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## **Decolonizing the international: towards multiple emotional worlds**

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This Forum addresses a glaring paradox in International Relations (IR). That is, world politics daily exercises emotions in practice; yet, the field of IR lacks any formal recognition of them as theory. Every leader from ancient to modern times knows one, fundamental truth about emotions and politics: each powers the other. Mainstream IR itself, Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker (2014, 491–514) note, originates in and perpetuates certain emotions – chief among them, fear. But the field rarely theorizes emotion as a concept, theory, or method – until now.

Neta Crawford and Jonathan Mercer help us make a breakthrough. They demonstrate that (1) nothing and no one escapes emotions, especially in politics, and (2) thinking that we could do so only serves to strengthen existing power relations. In response, Crawford aims to reverse the usual emotional order in world politics by institutionalizing empathy to reduce fear. Mercer, in turn, offers a theoretical foundation to understand the socio-political dimensions of emotions.

My commentary aims to supplement these efforts. I too look at links between individual and collective emotions but I do so by adding an element that is currently missing from Mercer and Crawford: an explicit engagement with the emotional legacy of colonialism. Emotions and emotional meaning are bound by culture and, by extension, a set of associated hierarchies. A postcolonial take on emotions explicitly seeks to break free of such hierarchies.

The main point I advance in this short commentary is that a postcolonial approach highlights the need to recognize multiple co-existing emotional worlds. Harnessing this sense of multiplicities is both theoretically significant and of practical consequence. I will illustrate the issues at stake by drawing on a ‘worldist model of dialogics’ that I have recently developed (Ling 2014a). This model offers opportunities to appreciate the hybrid emotional dimensions of world politics: the multiple legacies of thinking, doing, being, and relating that are normally not appreciated in Eurocentric scholarship.

## The colonial roots of emotional politics

I begin with a few short remarks about how IR has become flat, singular, and hegemonic in its treatment and neglect of emotions. The postcolonial scholar Ashis Nandy (1988) elaborated more than two decades ago on the colonial politics behind the anti-emotional attitude of IR. Pax Britannica, he said, propagated an ‘undeveloped heart’ to stamp upon colonialism and imperialism a sense of power and legitimacy that was linked not just to political and economic factors, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to cultural and psychological ones. A type of hyper-rational and hyper-masculine state arose in response. It denigrated anything smacking of the feminine, including a sense of welfare and compassion for all, natives and aliens alike. The ‘white man’s burden’ thus raped and pillaged the Scots, Irish, and Welsh as much as large swathes of North America, Asia, Australia/New Zealand, and Africa.

Colonizers and colonized alike came to accept and legitimize these anti-emotional values and placed them at the center of how to organize societies and conduct politics, both domestic and international. Colonizers have done so to maintain their status ‘on top’ while the colonized appropriated the same hypermasculine discourse to assert that they, too, are men. Mainstream IR remains influenced by these emotional legacies of colonialism. We see them in numerous rational models of analyzing inter-state power politics (Waltz 1979) or in public discourses that define the international more colloquially as ‘winners’, like the United States, who resemble Mars; as ‘subordinate’ partners, like Europe, who approximates Venus (Kagan 2002); and as losers, who do not count at all.

## Inevitable multiplicities

To decolonize IR, we must not only recognize the role of emotions but also treat them as repositories of multiplicity. There are multiple emotional worlds and they need to be recognized and appreciated as such.

Take a recent example: negotiations between the United States and Iran over the latter’s nuclear ambition. Two influential commentators (Mousavian and Shabani 2013: A21) draw attention to the consequences of the US failure to appropriately appreciate the cultural–emotional priority that Iran places on *aberu* (‘face saving’) over *maslahat* (‘expediency’ or ‘self-interest’). ‘Iranians won’t put expediency above dignity’, they claim. ‘The only way to stop the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program from spinning out of control is to offer the Islamic Republic a face-saving way out’.

This recommendation highlights the need to acknowledge multiplicities at numerous levels. There is the tactical diplomatic need to understand the

emotional world of the other. But that world too, any world, really, is bound up in multiplicities. The history and sophistication of Persian, a language of ancient politics as well as ancient poetry, would suggest nuance in usage and meaning. Are there not circumstances when *maslahat* could slip into *aberu*? Or one overlaps with the other through a pun or metaphor? Linguistic shifts and nuances highlight the recessive and dominant strains in any tradition. Note, for example, radicalized desire, whereby private feelings and behavior constantly disrupt public standards and rules (Fanon 1967).

