

Practices of sympoiesis *versus* the seducing allure of contemporary perplexities

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Abstract

International Relations scholarly production takes into account the micro and the macro scale, i.e., time and space contexts that capture both political and economic regimes, as well as livelihoods and practical life-supporting and life-enhancing functions and social roles. When addressing human faculties, such as memory, will or imagination, and understanding the ultimatum nature of current challenges, the pluri-crises, social and ecological and beyond, it is possible to argue that it is imagination that takes the lead. In other words, outstanding vanguard pioneer action is being taken by bottom-up governance, grass-roots initiatives, transnational networking and community-led action. This action is fuelled by imagination, that is, by the possibility of envisioning an alternative possible future. It is this imagination exercise that uses memory as a powerful resource and will as a detonator, a catalyser and energiser of free action and of free thought, individually and collectively. Focusing on real life examples and tackling the macro level rationale it is possible to suggest new perspectives, to explore a novel hindsight and to propose new prospective analysis and insights. History is history but the future is perfect.

Keywords: imagination; creativity; spontaneity; regeneration.

1 Introduction

Within the broad and multidisciplinary field of International Relations (IR), as occurs in other social sciences, there are epistemic shifts that transverse and rejuvenates scientific production (Vieira, 2018; Alden, et al, 2010). That is, there are collective patterns and mutual influences that become visible across widely diverse disciplines, namely the interest in exploring complexity and non-linearity, of integrating holistic, ecological and regenerative perspectives, and of addressing inner and outer worlds of meaning-making, including individuation and identification, subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Jaspers, 2014). IR scientific production that involves psychoanalysis (Vieira, 2018),

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psychodrama or Playback Theatre, witnesses this growing interest in profiting from the advances that may help to shed light upon contemporary challenges.

The purpose of the present text is to engage in an open inquiry that follows the lead of Critical Theory (Hornborg, 2017) and of Science and Technology Studies (Delanty & Harris, 2021), which address power structures and social injustices through the lens of transdisciplinary questioning. The key questions to be acknowledged are how and why may technology and science contribute to domination and oppression. Examining the social, cultural, and historical contexts of science and technology helps to critically evaluate their role in society, including their potential for both progress and regression. Topics related to ideology, hegemony, emancipation, technological artifacts, public understanding of science and social construction of technology, are part of the roadmap for better understanding current challenges and opportunities, individually and collectively.

2 Models of rationality

Contemporary scholarship in IR critically acknowledges the importance of holistic, integrative and regenerative approaches to the pluri-crises that affect current times. Models of rationality are to be understood as cosmogonies, which order visions of the world (Graeber, 2015). This positioning emerges from a phenomenological perspective, that is, from what is being manifested in terms of appearances and the resonances of participation, individually and collectively. This said, it is important to state the basic assumptions that perform the role of determining and conditioning what is being taken for granted.

- Each historical era is affected, i.e., determined and conditioned, by the available set of action-possibilities and thought-possibilities (Jaspers, 2014);
- Once new possibilities emerge, they become universally available, including the exercise of both negative forms of freedom, such as the removal of obstacles and threats, and positive and actable freedom, involving raising of opportunities and enhancing political and aesthetical action (Arendt, 2022); for Arendt, the glory and inner satisfaction in engaging in collective action is the essence of political fora, and aesthetics is the ultimate climax to be achieved (Calhoun, 1997);
- Rationality itself (not rationalism) is an open, plural and self-generative process (it is meaning-making, as all meaning calls for further meaning) (Greimas, 1968);
- Situatedness (being historically contextualised, in time and space) is possible through ahistorical universalisations (categorisation implies generalisation) (Heidegger, 2010);
- Subjectivity, intersubjectivity and the creation (emergence) of the subject are physical and metaphysical, immanent and transcendent, and ontic and epistemic conditions (Henry, 2008);
- Contemporary societies are a show-case of a white supremacist mandate (Graeber, 2015), to be understood and interpreted according to Global South and Global North tensions, and East and West paradoxes, where economic standards of living, social status, gender, ethnicity, power relations, territorial disputes, property rights over resources, and (predatory) production and consumption are destroying the social fabric and depleting life supporting nature;
- The clash between a desired co-constructed utopia that is made concrete by concrete action, people and territories, the sympoiesis world, versus the current dystopian and self-destructive social and ecological extractivist paranoid world, of a casino economy and arms race deadly

- game, has to be faced, confronted, denounced and dismantled, through re-signification of belief systems, and reconstruction and co-constructing of empowering concrete livelihoods;
- If the practices of sympoiesis bring forth a non-anthropocentric radical positioning that dislocates the centre of debate towards the interests of nature, of securing natural habitats and of restoring and regenerating ecosystems through deep commitment and conscious action taking (Haraway, 2016) then the seducing allure of insatiable consumerist happiness, the alienating mass media frenzy and propaganda, the cosy and dumbing-down comfort of wealthy households, and the consequences of some over-protected childhood and youth, reproducing and over-amplifying existentialist angst (Han, 2017), the clash between these two worlds – sympoiesis and the paranoid dysphoric dystopia of contemporaneity – is to be faced head-on and it is to be confronted directly and openly, regardless of how difficult or challenging, so that it is possible to get on, to engage in meaningful collective action, to protect life on the planet and to promote happiness among humans and beyond humans.

