REVISITING IR IN A TIME OF CRISIS: LEARNING FROM INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

The sense of crisis, fueled by military conflicts, the failures of neoliberal globalization and ecological degradation, is everywhere. Neoconservative agendas and cuts in educational spending are shrinking space for critical thinking necessary for understanding the impacts of these crises on ordinary people’s lives. This article examines some indigenous responses to these various crises. It reexamines IR’s Westphalian narrative about the origins of the nation-state system in seventeenth century Europe from the perspective of those who suffered the consequences of European expansion. Emphasizing the importance of rewriting their histories, indigenous peoples are offering very different models of world order and ways of life that are more sensitive to resource and ecological constraints. Similar to postpositivist feminist thought, indigenous epistemologies are hermeneutic and reflexive, seeking to uncover hidden histories and new knowledge from those whose voices have rarely been heard. The article outlines some visions of world order and national sovereignty offered by indigenous peoples in Africa, New Zealand and Central and North America. It concludes by reflecting on obstacles, similar to those faced by feminists, standing in the way of alternative forms of knowledge being taken seriously by the discipline of international Relations.
Keywords


The new millennium may just be the millennium of Indigenous people. Human/natural rights….must be defined by those whose ancestors have observed such rights for millennia, as opposed by those who derived from Coca-Cola civilizations and whose behavior for the past five centuries has caused more irreparable damage to humans and all life than ever before.

Naomi Kipuri (2004)

INTRODUCTION

In my address to the International Studies Association in 2006 I asked each of us to consider how our scholarship and teaching in what the Bush administration proudly proclaimed a new age of empire might contribute, even unknowingly to dividing the world along neo-imperial lines, whereby certain people and places are granted agency and authorship while others are denied it (J.A. Tickner 2006). At the dawn of the new millennium - an era marked by a new stage in US global reach, evidence of imperial pretensions was everywhere. Following the events of 11 September 2001, the United States stated that it was engaged in a war against evil that demanded a full spectrum global response to any imminent threat – in other words – preparing for a seemingly endless state of crisis and emergency. The response, articulated in the *National Security Strategy of 2002* (Bush 2002), was
backed by military budget outlays of $465.9 billion in 2005 (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2005). Besides its military component, the National Security Strategy called for the promotion of a neoliberal global economy and Western-style democracies, goals designed to further consolidate the world in the image of the West and thus defeat fundamentalist forces emanating from forces of irrationality located outside our civilization's boundaries.

Since the financial crisis, said to have begun in 2008, the year when it impacted those of us in the US and Europe, the imperial hubris in American political discourse has receded although many of the policies that were put into place after 9/11 remain. Following the official termination of the war in Iraq, the US began the process of withdrawing from Afghanistan and, in 2014, the US Department of Defense began proposing cuts in military spending; events in the Middle East reinforce the futility and irresponsibility of what were claimed to be attempts to install western democracy, as well as the animosity that it causes. Instead of neoliberalism's promise of continued economic growth and expansion we have witnessed a global recession with its harsh response of structural adjustments that have increased unemployment and cut welfare budgets in all societies. The financial crisis has further widened the gap between rich and poor, in rich and poor countries alike. A recent report released by Oxfam America reveals that 85 of the richest people on the planet own wealth equal to the bottom half the world's population. The World Economic Forum that plans the annual Davos gathering, for which this report was released, claims that the growing gulf between the rich and poor represents the biggest global risk for 2014. Threats to our natural environment
grow ever more present but there is little political will on the part of the international community to deal effectively with them. So the sense of crisis remains very real and has possibly intensified.

In her concluding chapter of the *Worlding Beyond the West* series, Arlene Tickner points to disturbing trends in higher education also – what she calls the commodification of knowledge whereby knowledge that has no explicitly commercial purpose is being crowded out across the globe. (A. Tickner 2013: 218-219). The practice of neoliberalism reinforces the desire for “practical knowledge” geared toward the demands of the global economy. This, together with shrinking budgets for education, inhibits the production of critical thinking, already under threat from neoconservative agendas. Another effect of this professionalization of knowledge production is the distancing of academic practice from political reality. The boundary drawing practices of the academy and its dismissal of knowledge not deemed scientific, particularly in the US, has removed it further from understanding the everyday needs and practices of people’s lives.

