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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking international intervention through coeval engagement: Non-formal youth education and the politics of improvement

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Abstract
After important critiques highlighted that studies of peacebuilding and statebuilding tend to bypass people living the consequences of intervention, scholars moved to include local experiences and subjects into knowledge production. This article builds upon these efforts by identifying and then furthering their common goal of coeval engagement. Coeval engagement implies encountering interlocutors as contemporaneous subjects of international politics and centring their experiences as a base for knowledge production. While the urgency and ongoing failures of coeval engagement are widely discussed, I focus on a thus far unconsidered possibility: that coeval engagement is impossible within the conceptual confines of intervention itself. The article delineates two defining parameters of intervention thinking that limit ongoing efforts at coeval engagement: predefined fields of visibility and the local-international binary. As an alternative, it proposes seeing intervention as part of a wider politics of improvement. This conceptual shift leads to unexpected empirical sites and continues challenging intervention's constitutive binaries. The potential of this reorientation is demonstrated by showing how a common tool of 'soft' statebuliding – non-formal youth education – functions within the politics of youth (un)employment in Serbia.

Keywords: International Intervention; Local Turn; Peacebuilding; South East Europe; Statebuilding

Introduction

In the last session of a political activism seminar organised by a small leftist party in Serbia and a British foundation, a participant who had to leave early said goodbye by wishing their colleagues 'the best of luck with the election and speedy employment.'[1] I was visiting the seminar to study political non-formal youth education (NFE) as a tool of statebuilding, peacebuilding, and Europeanisation in Serbia, so the reference to elections was expected. Even though the party that organised the seminar was marginal, and the focus was on non-violent resistance, the participants could be expected to have political ambitions. The reference to employment, however, struck me as unusual. What did political education have to do with employment? While striking at the time, it resonated with discussions that happened in the breaks of the many educational events I attended. These events were associated with significant expectations of internships and employment, but success stories were rare. I met people whose civil society careers started in similar events, but I also heard stories of disappointment: positions that went to other people, exploitative practices of NGOs, and employment contracts ended for minor mistakes. My interviews also sometimes

[1]Fieldwork journal, 19 March 2016. All organisations, events, and names in the text are anonymised.

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included meritocratic narratives of deservingness. In events catered to talented 'future leaders', industrious young people saw NFE attendance as a personal accomplishment differentiating them from their peers absent from such workshops: those struggling with infamously high youth unemployment, or the factory workers that are now a part of the Serbian 'competitive advantage' for attracting foreign direct investment.

The above scene illustrates a tension between the analytical underpinnings of my research practice, and its unfolding among the experiences of my interlocutors. I was in Serbia to study 'soft' statebuilding from the perspectives of its targets. This orientation developed in response to critiques of the bypassing of non-Western subjects in intervention scholarship and IR more broadly,[2] and it speaks to more recent discussions of similar erasures of East and South East Europe.[3] I call this orientation coeval engagement – encountering interlocutors as contemporaneous subjects of international politics and centring their experiences as a base for knowledge production. Coeval engagement, however, took my research practice in an unexpected direction: away from intervention and beyond its conceptual parameters. Even though I attended activities dealing explicitly with political education to investigate the changing forms of political action, (un)employability seemed more important for seminar participants. Moreover, while I was sensitive to the local-international binary so widely discussed in studies of intervention, this was often not the most important hierarchy for the people I spoke to. Instead, it was translated in vertical and horizontal civilisational axes to make sense of old and new inequalities. This incongruence raises a question thus far unaddressed in scholarship that highlights the importance of people living in spaces of intervention: how are we to centre experiences of our interlocutors, when those experiences challenge our own analytical focus on intervention?

In response, the article presents politics of improvement as a conceptual lens for understanding how individual lives encounter intervention, one that creates wide space for the always unfinished project of coeval engagement. While my research relied on ethnographic methods – participant observation (and observing participation), document analysis, and relational and ethnographic interviews, rethinking intervention as politics of improvement does not demand a specific method. Rather, it offers a tool for conceptualising the agency of intervention's targets beyond intervention, at diverse intersections of local and global politics. This argument unfolds in four steps. In the first section, I present coeval engagement and show how it pushes against two dimensions of intervention thinking in IR scholarship: fields of visibility that determine thematic and empirical foci of intervention scholarship, and the local-international binary that serves to conceptualise subjects within those fields. In the second section, I proceed through a generative critique[4] of three IR literatures that differently pursue coeval engagement in the study of interventions: postcolonial and decolonial critiques; local and ethnographic turns; and the subfield of political economy of the everyday. In the third section, I present politics of improvement as a way of engaging targets of intervention in the study of statebuilding and peacebuilding beyond the conceptual confines of intervention thinking. In the fourth and final section, I move to examine the politics of improving the employability of youth in Serbia to illustrate the potential of the reorientation advocated

[2]Zeynep Gulsah Capan, 'Decolonising International Relations?', *Third World Quarterly*, 38:1 (2017), pp. 1–15; Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem Difference* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004); Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique* (London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

[3]Nemanja Džuverović, 'Why local voices matter: Participation of local researchers in the liberal peace debate', *Peacebuilding*, 6:2 (2018), pp. 111–26; Nemanja Džuverović, 'Confessions of a local researcher', in Roger Mac Ginty, Roddy Brett, and Birte Vogel (eds), *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 353–64; Maria Mälksoo, 'Uses of "the East" in international studies: Provincialising IR from Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 811–19; Gëzim Visoka and Vjosa Musliu (eds), *Unravelling Liberal Interventionism: Local Critiques of Statebuilding in Kosovo* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019).

[4]My notion of generative critique comes from Olivia U. Rutazibwa, 'Hidden in plain sight: Coloniality, capitalism and race/ism as far as the eye can see', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 48:2 (2020), pp. 221–41 (p. 225); Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), pp. 24–5.

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in the article. The conclusion frames rethinking intervention as a conceptual retreat towards a less conclusive research agenda on the politics of improvement. Before moving to the first portion of the article that discusses coeval engagement, I present non-formal youth education in Serbia as my empirical starting point.

Non-formal youth education as an arena of intervention

In general, NFE refers to education that happens outside of formal education, but through structured programmes (unlike informal education). Political NFE, that focuses on issues of democratic participation and peaceful coexistence, became an orthodox tool of statebuilding and peacebuilding with the recognition of social capital and participation as key for democratic transition.[5] Its popularity grew as international donors saw young people as capable of bringing peace, development, and democracy.[6] In Serbia, young people and NFE were key both in bringing down Slobodan Milošević in 2000, and the multipronged intervention to build peace, a democratic state, and a market economy that followed. In the 2000 'democratic changes' in Serbia, youth were celebrated as a crucial actor in the 'revolution'[7] and became a part of democracy promotion that framed international efforts in the region.[8] But after 2000, they were seen as haunted by apathy, nationalism, and bitterness, thus becoming faulty political subjects that needed to be 'cured' of cultural factors causing democratic failure.[9]

The post-2000 interventions in Serbia are seen as failing: institutional frameworks are lacking, the transition to free market has turned Serbia into a 'super-periphery' of the EU, and the little legitimacy and accountability that international statebuilders have left is fast-disappearing.[10] While the role of NFE in these processes in Serbia and elsewhere is rarely discussed, existing studies of NFE as an arena of statebuilding and peacebuilding either celebrate or condemn its transformative potential. Problem-solving studies test whether NFE activities 'affect participants' civic engagement and political participation'[11] and scholarship close to the local turn sees it as a crucial 'everyday' dimension of peacebuilding.[12] Critical takes, on the other hand, interpret it as an internationally orchestrated technology of governmentalisation: promoting visions of freedom that produce neoliberal economic and political subjects.[13]

The aim of this article is different. It is not to evaluate NFE, condemn its rationalities, or find faults that can be improved upon.[14] Instead, I use NFE as a site for coeval engagement that can tell

[5] See, for example, Thomas Carothers, 'The end of the transition paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, 13:1 (2002), pp. 5–21 (p. 18).

[6] Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock, *Youth Rising?: The Politics of Youth in the Global Economy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), p. 5.

[7] Sharon L. Wolchik and Valerie Bunce, 'Youth and electoral revolutions in Slovakia, Serbia, and Georgia', *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 26:2 (2006), pp. 55–65.

[8] Marlene Spoerri, *Engineering Revolution: The Paradox of Democracy Promotion in Serbia* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), pp. 133, 143–4.

[9] Jessica Greenberg, '"There's nothing anyone can do about it": Participation, apathy, and "successful" democratic transition in postsocialist Serbia', *Slavic Review*, 69:1 (2010), pp. 41–64.

[10] Nemanja Džuverović and Aleksandar Milošević, '"Belgrade to Belgradians, not foreign capitalists": International statebuilding, contentious politics, and new forms of political representation in Serbia', *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 190–209 (pp. 194–7).

[11] Paulina Pospieszna and Aleksandra Galus, 'Promoting active youth: Evidence from Polish NGO's civic education programme in Eastern Europe', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23:1 (2020), pp. 210–36 (p. 210).

[12] Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, 'Theorising youth and everyday peace (building)', *Peacebuilding*, 3:2 (2015), pp. 115–25.

