

Recrafting International Relations through Relationality

Written by Tamara Trowsell, Amaya Querejazu Escobari, Giorgio Shani, Navnita Chadha Behera, Jarrad Reddekop and Arlene Tickner

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How we relate to others should be a central concern of the field of International Relations. However, independent political communities—states—and their interrelations have historically been the focus of the *discipline* of International Relations (IR), thus limiting the forms of interaction that potentially constitute the *field*.^[1] Postpositivist accounts have repeatedly indicated the disjuncture between the conceptual constructs that IR scholars use to make sense of the world historically and the way people practice their lives, which in the end is the substance of global politics. Many critical projects including Global IR have challenged the research produced through atomistic understandings of the world, and attempts have been made to integrate other ways of knowing into the discipline (Acharya 2014, Jackson and Nexon 1999, Tickner and Wæver 2009). While the ‘critical turn’ has made IR a more plural discipline by opening space for examining different types of relations, they have still been founded on modern, western ‘ontological’ assumptions about existence that have undercut their ability to reap the full benefits of other more robustly relational ways of existing (Blaney and Tickner 2017, Shani 2008, Trowsell 2013). Because the kind of plurality practised has not effectively dealt with distinctly relational ways of living and forms of knowing *in their own terms*, the call that we are making here is not just about adding other perspectives to the IR cauldron. We are aspiring for a deep plurality, in which IR scholars learn to effectively engage with difference at the ontological, methodological and practical levels.

Since the issue at hand is about ontological-cosmological commitments, we proffer our particular understandings of these terms. By *ontology*, we mean those basic assumptions about the nature of existence that are operative within any given tradition of living and thinking. In this sense ontology is closely linked to the cosmological in that they both reflect how we conceptualize our relationship with the cosmos and our place in it (Shani 2017). They are distinct in that cosmology refers more to origin stories and to cultural, spiritual and religious practices while ontology expresses the assumptions about the primordial condition of existence that provides the underlying logic of cosmological accounts and as such of all the other cultural fruits that emerge from them. Here we focus on ontology, because it helps draw attention to and provincialize many of the fundamental assumptions made in the dominant IR tradition, many of which have become invisible or merely commonsensical by being consonant with prevalent shared meaning systems and through longstanding and conventional use.

The general inability both in the field and discipline of international relations to recognize when and how one and others are engaging existence from very distinct ontological points of departure has had a serious impact in terms of both politics and knowledge production. Promoted through globally replicated institutions including academia, media, churches, etc., conceptualizing and practicing existence based on separation has become so naturalized that other more relational forms of being have been silenced and excluded. Conflict over what counts as real arises since those applying the predominant assumptions cannot even fathom that these other ways of being can be possible, legitimate or valid. As such living in one’s own or a group’s terms becomes a struggle when they are not aligned with the more predominant logic.

Several consequences of being blind to these relational ways of living and being manifest themselves politically. First these life expressions are often “othered” and “minimized” by treating them as myths (Law 2015), legends, superstitions, or stories about how people communicate with other beings. Denigration also becomes evident when examining public policies that do not even articulate, let alone protect, these relational ways of life. Among humans,

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groups abound that have not been deemed worthy of civil rights protections in the process of statebuilding for not engaging the world in sufficiently “civilized” manners (Sawyer 2004). Others have been the targets of state-led violence through national forced sterilization or “population control” initiatives (Carpio 2004, Pegoraro 2015). Beyond the human, these excluded groups have clamored to protect other beings that do not translate easily into traditional legal frameworks. For example, while indigenous groups were able to get the rights of nature officially acknowledged in Ecuador’s 2008 constitution, an effective implementation of these rights has yet to be seen. Efforts to maintain a healthy relationship with the beings of land, water, air, plants and animals often come into direct conflict with “national interests,” international treaties, foreign direct investment and forms of international cooperation, as can be clearly seen in last year’s indigenous struggles at Standing Rock in the United States. In the end, the ontological nature of these clashes has been clearly echoed in the zapatistas’ claims to a world of many worlds when stating, “We are another resistance, we are another reality.”^[2]

