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Enacting the pluriverse in the West

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Enacting the pluriverse in the West: contemplative activism as a challenge to the disenchanting one-world world

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Abstract

Within IR, scholars are starting to consider difference on the level of ontology rather than epistemology. Other *worlds* are introduced into IR's political *pluriverse*, however, these are often encountered in faraway places, thereby playing into the colonial narrative that ontological difference does not exist in the 'West'. This paper introduces another *real* from within the 'disenchanted North' that is shaped by contemplative activists: people using contemplation as a form of protest. An engagement with contemplative activism challenges *our* commonly held assumptions about what contemplation and social change *are*, thereby undermining the institutions of 'science' and 'religion' underlying the *universe*. It argues that the project of political ontology in IR should consist of two moves: drawing in other, in particular spiritual, realities into the political imaginations of IR *and* challenging the ontological assumptions underpinning concepts. Consequently, it suggests that the pluriverse in IR should be a methodological rather than an ontological commitment.

Keywords

Pluriverse, contemplative activism, spirituality, one-world world, uncanny, political ontology

Introduction

Difference – or the recognition that people go about living their lives differently – is frequently placed on the level of worldview, or epistemology. It rests on a single reality doctrine, the modern understanding that nature is unitary and that beliefs about nature are

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plural. Such a single reality perspective is based on the ontological separation of nature and culture which underpins many Western discourses of science (Escobar, 2020; Latour, 1993; Viveiros de Castro, 1998). This single reality doctrine is beginning to be challenged both in and outside the discipline of International Relations (IR; Blaney and Tickner, 2017; Blaney and Trowsell, 2021; FitzGerald, 2022; Hutchings, 2019; Querejazu, 2016, 2021; Reiter, 2018b; Tickner and Querejazu, 2021). Critique has focussed on how alternative ontologies are reduced to merely different epistemological positions of what people *perceive* reality to be (Law and Lin, 2010). The single reality doctrine or the *one-world world* hollows out and extinguishes alternative realities. This has predominantly happened through the colonial project and two prime institutions of modernity, 'religion' and 'science', through which the West has granted itself the right to define 'the world' as singular (Mignolo, 2018; Rojas, 2016).

To decolonize our thinking, critics have suggested that we need to begin to undo the one-world world by conceptualizing difference not as epistemological (different views on a single nature) but rather as ontological, as different conceptions and enactments of *what is real*. Encountering difference ontologically is in that sense political, not just because (international) politics often involves ontological struggles over the nature of reality (i.e. conflicts involving disputes about 'what exists', Strathern, 2018), it also challenges the colonial, 'modern' project through which Western realities are turned into *the* reality (Blaney and Tickner, 2017). Emerging from a convergence between Science and Technology Studies (STS), Anthropology, political ecology, decolonial theory and post-humanist philosophy, what is shaping up in the social sciences, and arguably also in IR, is a scholarly project of political ontology, treating questions of diverging ontological assumptions as a 'politicoconceptual problem' (Blaser, 2013). In short, instead of reducing reality to a singularity – a *universe* – that others have multiple perceptions on, scholars have suggested that we can study the creation of a multitude of worlds: a world of many worlds or a *pluriverse* (De la Cadena and Blaser, 2018; Hutchings, 2019; Law, 2015; Querejazu, 2016; Reiter, 2018b).

In this paper, I draw on the empirical example of contemplative activism to make two contributions to the debate on political ontology in IR. Contemplative activists respond to global challenges such as terrorism, climate change or conflict by using contemplation as a form of changemaking. In other words, social action becomes a form of spirituality, and spirituality a form of social action. I argue, first, that contemplative activism decenters the 'West' as a homogeneous ontological sphere in academic debates on the pluriverse. Second, by showing that contemplative activism inspires a reconceptualization of what social change, contemplation and even politics *are* in IR, I argue that the pluriverse should be a methodological, rather than an ontological, concern for IR.

The available literature on multiple ontologies, both in IR and the broader social sciences, focusses on the creation of indigenous worlds outside of what is commonly perceived as the dominant 'West', particularly in relation to Amerindian and Aboriginal cosmologies (Blaser, 2013; Burman, 2019; De la Cadena, 2015; Querejazu, 2016; Salmond, 2014; Verran, 2021; Viveiros de Castro, 1998). It generally seems to be easier to think of earth beings and ghosts mattering politically in faraway places than at the 'West's' own doorstep (Fernando and Harding, 2020). Such an approach risks externalizing strangeness and difference to locations outside the 'West', thereby only subscribing

to the imagined *universal*, secular and homogeneous nature of Western, colonial reality (Amit, 2000). Some scholars outside IR have therefore started to consider alternative worlds within the ‘West’ (Candea, 2011; Escobar, 2018b; Law, 2015), precisely because, as a decolonial practice of knowledge production, engagements with the pluriverse should also challenge what counts as real *in* the ‘West’, to undermine the homogeneity of the colonial single reality doctrine. In particular, these engagements should consider the non-dominant ontologies that are enacted by spiritual groups, as colonization has not only erased embodied experiences of spiritual realities overseas but also in European societies. As we will come to see, focusing on contemplative activism as a form of reality-making challenges the modern institutions of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ on which the one-world world is built.

Second, I suggest that to advance the project of multiple realities in IR, it is not enough to simply draw in other worlds to our knowledge production practices. An engagement with contemplative activism from a pluriversal perspective not only introduces another world but also challenges *our* commonly held assumptions about what contemplation, social change and even international politics, *are*. Following Blaser (2014), I, therefore, subsequently suggest that the decolonial project of undoing the single reality doctrine in IR comprises two steps: the first step is drawing out other worlds in our scholarly work, the second step involves making these other worlds the starting point of our theoretical and conceptual explorations of *what things are*. Through my engagement with contemplative activism, I show how a move away from the level of belief (i.e. activists *believe* contemplation provokes social change) into another reality (in which *contemplation provokes social change*) requires an active reconceptualization of both important concepts (i.e. peace, interconnection, contemplation, social change) and international politics itself. As I show, for *contemplativists* international politics is non-separational, nondual and prefigurative). Contemplation shapes a reality in which states, individuals and ‘nature’ are not separate individual entities but arise as nondual. Politics no longer is consciously ‘done’ or enacted, but rather shaping the conditions under which experiences of nonduality might occur becomes political, as these experiences are precisely signaling or prefiguring social change.

By provoking such reconceptualizations of *what things are*, I argue the pluriverse becomes a methodological device that allows IR to continuously decolonize its own ontological assumptions, as multiple worlds get to be explored and expressed in, through and as our texts. Inspiring us to do so over and over again, the pluriverse becomes not a ‘new’ ontological commitment that substitutes the universe (thereby only re-instating an ultimate ‘real’ to which no exceptions can be made), but rather a methodological device that centralizes the question of *what it is* that is allowed to exist politically (or rather, what exists becomes a political question). The pluriverse as a methodological device allows us to encounter the limits of the political yet requires us to never quite settle on what ‘international politics’ is prior to our interrogations. Such a methodological commitment thus has implications for *what* we produce knowledge about as ‘ontologies’ are no longer found ‘out there’ for us to study. It requires letting go of the assumption that IR ‘has an ontology’ or a set object of study (‘international politics’) and instead provokes a deep inquiry into what things (get to) exist and ‘who’ or ‘what’ get to be the objects of our interrogations.

