university, especially against the most progressive departments—gender studies, sociology and social anthropology, nationalism, history and so on and so forth—

it was simply heartbreaking. I remember those moments when we were in touch with our former professors and the staff there, and I remember the darkness that surrounded that moment. But I think by the time it moved, CEU was already slowing down a bit on its initial mission of bringing together pretty brilliant students from environments where it was very hard to get an education in a place like LSE or Oxford or Humboldt. When I went to CEU as a master's student, I went there because I never imagined that someone would take seriously my application for Oxford if I applied from Romania. It was considered by many Eastern Europeans as being the stepping stone toward proper Western education.

I did my MA there and yes, I was very interested in history always, but the political economy orientation was fully the result of my education there. When I left, I remember how my professors at CEU told me, "of course you have to go, Oxford is Oxford, and an Oxford degree is fantastic, but you will be so unhappy because you don't realise how much you changed this year". And they were right. When I got to Oxford, I realised how much my approach is profoundly historical, and at some level anthropological in the sense that I truly believe place matters.... I don't believe in research topics that don't have a place and that don't have a time. In Oxford, in the sociology department, this was not so evident. They were very nice to me, but they really didn't understand where I was coming from. They were really puzzled by my presence there and by the way in which I was thinking about research. And I was really puzzled by their way. When I was re-offered a PhD place at CEU after the end of first year, I think it took me like 30 seconds to decide that I wanted to go back.

The integration of sociology and social anthropology in the department at CEU has always been pretty imperfect, to be honest. I think it was mostly the opportunity to learn that research is, as I said, for me, always political economy and historical-related, and always has a 'place', even if I decide to do very sociological research one day. I think this was fundamental, but in terms of the programme itself, it's pretty hard to integrate sociology and social anthropology. You can actually do it only with a certain type of teacher and with a certain type of scholar who are already at the margins of their disciplines. And this is something people don't realise, that this effort of integrating different disciplines and different forms of looking at the world are successful—and CEU at many levels *was successful*—because people who do this are already at the margins. They are already somehow in their niche. So, of course, if you take political economy, history-oriented sociologists and put them together in the same room with historical anthropologists, Marxist anthropologists, of course it will work. But I can think of many types of scholarship in sociology and anthropology who would never come in the same department, and maybe they shouldn't.

Fiona

Research has to have time and a place. We were wondering how you decided to study the history of labour in socialist Romania and what drew you to it?

Alina

Well, it was Romania because I'm very, very bad with languages. That's the brutal answer. In the beginning, when I started thinking about my PhD, it was Romania because I knew how to speak and read Romanian. And I could not imagine myself having a classical anthropological trajectory where I would have spent one year to become fluent in a language, and *actually* become fluent in a language in a year. I know I was right, because I can't become fluent in German, no matter what I do. It's been years now and I can't get past A2 or something like this, so it's a struggle. The other thing was that it was 'labour' from the beginning. I was interested in class and labour since I was an undergrad. I don't even know how this came to me. I think I just had some excellent classes. I think I was lucky to have a very good department of sociology in Romania and very good professors there. That's a very long and complicated story of institutional building that if you are interested in, I can tell you about later, but I had very good professors there.

And again, a very solid methodological foundation, both in quantitative methods and qualitative methods and in ways of thinking about a research object, about being rigorous. I think it was such a strong foundation, actually, that the whole interdisciplinarity and the whole mess that came after that couldn't shake it, which I think is very important. And that's why I'm a strong militant for very good research methods courses for undergrads. If they don't have that, I think they are pretty lost after that. So, I was interested in labour and class from the BA. Then with the PhD, the reason I chose socialism was a very political one, actually, because in post-socialist Romania there was such a hegemonic anti-communist discourse. Not only hegemonic, but also pretty thin and pretty reductionist. I didn't want to enter that dialogue in an overtly manifest political way, but I wanted to do research to see what these people were actually talking about. And then it was very complicated, because, actually, there was no labour history in Romania, so there was no secondary literature. It was almost like an empty territory, but it was also populated with all the ghosts of anti-communists that were very strong still.

