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# Encountering the Pluriverse: Looking for Alternatives in Other Worlds

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## Abstract

The lack of ontological pluralism in International Relations has been a strong determinant of the general scope of the discipline and its objects of study, as well as all that is rendered irrelevant to the study of the “international”. IR has marginalized difference not only by disciplining epistemologies, but also by rejecting other ontologies, particularly those which belong to indigenous peoples, by relegating them to the realm of myths, legends and beliefs. The roots of ontological marginalization are deeply seeded, so much so that they are present in virtually every field of science (social or not). In order to understand this concern with ontology, we need to refer to the modern age, specifically its Western and now liberal manifestations. The main objective of this article is to put the ontological question on the table. It is argued that the “truth” of one-world, one reality and one universe is also a myth, showing how it has hidden many worlds and many realities. The concept of the pluriverse is used to show how – from different ontological positions, particularly relational cosmovisions like the Andean worldview –, alternatives actually appear. The text is divided into three parts: the first one depicts the pluriverse and what it implies and enables, the second describes how the pluriverse has been occulted by the myth of modernity, and the third part is an attempt to illustrate how relational ontologies contribute to the theoretical constitution of the global.

**Keywords:** Pluriverse, International Relations Theory, Relational Ontologies, Andean worldview.

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## Introduction

Theories are processes through which we make sense of our environment and our reality. This suggests that there can be as many theories as necessary to our comprehension of our cosmos. However, for the sake of coherence and achieving generalized knowledge, it is normally assumed that theories have to be proven, be complementary, convincing or else overthrown. Thus, theoretical work is in the business of “selling ideas” (Kurki and Wight 2013). This intellectual exchange between sellers and buyers is also embedded in power relations that have disciplined,

limited and authorized what should or should not be considered an idea, or theory worth selling. In International Relations (IR), arguing and assessing theories is the core of the discipline, although “buyers” should also have the option to choose between alternatives. However, what if there are no real theoretical alternatives? What if we as buyers do not have much room to choose?

The prevalence of Western thinking in IR has two obvious and reciprocal forms: the Western origins of the most important and mainstream theories in philosophy, political theory and history; and the Eurocentric historical framing of world history (Acharya and Buzan 2010, 16). The practice of gatekeeping, which has been amply illustrated and discussed<sup>1</sup>, reinforces this tendency, and yet, a discipline like IR that intends to produce knowledge about the world is by definition a discipline that should have space for theoretical perspectives *from* around the world. Sadly, this is not only not true, but the knowledge that is produced about the world in the northern Western center does not only neglect theoretical contributions from other perspectives but works against them. The result has been that even in distant regions of the world, IR study and learning looks pretty much the same (Tickner and Blaney 2012). Furthermore, this aspect does not stay in the theoretical dimension but has enormous consequences in the way we enact reality and in the creation of political arrangements that end up affecting our daily lives.

Consequently, the question about difference is very pertinent, but given the complex realities and diversity of the globe, and the fact that we are in the business of – at least – trying to give some accounts of the global, we need to take it seriously. In IR, a field which shows itself as characterized and constituted by discussion and debates, the epistemic and methodological considerations have been very narrow, not to speak about the ontological ones. It is pretty obvious that any actual different account is tolerated as long as it accepts the fact that we live in one world, one universal reality. The suppression of different interpretations is so strong and yet so subtle that any affirmation on the contrary must take a radical form of defense.

The lack of ontological pluralism in IR has been less attended, and the implications of it do not only refer to what has been the general scope or object of study in the field, but also to the enormous richness to analyze the international that is left aside. Therefore, the discipline as such has not only marginalized difference by ignoring other epistemologies, but by neglecting other ontologies, particularly those that belong to indigenous peoples, relegating them to the realm of myths, legends and beliefs. But the roots of ontological marginalization are so deep that they are present in every field of science (social or not). In order to understand the ontological concern, we need to refer to the Modern Age, specifically its Western and now liberal manifestation. The purpose of this paper is to put on the table the ontological question, to illustrate that the ultimate “truth” of one-world, one reality and one universe is also a myth, by showing how it has hidden many worlds, many realities. By portraying the perspective of the pluriverse, as the realities acknowledged by many peoples in the world, we attempt to show how – from other different ontologies, particularly relational cosmovisions like the Andean

1 See Weaver (1998), Smith (2000), Bierstecker (2009), Tickner (2013).

worldview —, alternatives actually appear. The text is divided into three parts: the first one depicts the pluriverse and what it implies and enables, the second describes how the pluriverse has been covered by the myth of modernity, and the third is an attempt to illustrate how relational ontologies contribute to the theoretical constitution of the global.