**FEMINIST RESPONSES TO CRISIS**

So how should feminist scholars be responding to these disturbing trends in both the academy and the wider world? Faced with shrinking budgets for education that generally result in the decline in subjects that encourage critical and visionary thinking, how can we construct knowledge that is transformative and more
attentive to those whose voices have been silenced by the conventional definition of what counts as scholarship? What sort of knowledge would be most useful to help us understand these ongoing and interrelated crises of conflict, economic inequality and environmental disasters, particularly their effects on those who often suffer the most and who are generally denied the voice to offer solutions? What different solutions to these crises might we learn about from those on the margins? Arlene Tickner claims that feminism and postcolonialism have been the most forceful in calling for the need to move around the edges, beyond or outside professionalized academic limits, in order to tap what “others” have to say and hence produce knowledge that, in Dona Haraway’s words, can provide a better account of the world so that people can live in it well (A. Tickner 2013: 220-221).

In seeking better accounts of the world, many in the feminist community have moved beyond the disciplinary boundaries of International Relations (IR) both in terms of subject matter and methodologies. With increased self-confidence, evidenced in the pages of the International Feminist Journal of Politics (IFJP) now celebrating fifteen years of publication, and in the panels at its 2014 annual conference, feminists are charting new paths to try to make sense of today’s crises. Asking new questions and drawing on a variety of disciplines to answer them, feminists are particularly concerned with the impacts of crises on ordinary people’s lives, especially those who are the most marginalized.

My response to the question I posed in 2006 as to whether we, even if unconsciously, are contributing to the production of knowledge that divides the world, knowledge that gives agency and voice only to those at the center of the
system, was to try to reconstruct different stories about the origins of International Relations and to investigate knowledge about those on the other side of the imperial divide, knowledge that rarely gets included in how we define IR. This exercise took me back to the seventeenth century, an important marker for the conventional story that IR tells about its historical origins. IR’s foundational myth places the birth of the sovereign nation-state system, the early beginnings of modern capitalism and of modern “scientific” knowledge, in seventeenth century Europe (J.A. Tickner 2011). Severe political and economic crises and the collapse of tolerance, manifest in that century’s wars of religion, motivated what Stephen Toulmin has termed a quest for rationality accompanied by a distrust of the emotions. In the search for certainty in an uncertain world, modern Cartesian science, based on the separation of the rational mind from the bodily emotions replaced Renaissance humanism. A belief in the possibility of a timeless, objective, and universal understanding of the world, independent of context – what has been described as “the view from nowhere” and which formed the basis for modern scientific knowledge, was a response to another time of extreme insecurity and crisis (Toulmin, 1990: 175).

Missing from this largely celebratory journey to modernity, Enlightenment knowledge and an ever-expanding capitalist world economy, is the simultaneous story of Europe’s colonization and enslavement of native peoples and the emergent gendered and racial structures, characteristic of the modern state system and the modern economy which failed to include women, and many men, on equal terms with privileged men. It remains the case that consideration of gender, race and empire are still largely missing from the mainstream of the IR discipline. Yet
attending to these omissions is essential if we are to understand the historical structures of racial, gendered and spatial inequalities that are fueling today’s security, economic and environmental crises.6