I was also politically not nostalgic for Romanian state socialism. So that was also something that I wanted to avoid by any means. I really wanted to understand more about what happened to a social category that everybody seemed to know what happened with: the workers. In a way, it seems so self-evident what happens to workers in a worker state, but actually, if you start reading labour history for the countries in Eastern and Central Europe, you see that there's nothing so straightforward. And the social contract between workers and the state in different countries was very different. It's actually a very rich and important part of history that shouldn't be treated as if we knew what we were talking about. In Romania, we really didn't know what we were talking about for a long time. There was a very good book about Romanian factories by Mara Mărginean that appeared in the Romanian language. And then there were two books on the Romanian fifties, my book *Planning Labour*¹, and Adrian Grama's *Laboring Along*², which appeared basically at the same time. He did his PhD in History at CEU, and I did my PhD in the Sociology and Anthropology department. These were the first two books in English in labour history, although I'm not technically a labour historian.

I think if I ever get to the point where I have my own PhD students, I will tell them that there is an immense joy of discovery when you start doing something that nobody has done before. But it's also very complicated, especially if you do it as a PhD, because it is such a huge learning curve in terms of doing research, and if you can't talk to someone who saw the same type of data that you are seeing, it's really hard. This is not about reading more or studying more or working more. This is simply about talking to people who saw the same type of materials, who made sense of the same archives. This is the type of work that good historians are doing for us so many times. And until you do it yourself, you don't understand how much they work, and you don't understand how lucky we are if we can simply use their work to reconstruct what people call "historical context". I find it to be actually the most important thing. There is something daunting about the impossibility of doing this reality check with someone who simply did the same type of research.

It can drive you a bit crazy if you're a PhD. I was very lucky with my PhD supervisor, but in the beginning, when I was in Oxford, I actually had an external supervisor Oxford agreed to, who was a labour historian, Mark Pittaway. He was a labour historian of Hungary, socialist Hungary, and he was an amazing person, an amazing intellectual and a very clear British socialist. He died when I moved to CEU. He was 39 when he died. I'm absolutely sure, just like I said in the acknowledgments of my book, that my book would have been much better if he was alive to actually help me. Precisely because some things make sense only if you discuss them with people who put their hands in the same dough.

Fiona

Related to that, I was wondering whether your academic community and your audience is primarily from Eastern Europe or Western Europe? Where do you think your contribution has been made?

1 Cucu, Alina-Sandra (2019). *Planning Labour: Time and the Foundations of Industrial Socialism in Romania*. New York: Berghahn Books.

2 Grama, Adrian (2018). *Laboring Along: Industrial Workers and the Making of Postwar Romania*. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg.

Alina

I think it's hard for me to say, and I must be a bit biased now, because I just came from Philadelphia from this conference, ASEES [Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies], which is basically the American association that deals with area studies. It's the former Soviet Studies plus Eastern Europe, to be honest. Now it's Russian studies plus Eastern Europe. I felt there was a lot of interest in our panel, but probably because I was with the right people in that panel, with pretty big names. But yes, the Association also gave me a prize for my book in 2020. And, actually, I'd never imagined people who do Eastern Europe and Soviet studies would be so interested in my book. I was really surprised when they started to write to me. But people who are interested in planning also started to write to me, because for my future projects, for instance, I seem to be in a way more interested in planning and forms of planning than simply in labour. So, I'm glad that even people who work on indicative planning in France or in Japan found something of value in my book. I'm always surprised when this happens.

It's not because I wanted to write a bad book or I don't believe there is something of value in my book, but it felt so confined to the interest of people who either work on Eastern European labour or work on Romania. I'm always very happy when I see people who come from very different disciplinary corners and from very different topics find something there.

Fiona

What would you say are the advantages and disadvantages of studying your own society?