## Pluriverse and plurality

Taking the pluriverse as an ontological starting point, implies not simply tolerating difference, but actually understanding that reality is constituted not only by many worlds, but by many kinds of worlds, many ontologies, many ways of being in the world, many ways of knowing reality, and experimenting those many worlds. The discussion then has an ontological fundament with epistemological and methodological consequences. In order to give difference a space in IR, we have to reconsider the ontological premises that have conditioned the development of the discipline, accepting a one world reality as a natural and universal fact.

Drawing from other worldviews — mainly indigenous relational worldviews —, the pluriverse implies the existence of many worlds somehow interconnected, in other words the human world is connected to the natural world and also to the spiritual world. This means these three kinds of worlds coexist in time and space. It entails a vision where the earth is a whole living being always emerging, encouraging the discovery and the imagination of different forms of planetarization in which human beings, along with other beings can coexist enriching each other (Escobar 2010, 2012). Such processes cannot be subsumed in the epistemic frame of modern social sciences, which are characterized by anthropocentrism, which exclude the connection between human and non-human as part of a whole, a same reality.

Notions of the pluriverse imply multiple ontologies, multiple worlds to be known — not simply multiple perspectives on one world. Universalist discourses and globalist projects are grounded in a unitary ontology and imperialist epistemologies which assume that the world is one, that it is knowable on a global scale within single modes of thought, and is thus manageable and governable in those terms. (Conway & Singh 2011,701)

Multiple perspectives of one world is what theoretical pluralism advocates for, but we need to go even further that the simple tolerance of difference according to the one world rule; we need to consider how these different worlds can coexist not submitted in one reality, but in incommensurability.

The idea of the universe is very powerful, and has been imposed as a reality through different processes, some more violent than others. This idea has become so strong and natural that it seems indisputable. But if we think of reality, and what it encompasses (space, time, truth, subjectivity/objectivity, and so forth), we see that it is a social construction, a situated

creation of our minds in connection with our environment and according to our frameworks of knowledge, or ontologies. Reality is the product of intersubjective practices (Haraway 1991), and so there are many ways to create reality and many possible realities, and there are of course, different kinds of subjects, not all of them human. Human, natural, and spiritual beings connect forming identities and realities that have tangible political effects, non-humans have political agency, will and interest as well. The pluriverse, then, is where the natural, religious-spiritual, political and social are not separated (Blaser 2013, De la Cadena 2010, Escobar 2010, 9).

In that sense we need to consider that the pluriverse is not something that needs to be created, it is something that needs to be recognized. It has been covered and needs to be fully displayed, taken to practice, without considering it something fixed or given (Blaser 2013, 239). If the universe appears normal is because it has been represented constantly in daily practices in the North and other regions as a result of colonization and the diffusion of specific values according to a certain rationality. For the reappearance of the pluriverse it is necessary to accept that ontologies are incommensurable, but can be partially interconnected (De la Cadena 2010). This is not a one way to relativism, but an invitation to think incommensurability in relational terms.

The thing is that pluriversal thinking is, by definition, not generalizable, the answers to a one-world reality are useless or insufficient to explain all or many realities. Hence, some proposals have been put on front by scholars that, sadly or ironically, do not belong to IR: one way to disrupt the universe is practicing or performing the pluriverse, taking it to practice through narratives and storytelling (Blaser 2013, De la Cadena 2010), another is assembling different methods with which we make sense of reality and produce it in different manifestations (Law 2004, 56); from other ontologies what is considered an object can be put in scene as a subject. Animals, spirits and nature can embody humans and vice-versa. This undoubtedly helps make sense and contextualize many of the actions and reactions of different actors in the world. Personhood, property, time, space, existence, power, concepts which are of ordinary use in the IR lexicon, could be analyzed and understood in a radically different way just by first accepting the existence of other worlds and their entities, and then by trying to see what these concepts look like or refer to from distinct ontologies.

