

AS:

First of all, I want to thank you very much for taking part in this interview and sharing your experiences.

KW:

It's my pleasure.

AS:

You have been at Harvard now, but since when? Exactly when did you arrive?

KW:

I arrived on February 6th, in the middle of a Massachusetts crazy winter that I haven't seen in Sweden even before.

AS:

So, lots of snow. Or was it like blizzard snow?

KW:

Very cold. Although lots of sun as well. I think that helps people survive here.

AS:

So, I want to know why you went to Harvard. What brought you there?

KW:

Well, in general, as probably majority of scholars, I have always had this kind of a dream to spend some time at, well, basically the best university in the world according to majority of the rankings. So, in 2023, I got the Emma Goldman Award and some significant amount of money that I can spend on research related activities. I decided that I would like to spend some time at Harvard, and in order to do that, I applied for a scholarship at Harvard, which fortunately, I was granted a few months later and I decided to come here and, well, not only spend time at Harvard, but also have some quiet time to focus on my writing, because, as you probably know, when you're working on a daily basis at your home university, there are many other activities that you're spending your time on. And it's sometimes hard to find a space for writing. So, this kind of sabbatical fellowship at universities where you don't have to teach, where you don't have that many other duties, and that many friends to hang out with. It helps to focus on writing. And that was my main motivation to come here.

AS:

What do you know about this area? You've been to the US before, I imagine, but have you been to this part of the US and to the Harvard area before?

KW:

No, never. I've never been to Massachusetts. I've never been to Boston or the area before. Metropolitan area of Boston, as they call it. The place where Harvard is based is called Cambridge. Hence, it was a very, very new experience for me also, tourist-wise. America is, as you know very well, an extremely diverse country. And, of course, Massachusetts is very different than other states where I've been before.

AS:

So just following the timeline: you applied in 2023, you found out that you were going in 2024. And then we have the US election coming up at the

end of 2024. Tell me your feelings leading up to arriving in February after Trump is elected.

KW:

Of course, I wasn't happy with the election results because, well, we'd already seen how the first presidency of Donald Trump looked like. Hence, the prospects were not good. Already in November, right when he was elected. But then I mean, this is life. So, you just need to accept things that you cannot really control or change. And honestly, I thought it would not be great, but I also remember that the last time when I spent significant time in the States in 2018, it was also under Trump. And, you know, nothing really happened to me. I mean, the atmosphere was not great again. But life goes on, right? I thought it would be the same or similar this time. I never, ever imagined before I arrived here that this presidency would shape my stay at Harvard to that extent, because it really has. And it still is the case. Every day, is somehow marked by the fact that Donald Trump is the president of the United States right now, and especially when you are an international scholar at Harvard University these days.

AS:

Now, it's sort of a perfect storm that you have arrived to, it seems. And, and here, you know, in Sweden, we're following the situation at Harvard, but filtered through Swedish news and international news. But it seems like Harvard's been put in a very difficult position. How has this played out for you individually and for the Center for European Studies there?

KW:

There are so many levels how this impact can be discussed. As we all know, reading the news, very quickly after becoming president, Donald Trump decided to subordinate universities and make them act the way he wants them to act. And some universities, threatened by the cuts of federal funding, decided to follow his lead, such as, for example, Columbia University. But some universities, among them Harvard, decided not to comply, because basically, what Donald Trump wanted from Harvard, at least from what I know from the letters that we are receiving on a daily basis, basically from the head of Harvard University. So, he wanted first to stop all the DEI programs at the university. Secondly, he wanted the university to act more actively in order to combat anti-Semitism at the university. Even though this particular request was not really about anti-Semitism, as we all know.

It is weaponizing anti-Semitism in order to make sure that, not only pro-Palestinian protests, but any kind of protests will stop. And, of course, the protests that are now being organized at Harvard University are very intersectional in the sense that they are anti-Trump, anti-Israeli treatment of Gaza and anti-many other things. And this was exactly what he wanted to do, stopping us, using anti-Semitism as an excuse to actually deal with the people who are not happy with his decisions and policies.

And the third thing was and that was especially significant for the academic freedom, is that he wanted to somehow have control over what is taught at the university. Can you imagine that? That one person, the president, wants to actually control what teachers, academics are telling their students, which is ridiculous. No wonder Harvard could not agree to these terms. And the university lost quite a lot of money because of that. That was the beginning. We thought that cutting federal funds will be the end of the story. And to be fair, Harvard is quite a

rich institution so the institution will survive. But the paradox is that the money that Harvard lost from federal funding wasn't even funds for research which Trump disrespects so much such as those on (in)equalities, race, diversity and gender studies. No, that is not the case, because projects which are conducted in, for example, sociology or gender studies departments, are not funded to that extent by federal money. They are cheap projects compared to those which are, for example, conducted at the medical school or physics school.