[13] Alexander Vorbrugg, 'Governing through civil society? The making of a post-Soviet political subject in Ukraine', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 33:1 (2015), pp. 136–53; Zubairu Wai, 'Making neoliberal subjects: "Idle" youth, precarity, and development intervention in Sierra Leone', *Journal of International Relations and Development* (2021), pp. 509–32.

[14] This is similar to Greenberg's approach of studying civic education in democracy promotion beyond the binaries of success/failure and apathy/participation. Greenberg, '"There's nothing anyone can do about it"', fn. 21.

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us more about intervention and the wider international politics it forms. Investigating a 'soft' tool of intervention in an under-examined case like Serbia helps better understand the longevity and breadth of seemingly mundane interventions' consequences.[15] It also challenges constitutive binaries of intervention research. Thinking from a region ambivalently positioned as neither 'coloniser' nor 'colonised' takes forward decolonial critiques of intervention (and knowledge production more generally) by showing how coloniality structures relations outside of North/South divisions.[16] Moreover, working with young people complicates the image of 'good/bad locals' – a binary representation that much of the local turn literature has worked to problematise.[17] Coeval engagement in NFE is thus an invitation to move intervention scholarship into unexpected empirical sites and continue challenging its constitutive binaries.

1. Coeval engagement beyond intervention thinking

I use the term 'coeval engagement' to refer to a mode of encountering research interlocutors as contemporaneous subjects of international politics. Understood in this way, coeval engagement is a meta-methodological orientation deriving from Johannes Fabian's critique of the construction of the anthropological subject.[18] Fabian's critique focused on a contradiction within anthropology: ethnographic encounters rely on contemporaneity of the researcher and its subjects, while the anthropological discourse relies on a negation of that contemporaneity.[19] Even though the researcher encounters their interlocutors in the present of fieldwork, they are there to explore a civilisational past and find laws that govern its evolution. Anthropological knowledge production then depends on a denial of coevalness or allochronism: 'a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse'.[20]

Allochronism is a crucial dimension of a developmentalism that pretends the existence of a known destination of political and economic development. Within International Relations (IR), David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah have shown how this outlook enables IR as an endeavour of explaining difference between units through temporal lags.[21] Outside of academic knowledge production, allochronism is more broadly constitutive of liberal (interventionist) ideology in what Beate Jahn refers to as 'its core contradiction: the universalist claim that all peoples are free and able to govern themselves, and the particularist philosophy of history which posits a developmental

[15]Serbia is somewhat overlooked in studies of peacebuilding and statebuilding, due to the spectacles of liberal interventionist hubris in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some important exceptions that focus on Serbia are Jasna Dragović-Soso, 'The impact of international intervention on domestic political outcomes: Western coercive policies and the Milošević regime', in Peter Siani-Davies (ed.), *International Intervention in the Balkans since 1995* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), pp. 120–35; Džuverović and Milošević, '"Belgrade to Belgradians, not foreign capitalists"'; Marlies Glasius and Denisa Kostovicova, 'The European Union as a state-builder: Policies towards Serbia and Sri Lanka', *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 56:1 (2008), pp. 84–114; Laura McLeod, *Gender Politics and Security Discourse: Personal-Political Imaginations and Feminism in 'Post-conflict' Serbia* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015).

[16]Catherine Baker, 'Postcoloniality without race? Racial exceptionalism and Southeast European cultural studies', *Interventions*, 20:6 (2018), pp. 759–84; Marina Gržinić, Tjaša Kancler, and Piro Rexhepi, 'Decolonial encounters and the geopolitics of racial capitalism', *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*, 3 (2020), pp. 13–38.

[17]Andreas T. Hirblinger and Claudia Simons, 'The good, the bad, and the powerful: Representations of the "local" in peacebuilding', *Security Dialogue*, 46:5 (2015), pp. 422–39; Roger MacGinty, 'Where is the local? Critical localism and peacebuilding', *Third World Quarterly*, 36:5 (2015), pp. 840–56.

[18]Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014 [orig. pub. 1983]).

[19]Ibid., p. 32.

[20]Ibid., p. 31.

[21]David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, *Savage Economics: Wealth, Poverty, and the Temporal Walls of Capitalism* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 9; Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, pp. 89–93.

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inequality between liberals and nonliberals and thus denies the latter these rights.'[22] People are nominally 'the same', but time (and tutelage) stands in the way of that sameness.[23]

In the post-Yugoslav space, this allochronism is embodied in the narrative of transition. Much has been said about the developmentalist teleology that underwrites theories of modernisation and transition,[24] but critiques written from the perspective of transition's subjects focus more precisely on the question of a 'known endpoint'. Dejan Jović notes the shift from the 'explanatory' ambitions of older transition theories that sought to understand outcomes of political transitions from authoritarianism to an unknown endpoint, to 'anticipatory' aims of post-1989 scholarship that looked at transition as a 'journey with a known destination, one that we can clearly define by using the models of democracy already developed in the case of West European societies'.[25] Hajrudin Hromadžić describes transition as having a paradoxical temporality according to which post-Yugoslav societies are included in the globalised present while simultaneously being 'irretrievably separated' and unable to 'equally participate in that time and its world'.[26] Similarly, Boris Buden's reflections can be interpreted as closures effected by a denial of coevalness: while critique in the socialist era strove for freedom that was open, the 'freedom' implied as the end of transition is a freedom defined and directed by someone else[27] – by the Western attitude that the West has 'been there and done that'.[28]

Allochronism shapes knowledge production by assuming an endpoint and assigning greater relevance to 'those who are seen as belonging to the present.'[29] While most scholars of intervention would instinctively reject overt notions of linearity and argue instead for hybridised and contingent outcomes, a deeper-seated allochronism survives in the continued centring of various 'failures' of intervention: the failure to listen to local people, implement local ownership, or evaluate interventions correctly. In doing so, even critical scholarship remains wedded to a predefined (although more emancipatory) endpoint.

This focus on success and failure forms a crucial part of intervention thinking where researchers 'share the conceptual and temporal coordinates of intervention practitioners, as well as their categories of practice, objects of analysis, and concern with success and failure'.[30] Coeval engagement requires breaking apart from this shared heritage of intervention thinking and it can move in different directions. I focus on two aspects of intervention thinking challenged by coeval engagement: fields of visibility that determine empirical and temporal parameters of any research practice, and the local-international binary that (still) shapes so much of intervention scholarship.

Acts in fields of visibility

Intervention cannot be understood on its own, and scholars emphasise the need to consider 'the historicity and international embeddedness of non-Western societies' and explore 'wider

[22] Beate Jahn, 'The tragedy of liberal diplomacy: Democratization, intervention, statebuilding (Part II)', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 1:2 (2007), pp. 211–29 (p. 224).

[23] Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, p. 92.

[24] Beate Jahn, 'The tragedy of liberal diplomacy: Democratization, intervention, statebuilding (Part I)', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 1:1 (2007), pp. 87–106; Jahn, 'The tragedy of liberal diplomacy'.

[25] Dejan Jović, 'Problems of early post-communist transition theory: From transition from to transition to', *Politička Misao*, 47:5 (2010), pp. 44–68 (p. 50).

[26] Hajrudin Hromadžić, 'Historizacija tranzicije – slučaj (post) jugoslavenskog prostora', *Socijalna Ekologija*, 29:1 (2020), pp. 81–95 (p. 85).

[27] Ozren Pupovac, 'Intervju sa Borisom Budenom: Ideologija postkomunističke tranzicije', *Slobodni Filozofski* (2014).

[28] Barry Hindess, '"Been there, done that ..."', *Postcolonial Studies*, 11:2 (2008), pp. 201–13.

[29] Christine Helliwell and Barry Hindess, 'Time and the others', in Sanjay Seth (eds), *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013), p. 73.

[30] Andrew Gilbert, *International Intervention and the Problem of Legitimacy: Encounters in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), p. 13.

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influences which reach beyond the immediate political situation, temporally as well as spatially'.[31] Efforts to do so are, however, limited by the fields of visibility through which intervention is conceptualised and empirically approached. I take the term fields of visibility from Michel Foucault, via Nicholas Rose who writes that '[t]o govern, it is necessary to render visible the space over which government is to be exercised.'[32] Similarly, 'to study', it is necessary to render visible a particular field at the expense of others.

Geographic, topical, and temporal exclusions constitutive of specific fields of visibility are often reflected upon. Most obviously, orthodox fields of visibility are shaped by and reify deep assumptions of what and who matters in the study of international politics.[33] When moving to spaces outside of the Global North, these exclusions intensify through analytical and methodological bypassing of non-Western subjects.[34] These assumptions create 'research fatigue' in communities that fit them,[35] and simultaneously remove from consideration issues and people already excluded from intervention programmes. In the case of the Yugoslav space, a specific understanding of causes and effects of war has often obscured socioeconomic issues in favour of continuously discussed ethnic violence and reconciliation.[36]

In my research in NFE in Serbia, the field of visibility was one of political action and participation – issues present both in project documents and in the literature that analyses NFE as either a tool of neoliberal governmentality, or a way to improve democratic performance. Coeval engagement, however, led me to consider experiences my fellow participants shared in breaks and drinks around NFE events: that of navigating (un)employment. This required shifting my attention away from the intervention I was initially interested in and attending to issues and subjects that I could not access through participant observation in NFE.