In addition to the important political implications in the field of international relations, the discipline itself has yet to consider seriously relational ways of knowing and being. Because the problematics typical of IR and the tools generated to deal with them have been identified and named through the same predominant set of existential assumptions, the conceptual capacity of the discipline to grasp and respond to these ways of knowing is limited. In fact the predominant understanding of ontology within the discipline of IR has been referred to as “scientific ontology” (Patomäki and Wight 2000, Jackson 2011). Here scholars fight over *what* exists in the world without a prior discussion as to how it is ontologically that we arrive at a place where we insist on the existential autonomy of categories in the first place. This means that we keep studying these cosmologies through ontologically incommensurate filters (not based on similar existential assumptions) thinking that in this way we will still be able to understand them and then use the knowledge generated through reduced filters to find effective strategies for engagement. Yet our ontological parochialism still translates into epistemic violence by not being able to hear, understand, engage their world *in their own ontological terms*. Simultaneously we continue to generate a skewed picture of the kinds of knowing and being practiced in distinct parts of the world and subsequently of world politics. Consequently the resulting “intelligibility gap” still reinforces certain ways of being and knowing in the world as more legitimate or acceptable than others, thus reinforcing the source of cosmological insecurity for those falling outside these parameters.

In sum, the degree of naturalization and silences about what is allowed to be considered possible or true eliminates discussion of other ways of being in the world. These concerns, ontological in nature, have not been properly or deeply addressed in IR conversations, and this constitutes another form of exclusion that perpetuates the breach between the world that IR claims to produce knowledge about and the worlds that constitute the global. These suppressions need to be taken seriously, since they refer directly to the problem of difference, and IR, after all, is about how we relate to difference.

This short article advocates that the discipline not just acknowledge the existence of ways of being in the world that emerge from a robustly relational perspective, but also develop tools that allow us to engage them in ways that reflect similar ontological commitments. Key steps of this effort would include becoming aware of these radically distinct ways of understanding existence, becoming conversant with how distinct onto-cosmological commitments shape how people engage politically with others, and at a more advanced level, exploring how we may approach theorizing, research and interacting with difference by starting from radically distinct existential assumptions. In the remainder of the essay we examine what garnering these skills of ontological translation might imply for how we engage the field of international relations after clarifying what we mean by relationality in contrast to conventional approaches to IR.

Conventional Approaches to IR

Conventional thinking within this discipline is embedded in specific ontological presumptions that are not universal but have been universalized. They belong to a particular philosophical tradition that assumes the priority of pre-existing, fixed, separate, and stable entities. Given that priority, one may then enquire into the properties of those entities or the subsequent relationships into which they enter. This atomist ontology is responsible for the way we predominantly start with a conception of units such that it is common sense to isolate humans as a universal class whose properties (reason, language, etc.) set them fundamentally apart from other classes of objects/beings (plant,

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animal, mineral, etc.) (Descola 2011). IR reflects these ontological commitments by privileging units of analysis, such as actors (states, international organizations and social movements) and phenomena (war, political systems and environmental degradation), and by epistemologically focusing on further identifying features that make the category *that* category and not something else, or on identifying the significance of causal relations between existentially autonomous variables.

Relationality in IR

Ontologically relationality begins by assuming interconnection as *prior* to the existence of entities. In relational ways of knowing and being, the object cannot exist without the observer; it does not exist separately from the act of observation; and the act of observation changes the relation of the observer and the object observed. Nothing exists in isolation. There are no great divides (Latour 2004); there are no divides at all. What entities are, therefore, is not given in advance. In relationality the limits between human and natural, life and death, present, past and future are blurred, and they coexist in a constant exchange and complementarity.

From this ontological point of departure, reality can be convincingly defined and explored through other logics. How we relate to difference can serve as an example. Experienced in the in-between space of relations, difference is always dynamic and subject to change through this lens. Even though categorical lines are blurred, the friction generated through difference is central because it kinesthetically lets us know where we are.^[3]

One relational principle critical for understanding the consequences of this conceptualization is the mutual complementarity of opposites. Since every impulse can only exist in complementarity with its opposite, difference is crucial to existence, to being. In this sense diverse life forms are much more than just a source of richness; they are the very ontological basis of one's existence. Through the different other we know who we are and that we are alive.