Alina

I think the advantages, the practical advantages are huge. They are huge. I could live at home during my PhD, I spent way less money than if I travelled abroad. It's important. It's really important. I had contacts, people knew me, I could find people for interviews. But I think that's where it stops, because there was this very interesting encounter with the world of the Romanian factories, which was very anthropological in a certain way, because although I grew up in Romania, I belonged to a different social class. My grandparents and my parents were what we called cultural bourgeoisie in late socialism. They were intellectuals, and I grew up in an environment that had...there was a wall between my world and the world of the factories. And although this was state socialism, I didn't have much contact with the factories. The fact that I was at a musical high school added to this separation because we were also exempted from voluntary work. So, we didn't visit the factories, and we didn't go to help in the field together with the workers when they were helping the peasants with the crops.

We didn't live in working class neighbourhoods, although in late socialism it was very likely that many intellectuals would live in the same neighbourhoods as the workers. Somehow the separation between my families and the working class was much harder. It was a much harder line to cross than for other intellectual families, for all sorts of biographical reasons. So, I had the feeling of looking at class as a foreign country, and that also meant looking at parts of the city that I've never been to before. I didn't know the industrial areas in Cluj at all when I started my research. So, it was a very interesting, but also a very humbling experience for a leftist person, a pretty big slap of awareness about where I came from and how protected my existence had been, and how different life in the same space, in the same *urban* space looked like for most people. I had absolutely no idea. This also gave me a way of understanding my profession as being something more personal than the career that one makes out of the type of instruments you get from your learning and from your research interests are the type of instruments that can shape you personally and politically.

The career is something that works or doesn't work. Let's hope it works. But those instruments always stay with you, if you start to identify yourself in a way with what you do. I think this is a plus and I'm not sure I would have had this kind of acute awareness without doing research in my hometown. For my second book I moved to another city, but the first book was all about home, about understanding my own home from a very different corner.

Fiona

And just to go back to what you said about sociology in Romania, and how you had a very good foundation there, could you tell us a bit more about that and how it influenced you as a sociologist?

Alina

I will talk only about the sociology department in Cluj because that's the department I'm more familiar with. I think there was an advantage in being a new department, because during the late socialist period, the sociology departments were basically closed by the socialist regime. You didn't have sociology proper. Sociologists started to teach in philosophy or in history departments, or to work for the industrial sociology centres at technical universities. And in the 90s, when this department was opened, there were not many people to teach. So, there was the old guard of sociologists, very good sociologists, actually. Some of them did their PhDs in France and very good old school kind of sociologists, very solid in their formation. And then they had very few students they could teach in these luxury conditions in terms of how many students they had. I think in the beginning, the first cohort was seven students or something like this, then twelve, then twenty-two and so on. They could influence these students to be very passionate and very resourceful. There were no books, so in the beginning, there was this huge enthusiasm of building a department from scratch, and they really chose the best students to teach the next generations.

Somehow those best students were my professors, and they were struggling to teach as well as they could. Also, they were learning a lot. All the time. They were obsessed with learning how to teach, how to do research. In a way, the fact that the struggle of understanding what research and teaching meant was so integral to their efforts really benefited us. But I still remember, when I was an undergrad, I still remember having two copies of *Economy and Society* in the whole city, both of them in that atrocious French translation, and queuing for the book, because there were no other sources. I remember queuing for books because we all wanted to read the same book. There was a waiting list, and you could read the book, not when they were teaching it at the seminar, but whenever you could read the book, it's something that I can't imagine now. It still worked somehow. But on that waiting list there were some of our professors as well.

It was a bit insane. Also, because our older generation of professors were in general this old guard, old school, quantitative oriented, professors, we got a very solid methodological education. We still learned how to do statistics with a pencil and to calculate everything in our minds before we used the computer. Everything was very solidly laid down. And I still think that was fantastic for later, because now, even if I haven't used any statistical software in five years, if I do, I do understand the logic and then I can build everything from there when needed. I think we did this with research in general, with interviews too.