Challenging the single reality doctrine: undoing the one-world world

Engagements with difference were up until recently mostly placed on the plane of epistemology, but lately scholars have considered that people who live their lives differently do not just do so in terms of ‘culture’ or ‘beliefs’ but also in terms of being (or ontology): they actively shape other worlds. In the last decade or so, multiple authors have argued that an engagement with the problem of difference in international politics has to revolve around a recognition that ‘worlds’ are grounded in different kinds of knowledge (Agathangelou and Ling, 2009; Blaney and Tickner, 2017; Querejazu, 2016). Distinct ways of knowing reality are to be found within specific and diverse ways of being across the globe, which consequently give rise to a plurality of economic, political and social worlds in which people experience life *differently*. Agathangelou and Ling (2009) have developed the concept of ‘worldism’ to describe such an orientation. It ‘presents world politics as a site of multiple worlds. These refer to the various and contending ways of being, knowing and relating [. . .] [that] histories, languages, myths and memories institutionalize and embody [. . .]’ (Agathangelou and Ling, 2009: 85).

Whereas notions such as worlding and worldism are essential in getting at difference from an epistemological point of view, these concepts, critics argue, nevertheless do not get at difference on the level of ‘what is’. Blaney and Tickner (2017) argue that this is because these concepts affirm the existence of *one* natural world against which these worlding practices are taking place.¹ Against the background of a single reality, ‘worlding’, or other epistemological signifiers of difference (including culture), can only go so far in shedding light on how difference shapes particular conditions of existence. It limits the coordinates within which difference may arise into a single reality. The idea that reality is made up of multiple intersecting worlds can be easily dismissed as a nice (cultural) story *about* reality (Law, 2015: 127). Even when we assume that reality is socially constructed, Blaney and Tickner (2017) argue, and that worldviews are often rooted in specific ontologies, ‘we customarily fall short of grasping the full performative effects of such alternative worldings, namely the existence of multiple worlds’ (p. 298).

According to Law (2015), this single reality doctrine, or the one-world world as he calls it, ‘[. . .] carries on by itself, people do not *perform* it. It is *outside* us and we are *contained* inside it’ (p. 126). It results in the modern, common sense understanding that nature (or matter) is unitary and beliefs (of the mind) about nature are plural. As Blaney and Tickner (2017) argue, the single reality doctrine is pervasive in modern practices of knowledge production and ‘hollows out, if not extinguishing altogether alternative realities, confirming the claims of numerous scholars that *science* is central to the colonial project and is indeed a form of colonial power’ (p. 296). The parochial, ‘Western’ distinction of one nature/multiple cultures succeeded in becoming global, thereby exporting not just a one-world world, but also the institution of ‘modern Western science’ with which it is intricately bound up (Seth, 2021).

‘Modern Western science’ constructs the world as existing separately or distinct from human behaviour and society. After the ‘scientific revolution’, nature and humans were no longer cut of the same cloth (as in earlier, predominantly Aristotelian conceptions of knowledge) but marked separate spheres of being and logics of knowing (Seth, 2021). In

this ‘disenchanted’ world, there are ‘no mysterious, incalculable forces at play, but rather one can, in principle, master all things by calculation’ (Asprem, 2014: 33). Consequently, meaning and purpose were no longer to be found in the natural world, and reason triumphed over superstition (Reiter, 2018c: 3). Knowledge needed to be secular, yet the mechanistic view of nature supported the advance of an omnipotent, nominal Creator to loom in the background of human relations (Gillespie, 2009). As nature and humans were no longer manifested by a single ordering or a divine logic that could be influenced by rituals or magic, religion became institutionalized as an internal state of mind, as a matter of belief, cognition and intellect (Asprem, 2014; Styers, 2004; Von Stuckrad, 2014). Scientists could thus be devout believers, *but* gods, spirits, the magical and the uncanny were deemed to have no place in either religion or scientific explanation and were banned to the realm of the superstitious (Seth, 2021).²

At odds with the Enlightenment presuppositions of knowledge (which, as Seth (2021) argues, also undergird the discipline of IR), the ‘occult’, ‘magic’ and ‘superstition’ consequently proved to be particularly valuable concepts and lived experiences against which the project of ‘modern Western science’ and the one-world world could be established, particularly in the overseas territories and colonies (Hanegraaff, 2014; Styers, 2004). As the European imperial project took shape, monotheistic religion and secular science could be posited over and against indigenous practices and realities (Styers, 2004). The indigenous ‘lack’ of religion was coupled with ‘the absence of other defining human features’ that could ‘distinguish them from the beasts that perish’ – creating the political space to deny indigenous peoples human rights or entitlement to the land on which they lived (Chidester, 1996: 14). In other words, science and religion – undone from magical elements – shaped a configuration of the human against which other societies and cultures were measured.³ Notions of the uncanny played a central role in demarcating the bounds of proper religion, scientific knowledge and who or what counts as ‘human’; they became prime indexes of the ‘nonmodern’ and the ‘nonwestern’.

Rooted in the institutions of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ that originated in what is perceived as the Global North, the one-world world is thus transported through the colonial project by the ‘North’ to parts of the ‘South’ (Law, 2015).⁴ Part of the project of colonial and capitalist modernity is that it grants itself the right to define ‘the world’ as singular (Rojas, 2016). Engaging ontological difference is therefore also about paying attention to the ‘coloniality of power’ through which worlds arise, recognizing that not all worlds are equal. In other words, as Blaney and Tickner (2017) argue,

difference is *not* about engaging across perspectives on or in a single world. Rather it is about struggling and working to craft encounters across ontological difference and recognizing the power at play in practices that convert Western realities into *the* reality and denote ‘other’ realities to differing representations of the world the colonizers have made. (pp. 298–299)

However, the singularity of the one-world world did not just destroy other ways of knowing and being ‘overseas’; non-modern worlds, in particular spiritual ways of being, have also been eroded in Western contexts (Reiter, 2018a: 314). Law (2015) therefore argues that the practice of decolonizing the one-world world also has questions to address in the ‘North’: ‘Single-reality practices are endlessly being done in daily practices of Northern

life. But even in the North we have a choice' (p. 128). As Candea (2011) puts it, any move to take other ontologies seriously should crucially involve refraining from deciding who experiences them or where – we can find practices of other-world making 'at home' in the 'North', or somewhere else. 'There is always more difference within', in what we 'simply thought was "us"' (Candea, 2011: 150). Perhaps we can find traces of other ontologies, not 'only amongst those who live in the shadow of the liberal diaspora in distant lands, but also among those of us inhabiting the densest liberal worlds', Escobar (2018b: 103) suggests.

This seems to be easier said than done, however; even today important studies of the uncanny in pluriversal literature are mostly located outside of the 'West'. Given that the one-world world is a Western, colonial invention firmly rooted in the presuppositions of modern science and religion, it comes as no surprise that it is somehow easier to imagine other worlds to occur outside of the 'North'. It seems that in IR we are often more comfortable 'othering' strangeness, exoticizing alterity and making it familiar as part of our explanations of 'fields' beyond the 'West' (Amit, 2000; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Statements in academic work such as 'they believe mountains have spirits' often imply that *we* know it to not be true, and serve to demarcate a hierarchy of 'fields': the further away, the *stranger*. In a colonizing move, it is generally uncomplicated (for 'Northern' researchers) to consider mountains to have spirits when they are placed in faraway places, yet it becomes a lot more difficult to consider different realities closer to home (Fernando and Harding, 2020). Mountain spirits might have political agency in the Andes, but an 'energy of peace flowing through the whole of Amsterdam' that contemplative activists experience as having political significance is 'crazy', as some of my academic colleagues have remarked when I presented my fieldwork at conferences or workshops.

In an attempt to undo the single reality doctrine, we might treat statements about the world not as beliefs about a unitary nature delimiting the coordinates within which difference might show up – for example, 'they *believe* mountains have spirits' – but as statements giving rise to an ontologically plural and fragmented reality itself (Law and Lin, 2010), a reality (among many) in which *mountains have spirits* (or *a flow of love passes through Amsterdam*). Practicing a decolonial stance towards difference entails that experiences of reality – what Law (2015) calls 'matters of reals' (p. 127) – cannot be reduced to matters of belief, 'superstition' or representation. Taking such statements seriously allows us to (re-)enchant IR, not simply by bringing other dimensions such as spirits, magic or the mystical into our knowledge production practices but also, as Harvey (2013) argues, by 'moving beyond the duality "you believe/we know"' (p. 148).

