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Reimagining Environment in International Relations

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KUMAR GAURAV, JAN 31 2022

The devastating impact of climate change has turned the gaze of academic disciplines towards the 'environment'. The effects of human-induced climate change are so widespread that many of them remain unregistered. The field of International Relations is not impervious to studying this change, with scholars highlighting the inadequacy of the orthodox theoretical framework in addressing the crisis (Cudworth and Hobden, 2011; Burke et al, 2016; Mitchell, 2017; Behera et al, 2019; Kurki 2020). IR suffers from what Kavalski (2018) calls 'the Columbus Syndrome' – the syndrome of looking at the world through the dominant lens refusing to accept the plurality of being much like Columbus, who did not recognize the diversity of the indigenous societies. The 'Columbus Syndrome' leads to accepting the dominant western cosmology as the guiding framework in IR. Cosmology here can be understood as 'images of the universe which shape the beliefs of a particular group of people. It offers a symbolic order which designates the place of all beings in the universe and their 'proper' relations to one another (Mitchell, 2014b, p.10).

This cosmology has taken the form of a deterministic understanding of the world through the archaic categories of anarchy, self-help, and bifurcation between the domestic and the international in IR (Walker, 1993; Hutchings, 2001; Nair, 2011). The high politics of studying the behaviour of states through a rationalist game theory model have become redundant in the face of the ecological crisis. The space seen through the distinction between domestic and international has become futile in addressing the pervasive and all-encompassing calamity. The categories of 'national security and 'billiard ball states', based on keeping the other out or deterred, need to make way for a reality that understands the 'cosmopolitan and enmeshed nature of the world' (Burke et al, 2016). Even when there has been a shift in IR from keeping the state at the center of theorization to focusing on non-state entities and discourses, this move away from mainstream theorization is still fraught with envisioning reality through a statist lens (Walker, 1993; Hutchings, 2001; Nair, 2011). That is to say that the state retains its dominant role as the most crucial mediator between different actors.

There is a need to address the planetary implications of the prevalent inequality and power relations, moving beyond the focus on inter-state relations to recognize 'the collective human interaction with the biosphere' (Burke et al, 2016). The precarity can no longer be ameliorated by only recognizing the diversity of actors but also 'the relations that constitute both these actors and global life' (Kavalski, 2018). The prevalent institutional and disciplinary frameworks of IR need to make changes to understand that 'security comes from being more connected, not less' (Kurki, 2021). Since the risk and the consequences of climate change are global, the notion of security needs to be revised and reframed. Any attempt to question the dominant epistemology and ontology needs to consider the underlying 'social mythologies' and 'social belief systems' determined by this cosmology (Toulmin, 1985).

As an attempt to address the issue, the article engages with the idea of 'relational cosmology' (Kurki, 2021). Relational cosmology questions the assumptions that underlie western sciences, challenging the prevalent categories for analyzing the threat of climate change laid out by the 'enlightenment problematic of human exceptionalism, rationalist problem-solving and liberal modernist imaginaries of progress' (Rothe, Miller and Chandler, 2021). It tries to help build a framework that can facilitate conversation between different ontologies – ways of understanding and imagining existence. It examines the constitutive realities of the discipline of IR: the founding myth of IR (Vitalis, 2015), the false veneer of secularism underlying the idea of order in IR (Blain, 2015), and the humanist exceptionalism at the root of the thinking and practice in IR (Mitchell, 2014). This helps us understand the relationship between the 'social sciences' and 'natural sciences' and reframes the relationship between the human

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and the non-human. The 'relational cosmology' further envisages 'a new interdisciplinary intervention into the scene of social theory' (Kurki, 2020, p.12). It tries to address the inadequacy of the nature-society binary and state-led epistemology in addressing climate change. Such interventions throw light on the claim that sciences study objects that are 'real' and 'out there' and are detached from the subjects who study them. The ultimate aim here remains the recognition of the pluriversal forms of existence through the concept of 'guanxi'—a Chinese term denoting the complex and relational ways of knowing the enmeshed and fragile nature of global interactions (Kavalski, 2018).

