



Revista Brasileira de Política
Internacional

ISSN: 0034-7329

rbpi@ibri-rbpi.org.br

Instituto Brasileiro de Relações
Internacionais
Brasil

Coutinho Lage, Victor; Chamon, Paulo Henrique
Resisting the denial of coevalness in International Relations: provincializing,
perspectivism, border thinking
Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional, vol. 59, núm. 2, 2016, pp. 1-17
Instituto Brasileiro de Relações Internacionais
Brasília, Brasil

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=35846974005>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative



Revista Brasileira de
Política Internacional

ISSN 1983-3121

<http://www.rbpi.info>


Victor Coutinho Lage

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do
Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Relações
Internacionais, Rio de Janeiro - RJ, Brazil
(victorcoutholage@yahoo.com.br).

 ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0002-0998-3619

Paulo Henrique Chamon

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do
Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Relações
Internacionais, Rio de Janeiro - RJ, Brazil
(paulochamon@gmail.com).

 ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0003-2474-0014

Copyright:

- This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original author and source are credited.
- Este é um artigo publicado em acesso aberto e distribuído sob os termos da Licença de Atribuição Creative Commons, que permite uso irrestrito, distribuição e reprodução em qualquer meio, desde que o autor e a fonte originais sejam creditados.



Resisting the denial of coevalness in International Relations: provincializing, perspectivism, border thinking

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201600206>

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 59(2): e006, 2016

Abstract

The notions of "international system" and "international society" must respond to the challenge of the encounter with the "rest of the world". "Colonial encounters" offer ways of exposing what we call, following Johannes Fabian, the "denial of coevalness" of alternative worlds and theories. We do so by turning to three different articulations of and responses to the colonial encounter.

Keywords: International system; international society; international order; colonial encounters; denial of coevalness.

Acknowledgements

Funding information: Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico - CNPq; Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - CAPES; Fundação de Apoio à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ).

Received: November 5, 2015

Accepted: June 14, 2016

Introduction

Our examination of the uses of Time in anthropological discourse has led us to state their general effect of thrust as the denial of coevalness to the cultures that are studied. The most interesting finding, however, was one that precludes a simple, overall indictment of our discipline. This was the discovery of an aporetic split between recognition of coevalness in some ethnographic research and denial of coevalness in most anthropological theorizing and writing. There is a split between a recognizable cognitive necessity and a murky, ultimately political practice (Fabian, 2002: 35).

Johannes Fabian coined the term "denial of coevalness", the move (constitutive of anthropology) of locating difference as "there and then", as distant in both space and time

from the modern, European, self. Such “allochronic” discourse denied the shared time of different cultures by operating an existential, rhetorical, and political device that negated the co-presence of difference (Fabian, 2002: 32). Since this conceptualization, the concept of denial of coevalness has often been recovered as a way to point to the pervasiveness of the temporal dismissing of difference in modern discourse.

However, an often overlooked part of Fabian’s argument inserted the discussion of the denial of coevalness within an analysis of the “schizogenic” temporality of anthropology, that is, its “aporetic split” between the recognition of the shared time of the ethnological encounter and the common denial of such coevalness in anthropological theorizing. Hence, the denial of coevalness was inextricable from the recognition of such coevalness in the very encounter that created the condition for the dismissal of difference.

In this paper, we argue that similar claims can be made about two of the main articulations of “international order” in the field of International Relations: the notions of “international system” and “international society”. We argue that these notions constitute international politics within very specific and limited logics that contribute to the construction of the world and of the venues for theorizing through homogenizing models. We also claim that in constructing world history through logics of recurrence and expansion, these notions must respond to the challenge of the encounter with the “rest of the world”. Hence, “colonial encounters” offer ways for us to problematize “international system” and “international society” in ways that expose their denial of coevalness of alternative worlds and theories. In this sense, to resist the political practice of denial of coevalness implies tracking paths towards shared times with other, non-Western, worlds and theories.

We divide our work in three parts. In the first two, we investigate some core articulations of the concepts of “international system” and “international society” in the field of International Relations (IR), unraveling how each assumes a semantic baggage that limits the history of the “international order” to logics of recurrence and expansion. In the third section, we point to the colonial encounter as a resource for both the problematization of narratives of recurrence and expansion, and for the resistance to their intrinsic denial of coevalness. We do so by turning to three different articulations of and responses to the colonial encounter. By mapping agreements and tensions between them, we hope to contribute to those seeking new limits and possibilities for world politics.

International System

Hans Morgenthau works as an entry point for our discussion. “International system” is not a concept Morgenthau used systematically: he interchangeably uses expressions such as “modern system of states”, “political systems”, “international politics”, “international affairs”, and even “society of sovereign nations” and “society of sovereign states”¹. In contrast, his use of the notion

1 Morgenthau (1948: 125), for example, uses the latter four expressions without a significant difference in their meanings.

of “system” is more consistent when referring not to the relation between States, but to the necessity of a systematic scientific approach to international politics². If Morgenthau didn’t provide a consistent use of “system” to the study of international politics, it is nonetheless with and against him that subsequent thinkers have tried to develop a *systematic and systemic approach to international politics*.