Moving beyond this duality requires a rethinking of IR's concepts, as it is precisely where our conceptual registers hit their limits that interesting opportunities arise to offer people 'ontological self-determination' (Viveiros de Castro, 2003) and to rethink *what things are*. Blaser (2014) therefore asserts that taking ontological difference seriously consists of two moves. The first move highlights the existence of multiple ontologies; the second involves including one's own ontological assumptions in the analysis. Holbraad and Pedersen illustrate this point with the example of the Maori gift exchange, in which gifts are returned because they contain within them the spirit of the donor (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 1–4; Mauss, 2002). One could point out that in this instance the

distinction between ‘things’ and ‘people’ does not apply, or that they are continuous with each other. But, they wonder, what are ‘people’ and ‘things’ when they are ‘continuous’ with each other? Surely, when we commonly think about ‘things’ and ‘people’, they are not continuous but indeed separated, and a ‘gift’ is not ‘a spirit’. What would ‘things’ or ‘people’ have to be in order to be a part of each other? What is a gift when it contains the spirit of the donor? It begs, they purport, for an ontological reconceptualization of what a gift, ‘things’ or ‘people’ might be. In other words, the pluriverse is not just a decolonial practice that introduces other worlds into the discipline of IR, but also a methodological commitment to rethinking the discipline’s own ontologies when we encounter realities that hit the limits of what we thought we knew. The pluriverse in that sense becomes a methodological device that allows IR to continuously pluralize its own ontological commitments.

As a decolonial, political encounter, I suggest that IR should start to inquire into ontological multiplicity in what is commonly perceived as the Western world, particularly by engaging with the superstitious Other of ‘science’ and ‘religion’. The next section therefore introduces contemplative activism as a reality-shaping practice along Blaser’s two-step process. It shows how a move away from the level of belief (i.e. activists *believe* contemplation provokes social change) into another reality (in which *contemplation provokes social change*) requires an active reconceptualization of our concepts (i.e. peace, interconnection, contemplation and social change) and inspires a spiritual, nondual politics. It illustrates, in other words, that it is precisely where our own assumptions about what things are in IR (i.e. contemplation is not a form of activism) hit their limits that possibilities arise to ontologically pluralize our academic understanding of reality/ies.

Introducing another world from within the ‘West’: contemplative activism

‘Meditate for Peace at the Arms Fair’ (Wake Up London, 2017), ‘Meditation Flashmob to offer peace to our cities and the world’ (Bell, 2014; Pen, 2014), ‘Yoga for Change’ (Uplift, 2018), ‘The Mindful Changemakers Summit’ (Lesser, n.d.), a ‘Peaceful loving walk for Mother Earth’ (Plum Village, 2019), ‘Silent Rebellion’ (Extinction Rebellion Cambridge, 2019) and a ‘mindfulness practice and study circle: “How to be an anti-racist”’ (2019) – these are just some of the events you could attend as a contemplative activist. Contemplative practices are increasingly used as a form of protest and as a response to global challenges such as war, terrorism, the arms trade, climate change and racial injustice. My engagement with *contemplactivism* in this article is based on fieldwork undertaken in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Belgium between 2018 and 2020 as part of my PhD project, where I visited and participated in over 10 events where people would engage in contemplative activities – such as meditation, yoga, mindfulness, sitting in silence, deep listening and sharing circles – as a response to international issues.⁵ I adopted an interpretive methodology and ethnographic methods during this fieldwork, such as participant observation and relational interviewing, that feed into what I have elsewhere called a methodological practice of *thoughtful observation* (Klein Schaarsberg, 2021).

Contemplative activists are convinced that reality changes as they come to experience it more deeply through silence, meditation, yoga or other contemplative ways of being.⁶ Even though we commonly do not understand contemplation and activism to be the same thing, *contemplativists* change themselves and the world by exemplifying another way of being that is founded on an embodied, ineffable experience of contemplation. Contemplative activists purport that change needs to occur first and foremost within people, and that current ecological and social crises are predominantly spiritual ones. Or, as it was put during a retreat called ‘Radical Wellbeing: Mindful Living for a Better World’, ‘everything that is wrong out there (the outside world) is probably also wrong in “here” (right where you are)’. Practicing contemplation, then, is not considered to be a typical disengagement from broader social issues, but rather a technique to reconnect with oneself, others and the world in a radically different manner. In other words, contemplation practised collectively exemplifies a changed reality; contemplation simultaneously becomes a spiritual and a changemaking practice. As I will show in this section, through contemplation my interlocutors experience themselves *as* peaceful, *as* interconnected and both themselves and the world *as* transformed.

Rooted in modern understandings of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ as outlined earlier, the conceptual registers at my disposal limit me in understanding contemplation as a form of changemaking. Inner, mystical experiences that alter outer reality resemble a magical constellation in which humans interact with the ‘natural’ order of reality. Some *contemplativists* are therefore convinced that ‘in the Middle Ages we would be burned at the stakes’. Being pushed into the realm of ‘religion’, contemplation nowadays has connotations of quietism, of a private spirituality, a retreat from social and political life into the personal sphere. When brought into contact with public discourse, it is often considered to be an expression of capitalist spirituality that supports neoliberal power structures rather than bringing about social change (Carrette and King, 2005; Jain, 2015; Purser, 2019). We assume the two – contemplation and social action – to be ‘a *disjunction*’, as if one has to ‘choose *either* spirituality *or* practical action, interior life *or* life in the world, theory *or* praxis, religion *or* politics, individual *or* social transformation’ (Burke, 2002: 123). Staying within a one-world framework that facilitates such divisions, I would be tempted to regard *contemplativists* as ‘crazy’. Can I challenge the one-world world and its underlying premises of ‘religion’ and ‘science’, not by considering that ‘my interlocutors *believe* contemplation leads to social change’ but by investigating the world that emerges (one that is peaceful, interconnected and transformed) when *contemplation leads to social change*?

Silence, peace and words that ‘break the magic’

In my encounters with contemplative activism, peace does not emerge as a material, outer condition but rather as an inner experience that can be cultivated through contemplation. The quest for peace as marked by an inner experience is ‘the principle of all spiritualities and religions’. By drawing upon such a shared principle, contemplative activism is thought to connect people regardless of their religion or culture by generating peace. As the organizer of a mass meditation in London remarked,

[the meditation's] intention is to raise awareness of meditation in public, unite people from all backgrounds, cultures and faiths together and send positive intentions out to the world. We come together to celebrate our very real capacity to generate peace, already in the here and now. *This is the peace we offer to our cities and to the world.* (Bell, 2014, emphasis added)

Contemplation as a form of activism thus goes beyond culture and faith and practices a form of spirituality that expresses political engagement as 'the very real capacity to generate peace' for our communities.

In many of my fieldwork encounters, I have noticed a move beyond 'religion' in favour of such a nonsecular perennial wisdom that unites all traditions (Aupers and Houtman, 2013: 167). Perennialism in short refers to the perspective that the world's religions and wisdom traditions share a single metaphysical truth (Aupers and Houtman, 2013: 177). I spoke with Maarten, one of the organizers of the Inner Peace Conference (IPC). He told me that one of the reasons why they initiated the conference was because 'organized religion was stuck'. With all the challenges that contemporary societies face and the existential stress it puts on people, 'old religious ideas' do not offer fresh solutions, he stressed (personal correspondence, 4 June 2018). For him, there is a 'bigger movement' that can be felt and experienced, an inner knowing or a flow that is 'clear, secure and free' of any worldview. It is time, according to him, to move beyond any certainty of knowing, religion or faith. He referred to Spinoza and his legacy:

In these days it was our Dutch philosopher Spinoza who tried to teach people how to use reason and insight to connect with their intuitive self, find happiness and end suffering. He wanted to show people that God cannot be found in external phenomena but within, within our existence. *Deus sive Natura*. In other words, God and Nature are interchangeable. So, Nature, God, Allah, Buddha, Love, Life or whatever name you like to call it, is inside each one of us and everything that surrounds us. During the Inner Peace Conference teachers from all different backgrounds and traditions will share their inclusive wisdom on how we can connect with that true Nature and experience a deep sense of inner peace.

