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Water governance

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Abstract:

This essay is about water governance and relationality. It reflects on the questions that articulate this forum on Relational IR: what do relational theories of IR offer to the field and add to the debate about International Relations? What are the promises or limits of relational approaches, and how can or should discussion proceed? I narrate my personal story about exploring and experiencing relationality to offer some reflections and thoughts on these questions which are relevant not only for IR, but to the ways we engage reality. I illustrate the potential of relationality by referring to three dimensions where relationality provides with alternative thinking: the problem of ontological difference; the pluralization and diversification of ways of thinking and being; and the engagement with the other than other-than-human. These aspects are some among many others, but they announce opportunities, challenges, tensions, contradictions, and possibilities. In the end, the essay reveals not only a transformative experience but a very different approach to water governance providing the reader a general understanding of the alternative thinking derived from relational standpoints and the possibilities it opens to theorize IR and beyond.

Keywords: Water governance, relationality, relational cosmologies, Andean cosmologies

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Some years ago, I started a research project on water global governance. From a - more or less- conventional approach and with the understanding that water is a scarce resource, my goal was to analyse how the global agenda on water was built, what were the institutional approaches and, how they impacted local communities through international cooperation projects. I was especially interested in access to water after the “water war” that took place in Bolivia in 2000, but also in asking why some of these cooperation projects tended to fail after their initial implementation. After reviewing some reports and literature I learned that while international cooperation referred to water as a resource, an object, the local communities used a different language: they talked about breeding, nurturing, taking care after water as an other-than-human person.

In a casual conversation but with my research interest in mind, I remember asking Elena, the Aymara woman who helped raising me, what the word for water in Aymara is. She thought about it and did not reply immediately, she didn't know how or what to say. Visibly uncomfortable, her first answer was that she didn't remember. Then she told me that water was *uma* and that the same word ‘sometimes’ also means woman. Clearly tensioned, she kept trying to explain to me that there was not really a word for water but depending on what is happening, or what the water is doing, the expression would change. I also understood that what she was referring to was that Aymara is a relational language, all words and meanings constantly change depending on their relationship with the context. As a Bolivian, having grown up in contact with the Andean cosmologies (particularly the Aymara world), this did not surprise me because in these relational cosmologies water is considered a -rather sacred- living being, with agency and from which we all depend. Still, there I was trying to ‘capture’ water in a fix translatable word, and there she was trying to put in Western terms what water is from a relational standpoint.

I was socialized in a Western epistemic framework and my formal education was Western. Consequently, I assumed that those tensions regarding water were cultural and that could be 'resolved' later with a proper contextualization. I was taught that everything that has to do with the Andean world corresponds to myths, beliefs and legends, cultural difference. Relationality represented something that referred to the 'other', and the complex interactions, entanglements and mixed practices between Western traditions and indigenous customs could be addressed simply as 'syncretism' or hybridity. Life was translated into dichotomies and binary thinking.

In Bolivia, it is not necessary to be indigenous to carry out Andean practices or to be indigenous or mestizo to enter the modern world with a certain versatility, although never fully 'fitting in'. In my environment, rituals and customs of all kinds were always practiced, such as *ch'allas* (ceremonies of reciprocity with the Pachamama, to thank for our blessings, based on the act of *watering* the earth and other elements); leaving our ancestors their favourite food, -always water-, so that, when they come and visit us the night of All Saints; celebrating abundance during *Alasitas* by giving miniature gifts of everything we want to become real during the year²; and others associated with carnival as the festivities that connects worlds. So intertwined are these practices to Western ones that these interactions between Western and Andean worlds become part of an everyday experience. As a child, every time we returned from a day in the woods, by the river or in the flatlands, my mother would call my *ajayu* (spirit) because Nature often steals children's *ajayus*. She would do it as her mother, and grandmother had done. Many follow these practices out of habit, belief, or just in case. Shamans (*yatiris*) have a cooperative interaction with Christian priests in the way festivities take place, in negotiating spiritual affairs of the living and of spirits. Not only families, but also corporations and businesses, hire *yatiris* to perform blessings. Both indigenous healers and Western physicians oversee physical and