Rodrigo

Talking about methods, you told us about how important history is to you, but your way of practising history is also very interesting, right? Because you talk about this ethnographic handling of historical data, this focus on the everyday life. So, we were wondering if you could just expand a bit more about how you practise history and how you came to that method.

Alina

With history, it's the clearest part for me. As I told you, history for me is not about the past and it's not about genealogical reconstructions, it is about unpacking historical configurations. So basically, that's why I never think about my work as not being historical. Now I'm applying for jobs and fellowships, and I also have projects that are not historical in the classical understanding. So, they are not about the past, they are absolutely about the present. And I still think about them as historical in the sense that I'm interested in how the social phenomena I want to look at are caught in these broader historical processes, how they are caught, for instance, in the logic of existential fragility of late capitalism. You can't understand this just by thinking that you are looking at one thing in one moment in time. I just don't believe it. I don't understand how this is *one* thing. Of course, there is the other, simple, basic methodological aspect of it, because looking at something historical is how you produce variation, and you basically produce your explanatory frames. It's very hard to produce variation in one place. That's why sociologists go so much for comparison. Because when you don't do historical work, then in order to produce variation, you need another case. But if you look at things historically, then you produce variation simply by comparing different moments in time within your own case.

The third very important aspect is related to how I believe our concepts work, or should work at least, as fully fledged historical artefacts themselves. And to understand that, when talking about gentrification, for instance, it's not enough to send your students to a dictionary; because it will not mean the same thing in the margins of Bucharest, or in the neighbourhood where I live in Berlin, which is still not gentrified, weirdly enough. I think historicizing is the first and maybe the only step that truly matters. In order to understand that our concepts actually work *in history*, they can't be emptied, in the sense of metaphysical concepts. We don't do metaphysics, actually. We have to have some ideas about the deeper ontological and epistemological foundations of our research. But we somehow need to understand that whatever we look at, it's always a snippet in a broader history.

This means that the instruments we use to understand that snippet are also transient and historical, and they are changing, and it's good that they are changing. This doesn't mean that they are always changing for the better, but it's good they are changing. It's also good to understand that probably the most work societies do is not to change, but to reproduce themselves and to get some forms of order and fixity. Because change is actually always there. If there is one thing we can be sure of, is that things will change. How they are stabilised in different moments, how you make that change intelligible, how you make that change acceptable, and what kind of social order and social contracts you build around those changes - these are very different questions, but somehow, I have always taken change as the constant, and then looked at the efforts of actually "fixing" things. And when I did research for my PhD thesis or when I wrote my first book, I was actually shocked of how much routine efforts and how much everyday efforts and political efforts it took to fix or to stabilise anything in a factory. Anything they wanted to work in a certain way required an immense amount of work to make it stay that particular way. It was much more certain that it would be fluid and fluctuate. I think that's how I think about history in my research.

Will

Staying with the historical method for a little bit, in one of your papers on 'Producing knowledge in productive spaces' there's a discussion of your methodology as an 'ethnographic handling' of historical data. Could you tell us about how you use ethnography in your historical work?

3 Cucu, Alina-Sandra (2014), 'Producing knowledge in productive spaces: ethnography and planning in early socialist Romania'. *Economy and Society*, 43 (2), 211-232.