By connecting to the divine that resides in all of us and that marks 'true Nature', according to the organizers of the IPC, suffering can be ended and peace and happiness can be found. Peace becomes the original nature of humans to be uncovered. Meditation, in that sense, helps to 'get out of the way' so that one's true self can shine through, which has a positive impact on the world. As Dutch meditation teacher Toubert (2017) puts it at the Inner Peace Conference, people do not have to go out onto the streets to protest, rather they just need to sit down:

That basically is what meditation is, in my understanding, getting out of the way. Because everything we are looking for and have been looking for, for thousands of years, is already here. *We are already peaceful* [. . .]. But the reason we are not experiencing that is because we are blocking the light. In a sense, we are in the way. Tonight, during this meditation, I would like to help you get out of the way. [. . .] *Peace is your original nature* [. . .]. All the searching for peace that we have been doing, leads us back to the deep realization that we are the ones we have been waiting for. *It has always been here, inside of us.* And every breath takes you deeper into this silence, into this peace.

Once out of the way, according to Touber (2017), in that peaceful silence

something magical starts to happen. You can listen to the voice of life, the energy of life, the love, the peace, the happiness, that is always there. It starts flowing through you and out of you. And then you do not have to try to change the world, it automatically happens.

In other words, for some of my interlocutors, meditation leads to a new, more peaceful society while it avoids the pitfalls of institutionalized religion. However, what lies at the core of wisdom traditions is not a 'belief', as Maarten so profoundly expressed. This underlying wisdom ('Nature, God, Allah, Buddha, Love, Life') can only be experienced, not 'known', it would 'break the magic'. When I asked my interlocutors what peace feels like, the most common response was 'I cannot put *it* into words'. Experiences beyond religion of a perennial philosophy which is 'inside all of us' uncovered through contemplative practices such as yoga, sitting in silence and meditation, shift the mentality from fear or suffering to peace and the building of a new society: 'The best way to contribute to more peace on earth is by creating more inner peace'. Peace is not simply 'the absence of war'; it is 'not just an external condition of particular circumstances in the world around us'. Rather, 'true peace is a state of heart and mind'.

Through spiritual practices a difference is thus made, but not in the common sense of changing something outside of people or constructing a different epistemological truth through a particular act or performance (Heelas, 2008: 33). Rather difference is made *within* the experience of subjectivity itself: contemplation allows a person to experience themselves and society differently, as peaceful rather than violent, angry or fearful. My interlocutors suggest that people need to *be the peace* if they want to bring more peace into their societies. Inner and outer realities are not separate spheres of being but felt to be a 'false dichotomy'. Peace in that sense emerges on the level of ontology on two levels. First, peace itself is a matter of 'being' not knowing: it is our 'true nature' and can be experienced in silence. Second, it challenges the conceptualization of peace as an outer material condition, as the 'absence of war'. It is rather is a 'state of heart and mind'.

'Everything is everything else': interconnection with nature, systems and society

As I outlined earlier, for *contemplativists*, God and Nature often become interchangeable, and as God is 'in us', the distinction between humans and nature as two separate spheres of being dissolves. For my interlocutors, it is only from this experience of being interconnected with all that is alive (a 'moving into a oneness with God, nature, and ourselves'), that we can look for solutions to the current problems we face. This experience of interconnection, 'coming from our bellies', is not an embodied sensation that is private, with significance only to the individual. In fact, my interlocutors tell me it is 'what the world needs' in order to heal from the pain caused by the 'Age of Separation' (us/them, nature/culture, humans/other beings) that, according to them, is the source of many of the problems that contemporary society faces (Eisenstein, 2013).

Contemplativists therefore commonly perceive an experience of interconnectedness to be a form of 'healing the wounds' that have been caused by this illusion of separation.

They do so by allowing themselves to feel grief and gratitude for the current predicament we find ourselves in. They host sharing circles to reflect on the interconnection of inner and outer realities, and silence and contemplation become ways to ‘balance inner and outer climates’. Director of St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, Justine Huxley, contends that ‘we cannot heal the world in a dualistic way, but we can be the healing’ by turning interconnectedness into a lived reality (Huxley in Martin, 2018). For Huxley (Martin, 2018), in the face of ‘consumerism and the extractive economic model that has got us into this mess’, it is precisely an experience of interconnectedness of humans and nature, inner and outer realities that needs to be integrated into politics to get modern societies out of the crises they find themselves in.

Contemplation, my interlocutors argue, allows for an examination of both how society and the self are structured and allows for an experience in which systems (i.e. capitalism) shoot through us. Jan Mertens (2019, author’s translation), connected to the Waerbeke, a Flemish social movement for silence, remarks,

when people say, ‘I don’t have to change because the system has to change’, I think it is a sign of weakness. Like ‘the system’ starts a meter away from you. The capitalist system runs straight through us, you cannot place yourself outside of it.

The same goes for the natural world, he contends. The rest of the planet is not ‘the Other’, Mertens argues, ‘if anything, the other *is us*. We need the trees a lot more than they need us. We need to be a bit humbler’. Through contemplation, ‘what you experience is that in fact, we *are* the trees, the sea *is us*’, he continues. Roger, who worked as a Buddhist chaplain in prisons, echoed this message. When it comes to effective change-making, we have to deeply experience the interconnection of ourselves with everything else: ‘everything *is* everything else’, he urges. As Buddhist meditation teacher Martin put it, ‘we are not just passive recipients [of life] but we live a relational life, a collective life. [. . .] There are limitless beings, numberless beings and countless universes. *And they are all right here in you*’. Or take my encounter after a public meditation to heal the world in Amsterdam in 2019, with the woman sitting next to me. I asked her what she experienced during the meditation, before we both sought shelter for a heavy downpour of summer rain. She visibly struggled to put her experience into words. She told me she felt intrinsically interconnected with a deeper layer of existence. ‘I felt connected with my heart to all that is alive and aligned with birds, trees, the police, and the children going back to school this week in *a flow of love that encompassed the whole of Amsterdam*’.

It seems that when *contemplativists* experience themselves as the trees or the countless beings of the universe, an affective experience generated by contemplation invokes a relationality in which the separation between them and the natural (trees, the oceans, etc.) and/or social (capitalism) worlds no longer holds. As my interlocutors come to experience an interconnection with the world around them through contemplation they begin to experience, as one of them put it, that they ‘do not have a separate self. All exist as part of a wonderful stream of life which is constantly moving’. They commonly use the term ‘interbeing’, coined by Buddhist monk and Vietnamese peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, to refer to this experience (Hanh, n.d.; see also for instance, Lim, 2019). It is

precisely this recognition of interconnectedness or interbeing that will create social change. As Sufi teacher Vaughan-Lee (2013), puts it,

if we are to take real responsibility for our present predicament, we need to respond both outwardly and inwardly. [. . .] We need to face the reality of our outer [crises]. We also need to sense inwardly [. . .] all the ways in which as a culture we have lost our sense of ‘interbeing’ with all of creation. (p. 302)

To sum up, my interlocutors experience no separation with nature, other species, systems and other people. Through contemplation, my interlocutors experience that ‘everything *is* everything else’. Again, as with peace, contemplative activism involves a double ontological re-definition of what things are. First, reality for contemplative activists does not consist of separate things or people. Rather the social and the natural world become one and the same. This experience both heals the wounds caused by separation (‘a flow of love spreading through Amsterdam’) and prevents new grievances from arising, thereby shaping a new society. Second, it also reconceptualizes interconnection not as a connection of different things. In other words, they are not connected with trees, but they *are* the trees. Contemplative activists consider interconnection as ‘interbeing’ in which everything is everything else.