The semantic baggage carried by the concept of “international system” is diverse. Here, we want to emphasize two scenes of the articulation of “international order” and “international system”. The first takes place in the late 1950s, notably with Kenneth Waltz’s *Man, the State, and War* (1959) and David Singer’s “The level of analysis problem in International Relations” (1961). These works divided the study of politics in (vertically visualized) domains—human nature, the internal structure of States, and the State system in the former; international system and national sub-systems in the latter. While they both pointed to the relevance of the “second image” (Waltz, 2001[1959], chs. IV e V) and of the “nation state as a level of analysis” (Singer, 1961: 80-82) to the study of politics, they also defended that the “international system” or the “system of states” configured a distinct level of analysis. The kind of questions and answers to be obtained from each level was fundamentally different; hence, while a choice is always necessary, it remains a methodological and research-oriented “convenience”.

The second scene relates even more directly to the association between a systemic and a systematic (scientific) approach to international politics. One of the exponents of this move was Kaplan (1957), who coupled the systematic character that Morgenthau argued for with a systems analysis of the international domain. Hence, Kaplan expresses an inflection of political realism in IR towards the ambition of an analytical tripod: a *science* constructed through a *systemic* approach to the *international system*. Theory, for him, needs to predict the conditions under which a “system” will be kept stable or change, and the kinds of change that will take place. International theory is, hence, interested in these dimensions of the “international system”, a systemic domain differentiated from others.

Such demarcation of the “international” is not exclusive to the scientific ambitions of IR. Indeed, one of its most striking expressions is to be found in Martin Wight’s differentiation, once more against Morgenthau, between the study of the State and that of the states system:

Professor Morgenthau who has had a great influence among international relationists in the United States since 1945 has consistently maintained that ‘a theory of international politics must be focused on the concept of the national interest’. *Few political thinkers have made it their business to study the states-system, the diplomatic community itself* (Wight, 1966: 20, emphasis added).

2 This epistemological concern can be read in light of the academic environment of post-Second War United States. One of its expressive examples is the late inclusion of the “six principles of political realism”, marking a scientific orientation absent from the first edition of *Politics Among Nations*. On the relationship between the “realist tradition” and “science”, see Guzzini (1998; 2004); on the scientific ambitions in IR, Jackson (2011).

To make it its business to study the “states-system” was the main objective of Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (1979), a core instance of the articulation of “international order” and “international system” that was just about immediately taken as an inescapable parameter in the field³. Here, Waltz substitutes a “simpler” twofold distinction between “reductionist” and “systemic” theories for the three images of *Man, the State, and War*: “[t]heories of international politics that concentrate causes at the individual or national level are reductionist; theories that conceive of causes operating at the international level as well are systemic” (Waltz, 1979: 18). While the former distinction offered a methodological choice, the latter concerned the kind of knowledge *necessary* for a proper understanding of “international politics”. The analysis of the “international system” becomes the necessary stance to understanding a well established object that is exterior to the method/approach: “international politics”.

It remains a matter of debate whether Waltz claimed that the “international system” was an ontological entity, or whether, influenced by functionalism and systems theory, he took the “system” to be an analytical abstraction⁴. In any case, what is important to us here is how it has been taken over subsequently in such a way that “international system” became associated with the “structural” impact on the behavior of the States. With this set of articulations, thinking about “international order” *must* translate into thinking systematically about an “international system” defined on material bases and composed of States.

We argue that this notion of “international system”, that had here one of its possible (re) beginnings in Hans Morgenthau, is marked by an *ontological fusion of systems*: the systemic theories of the political realisms interpreted above adopt an ontological and epistemological commitment of representing the “international order” *as if* it was an “international system”; this instrumentalism, however, slides into ontological implications of what this “international order” is, can be, and must be. In this sense, we can see how the stability or instability of international political dynamics—“international order”—is submitted to the logical recurrence of the reproduction of the “international system”. The delimitations of the political thought on the “international” meet, in this notion of “system”, the discriminations between the conceivable and potentially legitimate changes and the changes that are internally proscribed. To put it differently, the separation between stable and unstable political dynamics is here conditioned by that which is not destabilized: *the systemic logic of the “international system”*. This is the force of Waltz’s decree: “The system cannot be transcended”⁵.

According to Bartelson, once such relation between the “International” and the “State” has been established—that is, States have been taken as the only form of political community

3 See, for example, Keohane (1984) and Baldwin (1993).

4 The first position is argued by Wendt (1987; 1999)—though alongside the critique that Waltz fails to live up to this objective, making his theory reductionist—and Wight (2006)—opposing Wendt’s critique—; the second is defended by Goddard and Nexon (2005). Onuf (2009) argues that the core of the debate goes back to Waltz’s conception of theory, and that clarifications on this issue would lead Waltz to confront his ambiguous philosophical idealism on Chapter 1.

