

## **On Disciplinary Encounters: IR and Fieldwork**

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As far as I can remember, I encountered International Relations (IR) accidentally.

After high school in Benin, I wanted to study translation. My parents disagreed. I remember my dad saying that I would not be able to earn a living if I studied translation. There was no future in Benin for that kind of discipline, he told me. So, reluctantly, my IR journey started in 2005 at the National School of Administration of the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin. Although this first encounter with IR was accidental, my family had a significant impact on my studies. They shaped the direction I took by foreclosing some routes, and they made it financially possible in Benin. Coming from an upper middle-class family, my father had the financial means to support my education until my master's degree. This also meant I could not disagree with his choice of what I should study.

In the National School of Administration in Benin, I majored in Diplomacy and International Relations. The goal was that I might end up being employed as a public servant in the Beninois government. There was no guarantee of this, but at the time my parents saw this as a more stable path.

IR and I have a love-hate relationship. During my undergrad diploma at the University of Abomey-Calavi, I remember being lost because I did not know what to do with what I was being taught. In that school, professors covered topics from criminal law to project management and international law. When it came to my IR module, we covered only realism, neo-realism and systems theory. As students in that classroom, we dreamt of working in the Foreign Affairs Ministry, maybe because it was one of the few places we were being trained for. Our IR classes were complemented with courses on the functioning of an embassy and diplomatic etiquette. We attended a class titled *Les Éléments du Protocole* (Protocol Elements) which covered topics such as precedence and ordering of high-ranking officials in meetings, how to properly set up a table for such officials, and how to dress properly. I have little recollection of all I was taught now, but I keep my school notes with me to this day.

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Looking closely at the version of IR I encountered in the National School of Administration, Benin seemed not to matter in the international system; only richer countries with military capabilities mattered. Professors taught us unipolarity/bipolarity in the international system. We learned about the French realist Raymond Aron and American foreign policy during the Cold War. At times our profs covered how systems theory mirrored thinking in Biology. But I could not link the system to the people. I am unsure of what the teachers thought about Benin's presence in that system. I often wondered, what can I, a citizen of Benin, do with realism when it is about systems, military power, or hegemony? At times, I found refuge in my international law and international institutions classes; they gave an illusion of appeasement. If there was an international law by which all countries must abide, perhaps Benin was no longer an insignificant country. I hated that in IR courses I was not equipped to face the challenges of this tiny country. I did not know this yet, but the methods of both IR and development economics (a field that I discovered later) seemed to deliberately render poorer countries irrelevant.

I wondered where I could go from there. The version of IR I was being exposed to was everything I knew, but I hated how immobilizing that IR was. Indeed, disappointment in this early IR encounter led me to consider alternative avenues to understand how Benin could improve its economic situation. Later, I pursued a master's degree in development studies in grad school at *Université Laval* in Quebec City. My dad made graduate school financially possible for me, and it is through family connections that I chose to move to Quebec City.

In graduate school, I expected to learn more about Benin and how to improve its economic situation. More broadly, I wished to learn more about Africa. Unfortunately, development studies was not helpful either. I was trained to value theories mostly by white men. I could not see my people. If anything, Beninois people, Africans, were framed as problems, problems for the international system, problems to be solved, problems to be tolerated. There were wars in Africa, poverty and famine in Africa. My core classes, such as Poverty and Economic Development, were full of formulas. They gave a sense that, if you get numbers right, African problems of agricultural production, markets, or foreign direct investments would be solved. The classes were removed from lived realities, I felt. Ultimately, my encounters with these disciplines (IR and development studies) were uncritical.

I do not necessarily blame my teachers for this. Having now discovered more of the politics of knowledge and the complexity of building a syllabus, I do not know if blame would be appropriate. Some instructors' syllabi reflect their training. If one has been trained in mainstream approaches of IR and development studies, the syllabus might reflect just that. In Benin we had no syllabus to support the teaching. Students had to trust that the teacher was an all-knowing human. They dictated words that we furiously wrote down in our notebooks. In Quebec, it was different. I had access to course syllabi, but teachers were less transparent about the politics of the readings they assigned.

I began my PhD at the University of Ottawa many years later. I wanted to probe questions of armed violence: why people fight and how they come to make such decisions. My decision to undertake a PhD came after a year of work in Nairobi with the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). I had met my supervisor in Nairobi and wanted to work with her. This decision was easier because I had recently become a permanent resident of Canada, which allowed me to apply for scholarships and avoid expensive university fees.

My work experience in conflict analysis helped shape my interest in the conflict of the Central African Republic. To study conflict, I thought I must come back to IR. My rationale was that maybe I had been misled during my undergraduate studies. Book titles such as *Why Nations Fight*<sup>2</sup> stuck with me and gave me the impression that IR was the right place to be. When I was studying for the comprehensive exams, I discovered with great interest theories in the fields of international political economy, global governance, security studies, but I wondered which theory would help me better understand the armed conflict in the Central African Republic. I decided to take another departure point and did more reading in comparative politics and political sociology. However, I had already passed my comprehensive exams in IR. Speaking with other colleagues of my cohort about my research interests, I wondered if I should have chosen to major in comparative politics instead. I could not go back and change my major but I decided to study the comparative politics reading list as much as I could. For instance, the first iteration of my dissertation prospectus relied on my understanding of IR and armed conflict and talked about civil war recurrence. Basically, my starting point was war in the international system, and the shifts toward civil wars. I was asking, why has the CAR been witnessing instability since its independence and now a recurring civil war? In the prospectus, I seemed to already have an answer, it was because of exclusionary governance practices. But this made no sense to my dissertation adviser. I removed the recurrence literature, which is a subset of IR, and entirely focused on comparative politics literature, practices of governance and identity claims.