Another important principle reflecting emergent relations and the co-creative energy that courses through them is the fractal nature of what we experience. Through fractality, difference and plurality do not only signify different ways of seeing the world or signal one world being approached in different ways; they actually include differently enacted worlds (Viveiros de Castro 2007). Since the assumptions that we make and the way in which we direct our attention co-create distinct worlds through the fractal principle, it is up to us to take on conscientious forms of worlding. Furthermore, learning to stand in the tensions created between worlds can help us hone the skills we need to move more effectively between them. These points merely begin to shed light on how seeing relations as constitutive of reality may radically re-orient how we approach the field and discipline of International Relations.

Several pioneers have played a key role in introducing deeply relational work to the discipline of International Relations (Kavalski 2017, 2018, Pan 2018, Qin 2011, 2016, 2018, Shahi 2016, 2018, Shih and Huang 2018, Shilliam 2015, and Zhao 2006). At the same time we want to make clear that the relationality about which we are speaking is **not** the same as other approaches in IR that assume co-constitutive processes. Constructivism, for example, only privileges certain types of relations that constitute agents/structures (states, power, tendencies) in a way that leaves intact the ontological independence of the structures (see Jackson and Nexon 1999, Qin 2018). Most critical theories that question binary thinking, such as post-structural feminists (Peterson and True 1998) and queer theorists (Weber 2014), have not yet moved beyond a one-world world focused solely on human beings (Law 2015). Even radical poststructuralists start with a fundamental separation between humans and nature by only talking about relations constituted through discourse, assumed to be a uniquely human quality. While green IR theory explores indigenous perspectives as a way to move beyond anthropocentric logics (Dalby 2014), it integrates relevant constructs without a complete ontological overhaul of the theory. In short, it is not the same to state that reality is socially constructed than to say that relations constitute reality, or better yet, multiple realities.

Other disciplines have more consistently questioned assumed categories and anthropocentrism by showing how other worlds and beings are equally part of the latticework, such as in Science and Technology Studies (Latour 1993, 2004, Mol 1999, 2002, Law 2015, Law & Lien 2012, Haraway 2008) and anthropology (Blaser 2010, de la Cadena 2011, Escobar 2010, Kohn 2013, Viveiros de Castro 2004, Holbraad et al 2014). Such studies are key to understanding the implications of silencing other worlds that should be taken into account in the way both IR and our

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daily international relations are constructed.

When seriously applying relationality, these categories that we take for granted as objects of study (state, land, nation, treaties) are not only assumed to be socially constructed; they can actually be otherwise *at the same time*. Take *nation* for example. We tend to assume that nations refer to human socio-political communities, but in fact nations are much more than that for many. For the Anishinaabe, nation also involves animal communities into which human and animal leaders enter into treaty relations (Simpson 2012). In other Indigenous American contexts, the concept of nation has also been used to refer to the Andean *ayllu* (Yampara 2001) or the yshiro's *yrmo* in South America (Blaser 2010), both of which explicitly include other natural and spiritual beings and very different temporalities in their political communities.

Other politically relevant examples include land, rivers and mountains, commonly assumed to be natural resources about which public policies and legislation are developed. As objects they are considered to be goods, resources or commodities. Relationally though they are also natural and spiritual beings with the capacity to engage in relations and transform life (de la Cadena 2011, 2013, Blaser 2010, Viveiros 2004, 2007). As living beings with a will of their own, they are political actors. Accepting this as possible has drastic consequences for how issues may be approached in international politics.

It is important to clarify that we are not only addressing the cosmovisions of just a few small aboriginal, indigenous communities. In fact, millions of people across the world practice existence based on deeply relational assumptions. Relationality is prevalent in cosmologies such as *dharma*, *din*, *dao*, *advaita*, Buddhism, Confucianism and *Sikhi*. Across much of Asia, concepts of 'self' and 'other' are fluid and constituted by relations which precede them (Shahi 2018). These relations are *cosmically* defined; different notions of temporality co-exist and constitute different subjects within the cosmos. All of this makes it difficult to sustain a distinction between individual and community, peace and conflict, sacred and secular, life and death, and human and non-human.

