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Editorial

Many Worlds, Many Theories?

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The idea of organizing this RBPI special issue was born in April 2014, during an event organized to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the creation of the first undergraduate program in International Relations in Brazil at the University of Brasilia. The keynote speech, delivered by Andrew Hurrell on the subject of pluralizing IR, was like a seed falling into a soil fertile with the discussions that were already taking place at the Institute of International Relations, particularly in light of recent disciplinary developments that have highlighted the importance of history, geography and culture for problematizing the “international”. The November 2014 seminar, “Many Worlds, Many Theories?”, in which Nicholas Onuf and Arlene B. Tickner participated, became the basis for launching the Call for Papers.

Although the existence of “one world” and “many (or rival) theories” is a fairly well-known claim in the field of International Relations (Walt 1998, Snyder 2004), few alternative approaches have actually been recognized as constituting competing but equally authoritative (meaning scientific) readings of world politics. At IR’s core, the view that there are three main “families” of theories (realism, liberalism and constructivism), and that the discipline has evolved along two sets of debates between neorealism and neoliberalism, and rationalism and reflexivism, continues to prevail. And yet, the idea of a “one world” world at the root of the positivist mainstream is under increasing challenge. Posed initially by R.B.J. Walker in his seminal book, *One World, Many Worlds: Struggles for a Just World Peace* (1988), the possibility that international relations, understood as both

theory and practice, contributes to the making of multiple worlds (or a pluriverse) has been brought to the forefront more recently by concerns with “worlding” (Tickner and Wæver 2009; Tickner and Blaney 2012; 2013). “Worlding” entails not only processes by which the world is made intelligible and by which “we” determine who we are in relation to “others”, within and beyond fields of study, but also, how such sense-making exercises – that are always socially situated and power saturated – actually constitute the worlds that we inhabit.

One of the main consequences of this line of critical thinking is that instead of one world, few theories, some IR scholars have asked whether the field reflects the concerns of people outside the United States and the ‘Western world’ more generally. The global refugee crisis, climate change, Boko Haram, ISIS, the loss of collective lands and cultural sites by indigenous peoples, land grabbing, child soldiers, decreasing biodiversity, human rights abuses, biocultural colonization, economic and political crisis in many countries around the world, and the transition to the Anthropocene, all suggest that International Relations possibly lack concepts and theories to engage with such challenges in a meaningful way. Indeed, many voices have been calling for a recasting of the field’s mainstream epistemology, ontology, theories and methodologies.

The edited volume *Why is there no non-Western International Theory?* (Acharya and Buzan 2010), the Routledge “Worlding beyond the West” book series, the Teaching, Research and International Politics (TRIP) surveys, and the 2015 International Studies Association Annual Convention theme, *Global IR and Regional Worlds, a New Agenda for International Studies*, only to name a few representative examples, can all be seen as reflecting a growing call for an enlarged and more encompassing IR agenda. The RBPI’s Special Issue, “Many Worlds, Many Theories”, aims to add one more singer to this chorus. IR in Brazil was born as a multidisciplinary (and to a certain extent interdisciplinary) field of study encompassing contributions from political and other social sciences, history, economy and law. This origin needs to be preserved and enlarged. However, while pluralizing the International Relations discipline is highly desirable, a few dilemmas emerge, such as how to avoid falling into spiral of epistemological relativism, how to construct a hybrid space between uniformity and difference, how to encourage diversity along with some sense of unity or community, and how perhaps to create a middle path, or many paths to a vibrant and reflexive IR.

RBPI’s initial Call for Papers asked many questions: What do theories mean in South America and other regions? Are there Latin American theories of IR? Is metatheory dead? Are there different ways of thinking about foreign policy theoretically? And, Is it possible to think beyond state-centrism?, among others. It also raised a number of innovative themes: theory and the BRICS; the global South and postcolonial theorizing, governance, governmentality and theory; ethics and relativism; feminist theories go South; universalism and the pluriverse. The underlying goal of such breadth was to contribute to the construction of a more global or plural IR, and to bring to light IR views from South America and beyond.

Obviously, not all these questions were answered. In the process of putting together this Special Issue, we have come to see “Many Worlds, Many Theories?” as a work in progress that

constitutes an important although modest step towards creating genuinely alternative readings of the “international”. On the one hand, this realization arises from an understanding of the power of disciplinary International Relations that codes different types of theory as failures (Weber 2015) or as unscientific, including for instance, the various strands of the dependency school. It is important to emphasize that “science” has historically been invoked in the field of IR to “call to mind a panoply of notions connected with truth, progress, reason and the like (...)” (Jackson 2011:3), and the concern about the scientific status of the scholarship has shaped the field since its beginnings (Jackson 2011: 9). Upon closer scrutiny, philosophy of science debates make clear that there is no consensus on the “science question”, or the set of criteria that demarcates science from non-science. In this sense, “science” within IR has had a strong disciplining function, while the field itself has operated under loose notions of the “scientific method” (Jackson 2011: 3) with little serious engagement of philosophy of science. Moreover, and equally important in the South American context, the core-periphery structure that characterizes global IR (Tickner 2013) conditions the research agendas, IR teaching and theory reproduction and (non) production/development in the global South. Navnita Behera (2010) draws attention to the pervasive discursive power of Western IR that “boxes in” IR scholarship around the world. Additionally, there are numerous local structures and power dynamics within academia in the periphery itself that need to be reflected upon/thought through, and that work against theoretical thinking and the development of many theories in “many worlds”.

On the other hand, the project of creating worlds and knowledges otherwise (Escobar 2007) is an ongoing one in most parts of the world. In the specific case of IR, it is a “transnational” process to create “spaces for alternative thinking” (Behera 2010). In this vein it is important to recognize that scholarly networks often straddle the global South and the global North, underscoring the existence of peripheries in the center and centers in the periphery, as there is a South in the North, and a North in the South. The development of knowledges otherwise thus entails carving out alternative routes. One possible direction is to keep moving towards other sources of knowledge, engagement with philosophy of science and political economy of knowledge in order to be able to “do away with boxes altogether” (Tickner 2013). Another is to engage with other sciences, other ways of knowing and worldviews in order to re-think IR in the age of the Anthropocene, when human beings as a species are changing planetary systems and putting the life of the planet at risk.

In this sense, the articles that appear in this Special Issue contribute to this emerging debate in three key ways: they add to existing critical self-reflection in IR; they provide research that examines the evolution of the field in distinct geocultural sites (including Brazil); and they attempt to “step out of the box” (Behera 2010, Tickner 2013). Most importantly, the contributing authors extend an open invitation to continue questioning our a priori assumptions about knowledge and the world. Perhaps IR should be envisioned as an open space for trying to understand increasingly complex global realities, for cultivating an attitude of constant critical awareness and for making room for the worlding of many worlds.

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