Ontologies and epistemologies of other worlds show other ways of experimenting and knowing the global and allow us to overcome some of the already restraining categories and traditional concepts of international politics such as state, sovereignty, territory, personhood (Picq 2013; Shaw 2002/2008). Then, the pluriverse covered and silenced by the modern myth needs to be fully disclosed, allowing the coexistence of other narratives and world views that are not necessarily encompassed by Western ontology.

By embarking ourselves in the recovery and the encounter of the pluriverse, we can see that the political is much more than what has been accepted by Western mainstream thought. Just by considering that non-humans can have political agency (De la Cadena 2010), can be full subjects with rights and responsibilities, will and desires, that time and space may obey different rules, that conflict can be dealt with differently, that territory is alive and sovereignty can have other manifestations open the possibility of theorizing about the global in uncountable ways.

Then, thinking the global in terms of many worlds, many worldviews is not just about taking a critical stand against mainstream theories, it is to assume a politically emancipatory position that includes processes of knowing and also defending other possible ways of being in the world (Tuhiwai Smith 2005). The world each being inhabits is populated by entities (persons, objects, theories, practices) that are ontologically configured in processes of choosing and decisions that produce the establishment of reference frameworks that people use to situate themselves in the world. Accordingly, these reference frameworks are very different to a person in the Amazon than to a person raised in a Western city, those frameworks are historically contingent, not natural, neutral or universal.

Then, another aspect appears that need to be taken into account: in the pluriverse, those many worlds exist on their own, but are interrelated. It is precisely in that connection, in that relation where we can find our answers, at least some of them, to the question of ontological difference. The most traditional explanation to these kinds of connections which are natural and logical for Amerindian perspectives is that myth has been the mediating element that comes in aid to make sense of what we simply cannot explain. But here comes the tricky thing: if we speak about myths we somehow are not allowed to take them academically seriously. As an explanation it may suffice for those “exotic”, “uncivilized” peoples, but not for accounting actual scientific knowledge. We need to come up with *better*, more *logical* and *rational* explanations, and certainly the modern, Western and liberal world has some: syncretism and miscegenation are among the most usual. So there seems to be an agreement to the fact that different realities coexist somehow, but the way they do cannot simply be described as multicultural, or pluralist, because these imply that tolerance to difference operates as long as different worldviews are subsumed by the Western modern framework. To really talk about the pluriverse this categories are not enough, we enter the realm of political ontology (Blaser 2012), a realm where difference actually engages in an existential negotiation (da Costa 2014, 85) of many different life projects.

## The Modern Myth and the disappearance of the pluriverse

The problem is not only that the idea of one reality has become the universal truth but how this has happened, whereas other realities have been labeled as simple myths or beliefs (Law 2011). By telling reality we produce and practice it; if we tell, accept and practice a one-world narrative, we produce a universal reality. The universe is then an ontological historical product, with epistemic consequences; a construction (Escobar 2010). Accepting that the reality of one-world is universal, practicing and performing such reality is not only limited but also limiting, and excluding. So this is by all means an ontological concern, and an ontological discussion, because “[w]hen it comes to difference in beliefs we are in the realm of perspectives and epistemologies, but if we think that there are different possible realities, that are practiced



differently, we are in the realm of ontology” (Law 2011, 2). It is evident that behind this process of creating reality lies strong manifestations of power.

From the margins feminism, post colonialism, poststructuralism, and even science and technology studies, have made major claims on the many ways other narratives have been neglected and at the same time the different possible other narratives that open our minds to create reality differently. In the case of the pluriverse, most scholars have in common their inconformity with Western, liberal modernity<sup>2</sup>. So, against the predominant view of reality as one-world, rupturist narratives become essential in tearing apart the veil of universalism, with which the universe has covered the pluriverse, that is, the multiple and interconnected realities/worlds that conform the cosmos (Blaser 2013,30)<sup>3</sup>, totalizing reality.