Alina

That's the part that's more difficult to explain than the history part. The easiest way to do it is to say that for me, just like for anthropologists, place matters. Place matters not as context, just like history doesn't matter as "context". There is no such thing as "historical context". in my work. I go back to history for a moment just because it's easier to explain something in this way. But in my very limited experience as a teacher, when students ask me, "how far back in time do I have to go?", this is not an arbitrary formal decision. Your topic will tell you how far you have to go. Nobody can tell you your PhD thesis has to have a historical chapter that goes back to the Romans. No, nobody can tell you this, or that it only goes back to the 19th century. The processes you look at start to be important and start to be meaningful at a certain point in history and in a certain place, that's how you think about them. The same goes for place. As you probably know, for anthropologists, place is everything. But it's a logic of place that started with the idea that you go to a village or to a tribe, and you try to understand the place with the people who lived in that place. It's a very long and complex discussion about how and why it can be a good or a bad idea to think about places in these ways. But what you start to understand when you read a lot of anthropology is that place is also like historical moments, they also have their own logic. They are determined by certain forces. They are more in or out of certain value chains. They are caught into global capitalist dynamics in a certain way. I always remember about Braudel's work on the Mediterranean because he dedicates one volume to the geographical conditions of the space he looks at. We don't do this many times when we do our work, because geography seems to be outside the socially determined. But of course, when Braudel does this, the geographical also becomes the possibility of sustaining certain types of work, certain forms of social reproduction, and so on and so forth.

Then you understand that where you do research is actually a juncture between so many processes and relations, and you want to understand those processes and relations in order to understand how they meet in place. But also, the unique way in which they meet in place matters. So that's what makes a place *the* place. So you don't start with the city, you go in, you want to understand what that city is. And the boundaries of the city are not the official boundaries of the city. Just like I discovered in my book, you don't have a factory. You have a factory with the neighbourhoods, with the factory communities and with villages that supply labour. You also discover different ways of looking at the world and different ways of being in the world that meet on the shop floor in specific ways and make this idea of planning labour much more complicated than hiring manpower in an industrial unit.

Where is this place? How do you think about its boundaries? What are the boundaries made of? Are they class boundaries because you have a segregated city? Are they age boundaries because you have shop floors in the factory where you have an age difference between the workers? Is solidarity possible? Is conflict present? All these things somehow make up the place you want to look at. In practical terms, you start with a time and with a place, but then you need to unpack them and to see if they really make sense and if they don't make sense, always have the courage to break your initial idea and go for different ways of putting things together, because we do put things together ourselves. These are also, all of them, methodological decisions. They tell you how far back you go in the archives or how far further or how further you go to interview people from the neighbourhood.

Rodrigo

Sticking with ethnography, you also mentioned in your research how it was used by the Soviet Romanian state to gather knowledge about the people they were trying to govern. And also, you acknowledge, rightly so, the colonial history of ethnography and anthropology as ways of knowing. So, do you think there is a way to practise ethnography and trying to disentangle it from its colonial and authoritarian past, or a way of practising it that is aware of those entanglements?

Alina

Yes, absolutely. We should be aware of the entanglement. We should also be aware of how the basic concepts of anthropology, and not only the methods, but the concepts themselves, are shaped by its initial encounters with the Other, encounters that were pretty much shaped by imperialism. Anthropology was also pretty much shaped by the Cold War logic. These are things we should not be proud of, but statisticians have their own stories with eugenics, sociologists have their own stories, too. So, our disciplines are not great disciplines when it comes to their foundations, but in some ways, they *are* great disciplines when it comes to their foundations. I think we need to be able to separate things, we need to be very critical with the ways in which politics of knowledge production become parts of politics at different times. And I think we should learn to pay a lot of attention to how we do this today and to what we enable or not with our work today.

However, there is a part of me that never ceases, against all the critics of modernity which are well founded, there is a part of me who still believes in the fact that certain types of knowledge are worth producing. And I believe anthropological, sociological, historical knowledge are worth producing. I also don't believe too much in types of knowledge that separates them, because if you think about it, these were all disciplines that at some level were part of the Enlightenment and immediate post-Enlightenment political economy discourse. And in some ways, when I read those people, such as the Scottish Enlightenment and political economy thinkers, and I look at my own work, I see the spirit of looking at things in the same way, although I hope with less racist and imperialist lenses. Sometimes I think about sociology too, and about the problem of having three big white men as founding fathers, as having only fathers, and so on, so forth. We all know this, and we should be critical forever with this. But there is something that I always remember about the three big male founding white fathers. And this is that there was an ambition to think about this semi-fiction, *society*, in a very systemic way. There was an ambition to understand how things fit together, how many things fit together, which also derived from a very specific trust in the type of knowledge they were producing.

