

Bypassing Chokepoints

On the Anthropogeography of Smuggling

An interview with Elizabeth Dunn by Čarna Brković

In this interview from 16 June 2016 at the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies at the University of Regensburg, postdoc Čarna Brković speaks with Elizabeth Dunn, an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at Indiana University Bloomington, about Dunn's current project on 'Chokepoints' and research on displacement and humanitarian aid in Georgia. Dunn also discusses writing for different audiences, differences in academic cultures across countries, the value of long fieldwork, and her work on a lawsuit against then Governor of Indiana, US Vice President Mike Pence. This interview was originally published in the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies newsletter.

Čarna Brković: *It is a pleasure to welcome you as a Visiting Fellow. What have you been working on in Regensburg?*

Elizabeth Dunn: I have been getting ready for a project that I am doing with six other people called 'Chokepoints'. We are interested in geophysical, land mass chokepoints: any place where traffic is highly restricted through the chokepoint. We have one person at the Panama Canal, we have another person in these enclaves between India and Bangladesh. You can only get from the enclave through to the main part of the country through a narrow chokepoint called the 'Chicken Neck'. The chokepoint I am working on is the Roki Tunnel, which was built in the 1970s through the Caucasus. There are only five ways through the Caucasus. There are four mountain passes, which are extremely high – one of them comes up to about 15,000 feet, it is 5,000 meters – but they are closed most of the year, because of snow. The Georgian military highway, for example, is closed usually from October to

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June. So, there was a tunnel built in the 1970s that went, basically, from Tskhinvali, which is the capital of South Ossetia, then the Georgian province of South Ossetia, and it goes through to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia. The 2008 war between Russia and Georgia was largely fought over control of this tunnel. I am going to write a social and military history of the tunnel and people's battles to control the kind of traffic that goes through it.

Today, things go through it: lots of smuggled agricultural crops, fruits and vegetables mostly from Georgia heading north to Russia. Also, things going through it are drugs, guns, nuclear material. On five occasions, they caught smugglers bringing enriched uranium south from Russia through the tunnel, heading for Iran. So, nuclear smuggling, heroin (heroin actually moves north through the tunnel from Afghanistan but subutex, which is like methadone, goes south from the tunnel from Russia to Georgia; subutex is many Georgian drug addicts' drug of choice). Now, increasingly, it is also a major transit point for ISIS fighters, coming from Chechnya headed either to Syria or back from Syria. Because the head of the Russian-speaking brigades for ISIS was, or is – it is hard to say if he is dead or alive – a man named Omar al-Shishani, Omar the Chechen. He is actually a Georgian, his name is Batirashvili. He has been routing fighters through the tunnel and down into Syria.

This tunnel has become sort of a strategic flashpoint. The Russians decided, if they were going to control South Caucasus, particularly their bases in Armenia, that they would need to control movement through that tunnel. The 2008 war was largely about controlling traffic. That is a different interpretation of that war. Most people see this as a war of ethnic separatism. I think that was sort of a minor issue.

CB: *The tunnel has one entrance and one exit. It should be fairly easy to control it. How do so many things get smuggled through it?*

ED: Isn't that an interesting question? As part of this, I have friends who are smugglers, who have never really been willing to talk very much about what they smuggle and how they smuggle it. But one of the things I know is that they, in many ways, play the Russian state against itself. So, some of my friends who move back and forth got passports when the Russians wanted to 'passportize' all of the South Ossetia, which lets them move back and forth. Or they hold a Georgian passport and a Russian passport. Some of them got those passports by bribing low level government officials. A friend of mine paid 3,000 USD for his Russian passport. It is a real Russian passport. He is not a real Russian citizen, but it is a real passport. And he uses it to advance his smuggling business.

Another interesting thing is that, now that the Russians have captured both ends of the tunnel, they have moved the effective chokepoint all the way to the border between South Ossetia and Georgia. All of these crossing points, which are becoming increasingly militarised, big rolls of barb wire, and dogs, and guns – this was not true five years ago – all of those crossing points have become effectively control points for the chokepoint. For the original chokepoint, which is the tunnel. So, each border crossing is now a chokepoint. I am really interested in understanding what it is like for people to live not only in a chokepoint, but one in which control over it has become highly militarised.