5 One instance of this logic of recurrence is expressed in William Wohlforth *et al*’s (2007) and Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth’s (2007) endeavor to test the notion of “balance of power” in the 2000 years of “international systems” that preceded the “modern European system” by projecting statehood, hegemonic threat, and balance of power politics into two millennia of history.

and the “international” as their given site of encounter and structure of action⁶—“international order” is subsumed under a pattern of historical recurrence, as no alternative can exist outside the binding of State and International. It hence becomes plausible to argue that balancing, bandwagoning, hegemony, and boondoggling within the “international system”, despite their differences, represent variations within the same logic. Walker draws similar conclusions by starting from the ambition regarding the scientific modeling of the structure of the international system. He argues that the search for general laws to the behavior of units gets both Waltz and Gilpin caught up in a tension intrinsic to realism in which “[t]he history of a system is itself treated as a system. History is turned into structure” (Walker, 1993, ch.5). Only the regularities expected systemically can be envisioned—to the point in which both authors cannot think of the supersession of the present system in terms others than as a ruin of the system of States⁷.

The implications of the semantic baggage of “international system” for thinking the plurality of worlds and theories are substantial. On the one hand, only one form of knowledge is possible—scientific systemic theory—and only one object of knowledge is valid—the “international system” as the structured reality of the encounter of like-units States. Political units are always part of the “international system” and, therefore, always subject to its structure. This depiction of the “international” also excludes, by definition, considerations on “race”, “gender”, “religion”, “colonization”; one is left with a political unit, the State, atemporally defined as a rational actor within an anarchic environment. We return to this discussion in further depth below.

International Society

Our reading of the articulation of “international society” and “international order” has its possible (re)beginning in Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society* (1977). One of Bull’s main distinctions in the book is between international “system” and “society”:

A system of states (or international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another’s decisions, to cause them to behave—at least in some measure—as parts of a whole.

A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions (Bull, 2002: 9: 13, emphasis in the original).

6 Bartelson discusses the naturalization of the State in discursive terms in Bartelson(2001) and the historical constitution of the equivalence between the boundaries of community and the State in Bartelson(2009).

7 See also Ruggie (1983); Ashley (1984; 1989); Walker (1993); Jens Bartelson (1995; 2001).

As in the uses of “system”, “society” here intends to confer autonomy to the field of IR, breaking with the domestic analogy through which a “society” among States would be inconceivable, taken the absence of central authority in the “international” (Bull, 2002: 63).

This distinction between international “system” and “society” is foundational to Bull’s conception of “international order”: “a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals *of the society of states, or international society*” (Bull, 2002: 8, emphasis added; for the primary goals, see pp.16-19). An “international system” is tantamount to the “state of nature”: there are no social ties, no element of recognition, no purposeful interaction between units. In this situation, for Bull, disorder is the necessary result of political life. In contrast, “international society” appears as a solution to the problem of order in international politics, as it is defined in terms of the purposive work towards common interests and values. There is, in this sense, a tautological move traversing Bull’s initial definitions that interlocks “international order” and “international society” as mutually necessary. Hence, according to Bull, from the always disorderly and conflictive relations among States in a States-system emerges the possibility of a society of States that instills order in international life through the working of common rules of behavior and shared institutions.

Beyond Bull’s initial distinction, however, we highlight two conflicting voices on the relationship between “international society” and “international system” (Reus-Smit, 2002: 497-498). The first scene builds upon the recessive voice in Bull’s articulation of “international order” and “international society”⁸. Starting from the oft-quoted division of the three traditions of international politics, Bull claims that:

the modern international system in fact reflects all three of the elements singled out, respectively, by the Hobbesian, the Kantian and the Grotian traditions: the element of war and struggle for power among states, the element of transnational solidarity and conflict, cutting across the divisions among states, and the element of co-operation and regulated intercourse among states (Bull, 2002: 39).

Here, Bull opposes the “modern state system” to other state systems in which no element of shared value and interests exist—such as the relation between “Chingis Khan’s Mongol invaders” and “the Asian and European peoples whom they subjugated”, or the “Spanish Conquistadors” and the “Aztecs and Incas” (Bull, 2002: 41-42). An element of synchrony between the three traditions is placed alongside one of diachrony—once elements of society and community have emerged, they remain even if, sometimes, in recessive forms.

What makes such move possible is Bull’s claim that “[t]he starting point of international relations is the existence of *states*” (Bull, 2002: 8). This allows Bull and his colleagues to locate States as far back in time as they might find independent communities and in a wide range of geographical location and cultural context. Hence, in treating all political communities as States

8 For a reading of Bull in these terms, see Little (2000).

and all relations as systems and/or societies, Bull allows for synchronic analyses of political relations, so long as the array of variations remain within the terms of his logical relation between “system”, “society”, and “order”⁹. This project finds its apex in Adam Watson’s analysis of the “international societies” from the Sumerians to the present (Watson, 1992).

In that vein, the relationship between “international society” and “international order” through history is not simply the reproduction of the stability of a systemic logic. The historical dimension of this articulation finds an additional inscription in Bull’s characterization of “international society” as a description of the current form of the relation between States. In this second scene, “system” and “society” are mutually exclusive categories: “If we ask of modern international society the questions ‘when did it begin?’ or ‘what were its geographical limits?’ we are at once involved in difficult problems of the tracing of boundaries (Bull, 2002: 15).