In the millennia-old traditions of Indian civilization, for example, *dharma* governs all legitimate world ends (*purushartha*), including the pursuit of economic and social goals (*artha*) and aesthetic and sensual pleasures (*kama*). *Karma*, or the application of *dharma* to individual action, determines the cycle of birth, death and rebirth (*samsara*). How—and who—we relate to in any given situation is prescribed by *dharma*. Since it is a cosmic force, all beings are subject to its power and are constituted by it. No permanent distinction can therefore be made between different subjects since their forms may vary according to their proximity to *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth). Likewise the Buddhist concept of *nirvana* (liberation from suffering) differs only in that it may be achieved through the mastery of the cosmic force of *dharma* through individual meditation or as part of a community, *sangha*. In Sikhism, *dharam* (a variant of *dharma*) guides action, and liberation can be achieved through the recitation of the 'true name' (*Satnaam*). However, the *communal* aspect of identity is emphasized through the wearing of five external symbols of faith making difficult a distinction between the 'religious' community (*Khalsa*) and 'nation' (*qaum*) (Shani 2008). The interconnectedness of things is also emphasized in living cultures in China which comprise Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist elements which cannot be separated (Ling 2013, Shih 2016, Qin 2018). In Islam, the notion of *wadat al-wujud* (the unity of being) means that all living and non-living beings in this universe are mutually related. This Sufi metaphysical episteme negates the Cartesian separation of subjects and objects since they are all part of the common ontological condition that is determined by materiality, dependency of existence, mutability and temporality.

In short relationality as an ontological starting point is widely practiced throughout the world, and these practices are also an integral part of global politics. It would be logical then to bring deep relationality into IR to generate varied, more appropriate forms of knowledge cultivation and to locate more effective ways for dealing with the complexity presented in the field of international relations (Shilliam 2015). Toward this end we need to go beyond just becoming aware of other ways of life; we need to develop skills to move between these worlds. This involves knowing how to change our most basic ontological assumptions (for example from atomizing separation to integrating interconnection) and understanding the implications of having made such a switch by practicing moving back and forth between the corresponding logics.

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By cultivating skills in ontological translation in this way, we can broaden the spectrum of possible understandings within the discipline of IR, and this brings several advantages. First the method of contrast that necessarily accompanies relationality allows us to perceive the limitations of forms of thinking inspired through more atomistic existential assumptions. Furthermore, literacy in relationality provides scholars with more ontologically appropriate conceptual constructs and tools for engaging the multiplicity of worlds that comprise the area of study of IR. For example, one benefit of becoming ontologically competent is realizing that it is not necessary to choose “either/or” as we have been socialized to think and that conceiving of worlds in terms of “both/and” gives a distinct platform from which to generate analytical tools. With an increased variety of tools, we will be better equipped to interrogate the regular problems of IR from new angles, like those that emerge in relations between political communities or global challenges like migration, conflict, development, governance, environment, etc. We can also re-craft traditional concepts of IR, such as conflict/peace, governance, democracy, social contract, treaties, diplomacy, and rights and obligations, through a relational logic to give them multifaceted conceptual depth. For IR scholars concerned with pluralism, these tools provide a more comprehensive and meaningful way of taking difference into account.

Other benefits can come to the discipline through introducing and honing skills in ontological translation with a diversified toolset. For example, knowing how to practice existence in a deeply relational way provides students, scholars and everyday actors in the field common ground for easy intelligibility of ‘foreign’ concepts in disparate contexts and languages that also privilege interconnection as the primordial condition of existence. Expressing this ontological and conceptual diversity within the study of IR will help potential students coming from these contexts better relate to the discipline itself. For those participating in the field of international relations, demonstrating ontological competence and diversity can actually contribute to the “cosmological security” of all forms of life by appreciating the important role played by others who live in their own terms.[4] Finally we can recognize various worldviews as an integral part of the field, and by learning to harmonize them we can enrich the discipline’s capacity to study them.