3 Transformative economics

Transformative economics refers to non-mainstream economic thought, actively elaborating in non-dominant thinking theories, models, and methodologies. Global South, decolonial, feminist, anti-racist and anti-classism epistemologies are themselves producers and products of the transformative role of the dissident and disruptive scientific production of critical theory scholarship. Institutional economics and the social tradition in economics refer to the critical literature that radically questions the main arguments of the neoclassical economic theory of state-market relations (Bateira, Vasconcelos, 2002; Bateira, 2012).

More importantly, transformative economics refers to the product of an epistemic shift that questions the scientific project per se, socially and historically. The argument is that if mathematization of sciences led to nineteenth century's emergence of powerful probabilistic and statistical analysis, promoting technical advancements in hard sciences, across all disciplines, it was at the level of the so called humanistic and social sciences that damaging certitudes became mainstream, namely the focus in quantification, measuring and fact collection. Among the social sciences, economics became leader precisely because of its capacity to promote, disseminate and impose an apparent prediction and controlling capacity, which has created self-inflicted disaster, socially and environmentally (Graeber, 2015).

The capacity to face global and multidimensional crises, and the challenges they pose to people, organizations, territories and societies, has to include critical thought, under the format of dissident, heterodox and disruptive scientific scholarship. Transformation is regeneration; and it emerges as a potential for change and for action, for transformative thinking and acting, individual and collective.

This transformative science and actable knowledge is already present and active across pioneer and vanguard movements, civic initiatives, political groups, transnational networks, and bottom-up grass-root activities that are able to cut across political, cultural, social, historical and language barriers.

It is important to list and to illustrate the power of these initiatives that have proliferated in the past decades. The last two centuries have seen the growth of civil society causes, movements and achievements, yet since the last half a century there has been an exponential growth of these multi-faced and multi-task activities. Examples include the Permaculture movement, the Transition Towns

movement (Hopkins, 2010), the Global Ecovillages Network (Esteves, et al, 2021), the Playback Theatre International Network (Rivers, 2015), the Spontaneous Theatre movement, and the Theatre of the Oppressed. Other forms of social theatre include, Forum Theatre, Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre, or Legislative Theatre. Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and life-long global activism, and also Jacob Levy Moreno's master work as founder of group therapy, sociometry and sociatry (2014) – the equivalent of psychiatry to cure society - have influenced and deeply marked both Augusto Boal work in applied theatre and Martin Buber philosophy of the encounter.

The capacity to bridge inner and outer worlds, individual and collective first-hand experience, and the passion and magic of engaging in body-centred forms of collective manifestation and participation, present in social performance arts and in activist movements, has an outstanding role to play in contemporary societies (Jaspers, 2014). The body is emotional and rationality in motion; and novelty emerges from active and participative methodologies across all spheres of human activity and of social organisation.

Under the heading of transnational networks, the cooperatives movement, from Ethical Finance to integral cooperatives, is outstanding as it is able to cut across legislative and market related obstacles and constraints in order to serve an extremely complex set of goals and objectives. It is literally world-changing, the use of collective governance methodologies, the active ongoing reflective practice, the coalition with research groups and academic scholarship, as research students and senior level action-research are raising the standards of what to expect from territorial based groups of people who share powerful ideas and world-visions.

In Portugal, the Rizoma integral cooperative (Lopes Mateus, Olival, 2024), the Agroecology Network (Costa-Pereira, et al, 2024), the Plataforma Troca, related to international trade relations, investor-state dispute settlements (ISDS) and regional treaties, the DeGrowth Network, and Micélio, Orígens, in Orígens, Viseu, a community led arts-based nature-loving disruptive initiative, also globally connected through transnational networks; in Spain, the organizations MAD Africa, promoting anti-racist and feminist education, Maakum Ceuta, a pro-migrant and migrant protection organisation, and La Revuelta de las Mujeres, a feminist theology movement; in France, the Université du Nous, actively teaching and researching sociocracy and holistic epistemologies; and in Brazil, the editorial platform Outras Palavras, are powerful examples of the proliferation, variety, richness and complexity of practice-based, elaborate visionary and charismatic action that has been emerging and proliferating in contemporary societies.