Transformation, social action as a spiritual path and love

The above sections illustrate that through contemplation, my interlocutors experience themselves *as* peaceful, *as* interconnected and both themselves and the world *as* changed in the process. My interlocutors explore this connection between contemplation and outer changemaking in depth. See, for instance, the description of ‘a pop-up vision lab’ for ‘subtle activists’ (St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, 2020). It reads, ‘How do we include the inner world in our activism? How do we weave spirituality into activism in an inclusive way? How do we engage the heart and invite deeper transformation?’ As outlined earlier, *contemplactivists* seem to reject a separation of inner and outer dimensions of transformation. Activists are no longer ‘putting faith into action’, but instead ‘social action [. . .] is a spiritual path in itself’ (Huxley, 2019: 25) as they realize themselves *as* peaceful and *as* interconnected. Transformation emerges for my interlocutors as a concept in which inner and outer realities come to be interwoven.

Three-time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, Scilla Elworthy suggests for example that experiences of inner compassion are automatically followed up by outer action. People need to experience a connection between inner power and outer action to achieve social transformation. In her words,

The new brand of leaders that we need – those who are actually able to meet the challenges of today and thrive in the world of tomorrow – are the ones who know and live the connection between inner self-development and outer action. (Elworthy, 2017)

In her book *Business Plan for Peace*, she asks her readers to ‘imagine a world in which activists on the front line are supported by activist meditators, dedicated to the marriage

of radical action with inner meditation [which] could ultimately stop war' (Elworthy, 2014: 29). In short, for Elworthy (2014), 'the desired outer changes do not come without the inner change' (p. 3).

Much as Elworthy envisions, I joined a meditation that was part of a bigger protest against Donald Trump's visit to the United Kingdom in July 2018. With a group called Wake Up London that practices mindfulness in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, I meditated for 30 minutes at the beginning and the end of the protest march that would lead activists from the BBC radio tower at Portland Place to Trafalgar Square in the centre of London. I joined the sit-in that took place under the shade of a large tree in a street lined on both sides by fancy buildings housing embassies and wealthy companies. Three rings of a singing bowl marked the beginning of 30 minutes of silence. We closed our eyes as we sat in silence. Our silent sitting bodies were a sharp contrast to the rest of the protesters assembling. Most of them were standing up, making a lot of noise, bolstered by the music and speeches coming from the organization's sound system and a group of activists right next to us playing trumpets. I heard one of the bystanders saying that 'this must be the noisiest place to meditate'. I suppose it was. Later, on Trafalgar Square, when we repeated our 30-minute meditation, people were dancing to rhythmic beats and shouting all sorts of slogans. As I was sitting there with my eyes closed, my experience of the protest intensified, the beats echoed through my unmoving body. I realized this contemplative practice of silence, stillness and calmness starkly contrasted with the rest of our protesting peers.

This enacted paradox that meditation provokes when it is practised as part of regular protest is precisely what, according to my interlocutors, makes it a worthwhile pursuit. Take, for example, Maitrisiddhi's (2019) reflection, an ordained Buddhist nun who started the West Wales Buddhist Group, on her first meditative direct action experience:

My first encounter with a meditation protest was in Sheffield, ten or so years ago. On my commute home from work, I cycled past a protest about the Burmese military killing or imprisoning Buddhist monks. There were some loud shouting people with placards and then there was another group [. . .] who were sitting on the pavement meditating. It was so powerful to see them there, [. . .] *another way of responding*. It wasn't angry, and it didn't involve blame. They were so still, so present, yet somehow full of energy. The impact on me was much more powerful than the people shouting and waving banners. I tried to carry on going home, got five minutes down the road, stopped, turned around and joined them, sitting on the cold paving slabs using my shoes as meditation cushions.

For her, the impact the meditating protesters generated had precisely to do with the fact that they embodied another kind of response to a political challenge, in this case, the imprisonment of monks. It was silent, calm and not angry and did not involve blame, movement or noise. She reflects on this stark contrast emerging during meditation practised as a form of direct action. As part of Extinction Rebellion protests, she and her group drew lots of attention, and she suggests their meditation had a broader, calming effect on their surroundings:

To me, the atmosphere became very strong, and as though the forty of us meditating were grounding the whole area and generating a *field of love*. The other protesters became stiller, and the whole atmosphere seemed to shift. If I cracked my eyelids open, five or six people would be pointing cameras at us – media and passers-by. (Maitrisiddhi, 2019, emphasis added)

If there is no separation between inner and outer realities, between self, others, systems of power and the world around us, reality can be transformed by generating a field of love, more peace within oneself and an experience of interbeing with all that exists. If we take *contemplactivism* not as an epistemological way of looking at the world (they believe/we know) but as another way of shaping and performing reality, the experience of contemplation *is* an act of social change as it transitions my interlocutors into another, improved world (cf. Krøijer, 2015; Maeckelbergh, 2011). When it comes to transformation, for my interlocutors, it is not about opposing the old but about prefiguring and creating something new (Franks, 2018; Klein Schaarsberg, 2023; Raekstad and Gradin, 2020; Swain, 2019). My interlocutors practice a form of prefigurative politics by embodying an alternative through a non-oppositional experience that ‘undoes’ some of the distinctions that are introduced in the modern imagination.⁷ As I have explored elsewhere (Klein Schaarsberg, 2023), prefigurative social change gains an ontological dimension through contemplative activism that makes ‘being’ a form of ‘doing’ and spirituality a form of radical politics (cf. Newman, 2020). My interlocutors experiment, as it were, with other ways of being and relating that emerge in, of, through and as contemplation that perform themselves into an alternative ‘better’ world in which the distinction between nature/culture, subject/object, inner and outer realities, contemplation and social changemaking does not hold. In the next section, after reflecting on how contemplative activism challenges the one-world world in a bit more detail, I will tease out more specifically how Blaser’s double ontological move can inform IR’s engagement with the pluriverse as a methodological commitment.

An uncanny understanding of international politics

Following from the above, my interlocutors can be said to produce a particular non-dominant, enchanted world that is not founded on dualisms of one nature, many cultures, ‘Southern’ superstition and ‘Northern’ science, but on imaginations of a different mode of existence in which contemplation becomes a form of social changemaking. As such, contemplative activists, as a contemporary movement for social change, ‘[point] to the existence of nonliberal or postliberal social orders; these are worlds that go beyond the foundational liberal notions [. . .]’ and ‘denaturalize the hegemonic dualisms on which the liberal order is founded’ (Escobar, 2018b: 74, 75). Studying *contemplactivism* as a reality-shaping practice gives us information about the ontological conflicts that emerge from the unequal encounter between the one-world world and a world of many worlds. Precisely because in IR, we consider spiritual practices *not* to be acts of changemaking, imaginations of change in which inner and outer realities are not separated do not generally count as ‘real’.

