Rethinking Critical IR: Towards a Plurilogue of Cosmologies

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'Critical' International Relations (IR) began as a strongly emancipatory and normative project. It sought to challenge the emerging neo-'realist' and neo-liberal hegemony in IR by contesting the nature of its ontological and epistemological claims which would serve to reify and reproduce existing power relations in a highly unequal world structured by capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and the nation-state. However, we argue in our recent article "Rethinking Emancipation in a Critical IR: Normativity, Cosmology, and Pluriversal Dialogue" that it seems to have lost its initial focus and risks forgoing its *emancipatory* potential.

An integral part of recapturing emancipation is, however, an interrogation of normativity. This seems to be the condition of the possibilities for a post-western IR that views critical theorising not as an *exclusive* product of European thought, but identifies critical discourses in different cosmological traditions. Part of a more differentiated critique consists therefore in a re-conceptualisation of emancipation that does not reproduce a dichotomic opposition between those who would need to be emancipated and those who emancipate. Emancipation thus needs to be emancipated from the 'self'/'other' dichotomy. The de-essentialisation of 'self'-'other' dichotomies is crucial since the Western 'self' is historically constituted by relations of exploitation and hierarchy over that which it is not. Every language of a 'self' and 'other' that does not actively de-essentialise and de-construct its origins and legacies from a global perspective of difference(s), thus reproduces a certain, culturally specific (i.e., often liberal) subjectivity. It thus renders invisible the historical relations which made the exercise of liberal agency possible in the first place by downplaying the impact of colonialism in the historical construction of 'post-western' selves.

In order to recuperate an understanding of emancipation which avoids 'ontological imperialism' (i.e., imposing conceptions and understandings of the "Self" onto every "other" culture or individual; see Levinas 1989), we suggest the concepts of 'thin' and 'thick' normativity. Thereby, we seek inspiration and intellectual guidelines within the Western philosophical tradition that itself must then be revised as every encounter with politically, culturally, or religiously different cosmological discourses points to the very limits of this tradition. Therefore, the concepts of 'thin' and 'thick' normativity, giving initial orientation to approach and understand difference, must be amended in encountering different cosmological traditions in order to facilitate inter-cosmological understanding and exchange. For this exchange we suggest the term "*plurilogue*". Plurilogue implies that there are more than two voices and perspectives simultaneously that are equally legitimate (and worthy of respect). Thus, plurilogue implies a deep commitment to perspectivity and inclusion.

The term "plurilogue" seems to be only rarely used and this without further specification or definition. It is thus far from being a concept. We suggest it as such but are aware of initial stages. Among the rare use of the term "plurilogue" is an article by Lucy Rykers on "Woman of Colour in Coalition: A Plurilogue with Lorde, Mohanty, and Lugones" which describes the underlying proposition of plurilogue as "theory is never produced in isolation, but exists within a broader corpus of knowledge from a multiplicity of social locations and perspectives". In this understanding, Rykers draws upon an earlier paper by Shireen Roshanravan on "Motivating Coalition: Women of Color and Epistemic Disobedience".

The term "plurilogue" is also used by Politics and Philosophy blog (http://irnrd.blogspot.com/p/plurilogue.html) whose

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organisers derive plurilogue from John Rawls term "omnilogue" (Rawls 1995). Whereas accordingly plurilogue emphasises the *simultaneous* plurality and diversity of discourses, the Rawlsian and thereof derived understandings presuppose *one* from of rationality as yardstick for the legitimacy and inclusion of discourses. We critique such an understanding – that is also present in a Habermasian and Gadamerian understanding of discourse – as a form of ontological imperialism and epistemological violence.

Recapturing Emancipation through "thin" and "thick" normativity and their interrelation

While 'thin' normativity describes the norms behind deconstruction and critique, 'thick' normativity describes the norms behind active political and moral propositions. Both versions of normativity are not only always present in a political actor's and analyst's worldview and actual practice – whether, or not, conscious and pleasing – but are indeed necessary to understand, explain, and engage critically, i.e., emancipatory, with different positions, politically and theoretically. 'Thin' and 'thick' normativity thus each have their own significance and role in practice and in theory. They are co-constitutive and co-original.

'Thick' normativity is required to leave the circle of critique and to advance from the ethics of critique to political practice, re-articulating agency. Following deconstruction, we argue we need reconstruction. Critique and deconstruction, however, do not provide the normative orientation necessary for action and the creation of political order (for this argument, see also Behr, 2019). We must formulate actionable norms even if they are contestable; and they will always be contested in a pluralist world, thus global plurilogue, openness to, and empathy for difference(s) are indispensable. Such a reconstructive moment, however, will not be prescriptive. It must account for the plurality of theoretical and practical worldviews. And it is exactly this moment of correction that describes the second relation between 'thick' and 'thin' normativity: 'thin' normativity functions as critical corrective, claiming openness to, and the de-essentialisation of, difference(s) in case 'thick' normativity goes 'wrong', i.e., if political and moral narratives foreclose the empathy for difference(s) and thereby indeed undermine plurality and perspectivity. Then, 'thin' normativity as deconstructive normativity comes into operation to correct and critique respective narratives.

We develop thin normativity following Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction that is deconstructive of essentialisms and a corrective to thick normative political and moral claims (*inter alia* Derrida 1993: 19; 1997: 13; 2007: 24). Thick normativity – needed for a self-reflective stance towards our own positionality, to make such positionality explicit in the first place, and to develop the language and concepts to engage different cosmologies and their own normative claims from within – is derived from the work of Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse (Horkheimer 1937 [1999]; Marcuse 2009). Based on a reading of Horkheimer and Marcuse, we can formulate the following main characteristics of thick normativity: (1) critique embraces a *plurality* of values; (2) critique distinguishes between different forms of epistemological claims which may correspond to different forms of knowledge; (3) critique and its envisioned alternatives are generated from historical judgement and imagination.