This allows us to reframe the question: What if modernity is also a myth? This question is pertinent because it allows us to see that one narrative has become predominant. According to Mario Blaser (2013), processes of creating reality are in story-telling, in narratives we believe in and act upon. Then, stories of our being in the world are told according our view of it. The ontological starting point to tell a story can be very different not only in the way the story is told, but also because that starting point can be radically different.

The modern Western myth is characterized by three basic assumptions: the deliberate separation between nature and society, anthropocentrism, and the linearity of time (Blaser 2013). This myth has separation as its core feature, it is the main rule to see and understand the cosmos. The myth can be told as follows: with the Enlightenment, human replaced God, became the center, the cause and reason, the source of all questions and answers; man appears superior, distanced, disassociated – *separated* – from his environment, along with the predominance of liberalism he becomes rational, autonomous, individual, – in sum essentialized – an entity that with time can achieve progress and improve his imperfect condition. The answers to all questions are to be answered by their own rational resources and means, meaning that there is no supernatural explanation in their disenchanted reality. Adding the ingredient of positivism, these characteristics make of human a knower of his reality, an observer that can subtract himself of the reality he lives in in order to comprehend, make sense of it in a commensurable way, because reality is out there, *separated* from the observer. This superiority of man over nature is also a calling to dominate it. Along with this, reality has been constructed at the expense of what the West considers the “Other” (see Dussel 1994). Separation, always present in the process of making sense of reality, presents itself in the form of opposite dichotomies (object/

2 We have to stress that there are, of course, many modernities as well. Modernity should not be considered monolithic or homogeneous. It is also important to say that there is relational thinking in modern western thought, and that the pluriverse is part of modernity and can be thought from modernity also (Harding 2008).

3 Rupturist narratives consider that there are interesting conditions to defy and take distance from modernity. According to Blaser, there are three streams of rupture: first is the theory of network actor (drawn from science and technology studies), which seeks to destabilize the dualist system based on the separation nature/culture, subject/object, (Latour, Harding and Law belong to this stream); second, critical theory, cultural, subaltern and postcolonial studies, that try to question epistemic asymmetries and politics inherited by colonial difference between modern and non-modern (See Escobar, Lander, Mignolo, and so forth); third, feminist theory that challenges hierarchical relations between mainstream thought and the “others” less human (Haraway, Harding, Tickner) (Blaser 2013, 29).

subject, civilized/savage, good/bad, and so forth), which end up extending the domination duty over everything associated with nature. In the separation in poles, labels and categories, the Western, modern liberal human being becomes the starting point and the end of the story, the centerpiece of the stage, with the power to invite on stage (reality, history, time and space, actors), those phenomena that are rationally considered part of the act. On this stage, man performs the modern universe as a reality. Note that as other non-Western myths are told by the West, this narration is also caricatured and exaggerated.

According to the Western modern rationality, reality and the phenomena are assumed as whole, as essences, without time and space (Escobar 2007). In this context, science has been, and still is, one of the most important tools to produce the universe. The prevalence of positivism in social sciences has strengthened the idea of one-world with three main premises about reality: that it is *out there*; that is *defined*, and that is *singular* (Law 2004). The result of such reductionism is a form of epistemic violence that stimulates and is stimulated by the anxiety that we will be never be able to perceive reality(ies) completely. So facts and rules are by this assumption comprehensive, complete entities that can be generalized, while what is not is not only valid science/theory/knowledge but it represents the danger of relativism. The best way to apprehend and grasp what is “out there” is the establishment of Archimedean points that fix time and space (Trowsell 2013), that also leave us the sensation of domination. The anxiety against relativism is one of the most prevailing forces for gatekeeping in IR, it becomes the cause of a constant blackmail: in dichotomic thinking we only get to choose between one pole or the other, never both, never something else (Reddekop 2014).