The first question is not fully addressed in his work¹⁰, though he does claim that the origin of the “international society” is European, being afterwards expanded to the rest of the world—the late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessing, for the first time in history, a single political system that is genuinely global (Bull, 2002: 19). The mark of this use of “society” in a logic of expansion is clear in the volume edited by Bull and Watson:

[t]he purpose of this book is to explore the expansion of the international society of European states across the rest of the globe, and its transformation from a society fashioned in Europe and dominated by Europeans into the global international society of today, with its nearly two hundred states, the great majority of which are not European (Bull and Watson, 1984: 1).

This expansion of “international society” from Europe outwards made the relations among States and rulers to be conducted following the same moral and legal basis (Bull and Watson, 1984: 5-6)—defined mainly in terms of two principles: juridical equality among States and their individual absolute sovereignty. States operate historically to gain general acceptance to this principles, which, once established, become “logically applied” to all new members and “exportable” (Watson, 1984: 23-4).

Bull and Watson recognize in diverse historical moments that this expansion was not free of violence, domination, and revolt (Watson, 1984; Bull, 1984a; 1984b); Watson (1984: 32) also notes that there is no uniformity and systematicity in the history of this expansion; and, finally, Bull (1984a: 126) admits that, in the extra-European world, the great powers have enabled the coexistence of the principle of sovereignty with a relation of suzerainty in international politics¹¹. In spite of these acknowledgements, the logic of expansion of “international society”

9 Linklater and Suganami (2006: 50) locate Martin Wight’s influence on Bull’s work in this inclination towards a comparative history of international systems.

10 See Buzan (1993) for a meticulous attempt to draw this boundary that results, nonetheless, in the reproduction of vague categories such as “identity” in ways that assume the society that is supposed to be explained.

11 For the full implication of this acknowledgement, see Keene (2002) and Grovogui (2002).

is never abandoned in what constitutes its core principles. Hence, to a large extent, the revolts against the “West” serve, here, as ways through which the “rest of the world” gains entrance into the process of unidirectional historical expansion of a pre-defined logic. “International society”, when articulated with “international order” through a narrative of expansion, offers a logical framework through which history can be read as one single continuous movement¹².

This tracing of the semantic baggage of the concept of “international society”, reveals it moving from the position of “theoretical” concept to that of social and political “reality”, allowing the kind of ontological slippage also identified with the concept of “international system”. Furthermore, starting as a historical construction, “international society” becomes a logical principle that, framing history, allows for both synchronic and diachronic studies of international relations and history. Here, the semantic baggage of “international society” locates the field of IR into the wider problematic of the ambitions of modernization through historical development: all can be, and must be, part of the international society and order. Description slides into prescription and past, present, and future become conditioned by what Bartelson (1995: 230) calls the “prophecy of expansion” of international society. As with “international system”, the plurality of worlds and theories is subsumed under a history-made-logic. The “rest of the world” is always absorbed in a world constituted in Europe, all forms of this relation being reduced to narratives of entrance into “international society”.

International/colonial order

In the two previous sections we have shown how the semantic baggage carried over by the articulation of “international order” with “international system” and “international society” in the field of IR works towards producing history within very limited logics of reproduction, expansion, and transcendence. This has important although often taken-for-granted political implications, particularly the silencing of other (non-Western) worlds, and of other political issues, such as “race”, “gender”, and “colonization”. More specifically, it erases these differences under a homogeneous “structure of the international system”—internally differentiated only in terms of its distribution of capabilities—or by subsuming them under a historical inevitable expansion of a “Western civilization”. We have exposed those political implications resorting to the notion of “denial of coevalness”.

This reconstruction calls for a problematization of the uses of international “system” and “society” in terms of the possibility foreclosed by their articulation with order. It invites us to realize the limits constituting these concepts and, therefore, to track paths that can challenge that

12 Turning the passage from system to society into a logical relation also opens space for a more cosmopolitan-oriented literature positing a further moment where “international society” can be overcome towards “world community”, such as Linklater (2007). For a reading of the ‘revolt against the West’ in terms of a ‘moral learning’ towards the resolution of the tensions between world order and justice, see Linklater and Suganami (2006). For other engagements with the notion of “international society” and its relation with “pluralism” and “solidarism”, see Bellamy (2005).

denial. As it is not possible to address all those aspects here, we will focus, as stated above, on the potentialities of the problematization of the “international” from the angle of “colonization”.

In order to do so, we turn to three different strategies for such problematization: Dipesh Chakrabarty’s provincializing of Europe; David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah’s alternative historical forms; and Walter Mignolo decolonial politics. In their agreements, these authors can be read as showing the semantic baggage of “international system” and “international society” as not only intrinsically related to a modern discourse on politics and the modern State—as argued above—but also as a (re)inscription of what Johannes Fabian has called the *denial of coevalness*. From this diagnosis, they all point to the *colonial encounter*—conceptualized in different ways—as a fundamental resource for the problematization and resistance to this denial of coevalness, arguing for diverging ways of writing with and against it. We argue that the tensions between these responses can shed light into the tensions inherent to projects devoted to resist the denial of coevalness and, thus, pluralize worlds and theories.