In 2017, I was excited to undertake fieldwork. It was important to me to move beyond sanitized IR theory and get close to Central Africans. Amongst the many places where I ventured in the CAR, a public market downtown of the capital, named the *Marché de la Réconciliation* (Market of Reconciliation) captured my attention. The market is usually packed. Only when it rains heavily does the market look quiet. Otherwise, cars and motorbikes are honking, people are busy bargaining over prices, others are laughing. The public market brings in traders of all sorts, beauty products sellers, fruits and vegetable traders, second-hand clothes sellers, and many craftspeople.

Even as I was drawn to the market, it did not at first occur to me that this place was an important space to encounter people and rediscover IR through their lenses. In Benin, where I grew up until

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

my early twenties, public markets are central to city life. But, as a PhD student, who has now spent more than ten years abroad, this fact completely eluded me! Indeed, I had been disciplined to think that IR takes place in formal, official UN-like spaces. The market did not fit into that. If I were to focus on the national level, then people in government would be the focus. That is what I planned for, that is what I wrote in my prospectus, that is how I started my research.

Initially, I had totally ignored spaces like this, I felt people there were not important. As a reluctant IR scholar, I initially focused on interviewing important “actors,” such as government officials or international NGO representatives working in the CAR. I mapped, neatly, important “actors” and wanted to meet with them when I started fieldwork. In the dissertation prospectus that I defended to my committee, there was no mention of market spaces, or no initial intent that these were spaces I would like to be in.

“Reconciliation,” the notice board of the market read! On a sunny day, I decided to enter the market. I did not know what I was looking for, but I was intrigued by its name. Another interviewee had given me the contact of a woman, a market association trader. She met me in an empty room in the market, a room with one table and a bench, to discuss reconciliation and the market’s name. The woman’s colleague was there too and they would chat from time to time in Sango, one of the national languages of the CAR.

After a long discussion, the woman quipped: ‘We [the market people] do not want them [Muslims] here.’ I shuddered. The international media had framed the conflict in the CAR as sectarian. Some armed factions claimed to represent “true Central Africans” and others claimed to represent “Muslims.” But at the same time, struggles over political power at the elite level provoked the armed conflict. Other CAR civil society organization initiatives tried to correct the sectarian narrative, suggesting that Central Africans of all faiths lived peacefully together, right down to public spaces such as the market. When armed violence was raging in the capital Bangui in 2013 and 2014, some Muslim traders fled to neighboring countries Chad and Cameroun. By the time I was conducting fieldwork, some of these traders were coming back and the reconciliation narrative was present in the civil society media campaign.

Surprised by the statement of the woman, I followed up by asking why. This is when I started shifting my perspective. Speaking initially with her, and later with other market traders, opened me to their world, how goods move from neighboring countries to the CAR, and how traders sell the goods. I started to venture inside markets more often, observing what people did, observing the warehouses. I wanted to understand the woman’s answer. Ultimately, this market space was about the international. It was about people, relations, and connections to other places, how people bring and move goods around and hold the power of moving such goods. I discovered and understood (maybe superficially) how market sellers brought goods from Cameroun, Benin, Togo,

Dubai, and elsewhere. At the same time, traders of different faiths held different power to move goods.

Encountering ideas and stories in this space during fieldwork brought me joy. I was surprised, first, to have encountered the market space, an “unidentified political object,”<sup>3</sup> and, second, to have found things I was not set to find in my original research design. When I spoke with government elites, or armed groups representatives, our discussions centered on official/formal politics, questions of coups, political representations and participation. The woman’s words linked these discussions to lived realities. Muslims traders in market spaces were strong competitors because they had a broader network and financial capital allowing them to bring in more goods at cheaper prices. When they fled, other traders took their places. But by the time I conducted fieldwork, more of these traders were returning to the CAR. Through the words of people at the marketplace, I was able to connect the problems of formal politics to the lived realities of Central Africans. At the same time, if I had not encountered market women and men, I might not have been able to understand life in the market and the competition among market traders as international.

Considering my encounters with IR I think I would have not gotten very far with my PhD puzzles without fieldwork. From the university of Abomey-Calavi, to Quebec, and now Ottawa, I was disciplined not to see people. I learned to value certain people and ideas, even if I was absent from those representations. Now, I have graduated. I am still not sure of what to make of my journey in IR and development studies. But I do love that fieldwork opened up my perspectives and way of seeing the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Denis-Constant Martin, “À la quête des OPNI (objets politiques non identifiés). Comment traiter l’invention du politique ?” *Revue française de science politique*, 6 (1989): 793–815.