As Sandra Harding reminds us it is often from the standpoints of the most marginalized that we can gain the greatest insights into our present dilemmas (Harding 1991). To this end, the rest of this article will focus on some postcolonial and indigenous scholarship that can further help to uncover silenced histories about our imperial legacies, thereby contributing to a greater understanding of the roots of today’s crises and new ways to solve them. Conscious of a history rooted in centuries of oppression and marginalization, indigenous scholars are offering us new visions of a more just and environmentally sustainable world order as well as new ways of understanding it. Particularly concerned with the issue of national sovereignty, they are articulating new possibilities for a world order not based on the seventeenth century Westphalian state system that was built on the denial of the sovereign rights of indigenous peoples.7 Although later in time and more resisted by the international community than the international women’s movement, indigenous groups are finally getting some recognition from international institutions. Franke Wilmer claims that the denial of indigenous peoples’ self-determination represents the unfinished business of de-colonialization today. In many parts of the world indigenous peoples remain the poorest and most marginalized members of society.8 Wilmer claims that indigenous people are a Fourth World, sharing some of the perspective of the Third World, yet their marginalization is a step beyond in that
they have not yet benefitted from the principle of self-determination that the Third World now enjoys, at least in principle (Wilmer 1993: 5-6).  

Indigenous epistemologies offer important parallels with certain strands of feminism. Manuela Picq, who identifies her work as being at the intersection of feminist standpoint and indigenous knowledge, claims that indigeneity offers potential insights for thinking differently about the international, for breaking disciplinary silences and for moving beyond state-centrism. She claims that indigenous knowledge, like feminism, is valuable because it rescues stories deemed irrelevant and left invisible in hegemonic narratives of global politics; most importantly it expands our way of seeing. Validating storytelling and remembrance as legitimate forms of knowledge enables powerful counter-stories to emerge (Picq 2013: 123-124). The counter story that she tells is one about the struggles of Kichwa women against the Ecuadoran state, an issue to which I return later. Yet, as she concedes, few scholars have engaged indigeneity as a site for critical theory; indigeneity continues to epitomize the “non-scientific” and non-European, marginalized as unreliable and excluded from legitimate knowledge production (Picq 2013: 123). Historically, indigenous people, both women and men, have been either invisible or objectified, often characterized as emotional, childlike or lacking in reason, attributes also assigned to most women and racial minorities more generally. Like many forms of feminism, indigenous methodologies challenge modern science’s commitment to universalism and objectivity, arguing instead for reflexive knowledge building grounded in peoples’ everyday lives. Reclaiming one’s own history and identity is vital to this knowledge-building project. For indigenous
peoples, as well as disempowered people more generally, uncovering hidden histories is necessary, not only for understanding their world that they see as rooted in centuries of violence and oppression, but also for improving it. Emerging out of these histories and knowledge traditions are new visions of a world order that are based on different concepts of sovereignty.

**RECLAIMING AND REWRITING HISTORY**

History like all other arts is an integral part of culture and should be carried inside the head to enliven the entire body of the individual in society.  

Sankaran Krishna reminds us that the emergence of the modern Westphalian state system in Europe was coterminous with the genocide of the indigenous people of the “new” world, the enslavement of native African peoples and the colonization of societies of Asia. He claims that IR’s valorization of abstraction is premised on a desire to escape history, especially as it relates to questions of race; abstraction brackets questions of theft of land, violence and slavery, historical processes that underlie today’s unequal global order (Krishna 2001: 401-402). Abstraction is justified in the name of theory building; over-attention to detail is deemed too historical or descriptive and lacking in intellectual rigor. However, as Krishna himself acknowledges, abstraction is necessary for any knowledge-building project; nevertheless, as he and many other postcolonial and feminist scholars have claimed, what aspects of reality get left out in the process is an issue of power. He uses the
example of IR’s dominant historical narrative about the nineteenth century that is generally characterized as the “hundred years of peace”. While this description fits most of the interaction between the great powers within Europe, it completely erases European powers’ violent imperial encounters with the rest of the world (Krishna 2001: 404-405).

History does not create the world; it appropriates it and gives it meaning (Jenkins 1991: 17). History can never be separated from those who write it and it has usually been the winners and power holders who write it and who give it meaning. Krishna points to encounters between the Spanish and Mexicans in the mid-sixteenth century that led to the classification of the Mexicans as a people without history. Similarly, as historian Bernard Cohn claims, nineteenth century British imperialists saw Indians as a people without history who had therefore not progressed, a people for whom history must be constructed in order to rule them (Cohn 1996: 93). Historian Keith Jenkins suggests that a desirable way to overcome the deficiencies of authorized histories would be for as many people as possible to make their own histories such that their stories can have real effects, or a real say in the world (Jenkins 1991: 67). In order to avoid the trap of relativism, Jenkins suggests that historians should adopt a self-conscious reflexive methodology, or what he calls a radical historicisation of history (Jenkins 1991: 69). Such methodological sensibilities are quite compatible with certain feminist and indigenous methodologies.