While all forms of theorization consider relations and interactions between disparate phenomena in order to describe, explain and understand them, the relational turn focuses upon specific forms of knowledge that have their grounding in 'relational social theory' (Kavalski, 2018, p.42). The idea of relational social theory can be traced to the 'New York School' of sociology, which was then used under the rubric of IR by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon in the 1990s. This was developed in contrast to substantialism – 'the belief that actors precede and are formed outside the dynamics of interaction' (Jackson and Nexon, 1999). Substantialism can be categorized into 'self-action' and 'inter-action' (Emirbayer, 1997). The self-action theory emphasizes the pursuit of ideas or interests by rational actors to achieve desired ends (Emirbayer, 1997, p.284-5). The inter-actionists focus on 'causal interconnection' to analyze the social behaviour of the different actors (Dewey and Bentley, 1949, p.108). These categories adhere to an essentialized and static conception of entities for theory building.

Relationality as a mode of enquiry problematizes the essentialist underpinnings of the substantialist framework. It stresses the presence of a complex web of interconnectedness, giving rise to an enmeshed notion of entities, challenging the atomistic conception underlying western cosmology (Querajazu, 2021). The focus here shifts from just actors to include processes and relations that constitute the actors, enabling a better understanding of the climate crisis. The climate crisis has highlighted the need to look beyond just the exceptional events like war, terrorism, etc., and reconfigure IR as a field to address the planetary concerns. The primary concern here is shifting towards a cosmology that opens up alternative ways of being and thinking alongside other ontologies. The linear causal analysis associated with the closed system has been futile in addressing a multi-causal and unpredictable crisis (Reyers et al, 2018).

This reimagination is now being addressed by scholars who have called for 'Planetary Politics' instead of 'International politics' (Burke et al, 2016). This entails the formation of relational ontologies as 'ontologies of transience' – ontologies that do not become static but understand the transitory nature of being in a movement towards becoming (Querajazu, 2021). This would mean challenging the conception of time and space informed by the monotheistic cosmology:

Monotheism posits absolute truths; and it separates humanity from nature. Nature exists to satisfy humanity's needs. Polytheism knows a multiplicity of truths and is non-exclusive when it comes to deities and values. Pantheism perceives humanity as one with nature (Cox, 2000).

The challenge to a monotheistic cosmology does not mean embracing polytheism or pantheism but instead embracing the plurality of ways through which the human and its relationship with nature can be understood. The stress here is on recognizing the interconnectedness of human fate with other forms of life (Capra, 1996). To do so, the 'relational' turn further borrows from theorizations that might help us understand the darkness of the present cosmology. This entails borrowing from scholars who have advocated the need to address the inequalities that have been historically justified by colonialism and are thriving in the contemporary era instead of relying on technology-driven solutions.

New forms of Orientalism accompany the reverberations of climate change. In the Middle East and North Africa, for example, violence is caused by both the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, and the people displaced by this violence are dehumanized in Western political and popular discourses. This is especially so if they survive crossing the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea to arrive on European shores or at Europe's borders in desperate need of refuge (McEwan, 2021, p.81).

The focus here is on reconceptualizing the study of critical areas like migration, security, environmental threat etc. as

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not isolated events understood through their immediate causality, but instead, linking them to the understanding of how human history has been shaped and how these events are interlinked to it.

The notion of 'relational cosmology' problematizes the western cosmology that has been the dominant way of imagining and studying human relationships with the environment. In IR, the conventional categories associated with the dominant theoretical schools (such as realism and liberalism) that reflect Western cosmology, have left a lacuna in understanding the environment. This article analyses the problems with accepting the state-centric discourse that has reified the conventional ontological imagination confining 'environment' as just another element essential to the state-centric conception of security. This article also pushes for embracing the understanding of environment as not just an 'other' but something that remains central to understanding what it means to be 'human'.

The umbrella of 'relationality' highlights the need for an inter-disciplinary engagement, reconceptualizing and reimagining the very ways of knowing and being underlying the prevalent cosmology, and pushes the logic of looking at earth through an ecological map that transcends the traditional conception of state governed territories. This entails revising and recrafting what is seen as legitimate knowledge. In an effort to move beyond the dominant understanding, the very conditions of existence need to be problematized to make way for alternative possibilities of theorizing and understanding environment and ecology. For this, there is a need within IR to radically shift closer to an ontology that is inclusive, relational and recognizes the multiplicity of existence. Such a project questions the linear idea of progression and draws from the pluriversal forms of knowledge.

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