They were wrong many times to trust that knowledge. But I'm very suspicious about people who don't trust the type of knowledge they produce, really at all. And they keep producing knowledge. I'm sorry, but the world is full of academics who keep telling us that this type of knowledge, the type of knowledge they produce shouldn't be produced. They do this from their pretty good academic positions, and I'm pretty confused. I do trust that in the fact that understanding things in a processual, relational way is worth doing, and that there can be some ways in which this knowledge can be put to good work, just like knowledge can be put to bad work. So being aware, yes. Trying to disentangle things that actually came together in the past of our disciplines, no. I don't think funding and time should be spent on "cleaning" our disciplines and "recovering" their foundations. They are not clean, and we have to face it. But also, there is something very psycho-analysable about identifying ourselves with the founding fathers of our discipline so much that we can't move on.

Carla

In terms of this interdisciplinary background that you've explored and the different places you've studied, also maybe related to your experience at Oxford, we were wondering whether you have any advice for early career PhD students who face the pressure to specialise in a subfield and commit to particular ways of doing research. You said that you don't really trust scholars or researchers who don't combine different approaches and that are not aware of the different traditions within disciplines. But at the same time, there is this pressure to specialise. So, within this tension, do you have any advice that you'd like to share?

Alina

This is not going to be inspiring at all, I'm sorry. It's such practical advice, I think there are no early career scholars and there are no PhD students. There is this PhD student and that PhD student. If this PhD student has a lot of time and feels financially secure enough and feels like they can do interdisciplinary work properly, then they should do interdisciplinary work. But then, yes, you put a lot of effort. You publish actually way less than your colleagues, because if you have a narrow field where you can have a very clear set of concepts, a clear set of methods, then it is easier to write articles. I will not say where, but I remember someone saying, 'well, I will publish an article with this set of variables, and an article with this set of variables'—they were talking about regressions—I will publish an article based on this regression here and this regression here and this regression'... Basically, I couldn't see how these were different articles, except for the fact that there were different variables. But yes, in the time I publish an article, they will publish six.

And I'm not kidding. So, you publish less, your CV looks worse. This doesn't mean it shouldn't be done. What I don't like is when it's done just to be sold as interdisciplinary. If you want to put the effort, you need to know how much time you have ahead, how much money, what kind of funding you have, and so on and so forth. All these things become much more fragmented when you finish your PhD, unless you get a permanent position very early on. But even then, your time becomes much more fragmented because you start teaching. And in the beginning, teaching is a lot of work. So, the question is, can you do this properly? I think you need a plan for how to read and how to think about your research in these terms and accept from the start the limitations that pertain to the fact that, yes, you need to read in multiple fields. You need to understand the logic of multiple fields. Also, it's very important to build audiences, even if you work with multiple fields. This is something that I learned very late, that if you are an interdisciplinary scholar, then what you need is not an interdisciplinary audience.

You need audiences in multiple disciplines who can call your bullshit when you are wrong. You need people who truly go in depth into those aspects of your research where you can't go in depth, because there are only 365 days in a year. And you need people from different disciplines, who are serious and brutal with their feedback, and who are much more disciplinary than you are. Those are the people whose feedback you are searching, not the interdisciplinary scholars who will say, "this is great, because this is what I do". It's better to go there to business historians who tell you, "No, the data is wrong; where did you get these figures from? Why is this table blue and not green? That's not how you do it". And you learn from them. So, you don't try to learn from people who do everything like you do. You try to learn from those who do the kind of work you want to move beyond. But many times, when it comes to specific aspects, they do better work than you will. That's the truth. You also need to face this, that with interdisciplinary work, there will be a level of floating above certain things because you can't master them all.