This form of “writing back” history is a powerful tool for reclaiming and empowering marginalized identities and people. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith
claims that the history of imperialism frames the indigenous experience. Writing about experiences under imperialism has become a significant project for the indigenous world. Tuhiwai Smith asserts that reclaiming history is a critical aspect of decolonialization. “‘The talk’ about the colonial past is embedded in our political discourses, ...poetry, music, story-telling and other common sense ways of passing on both a narrative of history and an attitude about history” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 20). The struggle for self-determination has always involved historical questions as to how colonized peoples were represented as “Others” and excluded from official historical accounts. While carefully distancing her work from the mainstream academic discipline of history, Tuhiwai Smith claims that every issue in indigenous scholarship is approached with a view to rewriting and (re)righting history (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 29-31). Noting that many indigenous peoples today live in political and social conditions that perpetuate extreme levels of poverty, Tuhiwai Smith asks whether questions about imperialism may seem academic given the more pressing needs of physical survival. She counters that efforts to deny the historical formations of such conditions by states, societies and institutions have denied indigenous peoples their claims to humanity that depend so fundamentally on claiming the authorship of their own history. To quote Tuhiwai Smith: “To resist is to retrieve what we were and to remake ourselves” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 4). It is within these broader frameworks of decolonialization and social justice that Tuhiwai Smith sees indigenous scholars positioning their research, a difficult and contentious term in itself that comes with all the negative baggage of a colonial past. She notes that indigenous scholars are often informed by feminist approaches to
research, approaches that are also reflexively and ethically engaged in bringing hidden histories to light in order to understand the foundations of gendered structures of inequality instituted over centuries that continue to exist in most societies.

**REVISIONING WORLD ORDER**

We all know something is terribly amiss...and there is a feeling that indigenous people are closer to a better idea of how to correct the problems.\(^{11}\)

Indigenous scholars are using insights formed out of centuries of crisis to construct visions for new world orders. In her 2005 text, entitled *The New Imperial Order*, Maori scholar Makere Stewart-Harawira articulates her vision for a new world order as an indigenous response to contemporary crises. She writes that her research was driven by an accelerating sense of crisis in political, social and economic structures, the fragility of the biosphere and the loss of biodiversity and the ideologies that maintain such policies and practices.

Citing *The National Security Strategy* of 2002 to which I referred in the introduction, Stewart-Harawira sees what she calls the emergence of a new form of US unilateralism, manifested in the language of the *Strategy*, a unilateralism which, as I mentioned earlier, may be receding somewhat, but which must still seem overwhelmingly powerful to indigenous communities and, indeed, to much of the world outside the West. She notes also the crisis of neoliberal globalization an economic system that has failed on its promise of increasing growth for all and has further exacerbated extreme disparities of wealth and poverty (Stewart-Harawira...
2005: 7). Yet Stewart-Harawira sees in these various crises the potential for a new world to be born. Citing Robert Cox and Immanuel Wallerstein, two IR scholars who have engaged historically with the world system, she claims that an understanding of the historical processes that have brought us to this moment of crisis is vital for strategies of resistance and transformation to emerge.

Outlining what she calls an indigenous global ontology, Stewart-Harawira draws parallels with the holistic ideals of ancient philosophy, dating back to the fifth century BC and ancient belief systems that celebrated the Mother Goddess and the fecundity of the Earth. These holistic beliefs, in the interconnectedness of all beings and in a symbiotic reciprocity between male and female, survived into early Christianity but eventually got submerged by patriarchal ideologies that led to the marginalization of women and nature. This holistic view was still evident in secular Renaissance humanism but eventually gave way to the Cartesian view of nature that elevated humans to a position of domination over nature and separated the body from the mind, women from men, and humans from nature (Stewart Harawira 2005: 43-45). Franke Wilmer also draws attention to the separation of political and spiritual life that, she believes, is manifest in the development of the secular state. When spiritual life as a system of values became separated from political decision-making processes, economic values filled the space thus creating a normative vacuum (Wilmer 1993: 51).