With Chakrabarty, we interpret the logics of recurrence and expansion embedded in “international order” as an expression of “historicism”, a mode of thinking that tells us that in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as an historically developing entity, that is, first, as an individual and unique whole—as some kind of unity at least *in potentia*—and, second, as something that develops over time. According to Chakrabarty (2008: 7, emphasis in the original), “historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global, but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place and then spreading outside it. The ‘first in Europe then elsewhere’ structure of global historical time was historicist”. One of the crucial expressions of this structure is the denial of the coevalness of difference implicit in the depiction of world history through narratives that reduce historical difference into a reproduction of whatever is posited as having taken place in Europe’s past¹³.

Against these transition narratives, Chakrabarty offers a rereading of the fundamental role that history plays in Marx’s critique of capital that foregrounds the place of colonial difference. Chakrabarty locates two readings of history in Marx: what he calls History 1 and History 2. In his terms, History 1 is “the universal and necessary history we associate with capital”, “the backbone of the usual narratives of transition to the capitalist mode of production” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 63-4). In other words, History 1 is the universal history of capital that reads historical difference through transition narratives. Despite the tendency to equate History 1 with History, Chakrabarty locates another historical voice in Marx. History 2, as he calls it, is constituted by elements posited by capital as its antecedents, but not as forms of its own “life-process”. The author argues that “[t]o say that something does not belong to capital’s life process is to claim that it does not contribute to the self-reproduction of capital” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 63-4).

13 “Most modern third-world histories are written within problematics posed by this transition narrative, of which the overriding (if often implicit) themes are those of development, modernization, and capitalism” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 31).

Chakrabarty's last step is to (re)articulate the relation between history and logic in Marx. In this sense, he points that if one thinks about the historical side of capital as prior to its logical one, we once more face historicism: history as a transition narrative from pre-capital to capital logic. Here, we hear the historical-made-logical dynamic of capital echoing in our reading of the connections between, order, system, and society. As against this, however, Chakrabarty (2008: 65-6) proposes we think of logic and history as also overlapping:

“Becoming,” the question of the past of capital, does not have to be thought of as a process outside of and prior to its “being.” If we describe “becoming” as the past posited by the category “capital” itself, then we make “being” logically prior to “becoming.” In other words, History 1 and History 2, considered together, destroy the usual topological distinction of the outside and the inside that marks debates about whether or not the whole world can be properly said to have fallen under the sway of capital. Difference, in this account, is not something external to capital. Nor is it something subsumed into capital. It lives in intimate and plural relationships to capital, ranging from opposition to neutrality.

The colonial encounter between History 1 and 2—that is, the encounter between a history made universal and the elements necessary to, but also in excess of, this history—leads to the emergence of colonial difference. In Chakrabarty's (2008: 66) terms: “History 2s do not constitute a dialectical Other of the necessary logic of History 1 (...). History 2 is better thought of as a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1”.

It should be added that it is precisely this constant interruption that feeds such “totalizing thrusts”; *that is, it impels History 1 to proceed its universalizing move towards encompassing difference under its aegis.* . In this sense, “capital” (for Chakrabarty)—and, for us here, “international system” and “international society”—are “philosophical-historical” categories constituted by the irreducibility of colonial difference, not external to it (Chakrabarty, 2008: 70).

Though framed in different terms, Inayatullah and Blaney (2004: 1) draw similar conclusions explicitly arguing that “[t]he discipline of international relations is hamstrung by a relative incapacity to speak about ‘the situation of the Third World’”. This is because the entire architecture of the discipline is constituted as one possible (re)articulation of the broader problematic of difference in modern politics:

The internal logic of an international society mingles together the two polar responses to difference. The formal equality and independence of actors (in their role as sovereign competitors) expresses the essential “sameness” of states. However, the differences among states are translated into a hierarchy of cultures revealed by the competitions staged in the world market (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004: 155).

First, “the geopolitical demarcations of a society of states [works] as a spatial containment of cultural difference. Difference is placed at a distance (...) and resolved into “sameness” within one’s own political community” (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004: 23). This translates the

problem of difference into one of “international difference”: States are all equal *as States*—thus containing the possibilities of difference—but different enough among each other *internally* to justify plurality. Second, “the spatial difference between Europe and others is converted into a temporal one. With the conversion of space into time (...) the spatially distinct other is thereby converted into a temporally prior self” (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004: 55-6). The spatial move of differentiation is supplemented by a temporal move that negates any existence to difference except that of a previous moment in a singular historical track. If the first move sets the condition to the form of the “international system” that reduces history to the stability of a previously determined relation between identity and difference, the second assures that “international society” will grant the rest of the world “neither historicity nor mutability, but that which the Europeans might offer to (or impose on) them” (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004: 51). In this double move, the denial of coevalness is consumed.

In response to this incapacity of IR, Inayatullah and Blaney (2004: 9ff), like Chakrabarty, propose we think about the “contact zone” that characterizes the discovery of the other as amenable not only to this double movement, but also to more productive forms of encounter. However, responding explicitly to Chakrabarty’s argument, Blaney and Inayatullah claim that an encounter in which History 2 can only “modify” and “interrupt” History 1 strikes them “as a rather one-sided encounter”. Against this, their enactment of the colonial encounter works to “open more space for difference” by “recover[ing] the transhistorical aspect of categories that Marx deployed in order to expose diversity as temporally coeval with capitalism” (Blaney and Inayatullah, 2010: 169).

