Every time I'm in fieldwork, I promise to myself that this is the last time. Fieldwork rattles your world, if you are serious about it and put yourself out there, rather than treating the world as a candy bar from which to order home (office) delivery. Through fieldwork, the researcher breaks out of her shelter and joins the participants in their everyday lives. Problems that are otherwise repressed or bracketed, not least because of academic theories or methodological conventions and conveniences, now become central. Fieldwork has meanwhile acquired high status across social sciences. Researchers are expected to get off the academic armchair, to study practice and to live up to their politics, especially if they hope to receive research funding.

So who benefits from our putting ourselves out there? In this short talk, I revive a few unsettling questions about fieldwork in global politics. Has fieldwork become a form of distinction and virtue signalling, and thus a career strategy? Has it been co-opted to the practices of the neoliberal academy? Has reflexivity, that is, the awareness of the researcher’s integration in her study, led to productive humility and greater equality in knowledge production? Or has it tamed programmatic politics and displaced responsibility by shifting the focus away from structural issues? Is it more prudent to forego fieldwork given such dilemmas? Or am I just looking for excuses to stay in the armchair?

BIO | Xymena Kurowska is an Associate Professor of International Relations at Central European University in Vienna. She is an International Relations theorist practicing interpretive policy analysis. She has published and taught in the fields of international political sociology, critical security studies, and interpretive and narrative approaches in knowledge production. She is a co-editor of the Journal of International Relations and Development. She holds a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute in Florence and an MA in International Relations from Warsaw University.

FRUSTRATION/REVELATION SERIES | Research can be characterized by long stretches of frustration and puzzlement, punctuated by occasional moments of revelation. This series focuses on exceptional scholars who will not deliver standard academic talks, but who will bring to life struggles faced when pursuing their research, how they came to study a specific topic, difficult choices made, failures, and then sometimes revelations - sudden or slowly accumulating - that have transformed how they view their research, their respective disciplines, and even the world at large. In the process, we also learn about academic disciplines and the kind of work scholars do in crafting their research. There will be a discussion following each lecture where the first three questions are reserved for Undergraduate students.