The holistic worldview, submerged in modernity’s Cartesian view of science and knowledge, has always been, and continues to be, central to indigenous ontologies. As Julian Kunnie tells us in his discussion of indigenous African
knowledge, there is an implicit assumption in all indigenous cosmologies that all life is interwoven and inextricably connected as part of the spiritual web of the universe. The spiritual foundation of life is enshrined among all indigenous societies. There is no distinct word for “nature” among indigenous peoples because all of life is seen as coterminous with nature (Kunnie 2006). Interrelatedness is thought to be integral to knowledge and being. There is no sphere of life that falls outside the realm of the spirit, not even law or human rights (Kunnie 2006: 259).

Unlike Western knowledge that is linear, indigenous knowledge systems are usually described as circular or spiral and inclusive of both experiential and intuitive data. Within Maori ontologies it is impossible to conceive of the present and future as separate from the past; to describe this, Maori use the symbol of the spiral, a spiral that incorporates the past into the present as it reconstitutes the future (Stewart-Harawira 2005: 42). The spiral never returns to its point of origin but moves progressively forward – a process of constant motion and expansion. Stewart-Harawira compares this to the western philosophical tradition of critical hermeneutics, a critical methodology for uncovering submerged meanings and interpretations of events and discourses, one that reflexively places the self within the knowledge creation project, thereby holding out the possibility of transformation. Noting that the discovery of the double-helix spiral structure of DNA radically changed biology, Stewart Harawira claims that the concept of the spiral, embedded in indigenous epistemologies, could provide transformational pathways toward more meaningful and inclusive forms of global society that could have profound relevance for the future (Stewart-Harawira 2005: 46). The spiral is a
spiral of transformation that encapsulates the past as constitutive of the present and future; it is a spiral that encompasses the totality of human experience, the dialectic between the material and spiritual spheres – bringing forward from the past that which will transform the future (Stewart-Harawira 2005: 251).

Stewart-Harawira compares today’s crises to those in seventeenth century Europe, to which I referred earlier, when the chaos of the wars of religion fueled a quest for certainty and security. Just as that crisis resulted in fundamental changes in political and economic systems, enshrined in national sovereignty and an emerging global capitalist market, as well new forms of scientific knowledge, so in today’s crises she sees similarly transformational possibilities.

In addition to these more profound ontological shifts in the way we see the world, Stewart-Harawira points to the many, more immediate, indigenous struggles that are currently involved in fighting water pollution, deforestation and extractive industries, industries that are evacuating communities, mining on their lands, and endangering their ecosystems. The discovery of oil and precious stones in Africa almost always involves violation of the rights of indigenous peoples and the destruction of the natural environment (Kipuri 2006: 249). Faced with the long-term consequences of these destructive practices which extend far beyond their immediate impact on local indigenous communities, Franke Wilmer suggests that postindustrial society is in need of indigenous knowledge accumulated over thousands of years about how to maintain complex ecosystems, knowledge that may be vital to its very survival (Wilmer 1993: 115). Echoing the idea that indigenous knowledge systems are imperative for the continuing viability of the planet,
Stewart-Harawira signals some Western academic interest in the investigation of indigenous belief systems prompted by the need to rethink environmental practices (Stewart-Harawira 2005: 248).14