One note is of importance to us here. While Blaney and Inayatullah open their critique by looking at the limited potential of the logic of interruptions, they conclude their own (re)reading of Marx by claiming that “ [the general, the eternal] gives us access to a past that continues to intrude into the present; that interrupts our certainties—even our so certainly held uncertainties that are now fashionable” (Blaney and Inayatullah, 2010: 179). It seems to us from this passage that “interruption” is not so much the problem, but rather its association with “an uncertainty in the intimate space of capital”. It is History 2’s interruption of History 1 *through uncertainties* that leads Blaney and Inayatullah to raise their pen against Chakrabarty’s argument.

The authors argue that Chakrabarty’s limiting of the role of difference results directly from his limitation of the role of abstract thought in articulating a critique to capitalism by turning all abstraction into historicism and transition narratives. What remains outside of this scheme is the possibility of using general categories as instruments for a perspectivist endeavor that identifies “alternative historical forms”. In this sense, Blaney and Inayatullah (2010: 176, emphasis in the original) locate a recessive voice in Marx:

This notion of abstraction runs directly contrary to Marx’s expressed method in *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. What Marx presents us with here is not a “scale of forms,” (...) but a general category (...) which *reveals the diversity of forms* (...). Once again, we see Marx introduce a ‘perspectivism’ into political economy—a denaturalizing or relativizing move.

In investing in this method of “alternative historical forms”, Blaney and Inayatullah produce an ethnological political economy that makes market capitalism emerge as one possible social and historical form. Hence, the method of “alternative historical forms” sets the condition for locating “alternative values and visions for re-imagining *our future*” (Blaney and Inayatullah, 2010: 179, emphasis added).

Mignolo’s decolonial politics converges with the problematization we endeavor here. Mignolo argues that while *modernity* represents the specific cosmovision of a historically, geographically, and culturally situated group of people, *coloniality* involved embedding such vision in a pretense for universality, bringing to the rest of the world, through colonialism and imperialism, modernity’s particular good as humanity’s universal Good. This notion of a “modern/colonial world” opens a site to rethink the political implications of the notions of international “system” and “society” in terms of the problem of the denial of coevalness to “colonial difference”.

Mignolo articulates his decolonial project against such denial of coevalness through what he calls “border thinking”. The border here shouldn’t be understood as that which separates modernity from outside-modernity, but in terms of what Mignolo calls “exteriority”: “the outside created by the rhetoric of modernity (Arabic language, Islamic religion, Aymara language, Indigenous concepts of social and economic organization, etc.)”, that is, “*an outside* invented by the rhetoric of modernity in the process of creating *the inside*” (Mignolo, 2007: 462: 472, emphasis in the original). Border thinking means thinking from where coloniality externalizes all other forms of knowing and being as tradition, as that which “must be conquered, colonized, superseded and converted to the principles of progress and modernity” (Mignolo, 2007: 462). Hence, border thinking must dwell in the space of the colonial encounter and “delink the rhetoric of modernity from the logic of coloniality” (Mignolo, 2007: 494). It is such delinking from coloniality that can open space “to all forms and principles of knowledge that have been colonized, silenced, repressed, and denigrated by the totalitarian march of the genocidal dimension of modernity” (Mignolo, 2007: 193).

Colonial difference is thus defined as the space where “*local* histories inventing and implementing global designs meet *local* histories, the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored” (Mignolo, 2012: xxv). Such encounter takes place in a space that is at once physical and imaginary. On the one hand, “Western cosmology is the historically unavoidable reference point” to that space; on the other hand, “multiple confrontations of two kinds of local histories displayed in different spaces and times across the planet” happen there (Mignolo, 2012: xxv). Hence, colonial difference is a set of *loci* of enunciation that defy any attempt to turn a historical conjuncture into either a system that cannot be transcended or a society whose expansion is defined by the global extension of previously defined rules.

In this sense, border thinking implies an “epistemological disciplinary disobedience” that brings to the fore “the existential experience of dwelling in the border” (Mignolo, 2012: xvi). Hence, border thinking is inextricable from the project of epistemic delinking. However,

dwelling in the border is not sufficient to perform border thinking, which also “requires engaging in conscientious epistemic, ethical, and aesthetical political projects. (...) Border thinking is actional” (Mignolo, 2012: xviii). Through the epistemic disobedience of border thinking, it becomes possible to articulate projects that go beyond “alternative modernities” and towards “alternatives *to* modernity”.

In other words, decolonization pushes us to challenge the pervasiveness of Eurocentrism in post-colonial projects and ask about the limits of any project that can be articulated in the absence of epistemological disobedience. In sum, Mignolo’s decolonial resistance to the exclusions of modernity/coloniality is founded upon border thinking, a mode of dwelling on the encounter between modernity and its exteriorities that requires delinking and an actional project of pluri-versality, of “a world in which many worlds can coexist”.