The universe is then an ontological historical product, in that sense, if we want to encounter the pluriverse, questioning universal assumptions is both an epistemic and an ontological endeavor. In the first case, by reaffirming the importance and validity of situated knowledge as a way to produce and make science (Haraway 2004, Harding 2006), to refer to the locus of enunciation (Mignolo 1995) and to recognize that all reality is situated, historical, and contextual, and that there are many ways of knowing. Nakata’s argument in favor of an “Indigenous standpoint theory” stresses the fact that reality is experimented differently and so is the knowledge that we get from those experiences (Nakata 2014). In the second case, we have to accept that Western modern cosmovision is just one of many, another myth – as has been portrayed here –, that has been narrated as unique and universal; it is in Mignolo’s claim a local history with a global design (Mignolo 2000, Quijano 2007), that could be provincialized (Chakrabarty 2000) to give space to other ontologies. As such, it has the same power to create realities, as any other cosmovision (Law 2011).

Traditional approaches of IR, framed by this Western modern ontology, even though still predominant, have become limited to understand our complexities, disciplining and limiting; they are a cage. Increasingly, Western categories are not enough or do not suffice to reach the goal or actually try to explain some other, marginalized reality; but also aboriginal categories, naturally more adequate and ideal to do so are not understood by Western mainstream academy,



and like that dismissed, discredited or delegitimized. So what these categories do is to reduce realities, complexities and difference so that they can fit in their reach of explanation.

A lot is to be learned in tracing and retracing narratives from other cosmovisions. Denying the pluriverse leads to the elimination of the possibility of being, it rejects other life projects that do not commune with the modern myth, an aspect which is violent indeed. In this scenario, it is very difficult to discuss and negotiate epistemic differences, so we must take the discussion to the realm of ontology and to the time where divisions were created and the political was extracted from the natural world and forced into the social (Latour [1993] 2007)<sup>4</sup>. This has been put to important questioning by post-positivists approaches as feminism, postcolonialism and poststructuralism, and also by science and technology studies which altogether have contributed to put the ontological question on the table (Blaser 2013, da Costa 2014, Law 2004, Harding 2006). One world reality has been produced, and still is, by the West, and transported to the rest of the world (Law 2011, 2-3). Consequently, as we can see, the problem of IR theorization, or the lack of its diversity, is the product of complex processes that are somehow the outcome of ontological suppressions that need to be stopped or at least questioned and contested.

The problem that some scholars try to put out is that Western modern frames not only create reality based on dichotomies, anthropocentrism or the linearity of time, but stress that these Cartesian frames not only deny but work against cosmic principles of other ontologies which are based on synergies rather than on separation (Trowsell 2013). These deliberate processes of dominance come disguised in concepts like multiculturalism, where difference is accepted as long as the ontological premises are not questioned. Eventually this leaves the impression that difference is managed within a general framework with a fake universal reach. In other words, dissidence or other voices are allowed to believe whatever they like as long as those beliefs are not contrary to what the Northern West knows about the world. Acceptance and tolerance are viable only when they are reasonable and conceivable by authorized imaginations. Those who do not fit in are neglected, silenced, delegitimized or simply considered exotic, religious, mythological: not real.

This theoretical proposal of taking into account pluriversal ontologies clearly questions the conceptual pillars that constitute the discipline because difference is not only a question of method, or a question of belief, but it is a question of reality; what the world *is* is also at stake (Law 2011). It is worth stating that the pluriverse comes to life within modernity, not outside it. The best example can be the use of technological and scientific methods that portray the fictitious character of the universe showing that what we accept to be real is only the result of a political agreement in which we are demanded to choose one over many realities.<sup>5</sup>

4 In Latour, this division is an artificial epistemic outcome that can be undone with the re-union under the same constitution. Latour recognizes relationality, he accepts that objects have agency, however in comparison with indigenous relational ontologies, the solution is in a merger, a unification, the elimination of limits; for indigenous worldviews such as the Andean, the pluriverse is not necessarily characterized by unification of what has been separated, interconnections can be enough, worlds and realms are not fully united, they interact constantly but exist on their own (De la Cadena 2010, Blaser 2013, 246, Viveiros de Castro 2004).

5 This becoming of the pluriverse in a universe has been widely illustrated by Law (2011). See also Latour (1983), Harding (2004, 2006).