Actors along the local/international binary

While fields of visibility are created by the intervention tools studied, they are also instinctively populated with actors along a surprisingly resistant binary: the local and the international. The international (community) is created by its supposed, and contested, liberal quality,[37] while the local is imagined in opposing binaries. The conceptual legwork of bringing that local into existence has received a spate of scholarly attention and critique (that I return to in the following section), yet it is evaluated as continuously failing: problem oriented practitioners and academics wrestle

[31]Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, 'Introduction: The limits of statebuilding and the analysis of state-formation', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 4:2 (2010), pp. 111–28 (p. 117).

[32]Nikolas S. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 36.

[33]Cynthia Enloe, 'The mundane matters', *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011), pp. 447–50.

[34]Capan, *Decolonising IR?*; Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*; Meera Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace', *Security Dialogue*, 44:3 (2013), pp. 259–78.

[35]Tom Clark, '"We're over-researched here!": Exploring accounts of research fatigue within qualitative research engagements', *Sociology*, 42:5 (2008), pp. 953–70; Daniela Lai, 'A different form of intervention? Revisiting the role of researchers in post-war contexts', in Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Morten Bøås (eds), *Doing Fieldwork in Areas of International Intervention: A Guide to Research in Violent and Closed Contexts* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2020), pp. 171–84.

[36]Andrew Gilbert, Jessica Greenberg, Elissa Helms, and Stef Jansen, 'Reconsidering postsocialism from the margins of Europe: Hope, time and normalcy in post-Yugoslav societies', *Anthropology News*, 49:8 (2008), pp. 10–11; Daniela Lai, *Socioeconomic Justice: International Intervention and Transition in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[37]Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Florian P. Kühn, '"The international community needs to act": Loose use and empty signalling of a hackneyed concept', *International Peacekeeping*, 18:2 (2011), pp. 135–51; John Heathershaw, 'Unpacking the liberal peace: The dividing and merging of peacebuilding discourses', *Millennium*, 36:3 (2008), pp. 597–621; Katarzyna Kaczmarska, 'The powerful myth of the international community and the imperative to build states', in Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (ed.), *Myth and Narrative in International Politics: Interpretive Approaches to the Study of IR* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 209–28; Jan Selby, 'The myth of liberal peace-building', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 13:1 (2013), pp. 57–86.

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with the difficulty of accessing local difference and using it to advance the liberal peace project, while critical scholars 'worry about the inability to "write" difference without essentializing "it" or reproducing and legitimizing power structures'.[38]

The problem persists in multiple layers of critique.[39] For example, Meera Sabaratnam powerfully argues for a positional critique from the perspectives of targets of intervention.[40] This is a direct challenge to cultural critiques that depend on the 'ontology of Otherness' and shape much of the 'local turn' in intervention scholarship.[41] Anna Danielsson, however, evaluates this approach as again insufficient: as not 'problematising the epistemic category of "local" and "international"'.[42] In other words, even when critical approaches make local perspectives epistemically generative, the problems of delineating the local continue.[43]

In the face of this problem of critical intervention research, coeval engagement points in a direction not yet considered. Not only that the 'construction of the local' should be investigated, but that the local-international binary is not the only or most important hierarchy – discursive or material – for making sense of the political lives of our interlocutors. In South East Europe, the local-international binary and the conceptualisations of 'local' subjects, identities, and experiences are shaped by Balkanism: a discourse that organises representations of the Balkans and the attitudes and actions towards it.[44] The Balkans' essentialised characteristics – corruption, nationalism, violence, and generalised 'backwardness' – have been inspiring interventions and justifying their failures at least since the Balkan wars of the early twentieth century.[45] As the opposite of Balkan backwardness, 'the international' is imbued with the symbolic capital of 'Europe' that has become equated with the European Union and the process of 'Europeanisation'. Europeanisation, however, is not limited to the technicalities of EU accession but is an ever-present element of social and political life.[46] Thus, Europe as a symbolic space of utopian modernity – and 'the international' as its manifestation – is a key point against which self-understandings in the Balkans are formed.[47] It is then not surprising that a counter-hegemonic project would depend on not only claiming that there is such a thing as the 'Balkans' that stands in opposition, but that it is, in fact, beautiful.[48] Yet such an approach would fail to question how 'the local' comes to be, and occlude more complex hierarchies uncovered in coeval engagement.

[38] Pol Bargués-Pedreny and Xavier Mathieu, 'Beyond silence, obstacle and stigma: Revisiting the "problem" of difference in peacebuilding', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 12:3 (2018), pp. 283–99 (p. 284).

[39] Bargués-Pedreny and Mathieu, 'Beyond silence, obstacle and stigma'; Suthaharan Nadarajah and David Rampton, 'The limits of hybridity and the crisis of liberal peace', *Review of International Studies*, 41:1 (2015), pp. 49–72; Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism'.

[40] Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism', p. 272.

[41] Ibid., p. 266.

[42] Anna Danielsson, 'Transcending binaries in critical peacebuilding scholarship to address "inclusivity" projects', *Third World Quarterly*, 41:7 (2020), p. 1088.

[43] There are even fewer instances of problematising 'the international' in the same way. See Gilbert, *International Intervention*.

[44] Mariia Nikolaeva Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[45] Christine Andrä, 'Problematising war: Towards a reconstructive critique of war as a problem of deviance', *Review of International Studies*, 48:4 (2022), pp. 700–22; Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London, UK: Routledge, 2006); Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac, 'Framing post-conflict societies: International pathologisation of Cambodia and the post-Yugoslav states', *Third World Quarterly*, 26:6 (2005), pp. 873–89.

[46] Vjosa Musliu, *Europeanization and Statebuilding as Everyday Practices: Performing Europe in the Western Balkans* (London, UK: Routledge, 2021).

[47] Tanja Petrović, *Yuropa: Jugoslovensko nasleđe i politike budućnosti u postjugoslovenskim društvima* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2012); Tanja Petrović (ed.), *Mirroring Europe: Ideas of Europe and Europeanization in Balkan Societies* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2014).

[48] Maple Razsa and Nicole Lindstrom, 'Balkan is beautiful: Balkanism in the political discourse of Tuđman's Croatia', *East European Politics and Societies*, 18:4 (2004), pp. 628–50; For an important critical contextualisation of 'Balkan is beautiful', see Catherine Baker, 'Postcoloniality without race?'.

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2. Paths to coeval engagement

The importance of including local voices and knowledges in intervention design, implementation, and evaluation has reached a consensus across policy and scholarly work. Various strands of critical literature have worked towards this common goal with slightly different aims and tools. While developing important conceptual arguments and methodological and analytical tools, they also still push against the two definitional parameters of intervention thinking just discussed.

Postcolonial and decolonial takes on intervention

Postcolonial and decolonial critiques of intervention bring two important contributions to the project of coeval engagement. First, instead of a world divided into a liberal present of the interveners and the past of the non-liberal intervened upon, they emphasise their 'long history of mutually constitutive relations'.[49] This co-constitution is otherwise obscured by the fields of visibility on which interventions depend: problems and failures are construed as outside liberalism and explained away by allochronism. Second, decolonial scholars devise strategies for making non-Western experiences epistemically generative. This is most notably argued in Sabaratnam's work on 'reconstructing subjecthood' through 'recovering historical presence, engaging political consciousness, and investigating material realities of targets of intervention'.[50] Several authors have used similar approaches to embrace 'a wider conceptual and longer historical lens' in the study of intervention, so that 'themes come into focus that would remain hidden or ignored'.[51] These developments challenge established fields of visibility of intervention thinking temporally (by considering longer historical processes and the exclusions traced in them) and analytically (by making the lives of societies experiencing intervention epistemically generative).

Even though this literature jostles the local-international binary by insisting on situated, rather than cultural, accounts of local experiences,[52] there is little discussion of the construction of those accounts.[53] Foregrounding local experiences as epistemically generative paradoxically heightens the stakes of representation as it imbues these experiences (and our representations of them) with emancipatory expectations. This can foreclose investigating how these representations are implicated in complex matrices of power and make difficult recognising the multiplicity of local subjects that often do not fit neither the narratives of 'backwardness', nor the decolonial hopes of progressive politics. In the Balkans, there is an implicit expectation of critically deconstructing the hierarchy that posits Europe as superior to the Balkans. This, however, precludes engagement with the active and often ambiguous participation of subjects in translating this hierarchy both to non-European locations and domestically – issues that have been raised in relation to postcolonial takes on the Balkans more generally,[54] and that I return to in the context of intervention later.

[49] David Rampton and Suthaharan Nadarajah, 'A long view of liberal peace and its crisis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:2 (2017), pp. 441–65 (p. 442).

[50] Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention*.

[51] Mandy Turner and Florian P. Kühn, 'Introduction: The tyranny of peace and the politics of international intervention', in Mandy Turner and Florian P. Kühn (eds), *The Politics of International Intervention: The Tyranny of Peace* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015), p. 4.

[52] Meera Sabaratnam, 'Situated critiques of intervention: Mozambique and the diverse politics of response', in Susanna Campbell, David Chandler, and Meera Sabaratnam (eds), *A Liberal Peace?: The Problems and Practices of Peacebuilding* (London, UK and New York, NY: Zed Books, 2011), pp. 245–64.