Fulfilling Blaser’s first step of political ontology, contemplative activism as the enactment of another *real* from within the dominant ‘North’ mobilizes the pluriverse by

introducing another world into academic knowledge production processes that does not fit neatly within the one-world world in which humans and nature, object and subject, and ‘religion’ and ‘science’ are separated, independent entities (Escobar, 2018a). As Escobar (2018b: 17) reminds us, the consideration of spirituality in many of the contemporary movements for social change that involve struggles over ‘what exists’ ‘is a reminder of the systemic exclusion of this important area’ not just from the one-world world but ‘from our secular academies’. In particular, Hanegraaff (2013) contends that esotericism emphasizes specific worldviews, epistemologies and – I would add, ontologies – that are at odds with ‘normative post-Enlightenment intellectual culture’ (p. 13). The uncanny might have been excluded from much of our academic practice, Hutchings (2019) suggests, ‘but in practice we are constantly negotiating our relation with [it]’ (p. 124). Clashes of multiple ontologies and worlds, then, do not just appear between colonial Western worlds (or the ‘world’ as it prides itself on its singularity) and indigenous ones, but also between the modern world and realities that include gods, spirits and ‘flows of love’ that encompass European city centres. The more-than-human has never in fact left the ‘world of Euromodernity’, Hutchings (2019) argues.

Worlds in which political dimensions cannot be separated from spiritual ones problematize the conceptualization of ‘religion’ as monotheistic, private and cognitive in IR. What if the discipline starts to consider religion not just in its institutionalized, modern, colonial form but also includes contemporary or alternative spirituality, ‘occulture’ (Partridge, 2004), esotericism and perhaps even magic? In not bringing these enchanted worlds into our considerations, Shani (Trowsell et al., 2020) argues, ‘IR fails to speak to arguably the majority of mankind who live their lives according to spiritual and relational frameworks’ (p. 16). This paper, then, is one attempt to open up the discipline to an alternative ontology in which the uncanny shapes an understanding of international politics. To consider esoteric and spiritual dimensions as responses to global challenges that emerge not from our intellectual minds but from ‘our bellies’, and to make space for experiences of being that cannot be grasped by words. Not because these experiences somehow point to a better ‘truth’ but to challenge the preconditions that underly ‘modern Western science’ and the single reality doctrine. In other words, looking at world-making practices within ‘the densest of liberal worlds’ becomes an exercise in learning from ‘what Western modernity has disavowed’ (Mignolo, 2018: xii).

To learn from what Western modernity has disavowed in a pluriversal manner, we can begin to consider how it not only introduces another reality but also requires a reshaping of common concepts in IR (step 2 in Blaser’s process). What is social change when ‘everything that is wrong out there (the outside world) is probably also wrong in “here” (right where you are)’? What are contemplation and activism to be, when they are enacted as one and the same thing? For one thing, social change is no longer reached through loud protesting or signing petitions but is rather enacted through a transformation of one’s state of experience – by (for instance) moving from a state of separation and disconnection to an experience of inner peace or interconnection with all that is alive. Contemplation is no longer ‘passive’ or personal but it ‘moves’ something on a societal level; it alters both the self and the world. Social action can become a form of spirituality and spirituality (in some instances) a form of social action. What contemplation and social change *are* is extended, stretched and blurred through contemplative activism to such an extent that

a distinction between them no longer seems to hold much conceptual strength (also see Clot-Garrell and Griera, 2019; Schmid and Aiken, 2021).

Taking this conceptual exercise one step further, the spiritual experience of *contemplative activists* in which inner and outer, self and world are not separate spheres of being provokes a reconceptualization of what international politics might be. It becomes political to shape the conditions for these experiences of non-separation, because it shapes or creates a different (experience of) reality – a reality in which states, individuals and ‘nature’ are not separate, individual entities, but arise as nondual (what my interlocutors above have called ‘interbeing’). Loy (1997) illustrates what nondual experiences are by giving the example of being completely caught up in music. At the time, he says,

one cannot be said to be aware of oneself ‘enjoying’ the music, for when I do become aware of myself as enjoying, the nonduality of the experience has already faded away into dualistic hearing and it cannot be brought back by any effort or will of attention. Nondual experience cannot be repeated or produced by the self because it is something that happens to the self – the sense of self evaporates temporarily. One can only create conditions where this is more likely to occur (i.e. meditation) but even then, the expectation of such an experience will interfere with its occurrence, as experienced meditators know. (p. 72)

As Loy puts it, one cannot *produce* a nondual experience, but only shape the conditions under which it might occur. Bringing about the nondual experiences that contemplative activism rests on is thus not something a ‘self’ can do. In a sense then, nothing is ‘done’ by my interlocutors as if there were a separate ‘self’ somehow initiating an act. Just as no sound is consciously heard in the nondualist experience of music described earlier, nondual action cannot be experienced by the actor. ‘Nondual action requires that there be no differentiation between agent and act; in other words, no awareness of an agent as distinct from its actions’ (Loy, 1997: 95). As part of a nondualist experience, people *become* their action and so they are no longer consciously aware of it as an action that ‘they’, as an agent separate from the act, would be undertaking.

This has perhaps been the central tenet of contemplative activism: both self and world are transformed simultaneously when nonduality is experienced; people *become* their action. My interlocutors experience reality as radically different (interconnected, peaceful and transformed) once they no longer experience themselves as separate from people, nature or the system. Shaping favourable conditions for a nondual experience to happen – through for example contemplation – for my interlocutors is political *because* it erases a dualist experience of separation that causes suffering, violence and disrespect for self, others and nature. For contemplative activists, ‘the future of our biosphere depends to some extent on the quiet, unnoticed influence of those working to overcome their own sense of subject-object duality’ (Loy, 1997: 304).

If shaping the conditions for nondual experiences is political, it has implications for how we think about the nature of politics in IR (Brincat, 2020; Muedini, 2020; Shahi, 2019).⁸ It pushes us to become attuned to the possibility of a world politics without a self. The self evaporates, as it were, together with distinct objects, ‘systems’, actions and relations as they come to be experienced simultaneously through the experience of contemplation. Through contemplative activism, a nondualist experience not just of reality but

of politics arises (Schmid and Aiken, 2021). Yet, we cannot imagine this kind of politics without re-introducing the central nondual paradox. We cannot think of what my interlocutors are doing as ‘doing’ politics: this would introduce a separation between the actor and that which is done, in this case politics. Politics can no longer, in a dualist manner, be something people engage in, not something that can be done. Perhaps all we are left with is a politics of no politics that people simply become or experience; nondual politics springs up, chaotically, even mysteriously, as people are consciously not-participating in it but shape the conditions in which it can be experienced.

The creation of enchanted worlds: the pluriverse as a methodological commitment

Challenging our own ontological assumptions of what things are and bringing our concepts in line with our encounters in the field as part of the *politicoconceptual* exercise to destabilize the single reality doctrine has implications not just for our thinking about specific concepts but also for our engagement with the question of multiple worlds more broadly in IR. In an ethico-political manner, such practices, as I have argued throughout this paper, help to destabilize the nature/culture divide. It erodes the assumptions that make it hard, if not impossible, to consider other ways of being as plausible other *reals* that have in themselves both political implications (i.e. a ‘flow of love’ becomes a political subject in the ‘West’) and challenge what ‘politics’ *is* on an ontological level (i.e. a spiritual, nondual experience). As much of the work in political ontology shows, the pluriverse at its core, begs the question ‘what is politically possible?’ Who or what, quite literally, gets to *be* is the ultimate expression of power. The point of this approach is not to find a final answer to this question, but rather to put it centre stage in our engagement with those who struggle to sustain their worlds. This question allows us to encounter the limits of the political (Blaser, 2013) and to break through the ‘coloniality of reality’ that allows us only to perceive as ‘real’ what lies within the scope of modern categories of thought (Burman in response to Blaser, 2013: 561).

Some scholars argue that the pluriverse comes with a relational ontology and that pluriversality becomes, in Hutchings’ (2019: 120) words, ‘*the worldly condition* within which we find ourselves’ (Blaney and Trowsell, 2021; Hutchings, 2019; Querejazu, 2021; Trowsell et al., 2020). Trowsell et al. (2020) suggest that we ‘shift to assuming interconnection as the primordial condition of existence’ (p. 3) and label relational ontologies as ‘those which eschew the divisions between nature and culture, between individual and community, and between us and them that are central to modern ontology’, to which one could add, along the lines of this article, superstition and science, religion and secularism (cf. Escobar, 2018b: 74). Trowsell et al. (2020) therefore propose ‘an ontological shift at the foundational level’ of IR’s thinking from separation to relationality (p. 3). Whereas it will be clear that I share the commitment of relational scholars to engaging with difference on an ontological level in an attempt to disrupt common sense assumptions that underlie thinking in IR, I am less inclined to consider relationality or pluriversality to be an ontological condition in and of itself.