## Relating worlds, pluriversal thinking in the Andean cosmovision

As illustrated above, one of the features that, not without exceptions, has characterized the Western ontology is that of separation and that objects, subjects, and phenomena in general exist as essences, isolated and independently of their environment. This is a major assumption of positivist perspectives that consider that reality is separated from its observer and is commensurable. This is one of many possible truths, the reality of an atomistic ontology, but clearly not the only one. Relational ontologies are another story, not necessarily a better one, but definitively one that needs to be heard to explore other alternatives to our existence in these worlds.

Relational ontologies are pluriversal ontologies; they reveal different forms of interaction under the principle that nothing is completely isolated. For relational ontologies, such as the Daoist, Buddhist and the Andean cosmovisions – among others –, it is the connections between the social and nature, the divine and the factual that make sense. In the case of the Andean cosmovision, relationality is the main and fundamental principle of reality, everything is related, nothing can be and abstraction or exist on its own. This principle rules over any other natural/social/spiritual law. Other principles follow: *correspondence* – elements are correlated in a balanced duality –, *complementarity* (opposites complete each other and become whole, one does and cannot exist without the other, only in complementarity an entity becomes total); and *reciprocity* (it is the fundamental idea of justice in every relation, natural, human, spiritual, cosmic). Completion is achieved *in relation to* the environment, especially with that which is its opposite: day is not day without the night, man is not whole, but needs the woman to become complete. Under this vision, the main elements that one needs to identify and understand are the relations, the interconnections that are also always in context. Ethics of course is not limited to the human dimension, but has a cosmic reach (Platt 1987, Murra 2002).

Seen from the point of view of a relational ontology such as the Andean, all the “truths” of the modern myth can be put on trial: anthropocentrism has no place here, because humans do not have a superior status within their environment. they do not dominate nature, but as any other non-human, they are care-takers. Their role is much more humble, embedded and related to the rest of beings. The pluriverse is constituted by the human world but also by the non-human worlds constituted in three groups: souls of the dead, nature forces and supernatural beings. All these entities exist on their own independently of any interpretation or contact with humans. Humans can communicate with them and the other way around, among others, through the language of symbols (Van den Berg 2005), rituals and special skills that some humans can develop.

As other Amerindian worldviews, the Andean hold that subjects can embody objects and objects can embody subjects, so living and being in this world are not necessarily fixed, but can change depending on the perspective the entity has in a given space and time. What counts are not the bodies we have, but the capacity to occupy a point of view. In the end humans and non-humans are the same in essence, at least in their original state, then they occupy different bodies as robes and get different perspectives (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 244).

The many ways spirits and deities show to manifest their desires and will can be ambiguous, for in every entity there is good and bad, and the option of harming or benefiting. This has a clear impact of what personhood and agency entitle. The fact that entities are ambiguous shows flexibility in the Andean imaginary, but also that they play the role according to a certain context and a certain kind of relation. As an example, the *Pachamama*, (sometimes poorly translated as Mother Earth) can have different roles according to its needs: it can be a generous entity that grants food and water or it can be vengeful and cruel if she does not have what she expects from humans. *Pachamama* is not only an entity but may be the connection itself, relating the three worlds (heaven, earth and the underground) (Lozada 2007). This perspective shows that in the Andean pluriverse sacred supernatural entities are political entities with agency and interests, their role is not fixed according to manicheist interpretations, rather deities and beings have the ability not only of trespassing worlds but also to be both, good or bad and evil. To Andean humans, this demands an attitude of constant listening and interpreting human and non-human signs and also an attitude of caring.

The non-human world is an immanent world, spirits and non-human entities are as real as any human. Therefore, there is no difference between rational and spiritual; that is why epistemically speaking, reality can be known through rational processes as well as emotional processes such as rituals. There is no separation between observer and reality, both are interconnected, and therefore knowledge is situated (Estermann 2012; Kusch 2007; Mignolo 1995, Viveiros de Castro 2004). Under Western positivist modern thinking, science has become the best means to have access to reality and to create knowledge. According to the Andean perspective, knowledge is not only rational but also affective, emotional, bodily, mystic and can have origin in experience, memory, and suffering (Posey 2002; Sillitoe 2002), as well as in the possibility of changing the point of view (Viveiros de Castro 2004). The base of knowledge is emotional, not scientific; spirituality is the most elevated form of conscience, and conscience is the most elevated form of knowledge (Estermann 2009). In relational epistemological terms, knowing is loving and working is creating (Medina 2011, 42).