Invitation

Instead of a concluding summary, we would like to extend an invitation to the contributors of the discipline to bring relations back into IR. That is, besides knowing how to study and apply predetermined notions of what constitutes the “international”, it is also critical to know how to start from/with “relations.” By this we are not talking about identifying various “relational ontologies” and aggregating them to a single “global” framework that acts as a melting pot of a long list of many other approaches or categories. That would only further reinforce reductionism. Here we are suggesting that we become more versatile across a multiplicity of realities that stem from ways of being and knowing that emerge through distinct primordial assumptions about existence.

At a minimum, we need to expand our efforts to understand the logic that underlies both conventional and relational manners of engaging existence. Beyond that, we should contemplate what other existential forms that resist being inserted into categories based on great divides might mean for how we engage the “global.” In addition to looking at how others live according to distinct ontological assumptions, we can then open ourselves up to being unsettled by other ways of thinking that stem from different existential assumptions. Once “unsettled” we might learn to identify the assumptions that we too make on a constant basis and allow ourselves to play with intentionally changing those assumptions at any given moment to see where they take us. For example, once we learn to see and apply interconnection as the primordial condition of existence, we begin to understand how the logics of *both/and*, *in-between*, *in-motion*, *pluriversal*, *the here and now*, and *fluid possibilities* emerge through this assumption and how they are differently conceived.

Building our skills in ontological translation will enable us as scholars in the discipline to work more effectively with those worlds about which we intend to know more. By identifying how distinct logics generate different worlds and tracing how these distinct ways of being and knowing also shape the political panorama in the world, we can become more agile in discerning the complexities and difficulties that are part of life and begin to offer more meaningful processes of sensemaking. We may even begin to imagine a point at which, instead of always trying to force different realities or experiences to adapt to theoretical frameworks constructed in IR, the discipline and scholars can adapt to the complex, messy realities that *are* the “global.” In the end, we hope to foster a deep plurality that not only enriches

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the discipline by broadening its horizons but also helps to recraft it by making the acceptance of ontological diversity the starting point for all attempts to engage with difference. International Relations, we argue, should be reconceptualised to prioritize the relations that constitute units rather than to proceed from the assumption that units are self-evident. In so doing, we hope to open up IR to other ways of being in the world.

Notes

NB: This article is a fruit of the “Doing IR Differently” collective (#doingIRdifferently, @irdifferently). This movement was formalized on July 24, 2018 in the “Doing IR Differently” writing workshop sponsored by the Universidad San Francisco de Quito San Cristóbal Island in Galapagos, Ecuador. The sources of inspiration of this collective are varied and widespread, including post-colonial and decolonial work and the non/post/beyond Western debates.

[1] In their introductory book to International Relations, Dunne, Kurki and Smith (2013) signal the distinction between the field and discipline of IR: When using ‘the discipline of International Relations (IR)’, “we are following the important convention that distinguishes between capital IR denoting the academic study of International Relations, and lower-case international relations which is shorthand for the object of the discipline’s investigations (the actors, interests, institutions, and identities on a global scale). This distinction enables us to examine the sociology of knowledge of IR as a discipline: how and when it became a distinct subject, what kinds of topics get taught, where the subject is studied, what kinds of research get funded. If we were to do away with the distinction, we would end up assuming that there is a direct read-across from the discipline to the interactions that constitute the real world of international relations” (v).

[2] This affirmation was made by María de Jesús Patricio at the moment of registering herself as a presidential candidate for the 2018 election in Mexico. She was supported by the National Indigenous Congress Assembly of Mexico as well as of the Zapatista National Liberation Army. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9ObSljWF9E>, accessed 1 October 2017.

[3] It is in this sense that alternative experiences and facts that play an important constitutive role in the international and that are sensed and understood only in context—not rationally deduced—can find a place of expression through this perspective.

[4] Shani, G. (2018). From Ontological to Cosmological Security? Sikhi(sm) and Post-Western IR. Unpublished paper presented at “Doing IR Differently,” Universidad San Francisco de Quito (Galapagos Campus), July 20 2018.

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