Faced with crises of inequality, environmental disasters, and conflicts that are not confined within state boundaries, indigenous scholars and activists have joined the ongoing debate about constructing new world orders beyond the nation state. One such cosmology is the Ecuadorian indigenous concept of Good Life that has been articulated as a model for a new world order. Written into the constitution of Ecuador of 2008, Good Life offers an alternative to capitalist development, one that is centered on human wellbeing rather than profit. “In its most general sense, buen vivir [good life] denotes, organizes and constructs a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatio-temporal harmonious totality of existence” (Walsh 2010 quoted in Altmann 2013: 60). There is no indigenous concept of development; focused on the local community, life is seen as a way of living that tries to adapt to the local environment. Concepts similar to Good Life are an integral part of indigenous thinking about different world orders and exist in different expressions in many indigenous cultures. Since being written into the Ecuadorian constitution, Altmann laments that Good Life has lost much of its critical content. Nevertheless, he claims that it has led to the strengthening of the indigenous movement which is now being globalized (Altmann 2013: 66).

Since they do not possess the attribute of sovereign equality that enables even the poorest states to participate in the global discourse affecting their future, indigenous peoples are bypassing the state and making claims directly to the
international community, in some cases with some measure of success. Indigenous social movements moved onto the world stage in the 1970s at about the same time as the international women’s movement received recognition from the international community. In 1981 a Working Group on Indigenous Populations was established out of whose efforts came the 1993 UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and, in 2000, the establishment of a UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Stewart-Harawira asserts that international law is an arena of critical importance for the reassertion of indigenous self-determination (Stewart-Harawira 2005: 238). However, as Naomi Kipuri claims, while some individuals have attended international conferences on indigenous peoples, they do not do so consistently, mainly because of lack of funds (Kipuri 2006: 255). Writing in 1993, the year of UNDRP, Wilmer raised the question as to whether we might be seeing some elements of moral suasion developing in contemporary global political discourse with respect to indigenous rights (Wilmer 1993: 20). Nevertheless international legal norms regarding indigenous peoples remain essentially state-centric and tensions between group rights versus state sovereignty and non-intervention remains a contentious issue in indigenous politics (Stewart-Harawira 2005: 135).

RETHINKING SOVEREIGNTY

The struggle for justice would be better served by undermining the myth of state sovereignty than by carving out a small and
Manuela Picq claims that indigeneity is conceptually about as far beyond the state as it is possible to go: therefore, it is a strategic site from which to rethink sovereignty. Indigenous politics come from forms of governance constituted outside and before the modern state. Therefore, she argues, indigeneity is a necessary tool for recognizing the diversity of political configurations differing from Western state-centrism. Picq claims that whereas gender and race-based demands aim to expand access to the state, indigenous claims, framed in the colonial legacy of the modern state, demand rights autonomous from the state. Indigeneity demands less state not more and makes it possible to think of a world that is not state-based (Picq 2013: 121-127).

Using the case of Kichwa women in Ecuador, Picq shows how these women took international law as the main tool to advance their rights within their ancestral systems of justice. Faced with the reality that neither the new Ecuadorean Constitution of 1998, which recognized the rights of indigenous justice, nor the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) made explicit reference to the rights of women, the Kichwa women's challenge was to make indigenous rights respect gender norms. To this end they blended the language of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) with indigenous rights stated in UNDRIP. Their goal was to bypass the legal sovereignty of the state and to make sub-national systems of indigenous justice accountable to international women's rights, thereby pressuring
the state to adopt language on gender equality within the framework of collective rights and cultural autonomy (Picq 2013: 131). Picq suggests that this articulation of multiple scales of legal authority makes the homogenous forms of state sovereignty obsolete and, instead, offers possibilities of sovereignty in the plural (Picq 2013: 133). She concludes, therefore, that indigenous politics of self-determination are one of the places where sovereignty is obliged to reinvent itself, thus holding the potential for critical changes in the Westphalian system.

Similarly, Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena tells of a process called “the return of the Indian” that began in the Andean countries in the late twentieth century, a process whereby social movements started to articulate their demands around indigenous issues and ethnic claims. Among their demands was the concept of indigenous citizenship, a pluri-ethnic or pluri-cultural ideal that had as its goal the transformation of the modern state and its principal of exclusive national sovereignty. The most widespread expression of this ideal is a political project, most prominent in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, known as interculturalidad, a project that proposes, in part through bilingual education, to create a plurinational state that recognizes the diversity of its peoples and does not require cultural renunciation as a condition for citizenship (de la Cadena 2005: 24).