With these ontological and epistemic alternatives in mind, the myriad of possibilities to study and understand the global becomes evident. For the purposes of enriching international politics, and international politics study, what a relational ontology such as the Andean offers us is yet to be analyzed and needs further research, but at a glimpse we can say that global political arrangements can take a very different form if we consider that in the Andean cosmovision – an encompassing worldview –, everything exist within the great home or Pacha (a wide conception of time and space) (Untoja 2013), there is no possible exclusion, but the need to coexist with complexity and chaos. Each entity with its complement, where good does not exist without bad (extensions of these are unlimited, legal cannot be without illegal, and so forth).

Difference is needed for entities and reality itself to become possible; conflict is inherent to relationality and complementarity, revealing its political core, where we must deal with the “bad”, the “negative”, instead of just rejecting or denying them, negotiating with difference instead of

just tolerating it. The ritual of “tinku” (or encounter) – widely documented – can illustrate how the Andean world manages conflict as an encounter where antagonistic groups use symbols, dance, music and combat to negotiate their disputes involving the needs of *Pachamama*. Tinku is the evidence to show that, for relational ontologies, antagonism does not disappear, nor is desirable that it vanishes. In fact, it is key and always present, but treated differently, not in dichotomic terms but in complementarity and equilibrium. Another example is the case of a pluriversal approach to the environmental problem. Marisol De la Cadena (2010) has illustrated how the mountain Ausangate, an earth-being, affects the behavior of humans and gives purpose to their social mobilization and activism in a way that only a pluriversal approach can fully explain. The author shows how environmental issues are not only a human concern, but a non-human as well.

A pluriversal approach to nature should give us some insights to improve the international environmental agenda. It is not enough to say that the earth (land and territory) is alive, but also to consider what it implies: in the Andes, peasants are aware of the importance of taking into account the signs which will not only guarantee their survival as humans, but also the survival of the other beings upon which they also depend. If land is a living entity, then it must be fed. Rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies aim at satisfying the land’s hunger and, at the same time, they raise awareness to the signs that *Pachamama*, animals and spirits are giving. For example, according to how high birds build their nests, peasants can tell if there is going to be a rainy or a dry year, the same happens with plant blossoming according to their location on the top of the hill or on the base (See Van den Berg 2005). These signs are key to decide when and how to better cultivate a land that has its own needs. If human needs are met with reciprocity to the land the equilibrium is maintained. This is a fundamental basis for environmental drawn from relational thinking. As in the case analyzed by de la Cadena this is not just using ancestral knowledge to cope with environmental casualties, this is the pluriverse being seen. From a relational perspective the environment is protected in a cosmic dimension.

Another example can be mentioned. A lot has been said about the need of other categories to overcome the nation-state system based on territorial sovereignty. Given the transnational reconfigurations caused by the increasing flows of people, information and trade in an era of globalization, the repertoire of territory and sovereignty seems *passé*. The Andean concept of *ayllu*, as a political, social, economic and spiritual form of arrangement can be useful to this discussion. The *ayllu* is a pluriversal concept of political, social and economic organization that emulates the four forces that constitute life (matter, energy, time and space). (Yampara 2011, 17). As noted before, according to the Andean worldview, territory is not fixed, so the articulation of daily life in its political, economic and social dimensions does not depend on territory but on the community. For an *ayllu* to exist as such there is no need for territorial continuity. In fact, many *ayllus* still function under the idea of a territorial “vertical archipelago”<sup>6</sup> (see Murra 2002),

6 The territory of an *ayllu* can be compound by different “islands” of land located in different ecological soils. This ancient technique allowed the community to produce a variety of products in different climates.

that is their territory does not have continuity. Furthermore the discontinuity of territory creates alliances with different neighbor ethnic groups, and yet the logics of allegiance in terms of product complementarity remain (Platt 2010). Even if this territorial arrangement has almost disappear due to agrarian reforms, the interpretation of territory as a dynamic always changing scenario persists. This feature is really interesting to rethink the link between sovereignty and space, especially in a context of globalization. The *ayllu* is conceived as the organization of life, not only of political, economic or social human life, but of life in general, because it involves living spaces, because the *ayllu* is the expression that everything is related (Huanacuni 2010, 35), again, this is related to a human embedded in a living environment, the need to maintain equilibrium, returning to the point exposed in the previous paragraph.