² The festivity of the Alasitas celebrates the Ekeko or the god of abundance. The legend is that the god carries with him all kinds of miniatures that if bought and blessed on January 24 at noon and given away, they become real throughout the year. At the fair it is sold from money, credit cards, cars, houses, to marriage certificates, property titles and others

emotional health. Indigenous or not, even atheists and agnostics find themselves practicing some rituals because of social ways of interaction that are part of the cultural and social performative repertoire. There are sectors in the city of La Paz where shops to buy technological devices such as cell phones and laptops are next to the shops where you can buy all the necessary ingredients to make an offering to different spiritual beings, and hire a shaman to perform the ceremony, both can be next of a Catholic church, next to solicitors' offices. This spatial coexistence of difference is a vivid reflex some superficial layers of the complex and yet somewhat fluid interaction of different worlds, because *sometimes the solicitor is also a shaman*.

For relational cosmologies like the Andean, reality is primary constituted by relations that pre-exist and shape entities and beings. Since relations are in constant change, in constant transformations, the realities and beings that they create are also in a continual co-becoming and co-constitution. Nothing occurs in isolation but in relation (that is why you cannot just name water without considering its interaction with specific contexts). The principles of complementarity and reciprocity account for an ethics of cosmic balance that constitutes the goal and nature of life. Therefore, it is impossible to think of reality constituted by isolated entities or in binary terms of either/or, for nothing exist without their complementary and opposite 'other'. The complementarity of opposite forces or of opposite relations is what generates life under a logic of both/and that exist in attitudes, actions, and behaviour: the duality between 'good' and 'bad' is of complementation, for things and actions are not good or bad but both. Life is the tension of opposite forces. This ambivalence is present in everything. As such, water can be a nurturing, refreshing being that brings life, but can also be destructive and lethal. Consequently, the 'human' is also shaped by relations to other dimensions or worlds that are in constant interaction.

Despite 'knowing' all of this, I did not realize how difficult and complex this is until the moment in which, from the Western theoretical frameworks that predominate in the social and natural sciences, I was not able to explain that deep disagreement between what existed as water at the international level (predominantly Western) and

what it means for local communities. The tension was evident: as for many people on this planet my everyday life blurs dichotomies and embraces relationality rather unproblematically, my scholarly mind saw the world differently. I had a moment of what Verran (2002) calls epistemic disconcertment, caused by a sensation of impossibility that has to do with the difficulty of making sense or understanding with the cognitive elements that we have at hand. All the theories that I knew, all the methodological tools that I thought to use did not help me to address the issue. I realized that what is at stake is something much more complex than the already known cultural clash between the Andean world and the modern world, this was an ontological tension between two different realities. It is a situation that does not have so much to do with disagreements regarding how to proceed in the implementation of projects, but with a problem in which two 'worlds' had a different ontological conception of what apparently is the same for both: water. I was in-between.

This unravelled a deeper concern about the ontological logics of colonization and power, water was just the tip of the iceberg (that is also made of water). Just a postcolonial position would not be enough to unsettle strong ontological assumptions that have, as Kurki (2020) has shown, specific origin in theological and Newtonian or atomistic cosmologies (based on the separation of beings/units/atoms that exist on their own), and have been universalized and naturalized through complex historical, social and political processes. Andean is not the only relational cosmology in the world, in fact the presence of relational cosmologies coexisting with the 'modern atomistic West'. Millions of people in the world live relational realities. As Blaney and Tickner(2017) argue, it was a question of bringing ontological difference in the conversation before even being able to analyse water governance. When what is real (ontology) is at stake, then what is real is political and can be contested. Blaser(2012) has referred to this as political ontology.

Before addressing water governance, I had to shift the starting point, go back to the point of understanding what relationality is and how it works. I realized that I was part

of that problem and I also needed to decolonize my mind and my way of approaching reality from dichotomic and atomistic lenses that impeded me to be more aware of those other worlds. I had to abandon the privilege position of “I know, you believe”, and like Faust, after negotiating with Mephistopheles in Goethe’s poem, accept that if I wanted to fully understand and learn, I had to let everything go. I needed to abandon previous preconceptions and assumptions about reality and start to learn, to know, to experience the relational reality that had been there all the time and that I was part of.