Besides its goals of remaking the state and enacting indigenous citizenship, interculturalidad is also a site for the production of a different kind of knowledge. Cadena claims that the creation of alternative centers of knowledge has been a central concern of indigenous social movements. Rejecting the universalizing tendencies of an analytical epistemology, it resonates with a hermeneutic tradition
that finds thought intimately tied to places and particular forms of life and where rational and non-rational forms of knowledge can coexist (de la Cadena 2005: 23).

ARE WE READY TO LISTEN?

Sometimes I feel I am going crazy because I cannot think like an Indian anymore. I fight for Indians among whites, and therefore I have to think like them.16

Westphalia was a response to crises of seventeenth century Europe. National sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention were seen as answers to Europe’s religious wars born out of conflicts fueled by overlapping sovereignties and multiple identities. The quest for order in a chaotic world fueled the universalizing tendencies of modern western thought. But the stories we tell in IR about the successes of Westphalia in ending some of the worst wars in Europe’s history, have omitted the coeval and co-constituted stories of imperialism and conquest. Today the voices of those who suffered the devastating consequences of that history are seeking to be heard at a time when the state system is increasingly unable to cope with today’s crises of conflict, economic inequality and environmental destruction. Indigenous knowledge systems, which see unity between humans and nature and between the material and the spiritual worlds, are offering us new ways to think about these issues. Such knowledge draws on what Cadena calls “relational epistemologies” or situated knowledge which assumes the historical contingency of universal categories and which uses them in a dialogic process with local thought thus making local knowledge visible (de la Cadena 2005: 25). This is a form of knowledge that is quite similar to many forms of feminist thought. It is also similar
to other hermeneutic epistemologies that have continued to co-exist in western thought alongside more dominant analytical traditions. But these are forms of knowledge that, in the social sciences at least, have carried less weight than rationalist analytical epistemologies. Therefore, the crucial question becomes: are we ready to listen to new forms of critical thinking that are coming from voices at the margins whose knowledge has often been delegitimized as being “unscientific”?

In a reflexive epilogue Makere Stewart-Harawira speaks of the difficulties of positioning herself within what T. Minh-ha Trinh calls the “triple bind” of women writers of color who are made to feel they must choose between conflicting identities, aware also of the fact that all of these identities are used to dis-credit the scholarship of non-mainstream writers. She asserts that, choosing to write as a Maori woman academic is an act of resistance and reclamation and an ethical commitment to a value system that has been undermined by a set of norms that measures success in terms of its monetary value (Stewart-Harawira 2005: 255). Stewart-Harawira is conscious of the intersection of knowledge and power, manifest in the subjugation of indigenous ways of knowing not deemed scientific, as well as in the tensions between oral and written traditions.

Peruvian anthropologist-politician Carlos Ivan Degregori reflexively describes similar problems in Andean anthropology. With its greater access to bibliographic and funding resources, most comparative anthropological knowledge of the region is produced in the Northern hemisphere and most of it is written in English, even that which is authored by indigenous anthropologists. Even though he is aware of this problem, he admits that his own version of Peruvian anthropology
excluded, or at least marginalized, knowledge produced in provincial universities (cited in de la Cadena 2005: 13). Given the relationship between knowledge and power, all scholars who write from marginalized positions face a tension between speaking from epistemologies appropriate and useful to their own cultures and being heard by those outside their own knowledge communities.

Lily Ling and Carolina Pinheiro offer one suggestion as to how we might learn to listen to other forms of knowledge. Introducing their chapter with a question: How can the West listen? they propose what they call a "Daoist worldist model of dialogics" that offers respect, not just tolerance, as the basis for better listening and speaking (Ling and Pinheiro forthcoming). Creative listening helps us gain an understanding of mutual engagement across difference. As an example, they draw on the cosmovision of the indigenous people of the Andes for whom life’s objective consists of creating both the spiritual and the material conditions to sustain the good life. Living well means harmonizing with Mother Earth where everything is interconnected and where reality consists of everything that exists, both material and spiritual (Ling and Pinheiro, forthcoming). Similar to the Maori hermeneutic spiral, spiritual communication becomes logical when time is conceived not in linear terms, but as spherical where the past is still alive and capable of redeeming the future (Ling and Pinheiro, forthcoming).