If we are to think about the global in real global terms, we need to consider the fact that millions of people, most of them affected by colonization, or that are in contact with non-Western modern peoples, do live in-between worlds in their daily lives. So even though criticism refers to modernity, the idea is not to work against it, but to show that the pluriverse has always coexisted with it, even if this has not been recognized or accepted. The idea behind this argument is the one of partial connections or coexistence, otherwise we just perpetuate dichotomic (modern, non-modern) thinking (De la Cadena 2010). This is not an argument. The idea is not to advocate for a new ontological hegemony, but to eliminate any ontological hierarchy.

It is not only about conceiving a world where many worlds can fit, but also about the relation among those worlds, even those that are not human. In a one-world reality where separation rules, relational thinking becomes a key element to reconcile and reconnect what has been artificially detached. In order to achieve that goal, we need to step aside our modern metaphysics and think under the light of the tensions of alternative paths between ontologies and the way they reveal the world (Reddekop 2014, 182).

## Conclusion

A lot needs to be done besides just accepting different theoretical approaches to IR. To actually talk about difference in social sciences means to bring to discussion the ontological possibilities that we have at hand, especially when we are trying to understand the global. Methodological and epistemic discussions are important and pertinent, but the ontological one is key to actually open our minds to fully appreciate what *global* really means. Thinking about the world(s) in pluriversal terms is about imagining and apprehending, which is an intellectual challenge and an exercise of mental flexibility we are not used to, prepared or willing. Relational ontologies can teach us how to live and experience incommensurability, how to identify the connections to other worlds without the anxiety or the pride desire to embrace and know reality in absolute terms. If instead of focusing in the subject/object dichotomy we stress, for instance, on the relations between them, we can overcome our fear and reservations towards relativism, and become more versatile ontologically and epistemologically, thinking in dialogical terms.



As discussed here, the idea of one universe, one reality, one world, has become natural over time and under the shadow of many – sometimes violent, sometimes subtle – processes. This idea is nested in modern thought, which, as we illustrate, is one of many ways of telling and producing reality. Against it I argue in favor of a relational perspective that opens our eyes to the existence of the pluriverse.

That is why, when we think about the pluriverse, it includes modern Western ontologies, which complement and are interconnected, or better said, partially connected with the other world of other cosmovisions. In this spirit, defending relational thinking is not about rejecting what is modern. In fact, relationality is present in modern thinking and in modern life. There are very different worldviews in modern ontology, the problem is that, as said before, modern ontology works against other ontologies by pretending to be the only universal truth. Nor it is my purpose to suggest that the pluriverse approach is against modernity or opposed to it, or even to say that it is *better*; what needs to be stressed is that from the pluriversal perspective relationality becomes the core, which eventually means that it relates to modernity because it coexist with it, simultaneously but not absorbed by it.

The separation between the natural and social is a constructed reality. Relational ontologies see realities based on the union and the connection of many worlds, human, natural and spiritual. In doing so they make sense of reality differently, non-human entities are political agents with great impact in the human daily aspects of life. Just this consideration allows us to approach the global differently.

Drawing from the Andean worldview, this paper illustrates with some examples about conflict, territory and sovereignty, how pluriversal realities can reinvigorate the discussion in IR and maybe give it another -more inclusive- scope.

The goal is to try to connect this apparently incompatible ways of seeing realities. We acknowledge that this is a huge intellectual challenge and theoretical endeavor, that demands a tangling with humans and non-humans that will not always lead us to certainty, but surely to a more profound and comprehensive ability to narrate knowledge of other worlds. Relationality becomes the compass, the key tool to come with terms to the different alternative interconnections that facts, phenomena and ideas can offer us that at a first sight would be unlikely. In a context of political ontology, relational thinking offers tools to appreciate the real complexities of the global, as a constant negotiation of different and equally valid ways of imagining it.

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