Limits and possibilities of pluralities in world politics

As we have shown in this paper, the articulation of “international order” with international “system” and “society” has had the effect of constraining our capacity to think the politics of international order within very limited logics of recurrence and expansion. By problematizing these logics through the works of Chakrabarty, Blaney and Inayatullah, and Mignolo, we have shown how such foreclosing can be inscribed within the wider field of devices for the denial of coevalness of difference. Furthermore, by pointing to the different and contradictory ways through which these authors propose to resist such denial of coevalness by recovering the plurality intrinsic to the colonial encounter, we have endeavored to map the tensions inherent in projects of pluralizing worlds and theories.

Rather than providing a conclusion or a (theoretical) path to be followed, we finish this text with the tensions mentioned above, marking the limits and possibilities inscribed in the efforts to think how we can pluralize worlds and theories in, and from, a field constituted by certain articulations of “system” and “society” with “order”. It is worth returning to these tensions for a moment.

Both Blaney and Inayatullah, and Chkrabarty accept the indispensability of “Europe” in any project of resistance to the denial of coevalness; in Chakrabarty’s terms, Europe “is both indispensable and inadequate” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 6). As against this, we read Walter Mignolo’s conceptualization of the colonial encounter as an endeavor to make Europe “dispensable”¹⁴ to any effort towards setting the terms of such resistance (Mignolo, 2007: 462; 2000, “Afterword”). In this sense, Mignolo (2007: 452) differentiates his own project of *decolonization* from both

14 This is not an uncontested reading. Mignolo claims that his project shares Chakrabarty’s dilemmas and that their solutions to it are akin (Mignolo, 2012: 203-213). Furthermore, he often claims explicitly that “Europe”, “modernity”, and “capitalism” cannot be abandoned or done away with. However, we argue that his project of epistemic delinking conceptualizes Europe as much dispensable as anywhere else—which is politically quite different from saying that it is “both indispensable and inadequate”.

postmodern and postcolonial critiques of modernity, capitalism, and History: “the analytic of coloniality and the programmatic of decoloniality moves away and beyond the post-colonial”, introducing a “fracture” in both “the Eurocentered project of post-modernity and a project of post-coloniality heavily dependent on post-structuralism”. Mignolo wants to break away from critiques of the West that remains internal to its own intellectual and existential parameters—both in terms of a reformulation of academic thought, in Chakrabarty, *or in terms of the reform of “our future”*, in Blaney and Inayatullah.

The difference that Mignolo draws between his project of alternatives to modernity in relation to the ones conceptualized by Chakrabarty and by Blaney and Inayatullah is maybe best expressed in his distinction between two traditions of relationality—the idea that one can only think Europe in relation to its other, and vice-versa:

there are two epistemic foundations of relational ontology or ontologies. One has its point of origin in Western Europe and the Anglo United States and confronts ‘essential ontology’, that is, an ontology of the essence, whose genealogy Michel Foucault traced in his earlier work. The other epistemic foundation is not Western but indigenous, although it is articulated in confrontation with Western epistemology, both ‘essential’ and ‘relational’ ontologies. The main difference between the Western and the Native American and indigenous foundation of relational epistemology lies, among many aspects, in the genealogies of thoughts of each of them. (...) *The difference between the two, the radical and irreducible difference, is not in what is said (enunciated) but in the saying of it (enunciation)* (Mignolo, 2012: xvii, n. 10).

At stake in the texts approached above is the persistent critique of the terms through which one can interpret the multiple encounters between “modern” and alternative understandings of (international) politics, including the limits emerging from their own practices. In this sense, Blaney and Inayatullah’s epilogue recalls Nandy’s distinction between the counter-player and the non-player to ponder:

If we need an encounter that juxtaposes the putative temporally prior other with the modern self such that the implicit critique of the former is heard by the latter as an explicit critique, don’t we also need the non-appearance of that encounter so that we can see how to go on living aspects of a non-capitalist, non-modern, non-Western life without the obsessions of the counter-player? (Blaney and Inayatullah, 2010: 204)

Likewise, when introducing his project, Chakrabarty claims that:

My reading of Marx does not in any way obviate that need for engagement with the universal. What I have attempted to do is to produce a reading in which the very category “capital” becomes a site where both the universal history of capital and the politics of human belonging are allowed to interrupt each other’s narrative (Chakrabarty, 2008: 70).

Finally, Mignolo's prose commonly alternates between the dispensability and indispensability of the West—as shown by his claim of sharing Chakrabarty's project, when read from his project of delinking. This tension is expressed in claims such as that “[b]order thinking proposes how *to deal with* that imperial sedimentation while at the same time *breaking free of* the spell and the enchantment of imperial modernity” (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006: 219). The ambivalence between “to deal with” and “breaking free of” the imperial heritage is expressive of the tensions in the claim towards delinking and a decolonial shift.

By reading these positions in relation to one another, as we did here, it becomes possible to sketch the field of tensions that surround any project of thinking plurality in world politics. By making this field explicit, we endeavor to point to the limits and possibilities of thinking outside or beyond the logics of recurrence and expansion that underlie the semantic baggage of “international system” and “international society” and thus reduce the resources available in International Relations to think the plurality of worlds of the Non-West and of categories such as gender, race, and class. In doing so, we hope to contribute to those seeking, today, new limits and possibilities for world politics.