That messy, complex, intertwined set of entanglements that constitute reality takes place on daily basis. It is impossible to separate what is modern Western and what is not, and yet syncretism and hybridity do not account for the possibility that these scenarios offer for ontological versatility (moving between worlds), for not ‘fitting in’ constructed identity labels. In fact, like the relational Daoist yin-yang illustrates there is not dichotomy between West and Non-West for each is constituted by the other. And so, my research became a different project of learning how to tell the story of two interconnected worlds, in which water was still at the centre of my attention. For that I needed strong ideas, theories, arguments, findings from other social sciences, but also (both/and), from other skills. Strathern’s notion of partial connections (2004) partially and initially helped me to understand that -although there are interstices that connect different worlds and processes of developing the versatility to move across those connections-, that interaction never becomes a complete outcome (hybrid or syncretic). It is not possible to become fully Andean, fully western nor fully syncretic: our identities are in a constant flow, we are fractal beings. Like water, we can be contained, but that contention does not last, for like water we and our identities flow. Tsing (2015) has referred to this as contaminating diversity, relational, ever changing, without self-contained units. We are contaminated by our encounters, that change who we are and make ways for others. These interactions constitute realities, world.

I have always been part of a relational world that kept sending signals of relations, the interstices where there, but I was ill equipped to see them as other than myths, beliefs or cultural indigenous manifestations. I had to unlearn and to re-learn and know otherwise and to bring into the discussion the processes of interconnecting worlds, intersecting realities and that relationality was not the 'other' but part of who I was both in and outside academia. The fact that relationality blurs boundaries and binaries through logics that allow both/and possibilities, constitute a powerful way to address difference without exclusion (Trowsell *et al.*, 2020), difference as embracing the tension.

This has implications on the ways identity issues are addressed and how the so-called 'problem of difference' can be transformed. From Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010, 2015, 2018) I learned a relational way of understanding that versatility of moving between worlds and how fractal identities escape the binary logic synthesised in hybridity and syncretism, mestizo, and their binary predecessors (black/indigenous, and white). Relational being is always in constant transformation and co-becoming with different but that transformation is contingent, and identities can not only be determined in dichotomic terms or either/or but in terms of both/and. Rivera's use of the term *ch'ixi* or tainted expresses that possibility of *being in transformation* or in *latency*: water can be ice or steam according to context, its nature or molecular structure changes, but it is still water. A stone can be black and white without being grey, a piece of wood can be lit and at the same time is not fully burning. As the example of the Gestalt images, two different beings (for example the rabbit and the duck) can juxtapose, intertwine, and coexist constituting a third image. That however is not a fusion or merger, you can still identify the rabbit or the duck, but once you see both you cannot go back to just seeing one. The third image represents being in relation, or relational identity, it is present, but one needs to develop the awareness and sensitivity to see. This strongly resonates with Tsing idea of contamination (2015), Haraway's idea of kinship (2016), and Andalzúa's chicano mitáymitá (1987). All of them queer identities as relational, performative, unfixable

and versatile. For example, the lawyer as shaman, the shaman as lawyer, both symbolize different worlds and represent the existence and enforcement of different laws, these two worlds coexist relationally in one person.

With time, I realized that separation is not real, unless we make 'cuts' to try to focus and understand a specific phenomenon (Barad, 2007)³. This difference is constructed as two different realities and since then I have tried to learn how to identify and find the interstices that testify for the interconnections and interactions of worlds, but ultimately to realize that relations are what constitute reality. My Western atomistic world, that was once a comfort zone, had to be deeply contested, unsettled, queered and contaminated for me to understand the language and methods of *being with*.

I found commonalities and diversity in other relational approaches: feminist, queer, indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, post humanism, neo materialism, deep ecology and quantum mechanics have helped to engage in meaningful and strong arguments to understand realities in relational, and -why not- pluriversal ways. All of them taught me how to question binaries, how to think, learn and be *with*, and to contest categories that restrain and condition existence in very specific terms and ways. By now, I understand how relationality works and the processes of co-constitution, co-becoming change drastically who we are.

Relational approaches also offer an ethical framework that is not anthropocentric, that puts human in a larger scheme of things we are only a part of. Awareness and sensibility to talk about nurture, care, cultivation, and other emotional/relational actions as part por our political strategies and performative lexicon to be in and with the world and to engage with other than human beings (animals, plants and why not

³ Barad refers to this acting of trying to grasp relationality "agential cuts".

spirits and deities) in a more respectful and dialogic manner, as members of a larger society.