These claims serve as a starting point for critical theorising but need to be revised in order to take into account different epistemological and ontological claims in order to facilitate a global plurilogue. To sum up: Thin normativity is critical and *self-critical* of thick normative claims. Thus, thin normativity is a corrective of thick normative (political, moral, religious, etc.) claims. And it is this relation that leads us to reformulate thick normativity in encountering differences in global plurilogues.

Cosmology and Reconceptualising Emancipation in Post-Western IR

In order to connect critical theorising with different cultural traditions in a post-Western IR, we suggest the concept of cosmology. Cosmologies refer to sets of culturally specific ontological and epistemological propositions about the origins and the evolution of the cosmos and our position in it. These propositions evince and provide responses to existential questions concerning the basic parameters of human life including existence and being, finitude, and the experience of difference. Cosmologies link theories of origins with a set of normative political and moral claims which offer the possibility of going beyond what is and of constructing meaning through notions such as salvation, moksha or nirvana (see Shani and Behera 2021). Such normative claims correspond with our understanding of 'thick' normativity. Cosmology can be applied to categorise different cultural traditions which encompass notions of the

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'sacred' and 'profane'. All cosmologies have a notion of the sacred as well as the profane, thus there are no exclusively 'religious' and 'secular' cosmologies. The concept of cosmology, therefore, has the advantage of parochialising the western distinction between the 'religious' and the 'secular' domains. It can be differentiated from 'culture' which refers to those cosmological fragments which remain after colonisation has reduced living worlds to essentialised, ahistorical objects for study through a process of de-sacralisation; and from 'religion' which refers to notions of the 'sacred' severed from living cosmologies so as to constitute a distinct domain from the 'profane' which does not exist in the everyday lived practice of many peoples throughout the world.

Finally, an emancipatory dimension can be identified in cosmologies which includes the transcendence of any 'self' beyond and above its eventual essentialisation. Such transcendence would permit different cosmologies to engage with one another, opening-up the possibility of a global plurilogue. We argue therefore that instead of translating cosmological claims into a universal secular language, an attempt should be made to understand these claims in their own terms. Sensitised to cosmological differences, post-western understandings of emancipation should permit the articulation of multiple claims to freedom without first, categorising them according to a 'secular'/'religious' divide; and second, without prioritising any one tradition as having a monopoly over defining emancipation. This brings us to the problem of how to deal with multiple and potentially competing thick normative claims. It is here where an engagement with 'thin' normativity is necessary.

To sum up: Whereas 'thick' normativity proposes ontological and epistemological worldviews and moral claims of cosmologies themselves, 'thin' normativity defends the spaces for plurilogue and openness, operating as a critical corrective of thick normative claims potentially foreclosing through essentialisation of those spaces that make critical theory and practice possible. Theorists, we argued, must be aware furthermore of the permanent possibility of counterarguments. A dialogue between different cosmological traditions on the meaning and importance of emancipation and on the normative orientation of and for politics then represents a thick normativity. The characteristics of a 'thick' normativity for a plurilogue can thus consist of the following reformulation of Horkheimer's and Marcuse's criteria of normativity: (1) critique embraces a plurality of values since we inhabit different universes; (2) critique distinguishes between different forms of epistemological claims which may correspond to different forms of knowledge including those which have been marginalised and fragmented by the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000); (3) critique and its envisioned alternatives are generated from historical judgement and imagination influenced by and specific to multiple and different cosmologies; and, finally, (4) this necessitates an emancipatory project to decolonise our imagination rooted in different cosmologies and to uncover the pluriversal relationality which binds different cosmological fragments with one another.

Conclusions

Critical IR, it its current instantiation, is based on "ontological imperialism", imposing conceptions and understandings of the "Self" onto every "other" culture or individual. Following Lévinas, we conclude this to be form of epistemological (and subsequently often political) violence. In order to understand the "other" *in its own terms*, rather than imputing our understanding of its needs and desires onto it, we need to engage with "thick" normative claims which should be open to revisions and self-critique, what we term "thin" normativity. Collectively, "thick" and "thin" normativity are necessary conditions for any communicative encounter between different cosmologies which we defined as sets of *normative* ontological and epistemological claims about origins of the cosmos and our place in it. We term this communicative encounter a 'plurilogue'. A plurilogue is more than a 'global conversation' (Fierke and Jabri 2019) in that, like a dialogue, it is transformative and plurivocal but differs from Habermasian and Gadamerian understandings of dialogue in that it is open to multiple cosmological traditions simultaneously and it does not privilege one argumentative rationality as a mode of communication. Furthermore, a global plurilogue may not, as in Habermasian and Gadamerian conceptions of dialogue, result in an inter-subjective understanding leading to agreement or a 'fusion of horizons'. Plurilogue is and leads tothe articulation of less exclusionary ontologies and epistemologies than presently characterise international relations. A 'critical' theory of international relations (*as opposed to Critical IR*), we argue, emerges from, practices of engaging, listening to, and eventually critiquing each other's "thick" normative claims in a global plurilogue made possible by a commitment to "thin" normativity. IR as a discipline needs to be deconstructed to reveal the thick normative narratives upon which it is based and to facilitate a global plurilogue about the central themes of international relations (such as war and peace, security, poverty and

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inequality, order and justice, gender and sexuality, colonialism and race, migration, or climate change) without epistemic (or political) violence so that different cosmological perspectives are taken into account.

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