Even if the universe and the pluriverse exist alongside each other as ‘partially connected’ (Strathern, 2004) worlds, we must be careful not to replace one existential commitment (of the one-world world and of separation) with another (the pluriverse and relationality) in our sense-making practices. Scott warns us against distinguishing ‘two ontological types’: one separational, Cartesian ontology located in the ‘West’ opposed to a relational, nondualist ontology of the ‘Rest’ (Scott in Venkatesan et al., 2013: 306). In substituting our ontological commitments with relationality, there is a looming temptation to reinstate an essentializing distinction between the universe and the pluriverse. Shifting IR ontologically (from separation to relationality) risks the pluriverse (and relational ontology) itself becoming a ‘meta-ontology’ in which case ‘the problem of the one-reality world remains unshaken: that which differs from the ultimate reality being postulated does not exist, or only exists as error, belief or false consciousness – in short we cannot take difference seriously’ (Blaser, 2014: 52–53).

To put forward relationality as a scholarly ontological commitment to make space for the pluriverse, as some scholars of relationality seem to suggest, eschews the possibility that our interlocutors perhaps practice an ontology that is not relational or by extension pluriversal. In other words, whereas there is perhaps no doubt that ‘relational ontologies enhance reality as pluriversal’ (Querejazu, 2021), we need to be open to the possibility that the reverse need not always be the case. An ontological orientation towards difference should allow multiple ontologies – whether relational/pluriversal, separational/universal or something altogether different – to speak to our knowledge production practices in international politics. If we truly want to incorporate the creative and imaginary possibilities that alternative ontologies present us with, we must not a priori limit the expressive possibilities through or as which they might show up.⁹ I want to suggest scholars working on the pluriverse in IR should keep an open mind to how other ontologies might present themselves. In other words, relational ontologies might not be the only way to ‘do IR differently’ (Trowsell et al., 2020) in a pluriversal manner.

The ontological shift that needs to occur in IR is for the pluriverse to become a heuristic device, not a vehicle to propose a single alternative ontology (Blaser, 2014: 53). This demands, as Scott argues, a methodological nondualism, ‘one that seeks, not to impose itself globally, but to grant actual nondualisms and essentialisms *equal possibility* – one that seeks to elicit difference and multiplicity from others’ (Venkatesan et al., 2013: 308). IR thus needs to entertain a world of many worlds as a methodological engagement. Whereas the above authors turn relational ontologies that emerge through their encounters with other worlds onto how we do IR once (and thereby fulfil Blaser’s two-step process), an analytically richer engagement with ontological difference would require us to do so over and over again so that the ontologies of international politics can actually be multiplied, and we can begin to undo the one-world world.

Practicing such a methodological commitment has implications for *what* we produce knowledge about. Ontologies cannot be ‘out there’ for us to find, as that would merely replace one concept essentializing difference – culture – with another ontology. Through a backdoor, it would re-introduce the modern scientific dichotomy between ‘knowledge’ and reality (albeit plural) we can ‘know’ something about. Consequently, there is no ultimate reality that political ontology as a heuristic device will illuminate (Blaser, 2013: 559). Rather, as this article has argued, it becomes a methodological exercise that has ethical, political and ontological implications. In Blaser’s (2013) words,

the claim of the pluriverse is not concerned with presenting itself as a more ‘accurate’ picture of how things are ‘in reality’ (a sort of meta-ontology); it is concerned with the possibilities that this claim may open up to address emergent (and urgent) intellectual/political problems. (p. 554)

A pluriversal approach probes us to consider that reality is constructed and made, not somehow prior to our analytical engagement with ontologies that seem to differ from our own, but exactly through it. A world of many worlds is done and enacted rather than observed.

Political ontology seen as a heuristic device therefore does not generate theories to make better sense of reality out there, but rather reckons with the possibility that we have not been able to generate the appropriate concepts to understand multiple worlds from within a single reality framework. A core aspect of this analytical approach therefore is reconceptualization, a reformulation of *what is*, not to better represent reality, but to express – in, as and through our texts – alternative reals (in which a gift contains the spirit of its donor, or contemplation equals social change; Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017). Such a reformulation of *what is* introduces an internal difference into what things are rather than a difference between separate objects or ontologies that we find ‘out there’. As an intellectual practice, Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: 133–134) therefore suggest we no longer compare different things to each other but rather begin to distinguish them from themselves as what they are changes through our encounters in the field. Instead of comparing different objects to each other (i.e. gifts to spirits, contemplation to social change), it becomes analytically more rewarding to compare different conceptualizations of the same ‘thing’ (i.e. gifts *as* spirits, contemplation *as* social change, etc.) to understand how they can differ from themselves.

In short, allowing what ‘things’¹⁰ *are* to change as our knowledge encounters dynamically transport us across worlds enriches IR’s political imaginations with other ontologies.¹¹ Our intellectual practice should entail that we engage in the world-making practices of our interlocutors, whose worlds find their expression in and as our texts – texts that, as I have shown, put forward alternative worlds *and* simultaneously question the representational frameworks that underlie our common sense understanding. World-making thus becomes an intellectual praxis not because we are somehow ‘separate’ from the ‘worlds’ out there, or because we are part of the (deep) relational entanglements (Blaney and Trowsell, 2021; Querejazu, 2021) or ourselves practice a ‘spirituality of the Earth’ (Escobar, 2018a), but because quite radically we are a part of their creation in, as and through our texts as we draw out how things could also be (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017).

Considering the pluriverse as a methodological device has important implications for our study of international politics. If there are no longer ‘objects’ to be found ‘out there’ that we can ‘know’ something about, it begs the question *what it is* we are studying. Rather than formulating a purpose for the discipline, the pluriverse as a heuristic approach puts in question the ontological status of our ‘object’ of study. Precisely *what it is* that we are trying to get at, that we are trying to understand remains perpetually in question. It quite radically suggests that we do not have the words, quite literally, to describe *what international politics is* prior to our knowledge encounters in the field that present us

with something 'strange' or 'crazy'. The question 'what is international politics?' remains central in our scholarly endeavours yet never receives a final answer. What international politics *is* becomes an open ontological question; what 'ontology' is in IR becomes an open ontological question.

Are we open to philosophizing the 'building blocks' of international politics over and over again, letting go of the assumption that IR 'has an ontology', resisting the temptation to relativize difference away? Such a pluriversal approach provokes a deep inquiry into what things (get to) exist and 'who' or 'what' get to be the objects of our study. It allows us to be open to those instances where people engage with or respond to international political issues that seem 'crazy' to us at first (i.e. through contemplation); it probes us to expand our conceptual registers in order to engage in and with the unusual ways in which people *make, shape, contest or accommodate* international politics (e.g. as nondual). We need to be open to the possibility that international politics emerges differently *each time* we encounter something 'strange' in the field. Rather than yielding ultimate 'results', research in international politics becomes a process of continuous decolonization, of listening to and engaging with alternative ways of being and taking an active part in 'composing a world that is not yet common' (Latour in Carrithers et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Through an exploration of the world contemplative activists enact, this article increases our knowledge on how protest movements produce alternative enchanted realities from within the dominant world. In doing so, it contributes to the decolonial project that a multiple worlds orientation advocates, but in addition it decenters the, often implicit, understanding that what is commonly perceived of as the 'North' is ontologically homogeneous. Strangeness is not just encountered in exotic faraway places but is part of our encounters in the 'North' as well. Reality-shaping practices that include spirituality, the uncanny and esotericism are especially effective at this decentering exercise because these mystical experiences challenge the institutions of 'science' and 'religion' that underpin the single reality doctrine. My approach is therefore political in two senses. First, it allows different conceptualizations of politics (i.e. as a spiritual, nondual experience) into our knowledge production practices by giving those that modernity typically disavowed 'ontological self-determination' (Viveiros de Castro, 2003). Second, by drawing out these other worlds, it brings into focus political conflicts precisely over whom, or what gets to exist within a one-world world (is a flow of love a political actor? Is contemplation changing the world?).