[53] Danielsson, 'Transcending binaries'.

[54] Baker, 'Postcoloniality without race?'; Dušan I. Bjelić, 'Toward a genealogy of the Balkan discourses on race', *Interventions* (2018), pp. 1–24.

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Local and ethnographic turns

The 'local turn' literature explores the 'hidden transcripts' of life in intervention societies[55] by focusing on 'resistance', 'hybridity', 'friction', and 'the everyday'.[56] It contributes to coeval engagement by reflecting on representational practices, breaking apart homogenising representations of local subjects, and developing methodological sensitivity. First, there is a wide recognition that 'the local is both used and produced through practices of representation' by a wide variety of actors.[57] These representational practices, as well as 'the field' on which they draw, are engulfed in the colonial undertones of representation.[58] Second, conceptual and empirical works demonstrate the complexity and heterogeneity of local actors that are often occluded by a 'binary understanding of the international and the local'.[59] In turn, this literature goes on to 'problematise the global/local dichotomy'.[60] It uncovers local stratifications along class, racial, gendered (and other) lines,[61] and shows how they are affected by intervention.[62] And third, these conceptual developments translate into methodological strategies. The potential of ethnographic fieldwork is commonly recognised and practical reflections on the conduct of fieldwork in areas of intervention abound.[63] This literature emphasises the importance, and perhaps surprising difficulty, of taking 'the subjects of our studies much more seriously, as people capable of making sense of and reacting to the structures of power they are embedded in.'[64] In other words, engaging them as subjects of coeval political life.

These approaches, however, end at the parameters of intervention itself. Often, the focus is on evaluating the success of the local turn itself,[65] or using community-level experiences to evaluate the success of interventions more broadly.[66] Otherwise, scholars work to identify and give voice to 'small acts' that contribute to peace outside (or below) interventions themselves.[67] While providing valuable tools for including local experiences in designing, implementing, and evaluating

[55]James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

[56]For recent reviews of this broad literature, see Nemanja Džuverović, '"To romanticise or not to romanticise the local": Local agency and peacebuilding in the Balkans', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 21:1 (2021), pp. 21–41; Filip Ejdus, 'Revisiting the local turn in peacebuilding', in Jorg Kustermans, Tom Sauer, and Barbara Segaert (eds), *A Requiem for Peacebuilding?* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), pp. 41–58.

[57]Hirblinger and Simons, 'The good, the bad, and the powerful', p. 422.

[58]Oliver P. Richmond, Stefanie Kappler, and Annika Björkdahl, 'The "field" in the age of intervention: power, legitimacy, and authority versus the "local"', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:1 (2015), pp. 23–44.

[59]Thania Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: A critical assessment towards an agenda for future research', *Third World Quarterly*, 36:5 (2015), pp. 857–74 (p. 862).

[60]Annika Björkdahl, Kristine Höglund, Gearoid Millar, Jair Van der Lijn, and Willemijn Verkoren, 'Introduction: Peacebuilding through the lens of friction', in Annika Björkdahl, Kristine Höglund, Gearoid Millar, Jair Van der Lijn, and Willemijn Verkoren (eds), *Peacebuilding and Friction: Global and Local Encounters in Post Conflict-Societies* (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 2016), p. 1.

[61]Marta Iñiguez de Heredia, 'The conspicuous absence of class and privilege in the study of resistance in peacebuilding contexts', *International Peacekeeping*, 25:3 (2018), pp. 325–48.

[62]Philipp Lottholz, *Post-Liberal Statebuilding in Central Asia: Imaginaries, Discourses and Practices of Social Ordering* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2022); Jelena Obradović-Wochnik, 'Hidden politics of power and governmentality in transitional justice and peacebuilding: The problem of "bringing the local back in"', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23:1 (2018), pp. 117–38.

[63]Bliesemann de Guevara and Bøås (eds), *Doing Fieldwork in Areas of International Intervention*; Mac Ginty, Brett, and Vogel (eds), *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*; Gearoid Millar, *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding: Understanding Local Experiences in Transitional States* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014); Gearoid Millar (eds), *Ethnographic Peace Research: Approaches and Tensions* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[64]Lise Philipsen, 'Improvising the international: Theorizing the everyday of intervention from the field', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 55:2 (2020), pp. 151–69 (p. 151).

[65]Pol Bargués-Pedreny, *Deferring Peace in International Statebuilding: Difference, Resilience and Critique* (London, UK and New York, JNY: Routledge, 2018); Elisa Randazzo, *Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding: A Critical Exploration of the Local Turn* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017).

[66]Pamina Firchow, *Reclaiming Everyday Peace: Local Voices in Measurement and Evaluation After War* (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[67]Roger Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace: How So-Called Ordinary People Can Disrupt Violent Conflict* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

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interventions, they are of limited use for the questions I started with: what if taking my interlocutors seriously – reconstructing their coeval subjecthood – points to processes outside of intervention? What if their actions cannot be easily evaluated as contributing to either peace or conflict, but point to other aspects of international political life?

Political economy of the everyday

An emerging literature brings forth the economic dimension of liberal interventionism and studies economic reforms' manifestations in 'lived realities'.[68] Arguing for an 'economic local turn', this literature brings into view the economic everyday as an element of the liberal agenda that is, despite many warnings, often left unexplored.[69] In Sabaratnam's terminology, this positional critique moves away from judging the cultural misfit between international designs and local circumstances, and zones in on the materiality of the experience of intervention.[70] It is also a way of including historical presence[71] (as socioeconomic experiences are often made in comparison to a prewar 'before') and analyses of the targets of intervention themselves.

In Yugoslav successor states, where ethnicity and ethnic violence are often accorded empirical and analytical primacy, this has created space to engage a wider variety of experiences: the power of microfinance projects to shape women's agency; economic democracy in Yugoslav socialism that can serve as a site of reconciliation; the 'interplay of precarization and privilege' that locally recruited staff of international organisations navigate; and ways in which transitional justice interventions erase socioeconomic violence and justice from the policy realm.[72] The discussion of the (un)employment dimension of political education provided below contributes to this literature, yet its aim differs. While this literature investigates how economic interventions impact more 'traditional' topics of critical peace and conflict scholarship,[73] I point to the limitations of those 'traditional topics' and show the everyday political economy of seemingly non-economic interventions.

Cultivating coeval engagement

These three approaches provide useful strategies, but they do not explicitly question thematic and empirical contexts where they are to be used. This aspect is invoked in discussions of the role (and absence) of local researchers in intervention scholarship that spans the three subfields just addressed. Local researchers do not contribute only epistemological access due to cultural proximity, but they also 'bring into the spotlight issues that are almost never present when the topic is the Western Balkans'.[74] 'The epistemic locus' is on those 'topics and themes ignored by Western

[68] Werner Distler, Elena B. Stavrevska, and Birte Vogel, 'Economies of peace: Economy formation processes and outcomes in conflict-affected societies', *Civil Wars*, 20:2 (2018), pp. 139–50.

[69] Michael Pugh, 'The political economy of peacebuilding: A critical theory perspective', *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 10:2 (2005), pp. 23–42; Michael C. Pugh, Neil Cooper, and Mandy Turner (eds), *Whose Peace?: Critical Perspectives on the Political Economy of Peacebuilding* (Basingstoke, UK and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[70] Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism', p. 272.

[71] Ibid., p. 271.

[72] Elena B. Stavrevska, 'The mother, the wife, the entrepreneur? Women's agency and microfinance in a disappearing post-conflict welfare state context', *Civil Wars*, 20:2 (2018), pp. 193–216; Jasmin Ramović, 'Looking into the past to see the future? Lessons learned from self-management for economies in post-conflict societies of the former Yugoslavia', *Civil Wars*, 20:2 (2018), pp. 171–92; Catherine Baker, 'The local workforce of international intervention in the Yugoslav successor states: "Precariat" or "projectariat"? Towards an agenda for future research', *International Peacekeeping*, 21:1 (2014), pp. 91–106 (p. 92); Lai, *Socioeconomic Justice*.

[73] Birte Vogel, 'The economic local turn in peace and conflict studies: Economic peacebuilding interventions and the everyday', *New Political Economy*, online first (2022), p. 8.

[74] Nemanja Džuverović, 'How to study peace and security in the Western Balkans', in Nemanja Džuverović and Věra Stojarová (eds), *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective* (Abingdon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), p. 6.

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scholars'.[75] While these arguments relate to local researchers, I do not interpret them as (only) critiques of foreign/Western research(ers), but as reflections on the limitations of intervention thinking. Conceptualising these limitations in terms of fields of visibility and hierarchies found in them emphasises the responsibilities and potential of all, rather than just 'local', researchers in the common project of coeval engagement.