Yet, as feminists are only too aware, we have a long way to go before the West is ready to listen to Others or before IR is ready to accept different forms of knowledge. Whose history gets recognized and whose knowledge is considered credible and legitimate is an issue of power. And, as Franke Wilmer acknowledges,
with respect to the indigenous, perhaps still the most marginalized of all societies, learning has only moved in the direction determined by the dominant society. Industrialized societies claim that they have learned little from indigenous cultures, focusing instead on their presumed decline as forces of modernization and assimilation overtake them (Wilmer 1993: 114). Yet, in these times of uncertainty and crisis, shouldn't we be open to listening to new ways of thinking?
REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 An earlier version of this article, forthcoming in the International Feminist Journal of Politics was given as a keynote address at the IFJP annual conference, ‘Gender and Crisis in Global Politics’, 9-11 May 2014. Thanks to Sandra Harding and Randy Persad for their helpful comments and suggestions and to Arlene Tickner, Lynette Russell and Lily Ling for providing useful references.

2 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/24/us/politics/pentagon-plans-to-shrink-army-to-pre-world-war-ii-level.html?_r=0

3 Economic Times, 1/21/2014

4 With respect to the US this was highlighted in Nicholas Kristof’s article of 15 February 2014 in the New York Times entitled ‘Professors, We Need You!’, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/opinion/sunday/kristof-professors-we-need-you.html?_r=0

5 I use the abbreviation “IR” to refer to what has conventionally been defined as the discipline of International Relations.

6 Critical IR scholars in various locations have, of course, been engaging these issues for quite some time.

7 The first working definition of indigenous peoples developed by the United Nations in 1974 reads as follows:

“The term indigenous peoples refers to people living in countries which have a population composed of differing ethnic or racial groups who are descendants of the earliest populations living in the area and who do not as a group control the national government of the countries in which they live” (Cited in Wilmer 1993: 9).
See for example Josephine Flood (2006: 251) who documents the tragic plight of contemporary Australian Aboriginals whose life expectancy is twenty years less than non-indigenous, stuck at levels not seen in the rest of the population for a century.

9 Writing about the Maasai People in Africa, Naomi Kipuri suggests that, while the definition of indigenous peoples generally refers to the original inhabitants of a given territory, it should be expanded to identify poor, marginalized and oppressed peoples in all parts of the world. For this reason, she claims it is more useful to consider the word “indigenous” in a broader sense to take into account experiences of other people whose lives reflect similar experiences. See Kipuri (2006: 246).


11 This quote is attributed to a senior official at the Canadian Development Agency. It is referring to the likelihood of forthcoming ecological crises. Cited in Wilmer (1993: 205)

12 The idea of a harmonious relationship between man and nature is central to Sumak Kawsay or Good Life, a conceptual weapon developed by the indigenous movement in Ecuador to defend their territories as they struggle against petroleum extraction on their lands. In principle, also not yet in practice, it has been incorporated into the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador. For an elaboration on the meaning of this concept see below p.? and Altmann (2013).

13 For an extended discussion of this issue see Toulmin (1990).

14 One example that she discusses is Iris Young’s model of “decentered diverse democratic federalism” (Young 2000). She uses the example of the debate around
the degree to which the Iroquois model of federalism and its Great Law of Peace may have influenced the development of the US Constitution. For Young the importance of this debate is the way it hybridizes the idea of democracy (Stewart-Harawira 2005: 247).

15 Taiaiake Alfred of the Kanien’kehaka (Mohawk) Nation. Quoted in Bruyneel (2007: 224)

16 Attributed to an anonymous indigenous leader quoted in de la Cadena (2005: 26).