CB: *Your forthcoming book, 'No Path Home: Humanitarian Camps and the Grief of Displacement'¹, ethnographically explores refugee camps, or more precisely, camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). You suggest that humanitarian aid can be both 'something', from the perspective of those who provide help, and 'nothing', for the IDPs. Could you tell us how humanitarian aid can be both 'something' and 'nothing' at the same time?*

ED: Well, the status of an object does not inhere in the object, like the famous Marxist dictum that property is not a relationship between people and things, but relationship between people and people. Aid is also very much a relationship between people and people, but not in the way that aid providers think. It is also, very importantly, a relationship between things and things. Aid providers think that this object, which is a gift, is being given to displaced people to somehow replace the things that they have lost. Aid providers often see the problem of displacement as a problem of property loss: if we can just give them back their houses, and their pots, and their pens, and their clothes, then they would be fine. Aid has traditionally been really focused on moving things to people.

For things to be meaningful, though, they have to be related to other things and to people and to ideas in a kind of stable network of meaning. Your computer, your chair, your pen, your grandmother's diamond ring – all of these things have meaning because they exist in a social context. Aid comes to refugees in many ways outside of a social context, or in a social context that is very confusing and very difficult for them to understand. The objects that arrive are not networked into a stable relationship with other people and other things. They kind of 'parachute in' from nowhere. Most of the IDPs I knew would say, over and over, that they had nothing, that they were getting nothing. In fact, they had all sorts of

¹ <http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/?GCOI=80140100565670>

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plastic basins, cheap chairs, and replacement donated clothes. But those things did not have an ontological status of 'something', because they were not properly networked in to all the other things of their lives. Instead, they just became things that pointed to the missing other things. If you got a cheap aluminum pot as aid, it did not really stand for a pot itself, it only referred to your big, cast-iron pot, that was your grandmother's, that was now missing. Every object just reminded people of what they did not have. Every object pointed to an empty hole where something else was supposed to be for them. That aid had the ontological status of nothingness. For them, it only meant absence.

CB: *Do you think this duality of humanitarian aid is somehow specific to Georgia, as a so-called 'developing', Eastern European country?*

ED: Not at all. The interesting thing about looking at humanitarianism from an ex-Soviet country is, on the one hand, these are problems that are universal. The aid system is remarkably portable and the solutions it brings very often do not change based on their context. They are 'immutable mobiles', in a Latourian sense. So, the aid that comes to Congo is the same as the aid that is given to Georgia a lot of times. What is interesting is that precisely because Georgia was a developed country – or was part of a developed country in the USSR – people have a comparative standpoint. They have an expectation level of what they should have, of what life should be like. In many ways, that lets you see the ways in which the aid enterprise is disconnected from its context. The aid that is being given out is aid that might be appropriate for a third world country, but Georgians have different expectations of what their life should be like. The difference between those expectations and what they are actually receiving really shows you the ways in which aid is not appropriate to its context.

CB: *Your work converses with anthropologists as well as with geographers and you regularly publish texts in public media. Considering that the Graduate School is a very interdisciplinary environment, do you perhaps have any tips for our PhD students regarding how to write for different audiences?*

ED: I think that different audiences place a premium on different kinds of language. It is really important to understand that you are writing into specific genres. The kinds of things I would write for an anthropology journal, in which anthropologists place a high premium on complicated sentence structure, on a very high level of vocabulary – there is a certain notion that being a little bit obscure makes you sound much smarter – that kind of language does not play well in an international studies journal, for example. There it just sounds sort of obscure and stupid, or unclear, or as muddy thinking. I write very differently for an

international studies journal than I would for a geography journal, or anthropology journal. Professional journals very often want you to do what I call the 'bow to the ancestors' – where you have to have all the appropriate citations to the appropriate people. Writing in other disciplines demands bowing to different ancestors.

But when you come to public media, they are not interested in the least in your bowing to the ancestors. They find the kind of language that anthropologists or human geographers use to be really obscure, a little bit condescending, not worth reading. In public media, you now have about two seconds to grab people's attention, or they are just going to flip to the next article. In that sense, I have found writing for public media to be really about learning a new language for writing – and it has made me become a much better writer. You have to say what it is you want to say very clearly and very fast. You have to be a good writer in the sense of evoking particular images and evoking particular ideas and emotional states in your reader. Your control over language has to be much, much greater. I love writing for public media, I think it makes me a better writer.

