

We will be alright. Some encouragement for those in the starting gates and those
who will be

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Jana Stöxen



In this thought-provoking text, Jana Stöxen - winner of the inaugural Regensburg Prize for Outstanding Master's Theses in Area Studies - reflects on her experiences of developing her research topic for her master's thesis. She explores the social, disciplinary and material barriers she faced before outlining how she overcame them to produce an innovative piece of research. You can find out more about that research [in this contribution to *Frictions*](#). Her words offer encouragement to her peers - and others - who might be struggling with similar challenges.

“...and you are really going to live there in that block of flats for about two months?!”

This statement gives a good impression of the slight, or indeed often quite substantial, confusion I encountered when talking about the methodology of my master's thesis. What I proposed would involve moving into a ten-storey block of flats in Bucharest that I showed - mostly German - friends and family on Google StreetView and then basically writing about the evolution of post-socialist neighbourhoods. This confusion about my working techniques marked the start of my project. It was often accompanied by stereotypical othering of Romania and the East in general, which was opposed to a dominant West where the presence of Eastern European people often

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remains precarious. Still, most fellow students – perhaps conscious of such clichés from their own work – nodded understandingly, while those who were less acquainted with the field seemed somewhat perturbed by my decision. I still wonder sometimes what they thought my goal might be by pursuing this project.

The field my coursemates and I are in spans a breadth and variety of scales, from the local to global; it covers time and space but always comes back down to earth. It is known by many names including cultural studies, anthropology, and cultural anthropology. A lot of fields in the social sciences are related: sociology, religious studies and probably linguistics, too, are brothers from another mother, living a few miles away, I suppose. Given the confusion surrounding the subject's name and its focus, it seems necessary to clarify what the discipline we are preoccupied with actually does: Our everyday and, to put it bluntly, sometimes seemingly banal topics are in fact able to de-code society and its practices to dig deep into the layers of our surroundings. Dismantling and segmenting cultural structures to uncover, for example, underlying structures of power and coercion may produce conflicts – internal ones for researchers themselves and external ones involving tension with, for example, established standards. But this is all part of what we do in our field and what makes studying, researching and working in this area so fascinating.

Focussing primarily on everyday topics and their operationalization for a possibly bigger picture, our subject easily encounters curious glances and causes frowned foreheads. But being afraid of explaining and even of defending seemingly adventurous research projects cannot offer a way of facing those popular confrontations. Even though heated discussion prove quite entertaining, I propose picturing objective critique as an expression of allegiance and solidarity towards fellow scholarly and research communities. At the same time, perceiving non-violent conflicts and arguments as a way of achieving understanding or even reconciliation across regional and disciplinary boundaries might be a door-opener for cooperation and mutual comprehension. Criticism can be a productive endeavour. Therefore, I decided that I would not write another summary on what my thesis was about and why it is worth reading (though it is...), but instead offer a brief call of encouragement to you, fellow students and those who might apply for – and win! – the next Regensburg Prize for Outstanding Master's Theses in Area Studies offered by CITAS and the Leibniz ScienceCampus.

Until we arrive at a position where we might submit a thesis for consideration, there is a lot more to do than just to follow well thought-out but somehow always slightly flawed curricula. Sticking with academia is a decision that can be a compelling, irresistible one for people that want to broaden their knowledge and gain great command of their field. This is a thoroughly noble cause! Still, at some point – be it right at the start of an undergraduate degree, just in the gap between the bachelor and the master, or while completing a seemingly final paper without knowing where it will take you afterwards – most of us (including myself) struggle. Some too much to continue. But for those who do struggle – please, if so, admit it – and who might be questioning whether it is worth it, perhaps my words can offer warm and welcoming encouragement, and serve as a reminder of the value of our subjects and our own potential.

So, I would like to pass this on:

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There's plenty of stuff to explore out there. Let's tackle it in various ways and find new approaches to dealing with upcoming events and challenges. We're young. One of many generations, but most importantly: the next one emerging into adulthood, intellectual maturity, responsibility for the world - or whatever you want to call this awkward transitional phase of life. In any case: Make use of this liminal time in our lives and treat this state of uncertainty as an opportunity - hoping for the best, whilst not necessarily expecting the worst. We should really dwell on this in-between status. We're (still) political and this forms part of our daily life in which our work is a rather substantial part. Let's join forces! We're all gifted in our very own ways, so it would be a great loss not to combine our features, abilities, and passions. It's not about super-powers but about openness, support, and solidarity in an increasingly globalizing world. It's about staying in touch whilst being on the move - digitalization makes connections between us more than likely. Bottom-up is not only a method. It's an attitude as well. Let's see if we and the world can profit from it.

This is not a call to arms - though it certainly is a call to action. Especially in times when everything seems to (literally) shut down, commitment is one of the traits that can keep things going. How can we remain committed? To cite the eminence of an obligatory old, or here dead, white male who was far more critical of visions than I am, suggesting that anyone who has them should see a doctor - most probably thanks to willpower and cigarettes; Helmut Schmidt was a remarkable, albeit critical, example of this idea. Still, willpower is indeed essential, cigarettes not so much - or they may be substituted by a cup of coffee.

So, find your peers and find your niche, discover the wider world around it and try to figure out your approach on how it all *could* be. We will be alright, but we must get started at some point, so we need to get warmed up and ready to leave our own marks, whether on the beaten path or on paths yet to be established.

Perhaps our moves will be a source of friction, rubbing against the grain and the old ways of doing things, or against the barriers to breaking new ground. But these are the kinds of frictions we need, to produce heated debate, movement and change.

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Jana Stöxen (*1995) studied an interdisciplinary combination of cultural and social sciences and languages in Halle/Saale, Cluj-Napoca (Romania) and Regensburg. For her Master's thesis in East-West-Studies, she was awarded first prize in the Regensburg Prize for Outstanding Theses in Area Studies. She is currently working on a dissertation project on transnational labour migration between the Republic of Moldova and Germany.