So far, I have shown that cultivating coeval engagement requires a conscious choice to trespass intervention's fields of visibility. This involves both methodological openness and a dose of 'un-knowing'. My approach to method was varied. Some of my interviewees attended only one event, others were what I would call 'professional seminar goers' well acquainted with the broader NFE landscape in Serbia. I interviewed 'trainers', instructors, and people working in funding and implementing organisations. In pursuing the matters that seemed important to my interlocutors, the focus of my research practice eventually moved from issues defined by the programmes I attended and the literature on NFE and statebuilding, to the topic and experiences of (un)employability. In this process, the endpoint of my research practice became less evident. To translate into Sabaratnam's project of reconstruction,[76] while I was certain I want to focus on local subjecthood, I did not know which aspects of historical presence, political consciousness, or material realities are relevant. Moreover, finding those that are relevant took my research practice in unexpected directions. Coeval engagement thus challenges the 'organised hypocrisy' of a research design that pretends mastery and recognises the impossibility of 'know[ing] before we get a grip of what there is to know.'[77]

The efforts to challenge this mastery are underway, and they centre different elements of the research process. The 'knowing researcher' is displaced by recognising the 'intracorporeal vulnerability' of the researcher as a body relating to human and non-human elements.[78] Many of my insights came from complaining about bad food alongside participants in residential courses or staying up too late and struggling to attend the morning sessions. Continuous failures – like not making those morning sessions – are discussed as constitutive of knowledge production.[79] And the possibility of accessing subjecthood itself is problematised through an 'ethics of opaqueness' that 'concretizes the limits of knowing either the other or the self'. The idea of 'the other as inscrutable and radically heterogenous' complements the project of coeval engagement in important ways.[80] Coeval engagement is always a tenuous process wherein the researcher's self plays a role that must be interrogated. Yet coeval engagement also opens research to the multiplicity of subjects and can help discover a variety within what is knowable.

3. Politics of improvement

Despite my focus on the unexpected dimensions of fieldwork, rethinking intervention is not (only) a question of mismatch between 'fieldwork data' and 'theory' (a theme common to interpretivist and ethnographic research).[81] An approach focused on this mismatch would require suspending specific understandings of the phenomenon under investigation – intervention understood as a

[75] Vjosa Musliu and Gëzim Visoka, 'Conclusion: after local critiques', in Visoka and Musliu (eds), *Unravelling Liberal Interventionism*, p. 180.

[76] Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism'; Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention*.

[77] Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Xymena Kurowska, 'Building on ruins or patching up the possible? Reinscribing fieldwork failure in IR as a productive rupture', in Katarina Kušić and Jakub Záhora (eds), *Fieldwork as Failure: Living And Knowing in the Field of International Relations* (Bristol, UK: E-International Relations, 2020), pp. 167–8.

[78] Enrike van Wingerden, 'Unmastering research: Positionality and intercorporeal vulnerability in international studies', *International Political Sociology*, 16:2 (2022), pp. 1–16.

[79] Kušić and Záhora (eds), *Fieldwork as Failure*.

[80] Xymena Kurowska, 'Interpreting the uninterpretable: The ethics of opaqueness as an approach to moments of inscrutability in fieldwork', *International Political Sociology*, 14:4 (2020), pp. 431–46 (p. 431).

[81] See Cai Wilkinson, 'On not just finding what you (thought you) were looking for: Reflections on fieldwork data and theory', in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (eds), *Interpretation and Method* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), pp. 387–405.

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project of governmentality, imperialism, or liberal progress – to explore other, more grounded ways of explaining it. Coeval engagement, however, moves a step further and problematises the focus on the phenomenon itself as limiting. Hence the phenomenon of intervention, I argue, would be better understood as only one part of a wider politics of improvement.

Instead of conceptualising experiences (only) through dynamics of intervention, this means approaching them without knowing how exactly they are embedded in international political life. In this reconceptualisation, I turn to improvement because its origins and dynamics are entwined with contradictions in liberalism and allochronism itself.[82] Improvement is central to the emergence of liberalism – from its inception in colonial expansion, to its twentieth-century role as an organising principle of political, economic, and social life. Its reach is global, yet unequal and always heterogenous. While a complete genealogy of improvement is not my aim here,[83] a short detour to its historical emergence in discussions of land, ownership, and colonial conquest is necessary to highlight its centrality for the way we conceptualise political subjects.

Brenna Bhandar presents improvement as a key logic that connects laws of property with 'language, ways of seeing, and modes of subjectivity' that render subjects as 'outside history'.[84] After first emerging in William Petty's efforts to survey and quantify the land and populations of Ireland, improvement was naturalised in the thought of John Locke and William Blackstone, who cast it in civilisational terms. Ownership over land did not only come from labour that improved it, but people were judged based on their proximity to such a relation to land. In other words, a civilisational chasm appeared between 'those who were not productive' and the 'industrious cultivators' found among the colonisers and enclosers.[85] The skill and the will to improve thus became the civilisational fault line.

Locke relied on what Bhandar refers to as 'a fictive time of the premodern and prelegal world of uncultivated, wild lands, inhabited by uncivilized Indians.'[86] This led to a formation of a 'universal linear time scale' in which Indigenous people represented a civilisational past – a move that influenced much of European political theory.[87] When improvement moved into concerns of populations and their welfare, allochronism remained. Similar understandings of improvement worked co-constitutively in seemingly disparate spaces: in liberal thinkers' conceptions of property, in colonial conquest that depended on the difference between the improved (cultivated) lands and the unimproved wastelands in its *terra nullius* doctrines; in shifting logics of colonial government from extraction to supposedly benevolent tutelage; and in the emergence of 'development' in international politics of the twentieth century.[88]

Improvement pairs civilisational thinking with the faith in human agency. And this belief in the abilities and responsibilities of improvers was how many of the people I spoke to in Serbia envisioned the solutions to their varied, and very real, problems. They either denounced the absence the state as a source and organiser of improvement[89] or imagined different projects of improvement that would, someday, make Serbia look more like 'normal countries in the West'. The young people

[82]Here, I was initially inspired by Tania Murray Li, *The Will To Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice Of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[83]See Bentley B. Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Malini Ranganathan, 'Rule by difference: Empire, liberalism, and the legacies of urban "improvement"', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 50:7 (2018), pp. 1386–406.

[84]Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property*, p. 3.

[85]Ibid., pp. 47–8.

[86]Ibid., p. 49.

[87]Beate Jahn, 'IR and the state of nature: The cultural origins of a ruling ideology', *Review of International Studies*, 25:3 (1999), p. 417.

[88]Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property*; Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders*; Li, *The Will to Improve*; Ranganathan, 'Rule by difference'.

[89]For more on the state in this context, see Ivan Rajković, 'Concern for the state: "Normality", state effect and distributional claims in Serbia', *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta*, 65:1 (2017), pp. 31–45.

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I spoke to often saw themselves as doing improvement: not only in terms of self-betterment, but also in social, economic, and political terms of creating a new, implicitly more civilised, community – an aim and reasoning they shared with many NFE projects and funders.

This active participation of the subjects is where I depart most obviously from existing takes on improvement. Improvement is not only a top-down process imagined in government offices, thought up by experts, and explored in genealogies. It is a reality of people living in the many layers of its schemes – not because they have 'fallen victim' to an ideology, but because they are active subjects of international politics structured by the same logic. This changes how we understand actions that try to build peace and democracy across borders. Even though they are underpinned by the same teleological ideas of progress and history as international interventions, improvement schemes are not constituted by the inside/outside of nation-states, they do not neatly follow the boundaries between North and South, nor are they discrete acts that necessarily (try to) lead to liberal rule. The narratives of expertise and deficiency associated with improvement schemes do not shape only particular projects, but also the modes in which individual subjects are placed in international politics and their ways of understanding those positions.

Politics of improvement thus moves us beyond two limitations of intervention thinking: away from prescribed fields of visibility into less known empirical and analytical terrains; and beyond the local/international binary by focusing on varied translations of hierarchies. As Suthaharan Nadarajah and David Rampton note, liberalism is 'reproduced' through identifications working 'across social strata and at local as well as national, transnational, and international levels'.[90] Any difference that we encounter locally will always already have been globalised and hybridised in some ways, and any position – material, political, and ideational – always already shaped by encounters between the local and the international. While decolonial takes on interventions recognise 'the perpetuation of colonial power relations in seemingly benevolent activities' and argue for foregrounding local experiences and 'in-country critiques of foreign presence',[91] they rarely acknowledge that the former might preclude the latter. Often, we are not faced (only) with 'in-country *critiques*" of intervention, [92] but with in-country desires for international presence.

4. Improving youth through non-formal youth education

Instead of containing dangerous 'youth bulges' (as in many postconflict spaces), projects working with and on young people in Serbia focus on their lack of initiative in both political and economic matters. For example, a recent study funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung describes young people as 'ignoring the role of societal institutions, as well as their own responsibility, for the position in which they find themselves'.[93] They are said to lack interest in 'changing the society in which they live' and in politics generally.[94] This creates a field of visibility where apathy is a particular problem, and political education a specific act of intervention to ameliorate it. A local subject – a young person who needs to be taught democracy and thus 'activated' – is created. This fits the wider diagnosis of 'structurally weak and culturally deficient' civil society in East Europe, measured through (low) rates of 'civic engagement' and 'political participation'.[95] Post-communist civil society, where NFE is located, is simultaneously the object of intervention, and a tool for intervening into political parties and the public.

[90]Nadarajah and Rampton, 'The limits of hybridity', p. 67.

[91]Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa, 'What's there to mourn? Decolonial reflections on (the end of) liberal humanitarianism', *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 1:1 (2019), pp. 65–7 (p. 66).