The medical school was harmed the most. And that means all research about the cure for Alzheimer's disease and very advanced cancer research were stopped. Who is harmed by this? We all. Not just scholars who lost their grants, but also people who are waiting for all these results. So, you know, it's Harvard, it's students, it's scholars, but those who are also harmed are basically members of, not just even American society, but all the people in the world.

AS:

When you are there as a guest researcher, do you feel like you have to watch what you say or that you are being monitored? Has there been this kind of feeling, a fear of being able to speak openly amongst you and the other people who are there as guests?

KW:

Yes and no. We have had these kinds of discussions amongst colleagues, both American colleagues, but also other visiting scholars from different countries, mostly European countries, because at the Center for European Studies where I am based, we are mostly Europeans, interested in Europe. So, we have had these kinds of discussions

and, well, we have different conclusions. To me, as much as Trump's decisions impact my life to some extent in the sense that, for example, there was a day we didn't know if we had a visa anymore. There was a day that we didn't know if we could go abroad. There was a day when we had to worry about the students, that they would be deported from the country and forced to leave the university, international students. So, of course, on an emotional level, it impacted us very much.

That's that, let's be fair., let's be fair. I'm a European scholar. I'm from the European Union, one of the best places to be at the moment. And the only thing that could actually happen to me if they would deport me, I will be coming back to Sweden or, I don't know, Poland or Germany. And my life goes on. So, I decided that I am in a position which is quite privileged. Therefore, I shouldn't censor myself from posting anything on my social media nor going to protests which were organized and still are at Harvard

like almost every week. I don't remember the last time I was protesting so much. And mind the fact, I'm from Poland and there are always many reasons to protest there 😊 Therefore, I decided not to hide anything. Not to silence myself. Because I am not the one who is suffering the most. I understand colleagues, American colleagues having a different approach, although not that many actually are afraid. But most importantly, I understand international students. They are in the most precarious situation. They can be expelled any day. And despite that, many of them still participated in the protests, happenings and different types of events. They actually spoke up openly, so they're extremely brave. So how could a European scholar be less brave than international students who could actually be kicked out of the country or even put into detention?

AS:

Exactly.

KW: For the same kind of actions such as speaking freely about politics, which, in Sweden, we still believe that this is a basic human right, that no one would ever take from us. America shows that it can happen, basically saying "Well, hold my beer."

AS:

It's fascinating to hear about this. And the protests especially. We've been seeing lots of pictures and hearing what people are experiencing and seeing. And it always looks very alarming with the signs and then the presence of guns the potential violence always brewing. This isn't necessarily something we really connect with Massachusetts as a state. And Harvard especially, you know, it's just been very strange to see how this is all playing out where you expect to see this kind of Ivy League beautiful, manicured ideal.

KW:

Yes, yes. And to be fair, I have not experienced any type of violence here, and I haven't felt threatened by anyone. So, it is still a safe space for protests. But, you know, let's see how long that lasts. And, this is Massachusetts, like you say, but other places are not that safe. And we're already reading some reports from the Saturday No Kings protest. I was also part of it in Boston, where thankfully nothing happened. You know, many people came, and it was really a powerful event to participate in.

AS:

So, now you're going to be coming back to Gothenburg, and you come back with this experience, but what have you been able to do in terms of your projects, your writing? Has the situation at Harvard gotten in the way of any of your work? Has it informed any of your research? Do you feel like it's been an overall positive experience? Have you been impacted psychologically by having to continue with your work as an academic amid this? It could go either way.

KW:

Yes. Overall, it is still a positive experience. I'm happy I came. That said, the situation impacted my work here. Maybe not my research, content-wise at least. But the protesting, and the discussions about the situation here took a lot of my time that I thought I would be spending at the library writing my book. The book is being written, of course, but it's not finished yet So I can say the politics took quite a lot of my time.

AS:

Right!

KW:

You're not only part of the protest, but you're also observing what's going on. So, it didn't impact my research that I'm doing right now, about fatherhood, activism, migrant men, integration, but I am sure it gave me some ideas for the future. Depending, of course, on what's going to happen in the world. Because for a sociologist, you know, it's always a tricky situation because something that you actually research today might not really be the case tomorrow, and vice versa. It also impacted the whole intellectual experience of being here. When I was planning to visit Harvard, I was hoping for lots of discussions about theories, which

I love and looking forward to this hardcore science. But most of the discussions we have had here concern the current political situation, the Harvard case, of course. As a consequence, it was much less of this intellectual debate that I was hoping for, but no wonder, right? On the other hand, this is one of the most fascinating historical periods ever. Although, I prefer boring historical times. But still, being here right now is a very unique opportunity to see what is democracy? How fragile it can be, but also what the power of people is. And how people and institutions can possibly shape it.

AS:

Thank you, Kasia.