I argued that in addition to drawing out how other worlds are shaped in the 'North', IR scholars need to take another step when trying to take difference seriously on the level of ontology: what emerges as ontologically strange to us can be the starting point from which to rethink our own conceptualizations of what 'things' are. By way of illustrating, this paper showed that we commonly do not take contemplation and activism to be the same thing, contemplation shows up as a form of embodied politics which shapes the conditions for nondual experiences. These experiences free *contemplativists* of an ontological separation of spirituality and political action, inner and outer realities. Instead,

contemplative activism politically prefigures an alternative, nondual world in which spirituality becomes a form of social action, and social action a form of spirituality.

Subsequently, I argued such a commitment to reconceptualizing *what things are* in our scholarly work probes us to think of the pluriverse as a methodological device rather than as an ontological commitment. If we take the pluriverse to merely introduce an alternative ontology (albeit one of multiple worlds), we run the risk of replacing the universe with another, all-encompassing framework of reality outside of which other *reals* cannot exist. In other words, we must resist the temptation to substitute the one-world world with a commitment to the pluriverse as an ontological reality. Doing so risks falling into the ontological pitfall of taking only one ontological reality – in this case not a uni- but a pluriverse – seriously when engaging with difference in the field. I therefore suggested that we take up a world of many worlds as a heuristic device, one that pushes us to continuously question ‘what is’ and to (re)imagine ‘what could be’. This has implications for our study of international politics: to truly stay open to the multiple realities that might show up, ‘what international politics is’ might differ each time we engage with ontologies that differ from our own. To truly decolonize our knowledge production, we must let go of the assumption that we have a set object of study and take ‘what is international politics?’ as an open ontological question that investigates who and what get to exist each time we encounter something ‘strange’ in the field.

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Notes

1. As Tucker (2018) remarks, critiquing disciplinary assumptions through references to ‘multiple’ and ‘different’ realities runs the risk of not giving these alternative worlds actual space to *be* in IR.
2. Gülsah Capan’s contribution to the workshop ‘Encountering the Uncanny: Anti-establishment Esotericism and (post)colonial Entanglements in International Politics’, as part of the

- European Workshops in International Studies (EWIS) in Thessaloniki, 2022, reflected on the colonial politics of knowledge that underpin the separation of superstition of science. My argument here is indebted to our discussions in Thessaloniki.
3. Rather than strictly defined or pre-set up categories of knowledge, what counts as ‘science’ or ‘religion’ is continuously contested throughout intellectual history. The categories of ‘the occult’, ‘magic’ and ‘superstition’ provide interesting challenges to this modern dichotomy. For an in-depth study of how these boundaries are demarcated, negotiated and contested over time consult the following works: Aspren (2014), Hanegraaff (2014), Von Stuckrad (2014).
 4. He recognizes the difficulty in using these terms – North and South – and, like me, is very reluctant to do so. I use the phrase ‘what is commonly referred to’ as the North or the West, or inverted commas, to point out that this is not a fixed category or an ‘ontological real’ as such.
 5. N.B. *Contemplativists* might also join ‘normal’ protests if they support their causes. If this is the case, sometimes, small meditations might be initiated by them as part of ‘normal’ protests. There is thus considerable connection between these different forms of activism and practices. For the sake of the argument, I focus specifically on contemplation as a practice to induce social change.
 6. Contemplative activism is a term used by some of my interlocutors to describe their initiatives. Some also refer to it as ‘spirituality in action’ or ‘spiritual activism’. The reason I stick with contemplative activism is because it focusses on a specific expression or experience of spirituality that itself becomes a political practice rather than spirituality inspiring people to join regular social movements or engage in common tactics of dissent such as marching, direct action or petitioning. Following Komjathy (2018), I understand contemplation as an ‘umbrella category’ of experiences which in one way or another emphasize embodiment, interiority, silence, locatedness and presence (being aware of what is happening moment by moment). Etymologically, contemplation relates to ‘to look at’ or ‘to observe’ and meditation more specifically means ‘to consider/to think over’. In particular, it relates to the Christian *contemplatio*, a term signifying the maintenance of a silent awareness of the divine.
 7. Some scholars (see Naegler, 2018 for example) hold that it is necessary for prefigurative politics to outline what it is opposing in order not to lose sight of future ideals by privileging micropolitics. As I argue elsewhere (Klein Schaarsberg, 2023), contemplative activism challenges both such a linear conception of time and a strict distinction between means and ends. Rather than overtly opposing the status quo through ‘doing’ (i.e. marching the streets, signing petitions, etc.), they rather provoke another way of being (an ontological ‘not being like that’) that, as I argue, undoes some of these distinctions. As this article shows, we can think of contemplative activism as non-oppositional, it does not mean it does not have political consequences. Contemplative activism introduces an important ontological alternative that challenges what ‘things’ can exist politically.
 8. Some of these scholars start to think of nondualism as a political theology by tracing nonduality in religious doctrines and use this as a basis on which IR theories can be formulated. Whereas ultimately contemplative activism does not strictly relate to a single religion or wisdom tradition but rather, as I outlined earlier, moves beyond religion, it does show politico-theological themes (millenarism, apocalyptic and eschatological thinking, etc.) that could be investigated further. This falls however outside the scope of this article.
 9. An illustrative example here may be Sergei Prozorov’s (2014) recent Void Universalism project. An innovative and sophisticated contribution to political metaphysics that distinguishes between the void or nothingness that allows for the existence of the many worlds in which we live. As such, his metaphysics can incorporate any ontological reality as a real, existing world. However, this incorporation may go against the ontology of that world itself (i.e. in the case of many religious traditions), and thereby risks the subsumption of ‘other worlds’

- into a meta-ontology (i.e. the void, not heaven), thereby downgrading these other realities to the level of belief, which is here considered to be part of the problem in the first place. Once you accept Prozorov's metaphysical framework, it becomes virtually impossible to articulate a position outside of it. In short, even when deploying metaphysical frameworks that seem to make space for alternative ontologies, they often do not avoid representing our ethnographic interlocutors on our (Western philosophical) terms (Scott in Venkatesan et al., 2013). Rather, the goal of the ontological turn as I have illustrated here, is to allow the ontological realities of people we encounter in the field to trump any metaphysical claims made by us as researchers or academic institutions (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 287).
10. In this sense, I am more inclined to subscribe to the view of relationality offered by Kurki (2020) and Querejazu (2021), where 'things' are undetermined and can in fact, when aiming to plur(ivers)alize IR, no longer be the starting point of our analyses as they are never fixed, ontological entities. They suggest we therefore shift our concern from what relationality *is* as an ontological commitment to how relations relate 'things', 'worlds' and even 'relations' into being as partial connections. To avoid the pitfall of positing relationality (either as a thing or as a 'doing') as an answer to ontological questions, my proposal of the pluriverse as a heuristic device takes us one step further away from the language of relationality in favour of an (anthropological) understanding of difference as the catalyser of 'things' and 'worlds' that emerge in our texts.
 11. This is what Querejazu (2021) refers to as 'cosmopraxis' and as she argues, it is particularly adapted to bringing back into IR 'magic', 'dreams' and other ways of being/feeling/knowing that are latent in the one-world world.

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