Bibliographic references

- Ashley, Richard. “The Poverty of Neorealism”. *International Organization*, 38:2 (1984): 225-286.
- Ashley, Richard. “Living on Border Lines: Man, poststructuralism, and War”. In: Der Derian, James and Shapiro, Michael (eds). *International/Intertextual Relations*. New York: Lexington Books, 1989: 259-322.
- Baldwin, David (ed). *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Bartelson, Jens. *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*. Cambridge: CUP, 1995.
- Bartelson, Jens. *The Critique of the State*. Cambridge: CUP, 2001.
- Bartelson, Jens. *Visions of World Community*. Cambridge: CUP, 2009.
- Bellamy, Alex J (ed.). *International Society and Its Critics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005
- Blaney, David and Inayatullah, Naeem. *Savage Economics: Wealth, poverty and the temporal walls of capitalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Bull, Hedley and Watson, Adam (eds.). *The Expansion of International Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- Bull, Hedley. *The Anarchical Society*. A study of order in world politics. 3rd edition. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Bull, Hedley. “The Emergence of Universal International Society”. In: Bull, Hedley and Watson, Adam (eds.). *The Expansion of International Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984a. Ch. 8, p. 117-126.

- Bull, Hedley. "The Revolt against the West". In: Bull, Hedley and Watson, Adam (eds.). *The Expansion of International Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984b. Ch. 14, p. 217-228.
- Buzan, Barry. "From International System to International Society: structural realism and regime theory meet the English school". In: *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 1993: 327-52.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe*. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How anthropology makes its object*. New York: Columbia University, 1983.
- Goddard, Stacie and Nexon, Daniel. "Paradigm Lost? Reassessing Theory of International Politics". In: *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:1 (2005): 9-61.
- Grovogui, Siba N. "Regimes of Sovereignty. International Morality and the African Condition". *European Journal of International Relations*, 8:3 (2002): 315-338.
- Guzzini, Stefano. *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: the continuing story of a death foretold*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Guzzini, Stefano. "The Enduring Dilemmas of Realism in International Relations". *European Journal of International Relations*, 10:4 (2004): 533-568.
- Inayatullah, Naeem and Blaney, David L. *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus. *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Kaplan, Morton. "Balance of Power, Bipolarity and Other Models of International Systems". *The American Political Science Review*, 51: 3 (1957): 684-695.
- Kaufman, Stuart J.; Little, Richard; e Wohlforth, William C. (eds.). *The Balance of Power in World History*. Nova York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Keene, Edward. *Beyond the Anarchical Society*. Grotius, Colonialism, and Order in World Politics. Cambridge: CUP, 2004.
- Keohane, Robert O. *Neorealism and its critics*. Nova York: Columbia University, 1986.
- Linklater, Andrew. *Critical Theory and World Politics: Citizenship, Sovereignty and Humanity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Linklater, Andrew and Suganami, Hidemi. *The English School of International Relations. A Contemporary Reassessment*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006.
- Little, Richard, "The English School contribution to the study of international relations", *The European Journal of International Relations*, 6:3 (2000): 395-422.
- Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories/Global Designs*. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking. Second edition. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Mignolo, Walter. "Delinking". *Cultural Studies*, 21:2 (2007): 449-514.

- Mignolo, Walter and Tlostanova, Madina, "Theorizing from the borders. Shifting to geo- and body-politics of knowledge", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9:2 (2006): 205-221.
- Morgenthau, Hans. *Politics Among Nations*. The Struggle for Power and Peace. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948.
- Onuf, Nicholas. "Structure? What Structure?". *International Relations*, 23:2 (2009): 183-199.
- Reus-Smit, Christian, "Imagining society: constructivism and the English School", *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 4:3 (2002): 487-509.
- Ruggie, John Gerard, "Continuity and transformation in the world polity: toward a neorealist synthesis", *World Politics*, 35:2 (1983): 261-285.
- Singer, David. "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations". In: Knorr, K. and Verba, S. (ed). *The International System: Theoretical Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961: 77-92.
- Watson, Adam. *The Evolution of International Society: A comparative, historical analysis*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Walker, R.B.J. *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge: CUP, 1993.
- Waltz, Kenneth. *Man, the State, and War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.
- Waltz, Kenneth. *Theory of International Politics*, New York: Random House, 1979.
- Watson, Adam. "European International Society and Its Expansion". In: Bull, Hedley and Watson, Adam(eds.). *The Expansion of International Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. Cap. 1, p. 13-32.
- Wendt, Alexander. "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations". *International Organization*, 41:3 (1987): 335-370.
- Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: CUP, 1999.
- Wight, Colin. *Agents, Structures and International Relations*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006.
- Wight, Martin. "Why Is There No International Theory?" In: Butterfield, H.; Wight, M. (eds). *Diplomatic investigations*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1966: 17-34.
- Wohlforth, William C.; Little, Richard; Kaufman, Stuart J.; Kang, David C.; Jones, Charles A; Hui, Victoria Tin-Bor; Eckstein, Arthur M.; Deudney, Daniel; e Brenner, William J. "Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History". *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:2 (2007); 155-185.