Relationality helps to navigate incommensurability and uncertainty of an always changing reality. Hutchings (2019) has observed that at the root of a pluriversal relational ethics can never be fully known, only practiced. We are not alone but held by visible and invisible set of connections that cushion uncertainty. Uncertainty stops being a place of fear and anxiety and becomes a dwelling space to be amazed, to learn, to be more aware constituting a fertile ground for reflection. This means giving up preconceptions, and instead slow down reasoning and start listening. This means giving up the obsession of mastery and control. As Donna Haraway says: good thinking comes in moments of speechlessness. Consequently, the uncertainty and incommensurability of relationality become spaces to dwell, spaces for good thinking. We can develop sensibilities and skills to better navigate uncertainty but also understand practices that constitute realities. We can learn to 'read' relationality as others have learned to listen to the signs we constantly get from other-than-human companions. Learn how to read the weather or behaviour like water currents (or water's temperament) not only engages us phenomenologically with our surroundings but can mean that we understand those manifestations as other-than-human agency. Andean cosmology offers the notion of *cosmopraxis*⁴ to better understand this. It refers to the experience of moving about multiple worlds as practiced by 'people' (including eventually, other-than-humans) and entails relational practices of co-participation in the cosmos as a simultaneous experience of being, while knowing, while doing, while feeling, while being. *Cosmopraxis* is a relational way of wording (Querejazu, 2021; Tickner and Querejazu, 2021).

Relational methods and relational knowledges also auspice attitudes to develop our awareness. By advocating for more emotional ways of knowing, together with

⁴ Cosmoexperience and cosmoliving are close synonyms.

rational, languages are in constant construction, and can be more open to experimental, curious, imaginative, creative, responsive, and responsible processes as valid to account for strong knowledge. This has created in me as a scholar a new sense of ethical and purpose for my research in IR, one that departs and arrives from amazement and uncertainty, and transforms my work more as 'crafting' (IR)(see Blaney and Trowsell, 2021) instead of rationalizing it. Relationality illustrates that no knowledge occurs in isolation, a paper, idea, article, argument, is not 'mine', but a result of collective co-creation, because I am also transformed by the words I read/write, the thoughts I think and listen to, the emotions I experience/cause. Because of all this process I have learnt about the importance of writing from the heart, not only because rationality and emotions are part of the same relation, but because doing things with care and love and responsibility not only opens space for affective experiences, but also affect and contribute to a rigorous and disciplined form of research(Ingold, 2021).

In that journey of unlearning and unknowing, I had many companions: thoughts and ideas of other authors and thinkers who I conversed with, by reading them or by talking with them. My teachers were many, human and other-than-human, and I began to be more aware of interaction with the cosmos, what surrounds me every day, natural forces, other-than-human beings, ancestral knowledges, peer reviewers. My debt to all of them is undeniable, for some of them showed me other ways of knowing and being (flowing), some other closed me doors (dams); some tested me and challenged me to go deeper or around, and like water, I had to find other ways to find other currents in my processes of sense-making; some came with me along the way; some found their own course, I found my own course.

In trying to "reply" to specific questions on *what relationality brings to IR* I am now in a similar position I put Elena once. What a relational lesson! As a scholar I am expected to provide concrete, apprehensible, verifiable answers, this time about relationality no less. The tension is there again, I acknowledge the importance of

providing answers that contribute to specific debates, to advance the discipline and strengthen the field, to accumulate or contest knowledge. But I also know that the answers I may provide, are possibly not what is expected. Not anymore. Like Elena, I don't feel like there are actual 'answers', but I can account for the happenings. This is not only about IR anymore, but about a larger experience of being in/with-connection in/with the worlds we inhabit.

However, I can say that there are clear paths or sets of relations that one can follow to understand what relationality brings to IR. This becomes clearer if we see relations as happenings, because relationality happens to us all the time. Relationality enables the conversation with other worlds, pluralizing our ontological lexicon, it provides tools both to do, learn, but also to undo, uncover, unlearn and to become familiar with ambiguity and ambivalence. By using my background and the transformative process I experienced with relational approaches I can say that relationality pluralizes, expands, disrupts, unsettles, and creates ways of knowing and being, and therefore can offer varied tools to IR. These processes of pluralization and disruption bring about more complexity and challenges, which account for political and not only romanticized ways to approach relationality. But unquestionably, relationality highlights the importance of instinctive and intuitive ways of acting in life, and in doing so develops awareness of the connectivity impacting our ways of worlding and transforming reality.