Collective forms of governance, including sociocracy, holacracy and intentional communities' decision-making, is itself an example of the effervescent and exponential growth, need and desire to break through the status quo dominance of white supremacist privileges, able to capture mentalities and consumerist expansion. Psychopathology behaviour, individual and collective, is forcefully self-destructive; like in a defence maniac reaction, when threatened, it intensifies its paranoid drive; as a no-alternative equivoque, it forces whatever action, activity, movement, under the illusion that it could solve existential anguish; it is a drive or impulse for action because it soothes and holds anxiety and guarantees immediate gratification, fostering illusion and alienation. Heroin and the heroin addict, a child in a sweet-shop or the shopping-therapy frenzy, are a pathetic and sarcastic vision of a deity that has a dark sense of humour.

There is the need to promote debate and confrontation of ideas that help to grasp the tensions and polarizations around alienation and self-referential modes of justification, that feed toxic and psychopathologic forms interaction, individually and collectively, in groups and in society. The practice and compromise with sympoiesis, of reaching beyond auto-poiesis and self-organisation and

to embrace the adventure of significant action, implies adhering to constructive realism and to the collective intelligence of transformative design and of transformative science. Only a truly authentic and genuine experience of social learning spaces may counterbalance the seducing allure of entrenched social structures that are closed onto their privileges and blind to the extractive, toxic and destructive mechanisms of mainstream activity - across academia and beyond.

Human thought and action cannot lose its creativity and spontaneous regenerative power. Civilizations that deny human capacity to reinvent itself and create new possible futures, are a menace to life itself, beyond human dimensions. Ethical and governance concerns, the strengthening and deepening of democratic calls for action, and the urgency of open and free spaces of intersubjectivity, are work-in-progress that avant-garde academia already voices and embodies.

To overcome outdated and shallow institutionalised myopias, it is crucial to perform creative art-making instances of resignification of previous taken-for-granted approaches. Beyond the extractivist self-destructive abyss, it is possible to regenerate and offer pre-figuring exercises that may help to shape change, transformation and renewal of human thought and action towards a desired present and future reality, that includes non-human and more-than-human as its *modus operandi*.

Transformative economics is itself a form of existential phenomenology, of actively engaging in creative thinking and investing in disruptive imagination. Sympoiesis is a kernel example of the emergence phenomena that is multiplying and spreading like wild fire, a pluriverse of transformative initiatives that are paving the way to new possible futures.

4 International relations' complexity

Capturing through gentrification and financialization strategies every single aspect of contemporary societies' life, under the forms of abuse and co-opting, implies that the forces that denounce this status quo misuse of collective resources are also the forces able to break new ground and to produce breakthrough novelty (Graeber, 2015). To denounce inevitably includes announcing something new and disclosing new possibilities, not for a utopia and far-fetched distanced future but here and now, *hic et nunc*, in the present.

The armaments race is part of an effective technology selling strategy and wars are a perfect-fit for the need to expand new technology markets. Technology is an enabler of human action and its function is to empower and bring greater effectiveness to human's desires, wants and wishes. The same technology available to create bombs and arms, in an inevitable self-destructing spiral, is also ready-at-hand to inspire dissidence, resistance and innovation, social change at its best, through radical and committed larger-than-life ideals, values and principles.

A word of caution is needed in the sense of understanding the complexity and holistic nature of values and principles that are to be plural, inclusive, diverse, integrative, ecological and regenerative. As a whole, this is a scientific project's ideal, still in the footsteps of the Enlightenment movement, understanding science as a benefit to humankind, to life on the planet and beyond (Alden, et al, 2010).

When civilizations die, culture is the process that is able to filter and to reinterpret past principles and values, as it resignifies previous belief systems. This dislocation and refocusing can be individually experimented in different phases of an individual life-cycle. Groups also live through developmental phases and it is crucial to acknowledge this fractal theory repetition of complexity and of pattern forming and reformatting.

The Enlightenment movement and the idealised role of science that unleashed unprecedented technological development, where Europe's industrial revolution and then Europe and later North America's colonisation of the world's natural resources was secured till present times, is still a force to be acknowledged, reframed, recontextualised, decolonised and given-back its true essence, of freeing humans from its evils, which are also a product of fears and blockages, lack of recognition of alterity, of the importance of plurality and the need for a new science and a new technology able to serve all, humans and beyond humans.