CB: *You spent sixteen months conducting ethnographic fieldwork for your first book, 'Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor'. You spent another sixteen months also conducting participant observation on Georgian humanitarian camps. Could you tell us why anthropologists take so much time simply living in the field, seemingly doing 'nothing'?*

ED: Our method is 'hanging out' [laughter]. I think there is an enormous difference between the data you get in an interview and the data you get by watching people live their everyday lives. At least I have discovered this. This is especially true in Eastern Europe, where people have long habits of watching what they say very carefully. Very often, you will see that – and this is particularly true of refugees and displaced people – that they get a story that becomes a common story. And you will hear that every person basically tells you the same story. That story lacks a lot of detail; it does not capture differences of opinion within a community. It does not tell you about historical change. So, for example, the story the IDPs in Georgia told me was: "Oh, we got along so well with the Ossetians. We went to their weddings and they came to ours". That does not tell you about how things changed over time, and they changed a lot between, say, 1970 and 2008. It does not tell you very much about the fact that people had different relationships based on gender, based on their kinship relationships to one another. It does not tell you about why violence would flare up and then die down. It was much more useful for me to spend a lot of time with people, get to know them, and eventually hear specific stories about specific incidents in their lives and histories. Specific conflicts with Ossetian neighbors. Specific marriages in which

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people married across lines and had problems – or did not have problems. To hear people's experiences of conflict and war as being also differential among them. People had really different experiences of the war, depending on how far away they were from the border, or the town of Gori, or how long it took them to get into Georgia proper. Age made a huge difference. Older people stayed back longer, because they thought the soldiers would not attack them. They stayed back to guard the livestock and houses, and so they became much more traumatised and saw much, much more violence. Those are stories you only get when people know you and trust you and when you have long, ongoing conversations.

The other thing about staying there longer that became very useful was that, initially, in the interviews, people were very reluctant to criticise the Georgian government or the aid providers. They believed that their aid would be cut off if they were openly critical, or that they would suffer some kind of political consequences. That was a pretty realistic fear. Our camp had the Georgian secret police, state security services in it. People were threatened that, if they were openly critical, or if they protested the way aid was being delivered, that they would lose their aid and family members would lose their government jobs. So, people were very afraid of speaking openly. The things that really bothered them about the way life in the camps was organised did not come out until I had been there for a very long time and people really trusted me. I think that, when you are there a long time and you build this rich network of social relations, you see different things than you would see by jetting in for two weeks.

CB: *You are a member of the group that has recently won a lawsuit against a Governor's order that barred state agencies from helping Syrian refugees resettle in Indiana, US. What will be the effects of the lawsuit and how did you become involved in this?*

ED: The lawsuit was actually carried out by the American Civil Liberties Union and the named plaintiff was Exodus Refugees Services, which is a federally funded resettlement agency in the US. All refugees have to be resettled by federally funded, federally authorised agencies. This was, in many ways, an important case about the locus of power. Who has the power to decide where refugees will be resettled? Is that up to states? The governor of Indiana [Mike Pence, who became Vice President of the US] said it was his legal right to bar Syrians from resettling in Indiana. Or is that a federal issue? The federal district court agreed that it was, in fact, a federal issue and that the governor of Indiana does not have the power to decide who would get aid and who would not, who would resettle and who would not. When the governor said he would deny state provided aid to refugees from Syria, the federal district court said that is discrimination of the basis of national origin. And it is unconstitutional. So – yay! We win!

CB: *Congratulations!*

ED: Thank you! My role in that was – I was not an attorney, and I was not a plaintiff – so my role was mostly as a cheerleader and as a rabble-rouser. I helped plan a lot of marches and rallies. I did a lot of work in newspaper articles and writing op-eds for the local newspapers. I have been really involved in general in trying to overturn the idea that governors can bar certain classes of refugees from resettling. Now, we have done all this work in Bloomington (and it has been really fun, actually; we have had fantastic response from the local community, a real Willkommenskultur). Bloomington is not like the rest of Indiana. Indiana is largely ‘Trump country’; it is a very red state (red in the sense of republican, not in the sense of communist). I have done a lot of work with local religious groups getting ready to help support refugees. They get very little support from the government, once they arrive. I think here, in Germany, they get money and the housing for a year, or something like that. Refugees in the US get ninety days’ worth of aid. They are expected to have jobs, and be working, and be financially independent, and to repay the government for their plane tickets. They have three months of aid, four months of right on an apartment, and six months of heat and light. That is very optimistic. We are going to help fill in the gaps there. It has been really great organising networks of volunteers and churches and synagogues to help support these refugees. The most wonderful thing about this story is that I was working with a group of people in the temple Beth Shalom, which is a synagogue, and the most active group welcoming and supporting Syrian Muslim refugees has been the Jewish synagogue. I think that really says something important.

