Ester Herlin Karnell is one of those lawyers. She is fascinated by European law and are put off by the dry nature of the subject. Many criminal lawyers do not fully understand the importance of Law Elies van Sliedregt. “She has a background in both ‘She is one of those talented young people you encounter and wonder what the point of the EU is for them and become less cooperative in other areas at the same time as it is a severe economic crisis. This is why it is important for me to investigate whether there is actually a shared notion of justice among the 28 countries. “If there is no common goal, you might as well wonder what the purpose of the European Union really is.”

The anger that surfaced at that time was all too obvious. The complex issues currently at play with regard to criminal law, asylum law, money-laundering, terrorism and privacy are things we were not accustomed to in the EU. All of them show how essential a shared sense of justice is in order to form a stable union. Tax law is another perfect example: countries with more favourable regulation attract more businesses, much to the dismay of neighbouring countries. “If there is no common strategy, you might as well question what the purpose of the European Union really is.”

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Herlin Karnell does not limit herself to the issue of law alone. The subject itself prevents it, she explains: “The subject is a political one. If European electors do not want EU laws, things become complicated. The issue is not that I myself would like to see a massive canon of EU legislation, but I do wonder what basic shared principles we could effectively establish.” Although this may sound all very practical, just imagine how complex the subject is. So many member states, each with their own background and perspectives. “The main focus of my research is on why things are as they are and how it can be improved. There are gaps in the law and it is up to the EU to solve that. European judges have too little theoretical context and knowledge with which to work and in practice are having to reinvent the wheel.”

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Many lawyers need to be much more receptive to other disciplines. It could be that I am actually too receptive and should really be more restrictive. But, for the time being, she can pursue her interests in her own way and that suits her fine. “As a researcher, you need to have drive if you are to be productive. That is also what I tell prospective PhD students. It is not only about your CV – you also need to have passion. The great thing about being at VU University Amsterdam is that I got the freedom to set up a new master course in European law and develop my own courses from scratch. And nobody really minds which journals I publish in or what exactly I am working on. As long as it has something to do with law, there is no pressure placed on me. The work can be lonely at times and I miss all the action in court, but what I really enjoy is being able to read, think and write freely.”

Never before has anyone analysed European law and its possibilities in the way that Herlin Karnell is now doing. There are also very few colleagues at the University with the kind of practical experience she has from her time as a lawyer. Nevertheless, she was very surprised to be appointed: “I did not think I would be senior enough. Explaining the importance of my work is also slightly more difficult than it is for a scientist.” Perhaps it is true that she publishes a lot. Still, she sometimes has doubts: “In times like that I think: no one will ever use this.” But that kind of existential doubt affects any reasonable person now and again. If she needs to clear her head, she goes horse-riding. And despite all her modesty, she has been lucky enough to have her talent acknowledged and recognized, enabling her to pursue this enormous intellectual challenge still further.