The ideal of the Enlightenment movement also presupposed (and also created) a new subject, a new category, of the European white male, rich and educated, autonomous and rational, self-assured and fully in charge of himself and the world. This eighteenth century category of the Enlightenment has helped science to reach its present stage or state, in terms of integrating, acknowledging, validating, recognising and legitimising all possible sources of human knowledge, including original people's and indigenous knowledge. It is possible to argue that there has been and there still is a co-opting and extractivist abuse of traditional sources of knowledge but the rationale is to understand that there is a strength and source of empowering forward-looking promoters of social change by acknowledging and realising the emancipatory, democratic and edifying nature of knowledge, of science and technology (Jaspers, 2014).

In simple terms, taking two opposing sides, one totalitarian and the other democratic, both have resorted to the same available pool of sources and resources. Indeed, the difference is that non-democratic positions are examples of abusive capturing of power, using manipulating and seducing techniques and strategies to induce alienation and blind obedience, whilst a democratic practice ideally enables reaching the best possible outcomes, no waste is produced and no resources are lost, as the service of all is optimised and no one is to be left behind. In political discourses, some mantras may become part of the propaganda jargon, void of their social change power, yet the real fight is to try not to give up on the true significance and deep essence of words, values and principles that may include democracy, freedom, plurality, inclusion, social cohesion and social and ecological justice for humans and beyond humans.

5 Multidisciplinary innovations

Expansion of horizons of thought and action, as well as border crossing of scientific disciplines, implies that multidisciplinary innovation is literally the process through which IR is able to stretch the reach of its scholarship. In other words, IR models of rationality actively engage in the exploration of spontaneous processes of creation, addressing imagination and regeneration as working tools and as radical strategies for creating novelty (Vieira, 2018).

Examples of IR scientific production that involves psychoanalysis, psychodrama or Playback Theatre, helps to call attention to the need to bridge inner and outer worlds, personal and subjective and also collective and practical, hands-on experiences. As a social science, IR has the advantage of benefitting from a broad spectrum of influences and scales of analysis. From inner dialogue and individual perception, to group level dynamics, to institutional life and intra- and inter-relations, to societal dimensions, IR is able to capture the functioning of the social fabric of a specific setting and compare it and contrast it with other examples and contexts.

Addressing diversity and dealing with opposing and polarised sides in political, social, cultural, historical and economic terms, that is, bringing forth the full complexity of contemporary societies' contexts, implies that IR knowledgeably, intentionally and consciously or otherwise continuously

aggregates and integrates data, information, knowledge and wisdom. Indeed, regeneration crucially emerges from the new perspectives that are opened by this dynamic movement (Graeber, 2015). Moreover, the effectiveness of IR is illustrated by this fluidity, by cutting across sensitive, delicate and subtle dimensions, from social to individual, from inner to outer worlds of experience, from group, to institutional and societal dimensions, and from theory to practice and vice-versa (Alden, et al, 2010). Indeed, IR flexibility and explanatory power is not so much offering ready-made solutions and recipe-like formulas but rather through new insights, perspectives, critical thought and alternative forms of inquiry.

6 Conclusion

Positive, indeed illuminating and visionary examples of practical and theoretical breakthroughs, in terms of answering the challenges of contemporary times, enable expanding the horizons of thought and action (Alden, et al, 2010). The 2000-2025 period, reaching the end of the first quarter of the first century of the third millennia of our common era, according to the Gregorian calendar, has seen several international events that resemble twentieth century's equivalent period, including the repetition of a severe global economic crisis, in 1929 and in 2008, and the rise of extreme right wing political parties in the economies of the Global North. The white supremacist political order that has tailored the legal and international trade regimes on a global scale are, literally, larger than the planet Earth, in terms of encompassing space exploration and the sequence of territorial disputes that has colonised land, oceans, the surface of the planet's crust and mining extractivist exploration, in-land, off-land, under-water, and in-space.

It is possible to argue that there is a parallelism and a pattern repetition phenomenon that uses technology and economic power over technology as a mechanism for social change (Puskás, et al, 2021). The advancements and conquests of civil rights social movements related to labour rights, the women's vote, anti-racism, and to social rights, in housing, education, healthcare and justice, in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, created a backlash of totalitarian regimes and ideological conservatism. The present rise of extreme right political parties and national regimes can also represent an aggressive defensive strategy against the risk of securing privileges (Vieira, 2018). In this sense, if social and ecological justice, feminist and queer critical theory, or decolonising and self-governance practices matter and are important, then the present aggressiveness and violence of non-democratic and totalitarian forces, explicitly and implicitly represent a victory, a bitter and often deadly victory, but still a positive sign of the imperative need for resilience, resistance and empowerment.

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