[92]Rutazibwa, 'What's there to mourn?', p. 66, emphasis added.

[93]Dragan Popadić, Zoran Pavlović, and Srećko Mihailović, '*Mladi u Srbiji 2018/2019*' (Belgrade: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2019), p. 3.

[94]Ibid.

[95]Bojan Baća, 'Practice theory and postsocialist civil society: Toward a new analytical framework', *International Political Sociology*, 16:1 (2022), pp. 1–21 (p. 5).

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To allow for a varied engagement within this field, I selected short residential courses and longer programmes that focus on issues of broadly defined political education. The three week-long residential events I attended included a course on conflict and reconciliation for youth coming from Yugoslavia and Yugoslav successor states implemented in cooperation of a Turkish and British university, and two Erasmus+ trainings (one on social inclusion in Novi Sad and another on climate change in Belgrade). In Belgrade, I attended one semester of a year-long course for youth active in right-centre and moderate right political parties (funded by a German political foundation and implemented by a renowned Belgrade NGO) and a seven-week course on transitional justice organised by a human rights NGO. I also attended lectures in other courses taking place in Belgrade and Novi Sad – for example, in the seminar of the small leftist party that opened the article or a course for talented future leaders – and numerous public events with educational goals. This variety allowed me to engage with different sources of funding (Erasmus+ and different foundations) and varied ideological groupings, as Erasmus+ activities are more 'neutral', while political (especially German) foundations cater to well-specified ideological spectrums. While I remained within urban centres, several of the events funded travel costs for participants to travel to Belgrade and thus allowed me some insight into diversity within the country.

My observations of NFE and the broader civil society in which it unfolds are closely related to studies of civil society building in Serbia that highlight the formation of networks that blur the lines between the state and civil society, and the 'NGO-ization' and 'projectivization' of political action.[96] When attending a small civil society conference in Belgrade, I recognised a participant I had met at a residential course a few months prior. Another conference attendee, a successfully employed member of staff in a large NGO, descried him as a 'real [NFE] student [*pravi školarac*]': he attended many seminars, completed an internship with a famous civil society organisation, and was interning at the EU delegation office in Belgrade.[97] Becoming a *pravi školarac* here implies becoming a part of a specific network of power (and labour) that straddles civil society, the state, and international institutions.

Based on this criterion, however, most people I met in NFE never managed to become *pravi školarci*. While some dreamt of civil society employment, they all struggled to find secure employment or ways to continue education. Centring their lived experiences through coeval engagement thus goes beyond civil society offices and projects concerned with peace and democracy. It brings into view the politics of improving the employability of young people in Serbia and requires shifting analytical focus beyond the conceptual parameters of intervention.

Unemployment as a field of visibility

Moving beyond predefined fields of visibility in NFE required two steps: recognising (un)employability as an expanded field in which politics of improvement unfold, and then inquiring into its logics. The importance of unemployment is part of a larger reorientation of donors (and local actors that follow them) towards 'employability' as a policy field. As a young man working in a youth NGO lamented: everyone was 'into employment' these days, 'even organisations that did sexual education are now employment experts!'[98] While this reorientation itself points to new ways in which subjects are incorporated into global flows of labour,[99] my encounter with (un)employment happened not in the context of projects overtly dedicated to employability as a policy field, but in political education and capacity building. Making sense of it thus requires transgressing predefined fields of visibility.

Even though the content of the courses I attended was political, and many were organised around ideological lines, many of the participants, in the words of one of my interviewees, were

[96] Marek Mikuš, *Frontiers of Civil Society: Government and Hegemony in Serbia* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2018); Theodora Vetta, *Democracy Struggles: NGOs and the Politics of Aid in Serbia* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2019).

[97] Fieldwork journal, 11 February 2016.

[98] Interview, Belgrade, 26 April 2016.

[99] See Wai, 'Making neoliberal subjects'.

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'expecting some kind of employment' as a result. In interviews with people working in NFE, these expectations and the broader mood of struggles for employment were juxtaposed to the past in which political education was more 'political'. The most dramatic comparisons referred to 'suitcases of cash' that were smuggled into the country while working to bring down Milošević and the highly political nature of civil society work in that era.[100] At other times, interviewees looked farther into socialism. A manager of a large NFE provider reflected:

> Now, in relation to this non-formal education, this is very – since I am that generation from that socialism [*ta neka generacija iz tog socijalizma*], this non-formal education is not, how do I say, related to only this period. Because, especially, this part of political education was present in youth [party] organisation ... We had, practically, a whole ... a structure that did this. ... So, this political socialisation is not a product of modern times, but simply, there was this political socialisation. I really ... I often laugh when I see those programmes ... and now, 'how do you conduct a meeting'. We did all this 30 and more years ago.[101]

This historical consciousness challenges the 'novelty' of NFE by invoking its important role in Yugoslav political socialisation. This is a common feature of interventions that 'take an idea or concept out of one historical or institutional context and repurpose it to serve the goals of intervention'.[102] But NFE as a part of socialist political life is different from the accounts of 1990s that focused on working against, rather than with, the regime. And importantly, they both differ from the way that NFE is experienced today.

A young woman in charge of two year-long courses captured the comparison well:

> Some time ago ... Let's say in the last decade, when you would come to [the organisation] you were a little revolutionary [*mali revolucionar*] and desired change. Now you are an individual fighting for yourself.[103]

This points to depoliticisation as an effect of intervention – no one is bringing down dictators today. But outside of intervention's field of visibility, it points to the experience of 'fighting for yourself'. The two were often in stark contrast. The seven-week seminar on transitional justice, for example, was designed around cases from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and we discussed details of war crimes and atrocities. Some of the emotional burden of these discussions was removed by the legalist frameworks used, and I suspect, by the participants' experience in discussing this topic that shaped much of civil society in Serbia.[104] War crimes cases were political and politicised. However, I often found them difficult: I was not used to the field and the legalist framework did not remove the shock of graphic detail. After a particularly gruelling session detailing a massacre, I joined a couple of participants over coffee.[105] As soon as we exited the door, they started updating each other on the status of ongoing job applications directed at civil society organisations that we met in one seminar or another. A common friend was recently fired for misspelling a speaker's name and failing to provide water during a public event. Another one got a job that many people, including my colleagues, had applied for. And a new call had opened, but it required more experience than my colleagues had – they were debating whether the effort of applying was worth it. The juxtaposition of the political nature of war crimes persecution and the seemingly apolitical job application points to more than the affective dissonance I personally

[100] Interview, 7 April 2016.

[101] Interview, 16 March 2016.

[102] Gilbert, *International Intervention*, p. 16.

[103] Interview, 7 April 2016.

[104] For a critical appraisal of a human rights approach to memorialisation, see Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[105] Fieldwork journal, 31 March 2016.

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experienced. It brings into view coeval lives outside of NFE classrooms, where the reasons for coming to the classrooms in the first place were formed: a need for skills and networks.

This value of NFE on the labour market was captured well in an interview with an Erasmus+ (previously Youth in Action) trainer when he reflected on the development of the flagship EU NFE programme:

> Youth in Action became an employment service. Unfortunately, employment service meaning that we, like, train youth to be super employable. And Youth in Action began as building solidarity, intercultural understanding ... yeah, yeah, yeah ... All those values [*sve ono vrednosno*], and it ended up as 'let's build super employable young people since they are complaining that they cannot find jobs.'[106]

Like NFE veterans that reminisced about the overtly political nature of NFE (and civil society more generally) in the fight against Milošević, the EU-funded programmes noticeably changed from social values of 'solidarity' and 'intercultural understanding', to being an 'employment service'.

Once the field expands to consider experiences of (un)employment, different logics of improving employability of young people come into view. And it is within these different logics that politics of improvement lie. The young people I spoke prepared for entrepreneurship and civil society, with politics increasingly unavailable to anyone not following the ruling party line. Many were exploring options for postgraduate education – my own experiences of applications, internships, and scholarships started numerous conversations. But there are also other, substantially different, projects targeting distinctive groups. I want to briefly mention two: migration and vocational or 'dual' education. Even though the young people attending NFE activities were not directly involved in these programmes, and I therefore did not observe them first-hand, inquiring into the wider politics of improving youth (un)employment brought to fore these experiences that otherwise remain obscured.

Training for migration as one 'alternative way' of improving employability was brought to my attention by Jelena, a professional seminar-goer I got to know. Jelena was explicitly 'political:' she grew up protesting against Milošević with her parents and saw her future in one of the human rights NGOs in Belgrade. When I met her, she was finishing her second MA and looking for a job. The gloomy prospect made her look outside of the desired NGO circle. She was considering starting her own publishing house through a state project for helping young entrepreneurs, and simultaneously trying to find a teaching position in one of many schools in Belgrade. Telling me about it, she emphasised that I cannot imagine how *many* schools there are in Belgrade. She only finds out about them when she sees the job listing: 'You enter a building, and op, there's a school!'[107] She mentioned a particular school located on the fourth floor of a building in downtown Belgrade: on one side there are four classrooms of a medical nursing school (years one to four) and on the other side four classrooms for learning German. The match is obvious: as soon as they obtain their qualification, the students are ready to work in Germany.