Focusing on relations as the constitutive element of life relationality transforms our theorizing and thinking in ways that allow to think of global politics as non-anthropocentric, to engage and commit with other-than-human dimensions as part of the political realm. It demands the development and learning of different skills and awareness to 'observe' and engage realities otherwise. As Shilliam (2015) has affirmed, it is a powerful decolonial tool, that in this case has allowed me to understand Elena's world and to provide a whole different approach to water and

water governance. It has helped me to understand my world and to decolonize my mind. But being an unquestionable decolonial tool, it is not limited to a postcolonial agenda.

I am aware that this seems perhaps too abstract, but there is a growing body of literature available now that illustrates all of this with cases and theorization from around the world. Here I have used ontological conflicts, difference and other than human agency to exemplify dimensions of analysis and possible paths relationality opens using my Andean background.

I am aware of the difficulties and challenges relationality brings. Many do not feel socialized in a relational world and tend to feel this is too incommensurable and somewhat relativistic, complex, unproven, or still belongs to the realm of myths and beliefs of less civilized peoples. There are complexities derived from that: difficulties about how to engage and cultivate the sensibilities do develop the awareness is one, and although there is no rule this makes it still very difficult to talk about some aspects integrated to relationality such as 'how to do science', how to understand embodiment, agency, and other categories in a dynamic and in constant transformation. I believe, however, that because of privileging paths to modernization, secularism, anthropocentrism, we 'modern humans' have forgotten how to be in/with/of connections we are part of and define us. The sensibilities and capacity to connect are part of us, latent and sometimes not seen or felt at all, but we can remember how to trace back those paths.

There is still much to explore and find out, and some aspects and concerns that challenge analysis based on relationality; among them are how to navigate constant transformation, becoming and 'incommensurability'; explore the drawbacks and downsides of relationality; the ethics of balance and reciprocity and how it interplays with other ethical frameworks, and discuss the logics of power that involve other pluriversal dimensions that relationality opens among human, natural, cosmical,

physical worlds (or power and relationality in more general terms). The scholar in me is certain that the more contributions, more theorization, more 'cases' are explored and analysed, the more intriguing all this becomes, and I look forward to seeing how this will impact IR.

Relationality has changed me and my work. I can see that it has been the same for others as well, reading Milja's essay for this special issue and talking to her while walking around Aberystwyth during pandemic times, are aspects of that transformation. Other colleagues have also been deeply affected, inspired, or unsettled. Engaging relationality is a transformative experience regardless of whether one makes of it an object of study or a philosophy of life. Using my personal experience and a different narrative allows me to illustrate how much I needed to engage with relationality and learn from it to provide space for other worlds to become possible in their own terms and discover its transformative capacity both to theorize and imagine world politics.

It feels like I have come a long way, and at the same time it feels like it is only the beginning, that there is so much more to un/learn. I find myself in what could be called a 'Gestalt experience', once you see the interconnection of everything it is very difficult to go back and see reality as composed of units that are isolated and detached. Now I find myself in the position of asking *how it is possible to have a non-relational knowledge/approach, sense of being?* I have too many questions and very few 'specific answers'. This is fine, because relationality is not linear it reflects better cyclical processes where ends are beginnings and beginnings are ends. Like water, always changing, always coming and going, it reminds us of and shows us what this is all about. That is the governance of water.

As Tsing (2015) argues, we are not used to stories where humans are not the protagonists. Along the text I have insinuated how much we are like water, made of it, and therefore governed by it, relationality allows me to take another step to tell the

story of water as the protagonist of governance. We are made of water and water is who we are but acknowledging water's protagonism is not only to acknowledge that we come from it, but that we can intentionally be more like water and submit to her teachings and learn from her rules. Some years ago, I started a research project on water governance, today I have relationally learned from water, how to flow, subtle and gentle enough as -within time- to shape hearts and minds, strong enough as to break from ontological assumptions. Water always finds its way. That is the governance of water.

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