CB: *This is not the first time you are in Germany. In 1999-2000, you were a Postdoctoral Fellow at the IAS Berlin (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin). If you were to compare academic life in the US and in Germany, what would be the most striking difference, and what would be more or less similar?*

ED: In the United States, graduate students are rarely hired into projects. The way that graduate positions are organised is quite different. You will not find a graduate student hired to do research on a particular topic; they are generally told to develop their own topics and do their own research. At least in the social sciences.

I think that the most striking difference is how much bigger the role is for intellectuals in German social life. That what intellectuals think, the kinds of work they do, the discussions they have – have a real place in public life here. That is not true in the US, where, generally, academic discussions are held kind of behind the closed doors, they are published behind

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a paywall, so the general public has a much less idea of what we do. I think that is really hurting us. It is hard to explain to tax payers why they should continue to fund universities, which are very expensive, with no idea of what we do, and when the things we write are totally obscure to them. They cannot understand any of it. I really like the kind of life of the public intellectual here, in Germany. I think it is a wonderful thing that you should treasure and preserve.

CB: *Recently, there has been an explosion of criticisms addressing changes in the US and the UK universities, especially trends towards adjunctization and increasing metric evaluation of academic work. Could you perhaps tell us something about the 'movement for slow scholarship' that is currently developing as a grassroots response to these changes at the universities?*

ED: I think this is really related to the fact that, in the US, the general public has very little idea about what we do at universities. I very often hear the criticism: "You only work eight hours a week", because I am only in the classroom eight hours a week. Even my own students do not know what I do the other fifty hours a week that I work. One of the big demands that the public has put on public universities is that we show more evidence of actual work. That means having a lot more papers – so people are publishing, publishing, publishing, even when they do not actually have anything to say, or they are saying the same thing over and over. The explosion of absolutely crap articles has been dramatic. It turns out that something like eighty percent of articles are never cited. Because in many departments – and I used to be in a department like this – it did not matter what you wrote. It mattered how much you wrote. Nobody read what you wrote, they only counted the number of articles. So, nine crap articles was better than one really good article. I think that this kind of neoliberalization has left us with not enough time to read – so we do not read each other's work nearly in the amount we should. When it is semester time, I do not read anything that is not related immediately to a class or something, some text that I am cranking out. It is like I work in a factory.

Yet, one of the things that we know is that real intellectual work comes from having the space to let your mind wonder. A friend of mine, Alex Pang, who is a historian of science, has just completed a book called *Rest*, which I highly recommend [Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*, Basic Books]. It is exactly about the virtue of resting – to improve your productivity, actually; to make what you do better and more important. He did a ton of interviews and a lot of historical research on the working habits of intellectuals. It turns out that really successful intellectuals say "no" to a lot of kind of the busy work of academia, in order to preserve this time to write and read and

think. I think the movement for slow scholarship is very much about doing that. That is a luxury that very few of us have. So many of us have been hired to do factory work: to teach eight classes per year; I have friends who have to teach eight classes per year, but at three different universities, or even eight classes per semester at three different universities. All they are doing is running, running, running. We are pressuring assistant professors to just publish, publish, publish... Whether or not what they have to say is of any value, or whether they had the time to think it through. The luxury to actually read and think is a class privilege in academia. I think it is incumbent on those of us who have it to try and extend it to more people. That means, for me: Yesterday I submitted a grant for three million dollars. Let us see if I get it, fingers crossed. Two of the participants are adjunct faculty, and part of this grant would buy them time to read and think, to work, to conduct fieldwork. I think it is really incumbent on us to start building those opportunities for colleagues who cannot themselves obtain that kind of space.

CB: *Thank you so much!*

ED: It was a pleasure!