In this school, Jelena observed a small illustration of a much larger phenomenon of economic migration from Serbia (and the Yugoslav region more generally), and the training for migration that is a part of it.[108] It is particularly strong in the health and care sectors and forms a part of the

[106] Interview, 21 February 2016.

[107] Fieldwork journal, 31 March 2016.

[108] For historical and experiential context of migration to Germany, see ch. 7 in Danijela Majstorović, *Discourse and Affect in Postsocialist Bosnia and Herzegovina: Peripheral Selves* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021). Even though she focuses on migration from BiH, similar dynamics are present in Serbia as well. A short study on emigration of medical nurses from BiH and Serbia finds they generally leave for financial and labour condition reasons, see Vesna Stevanov et al., 'Why do nurses migrate?', *International Journal of Health, New Technologies and Social Work*, 16:1 (2021), pp. 43–9.

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now famous 'demographic crisis' in South East Europe.[109] This migration is often helped by development agencies and bilateral agreements. The GIZ[110] programme for the recruitment of nurses from Serbia to Germany, for example, sees it as a triple win: a decrease in unemployment in countries of origin; development of origin countries through remittances; and a solution to a shortage of nurses in Germany.[111] These movements depend not only on a particular image of the 'free' subject that can pursue employment without worrying about social ties left behind, but it is also driven by symbolic geographies that see (employment in) the West as a way out of the futurelessness and corruption of Serbia.[112] It is a process wherein 'the horizon of hope is transposed onto imagined lives abroad'.[113]

Another alternative emerged in the public debate around 'dual' or 'vocational' education that unfolded during my stay in Serbia. I encountered it in the media as directly related to unemployment, but also through an organisation that both managed a NFE programme, and publicly protested the proposed educational reforms.[114] The conversation around the reform was led by the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and supported by several development agencies that provided technical support and funding.[115] Vocational education is supposed to benefit students by providing an opportunity to earn money (by spending a part of their school week at work) and gain skills that not only make them generally more employable, but also provide a chance for continued employment in the same company.[116] In the public discourse, dual education became a symbol of far-reaching societal transformations. The then-Prime Minister (now President) Aleksandar Vučić explained that the model was crucial for a whole range of 'most important questions that we [Serbians] have to best answer about … employment, GDP growth, life standard, European integration'.[117] His comment situates dual education within the wider project of development through foreign direct investment (FDI) that has emerged as the hegemonic political imaginary of progress in the last decade.[118] In short, while advocates of dual education presented it as a key element in negotiations that facilitate the arrival of FDI in Serbia, opponents condemned it as another way of favouring big capital at the expense of citizens.[119]

FDI – the implicit backdrop of vocational education – was contested in NFE classrooms. One of the most eagerly awaited speakers in a course for youth in right-of-centre political parties was

[109] For an example of the public debate, see Tim Judah, '"Too late" to halt Serbia's demographic crisis', *Balkan Insight*, available at: {https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/24/too-late-to-halt-serbias-demographic-disaster/} accessed 1 December 2021.

[110] German development agency: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

[111] See GIZ, 'Sustainable Recruitment of Nurses (Triple Win)', available at: {https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/41533.html} accessed 1 December 2021.

[112] Tanja Anđić, 'Futurelessness, migration, or a lucky break: Narrative tropes of the "blocked future" among Serbian high school students', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23:4 (2020), pp. 430–46; Ildiko Erdei, 'Migrants of the future: Serbian youth between imaginary and real migration', *Ethnologia Balkanica*, 14 (2010), pp. 109–28; Dana N. Johnson, '"If you look at the sky you step in sh*t": Horizons of possibility and migration from Serbia', *Social Anthropology*, 27:4 (2019), pp. 655–70.

[113] Anđić, 'Futurelessness'.

[114] The openly political nature of this programme further challenges the accounts of NFE and civil society building process as always depoliticising. I discuss this issue further in forthcoming research.

[115] For more information on the project in Serbia, see Dieter Euler, *Dual Vocational Education and Training in Serbia: Feasibility Study* (Belgrade: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, 2015). In 2020, the European Bank for Development and Reconstruction announced its support, see Olga Rosca, 'EBRD and Serbia's Ministry of Education Join Forces to Bridge Skills Gap', European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, available at: {https://www.ebrd.com/news/2020/ebrd-and-serbias-ministry-of-education-join-forces-to-bridge-skills-gap.html} accessed 28 November 2021.

[116] Danas, 'Dualno obrazovanje: novo ruho proverenog sistema [Dual Education: New Clothes of a Verified System]' (2019).

[117] Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, 'Dualno obrazovanje prioritet vlade i privrede [Dual Education is a Priority for the Government and the Economy]', available at: {http://www.pks.rs/Vesti.aspx?IDVestiDogadjaji=21005} accessed 12 May 2018.

[118] Tena Prelec, '"Our Brothers", "Our Saviours": The Importance of Chinese Investment for the Serbian Government's Narrative of Economic Rebound' (Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute, 2020).

[119] Bojana Oprljan, 'Postaju li djeca jeftina radna snaga', *Balkans Aljazeera*, available at: {http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/postaju-li-djeca-jeftina-radna-snaga} accessed 19 May 2020.

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a guest from Germany. It was a special occasion, attended by the representative of the foundation that funds the course, and the project manager was visibly nervous: used to dealing with the young participants, she was now performing for the people funding her employment. The speaker was there as an experienced politician, and he spoke about the German model of social market economy. But a very different topic emerged as soon as the Q&A opened. The students prepared: they knew he had left politics and has since become a successful businessperson and the designer of one of the most famous (and controversial) FDI projects in Serbia.

They opened with questions about investments in Serbia: how did he decide to come? Why? What place does Serbia have in long-term business plans? The politician-turned-investor explained the choice to come to Serbia by comparing it to two other options: Southeast Asia (deemed less attractive due to transport costs and 'less trained workforce') and Bulgaria (deemed politically less stable and therefore less able to provide state support for procuring licenses). Serbia was the winner of the race to the bottom: labour was affordable but qualified, the state was strong enough to subsidise financially and 'move' legislation and licenses, and it was close enough to the European market. Hearing it put this simply, I braced for the expected storm: while the aspiring technocrats in the audience might accept this economism, the nationalists – there was a wide variety of right-wing party members present – will surely intervene!

I was very wrong. Many hands went up, not to challenge this narrative, but to appropriate it: is there a chance for an investment in a different region? What exactly would they need to consider opening more factories elsewhere? Does he know that there are free trade zones opening around the country?[120] Instead of condemning exploitation, my classmates saw it as an opportunity for development. Political NFE thus became a stage where general issues of improvement were both debated and tried, and where FDI was seen as an opportunity to create jobs. Politics of improvement as a lens here connects NFE as a site of labour and ideas, dual education seemingly separated from it, and FDI as an increasingly hegemonic understanding of both economic and social development in Serbia.

This expanded field of visibility points to the movement of labour, capital, and ideas of human value that shape the youth labour market and the experiences of my interlocutors. It improves our understanding of how particular everyday political economies are formed under international presence and ways in which postconflict transformations in the Yugoslav region result in increasing precariousness.[121] However, it also expands the view from the actions of interveners – who invest in NFE activities – to manifold international flows of capital and labour that come together to shape what young people dream of and where they find employment. And, contrary to research that analyses and critiques NFE as a process of governmentalisation to shape the population to a particular ideal, this expanded field of visibility uncovers a quiet coexistence of radically different ways of preparing young people for the labour market: one that nurtures an entrepreneurial spirit and self-employment, and another one that creates a narrow-skilled workforce ready to be harnessed by the private sector (in the country or abroad).

Translating hierarchies between the local and the international

In expanded fields of visibility where politics of improvement unfold, civilisational hierarchies work beyond and besides the local-international binary. Agents of intervention are usually understood to be donors and organisations that directly and indirectly promote 'international' ideas supposed to shape local populations and politics. In NFE, these are governmental and non-governmental organisations supporting democracy and development through building capacities and civil societies. In this process, local actors and circumstances are often pathologised through

[120] For more on free trade zones in Serbia, see Milenko Srećković, *Corporate Imperialism: The Zones of Exploitation in Serbia* (Belgrade: Freedom Fight Movement [*Pokret za slobodu*], 2015).

[121] Goran Musić, *Serbia's Working Class in Transition 1988–2013* (Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office for Southeast Europe, 2013); Michael Pugh, 'Precarity in post-conflict Yugoslavia: What about the workers?', *Civil Wars*, 20:2 (2018), pp. 151–70.

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Balkanist discourses. Investigating NFE as politics of improvement, however, expands our view: from the labour and power of representing 'the local' as the target and tool of improvement, to other, sometimes more important, hierarchies.

