Unthinkable and Invisible International Relations

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The colonial underpinnings of International Relations (IR) have been receiving increasing attention (Grovogui 2006, Krishna 2006, Sabaratnam 2011, Çapan 2017a, Shilliam 2021). The discipline has addressed its own Eurocentrism in a myriad of ways such as non-Western IR and Global IR. (Acharya and Buzan 2009, Acharya 2014). One of the shortcomings of these approaches has been a focus on adding more perspectives into an already existing account of the international rather than questioning the politics of knowledge that constitute the international (Çapan 2020). This intervention aims to elaborate further on the politics of knowledge that continue to make events, histories and knowledges unthinkable and invisible within the discipline.

The notion of unthinkability is borrowed from Trouillot's (1995) discussion of the Haitian Revolution. He argued that the Haitian Revolution 'entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened', as contemporaries failed to 'understand the ongoing revolution on its own terms', as they 'could read the news only with their ready-made categories, and these categories were incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution' (Trouillot 1995: 73). He argues that there are two tropes within narratives of Haitian revolution: formulas of erasure and formulas of banalization (Trouillot 1995: 96). The formulas of erasure 'erase directly the fact of a revolution' whereas formulas of banalization 'empty a number of singular events of their revolutionary content so that the entire string of facts, […] become trivialized' (Trouillot 1995: 96).

The banalization happens through narratives that argue that the revolution 'must have been 'prompted', 'provoked', or 'suggested' by some higher being than the slaves themselves: royalists, mulattoes, or other external agents' (Trouillot 1995: 103). The formulas of banalization are important in problematizing the discussions around 'bringing in history' into IR to address its ahistoricism and Eurocentrism (Hobson and Lawson 2008, Buzan and Lawson 2015). The focus on bringing in more facts to correct erroneous narratives overlooks what Trouillot points to, which is that even when an event is 'known' it might continue to be 'unthinkable' on its own terms. As such, the aim should not be to solely bring in more facts but explore the unthinkable through making the invisible visible (Çapan 2017b, 2020).

Events, histories and knowledges become unthinkable because of what Santos (2007, 2015) calls 'abyssal thinking'. Santos (2007: 45) argues that 'modern western thinking is abyssal thinking' that consists of a 'system of visible and invisible distinctions'. The division works to make the 'other side of the line' nonexistent. With respect to systems of knowledge it means that modern science is accorded 'the monopoly of the universal distinction between true and false, to the detriment of two alternative bodies of knowledge: philosophy and theology' (Santos, 2007: 47). The disputes between science, philosophy and theology happen on the visible side of the abyssal line. The visibility of these disputes is based on the 'invisibility of forms of knowledge that cannot be fitted into any of these ways of knowledge' such as 'lay, plebian, peasant, or indigenous knowledges' (Santos, 2007: 47).

As a consequence, knowledges on the invisible side are categorized as 'beliefs, opinions, intuitive or subjective understandings' and are 'rendered incommensurable and incomprehensible for meeting neither the scientific methods of truth nor their acknowledged contesters in the realm of philosophy and theology' (Santos, 2007: 47). Thus, the banalization that Trouillot discusses happens because of the way forms of knowledge on the invisible side have not been categorized as knowledge and, as a consequence, events on the 'other side' can never be understood on their own terms and become 'unthinkable'. This dynamic is demonstrated in Hulme's (1978: 119) discussion of Columbus and the Cannibals where he argues that the 'supposed "communication" between European and native

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was in effect a European monologue'. It was a monologue because 'Europe took to America an interpretative grid with which to observe what it found' (Hulme 1978: 132).

Therefore, the knowledge systems, histories and subjecthoods of the indigenous populations became invisible as they had to fit into the 'interpretative grids' of the Europeans. This dynamic is what has allowed the narrative of the 'discovery of America' to become dominant and the process of the 'invention of America' became invisible (O'Gorman 1972). The existence of knowledges, histories and subjecthoods becomes, within the visible system of knowledge, unthinkable.

In terms of the discipline of International Relations, the 'big debates' have occurred on the visible side of the abyssal line. The invisible side of the abyssal line has been characterized as beliefs and superstitions, and has not been included in the account of the making of the international. The question then becomes how to access the invisible that has been made unthinkable through the 'interpretative grids' of the scientific method.

An example of that process is given in Robbie Shilliam's (2014) article 'Open the Gates Mek We Repatriate'. In that article, he analyzes the 'politics of knowledge production' whereby 'a privileged group, the 'scholastic caste', possesses the power to de-value the explanations of 'lay' groups' experiences by deeming them to be insufficiently 'scientific'' (Shilliam 2014: 350). He problematizes the way in which constructivist literature has engaged with the topic of 'abolition of and emancipation from Atlantic slavery'. He does this through the hermeneutics of Erna Brodber who suggested 'to stop seeing 'slaves' and to see instead 'enslaved persons' (Shilliam 2014: 360). Brodber's oral history project challenges the 'progressive timeline' used by constructivists that presents 'a before and after of slavery' and underlines that 'the slaving past is alive and brought inside the present because the ancestors and spirits of the past have personhood and exercise agency in here and now' (Shilliam 2014: 363). Thus, Shilliam (2014) asks:

Can the meanings of freedom that are popularly signified by 'abolition' really be adequate if they have silenced the meanings mobilized by descendants of enslaved Africans in their ongoing struggle for spiritual, psychical and substantive emancipation (368).

What Shilliam's problematization is doing is then to make the knowledges, histories and experiences that were left on the invisible side of the abyssal line visible.

In conclusion, attempts at addressing the Eurocentrism of the field have predominantly focused on how to make present what was absented from the narrative of the making of the international (Çapan 2020). This has meant that events, histories and knowledges were added into an already existing account of the international rather than questioning the politics of knowledge that has constituted that account of the international. This intervention has underlined that International Relations as a discipline has to work towards making the invisible visible in a way that addresses the politics of knowledge and interrogates what events, histories and knowledges have become unthinkable in our narratives of the making of the international.

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