Emotional multiplicities are inevitable. Any kind of approach that either suppresses the diverse world of emotions or assigns them a single meaning is unable to understand the complexity of political factors that transgress cultures and national boundaries. Social emotions in world politics invariably involve and engender trans-subjectivity. Even the formation of a national identity requires transcendence of local, individual emotions to create a collective sociopolitical order, whether through ‘print capitalism’ (Anderson 2006) or civilizational/imperial competition (Suzuki 2009). No single actor, not even the almighty Leviathan, can control the results of collective, social interaction.

### Multiple worlds of emotion

In an attempt to acknowledge and understand these emotional multiplicities, I have developed a model of ‘worldist dialogics’. Drawing on Daoism and other non-western conceptions of self and society, I employ this model to investigate the interstices of various world orders and how they produce hybrid, créole, and *mélange* legacies in how we think, act, be, and relate (Agathangelou and Ling 2009; Ling 2014a, 2014b; see also Pieterse 2003).

A worldist model asks: (1) Who is saying what to whom and why?, (2) Where are alternative discourses coming from and what do these mean?, and (3) How can I act ethically and with compassion? (see Ling 2014a, 2014b). Such an approach explores the power relations behind social forms and the language and emotions that underpin them. It asks, for example, why *aberu* (‘face-saving’) would apply where *maslahat* (‘expedience’) would not? *Aberu/maslahat* may be a dominant practice in Iran but also exist recessively in Egypt, India, China, and Russia. What, then, are the consequences of adhering to one emotional world alone and subordinate a recessive resonance like *aberu/maslahat* to a dominant regime of liberal-legalism?

Appreciating multiple worlds of emotions offers a way out. In a world of rapid globalization, emotions intersect cross-culturally as much as financial transactions and the flow of information. Being is always interbeing, for there is already an Other within the Self and a Self within the Other. Taking our example of *aberu/maslahat*, we may find that the dynamic between ‘face-saving’ and ‘expedience’ operates as much within liberal legalism as liberal

legalism exists discursively in *aberu/maslahat*. From such mutual embeddedness, dialogue across multiple worlds of emotions can facilitate understanding and even solve conflicts in a way a dominant single narrative cannot.

## Conclusion

Taking emotions seriously involves decolonizing our minds and our world politics, away from a single hypermasculine model that banishes all that is feminine and emotional, towards a cross-cultural model of understanding that accepts multiplicities, including multiple emotional worlds.

Such a 'worldist model of dialogics' extends what Mercer and Crawford identify as social emotion in world politics. The model appreciates how emotions are not just multiple but also transgress cultures and reconstitute politics within and across bordered worlds. Highlighting these transnational forces strengthens Mercer's objective by showing how the social operates in and cross-multiple emotional worlds. Crawford, in turn, is pushed closer to the goal of institutionalizing empathy through the ability to harvest multiple empathetic sources from across different emotional worlds. Several larger implications follow.

First: social emotions involve more than feelings or affect; they also convey traditions, philosophies, and worldviews. Language codifies the legacies and connotations of emotion through narrative. Understanding one requires knowledge of the others.

Second: social emotions do not require embodiment. Emotions have a normative and spiritual dimension not captured by physicality alone. History shows that our multiple worlds of emotion intersect across national and other boundaries more often than we realize.

Third: emotions research must take the state out of its conceptual black box. Contending narratives constantly give meaning to national institutions. No one set of emotions pertains to the state all the time; rather, multiple emotions tied to multiple national subjectivities juggle for attention. Politics aims to make sense of these contending subjectivities and their narratives.

Fourth: social emotions are inevitably intertwined with power. 'Local moral orders' or 'feeling rules' shape 'emotional regimes' of who gets to feel and express what. But the reverse applies as well: certain power relations sanction certain emotional regimes. Conventions of everyday life permit elite men to indulge in tantrums as a way of demonstrating leadership. Women and non-elite men acting in the very same way would, by contrast, be seen as 'hysterical' or 'out of control'. The same holds true in world politics: a global hegemon like the United States can declare war on a state (Iraq) based on concocted charges and contrary to both international

law and votes at the United Nations. Yet, mainstream views still see the United States as an icon of an ‘open and rules-based’ liberal world order (Ikenberry and Slaughter 2006; Buzan 2010; Clinton 2011). There is no way that smaller states can embark on the same kind of illegal actions and receive emotional approval from the world community.

Taken together, such postcolonial takes on emotions make us realize that behind Mercer’s and Crawford’s identification of social emotion is a bigger political task: emancipation. Bringing emotions to the theoretical fore opens up opportunities to throw off the shackles of colonial politics. No longer is the world of IR hostage to an ‘undeveloped heart’ and its singular, flat hegemony of fear. Instead, IR itself can serve as a site of multiple social emotions that allow for new ways to celebrate freedom, joy, and community.

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