First, horizontal civilisational hierarchies are used to position Serbia as simultaneously inferior to Europe and superior to countries positioned geographically further East/South.[122] Explanations of problems, offered by both trainers and participants, often fixated on local pathologies: failed state policies that produced failing citizens. Take, for an example, a seminar on the EU integration process that was a part of a long-standing 'advanced undergraduate course' (funded by various corporate and political foundations throughout its existence) that I occasionally attended. The guest speaker held a high position in the EU accession negotiating team and he started the lecture by talking about the long process of EU integration in Serbia, then counting 17 years already. He quickly added that one never really starts from zero: Serbia started from 'minus five years' after the regime change in 2000. During the lecture, this number grew to Serbia being 10 and then 15 years behind the rest of the region in its 'return to Europe'.[123]

This temporal othering was not happening in an anthropological text by an enthusiastic ethnologist discovering the Balkans. It was performed by a progressive, educated, cosmopolitan member or the Serbian elite, for a class of aspiring students in their early twenties. In many classrooms I visited, Balkanist allochronism was not just a 'foreign' imposition but it was constantly re-enacted: if we spoke about unemployment, we talked about the outdated education system and the unreasonable expectations from the labour market that young people inherited from socialism (although they were mostly born after its end). Both the state structures and the people in the country were seen as backward when compared to European ideals.

At the same time as denigrating the country and the people in it, the same horizontal axis was used to differentiate Serbia from those 'more backward'. This happened, for example, when comparing Serbia to African countries and using their similarities to demonstrate Serbian backwardness. In a seminar explaining the dire state of Serbian economy, the lecturer was trying to show the students the connections between economic progress and the rule of law. To illustrate the gravity of the situation in Serbia, he reached for a comparison: 'you can't expect economic progress when you have the rule of law on the level of Senegal.' Students laughed in response – the comparison is unthinkable. But the trainer silenced the giggles 'these are *international* comparisons!'[124]

Similar comparisons have been noted in passing by other researchers. Theodora Vetta, for example, interviewed an NGO worker who described the hardship of the early 1990s:

> I remember an example from eastern Serbia, there were people paid to help other people to be pushed into the bus!!! You know, like in India, like in Bangladesh. Really from being in the first world we fell [to] the third in a matter of years.[125]

These comparisons are effective because a racial and civilisational logic makes the parallel unacceptable: Serbia should not be like the Global South. The same logic underlines the absence of other spaces that went through conflict and economic 'transitions' from our discussions. While some experienced civil society employees would criticise decontextualised foreign expertise by describing them as arriving 'thinking that this is Mozambique', there was no space to discuss potential similarities or solidarities to, for example, Mozambique as a space with a history of recent conflict. Recognising possible shared material realities was precluded by claims to Europeanness and its constitutive exclusions.

[122] I take the terms horizontal and vertical hierarchies from Orlanda Obad, 'How we survived Europe (and never laughed): The role of liberal-humanitarian utopia in Croatia's accession to the EU', in Zlatan Krajina and Nebojša Blanuša (eds), *EU, Europe Unfinished: Mediating Europe and the Balkans in a Time of Crisis* (London, UK and New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), pp. 185–6.

[123] Fieldwork journal, 13 March 2016.

[124] Fieldwork journal, 1 February 2016.

[125] Vetta, *Democracy Struggles*, p. 56.

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Finally, the same civilisational hierarchies were used to explain inequalities within Serbia. This vertical axis 'uses notions related to Europeanness to (re)produce hierarchies and exercise exclusions/expulsions of various segments of the [same] population'.[126] It operates within countries and uses individualistic ideas about hard work and entrepreneurship – inspired by global images of backwardness and productivity – to justify why some people are targeted by governmental power to become more competitive and more ambitious, while others are conspicuously silenced. Both NFE trainers and participants relied on a common-sensical division within Serbia that contains within it allochronism: the idea that inequality is explained by a civilisational lag in a part of a population, rather than, for instance, contradictions within capitalism.

When a trainer would describe Serbian society as 'schizophrenic' for being seemingly unable to decide whether to 'accept or reject EU values', they and the class they were speaking to would be implicitly excluded from this general societal condition.[127] In discussions we had about faulty education systems and the failed labour subjects they create, young people in the room did not consider themselves equally damaged as their less successful peers. My interlocutors also provided a particular explanation of inequality that used their own commitment as proof that precarity can be ameliorated by improving oneself. This is best illustrated in an interview with a young woman employed in a large NFE organisation, who had herself completed several NFE programmes. I asked her about the motivation of so many young people I met at the organisation:

> The most important challenge in growing up is that you have to equip yourself [*osposobiti se*] for the labour market, which is quite closed … And then your … I mean, it is simply not enough that you just get a university degree and that you are academically … on any level, even on the highest level … It's not enough.
>
> We are all afraid of jobs in some … If everything will be ok, if we will have a salary, if everything will be ok tomorrow … Will it be this way or that way …? All these are … The labour market conditions you [*uslovi te*]. But the good side of this is that really everyone is then all over the place.
>
> It's only an excuse to say, 'I am studying at a university' I'm telling you: I studied and finished in time [*u roku*].[128] By then I already had two jobs when I was finishing, and I think this can be accomplished … It's just … Just good organisation, good plan, and serious motivation. And the motivation firstly comes from the outside, I think in our growing up, and then it somehow quickly moves to the inside. When you are already finishing your degree and you really start to really want this … And somehow these two connect.[129]

She offers a particular explanation of inequality: her own commitment is proof that precarity can be ameliorated by improving oneself. Individualist meritocracy celebrates having a 'good organisation' and 'serious motivation', while at the same time providing a critique of the 'excuses' that others might make. This points to a more general understanding of the difference between NFE-goers as modern citizens, and their peers who were not a part of the choir to which the NGO sector was preaching: these young minds were opened through a combination of will, self-sacrifice, and skill. Here, the accusation of 'passivity' and 'apathy' did not refer only to political action (as discussed in the literature), but also to actively taking personal responsibility for employment.

Beyond the local/international binary, seeing NFE within a wider politics of improvement brings to the fore the motley life that hierarchies of local/international, Western/non-Western, and modern/backward have beyond the discourses of interveners. This reconceptualisation helps empirically and theoretically link global and local hierarchies, showing their co-constitution and

[126] Orlanda Obad, 'How we survived Europe', p. 186.

[127] Fieldwork journal, 13 March 2016.

[128] This is a reference to the excessive time needed to obtain a higher education degree in the region.

[129] Interview with NFE programme coordinator and former participant, 7 April 2016.

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ways in which global politics connect with everyday experience. This does not mean ignoring the very real power imbalances that structure intervention encounters but aims at understanding them better. Approaching these hierarchies as constitutive of politics of improvement creates the space for considering their enactment horizontally (to spaces not limited to those with direct experiences of colonisation and slavery) and vertically (within societies) as they make international politics on multiple scales.

Conclusion

The article started from an awkward observation: while critical scholarship argues for a knowledge production that starts from and centres the experiences of people thus far absent from it, there is little discussion about how this orientation might clash with the organising concepts of our research practice. Building on work that has thoroughly condemned the methodological and analytical erasures in intervention scholarship,[130] this article argues for problematising the phenomenon of intervention itself by means of coeval engagement. The article first delineated two definitional parameters of much critical scholarship on intervention that coeval engagement challenges: acts ordered within predefined fields of visibility and actors understood along the local-international binary. It then reviewed the echoes of these parameters in existing critical scholarship that pursues coeval engagement. Finally, it proposed politics of improvement as an alternative conceptual lens. In tracing the politics of improving the employability of young people in Serbia, I located intervention in wider contexts and found civilisational hierarchies beyond the local-international binary.

Any critique of liberal intervention – democracy promotion, development, statebuilding, or peacebuilding – must account for the contradictory processes that simultaneously nurture greater freedom for some and circumscribe it for others. Critiques intent on finding exploitation will be faced with subjects entrepreneurially embracing liberal freedoms and creating pockets of prosperity. Critiques focused on dispersed government that fosters freedom will be confronted with silencing, exploitation, and violence. The power of liberal government, and the interventions that it inspires, lies in the normalisation of the contemporaneous existence of freedom and constraint. Politics of improvement brings to the fore the lived experience of this contradictory nature of liberal interventionism.

With this, I argue for a conceptual retreat from intervention. Olivia Rutazibwa's work on retreat as an ethical alternative to intervention challenges the fact of internationals 'being there' in the first place.[131] My argument is perhaps less radical. It is difficult to imagine Serbia, or the post-Yugoslav space, outside of the power of Europe as an organising force of political and social life, despite recognising the corrosive nature of EU's overbearing presence. Additionally, the planetary challenges that await us in coming decades will surely require transnational action, albeit hopefully underwritten by logics of solidarity rather than paternalism.[132] I thus do not argue for a practical retreat, nor can I offer advice on 'doing' intervention better. Instead, the article takes as its target knowledge production as an important part of liberal interventionism.[133] It calls for a conceptual retreat that would decentre intervention to explore other ways in which its targets participate in international political life. It is thus an example of a research practice that follows politics of improvement instead of intervention traditionally understood, and it can perhaps inspire novel directions of moving beyond and besides intervention thinking. Not because practices, actors, and hierarchies of intervention should not be studied, but because its conceptual confines limit the pursuit of coeval engagement.

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[130] Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism'.

[131] Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa, 'What if we took autonomous recovery seriously?', *Ethical Perspectives*, 1 (2013), pp. 81–108; Rutazibwa, 'What's there to mourn?', pp. 65–7.

[132] A similar take on the future of transnational action is provided in Gilbert, *International Intervention.*

[133] Lai, 'A different form of intervention?'; Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa, 'Studying agaciro: Moving beyond Wilsonian interventionist knowledge production on Rwanda', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 8:4 (2014), pp. 291–302.

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