Then you really need to keep this in check by going to those people who will destroy you. And this comes with its own emotional price. You feel like a fraud all the time, much more than people who work in well circumscribed fields. Your chances to develop an imposter syndrome, and for good reasons this time, are actually pretty high, but it's much more fun.

Carla

You developed your career in a time of growing precariousness, so we were interested in how you have experienced these challenges and these changes within the higher education academic career.

Alina

Again, this is something that has a lot to do with the fact that my existence was kind of protected. It's a class issue, but again, it was not protected enough because I don't come from money so my family was never rich. It was just that I had the right habitus for this career which is, as we all know, pretty important. And it's also pretty important if you don't choose the path that takes you to the best or most recognised schools. Then if you come from schools that are second layer, you need to sound like someone who can be up there. I think this is important. But for a while I was pretty lucky to move from fellowship to fellowship without much effort. So, my success rate for the application was pretty high, because when you apply for grants, interdisciplinary work is actually great for institutes of advanced studies or this kind of places. At some point, I started to experience it very brutally, at an emotional level, because at some point I just started to be desperate about making friends and living. When I had to move away again after just nine months or a year, it simply felt like my heart kept breaking. I just don't want to do this any longer.

And then when I started to realise this, I realised that if I wanted a permanent position or if I wanted to stay in one place, then it's a very different game to play. And I don't understand the game yet, but you do need strategies for embedding yourself in certain places. I think if I did it again, what I would do is to actually build much stronger feedback networks and much stronger and active intellectual communities, even if they are transnational. Because I think you'll see when you leave each other, there is a form of intellectual loneliness that it's actually pretty alienating and pretty hard to bear. But I also learned that it doesn't have to be like this. It takes more effort. But putting work into having working groups, reading groups, feedback groups, having five people in this world who read what you write, and see how your mind evolves, how your thinking evolves, who know you as an intellectual not only today, but also next year and next year and next year,. So, this kind of dialogue, if you don't keep this... I think this is the greatest advice. I have just put effort into networking, not in the sense that people tell you to get the positions, network with your peers a lot and keep your peers close and read each other's work.

If you feel like you don't have time and it's too hard to go to research seminars, then remember that's where the profession should actually happen, much more than it does and much more than we make it happen. Maybe instead of reading one more book we should go read the unfinished work of our colleagues. Go read bad work, and give feedback, and be honest. I think that's the only advice, because otherwise, well, we'll have to think very carefully about what academia stands for and what the university stands for. If it stands for producing a labour force for the future, then we are not in a very good place, because there are other ways to produce a labour force for the really weird labour market that's probably coming. I think the place of humanities and social sciences in this political economy of global labour is very weird, precisely because we keep being the ones saying that our work is actually so problematic and we are so critical with our own work. We should be very critical, but we should recover a very strong sense of professional identity and trust in what we do. Otherwise, we can't complain that people find us irrelevant because we keep telling them that what we do is so bad.

I read with great pleasure and with great interest any form of critical theory these days. This is not about this. It's about the fact that we need to be able to integrate the insights of critical theory and still believe that what we do matters at some level. Because if it does not, then have the courage of saying that it does not, and that's it. Most people out there will agree, because they don't want to fund our kind of things anyway.

Fiona

This last question is about your plans for future work. Could you share some of your current projects or maybe some avenues that you're interested in researching with us?

Alina

Now, theoretically, I should write my second book. That's what I should do. I did research on a factory in Romania in the southern part of Romania. And it's historical, but it comes to the present and I should write that book. But it's application season. So, what I'm actually doing is putting together two different projects, very different projects. One of them is a proper historical project that looks at the entanglements between planning mechanisms in Romania and in France, and looks at the dialogue that developed between French and Romanian economists and economic executives in issues of planning and economic coordination.

And the other, completely different project I'm trying to put together is looking at the transnational labour markets for therapy and mental health services and how the fact that we have a global labour market changes professions related to mental health, especially psychotherapy. These are the two projects that I'm trying to put together.