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Opinion - Global Environmental Politics in Times of Coronavirus: Lessons from Mexico

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JOSÉ-MANUEL LEAL, JUN 19 2020

Traditionally, we believe institutions are the only ones behind the act of governing. As a result, we maintain the idea the world needs more laws and institutions, and new markets to solve the current environmental crisis. What kinds of challenges and debates in International Relations (IR) would race to implement these structural changes in the food system? Does the way we study IR contribute to this narrowness in the discipline? What kinds of effects would these, hypothetical reforms, bring to IR theory?

A theoretical lens that helps to address these questions in IR theory debates is the decolonial approach. This theoretical perspective gives back agency to other actors in society, opening the doors to consider a power distribution and bottom-up governance, as well as the participation of non-state actors in IR. In his book, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, Enrique Dussel applies this decolonial approach to the study of power. He suggests moving away from the study of power from a functionalist approach and instead, refers to society as a “political community” (e.g., civil society, NGOs, social movements, local governments, etc.). This community of actors, he claims, has a better capacity for organizing, intervening, and supporting other members of the community, making it better suited to influencing the macrostructure. This theoretical perspective also assumes that each actor interacts collectively, not individually, gaining more capacity to influence and shape policies.

To focus on macro-institutions –the state, capitalism, or the international system to name a few—is to lose the sense of the micro, heterogeneous, plural, hybrid, complex, or transnational. In IR, focusing the analysis on structures, prevents us from observing interior dynamics, considered key actors in localities who recognize, or “give entrance” to external influences. Accordingly, Dussel claims it is important to include micro-institutions in the analysis since they facilitate the articulation and development of macro-institutions. The concept of *collective actor* attributes more agency to the subject, making it more responsible and capable of influencing the macrostructure. It is essential not to ignore the micro-institutions, to articulate the macro-institutions better, since power is constituted mutually and in the relation between both structures. Furthermore, Dussel suggests getting rid of the dual *simplism* shown in dependency theory or the world systems theory commonly used to study international relations and politics in the global south. Based on this reconceptualization of power, it can be argued local actors –like cities, local NGOs, and social movements- participating in global governance, illustrates how the reconfiguration of politics is happening. These theoretical tools from the decolonization approach contribute to giving back agency to other actors in society, opening the doors for power distribution, bottom-up governance, and interaction among actors.

One way of encouraging this collective power is through the reduction of processed food consumption. By simultaneously, promoting urban agriculture practices, and building the necessary infrastructure, we can move toward a more sustainable and healthy society. Also, encouraging students to create consumer cooperatives can provide access to healthier, more affordable food to all students on campus, instead of prioritizing franchises and industrialized food. All these initiatives can contribute to set the basis of a more fair, healthy, and environmental society. That is the case of the Concordia Food Coalition and the Hive Café Solidarity Co-operative at Concordia University, and the recently created McGill Food Coalition at McGill University, all in Montréal, Canada.

An attempt to illustrate the embedded collective power in a small Mexican city is to describe the food habits that we

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still conserve briefly, and how part of the prevention against COVID-19 manages. At the beginning of March, when the spread of COVID-19 started, I was in Ottawa, finishing the semester's activities. After eight years of living in Canada, I flew back to Mexico (where I come from) for unavoidable personal reasons. I first landed in Mexico City where I took a bus to Guadalajara (all flights were canceled at the time). Upon my arrival, family members collected me and drove, straight to Zapotlán el Grande, where I have spent most of the quarantine. Since it is not a big city (a bit more than 100,000 inhabitants), most likely, you have never heard of it in the past. What I am certain you have heard is the song "Besame Mucho" in any of its versions. Well the woman that wrote that song was born here.

Living the pandemic in a small town in the west part of Mexico is hugely different compared to what I experienced in Ottawa. First of all, there is plenty of toilet paper and vitamins. Simply because we have access to fresh oranges, limes, and guavas, all rich in vitamin C. And it is not only the nice weather that motivates people to grow fruits and vegetables. There is an embedded culture of planting trees in parks where neighbors cooperate with each other to take care of them. Also, the tradition of curing simple ailments with medicinal tea rather than taking western medicine is an example of independence from pharmaceutical companies. In Ottawa, while most people were fighting for toilet paper and vitamins, almost no one was buying oranges (and there were plenty of them in the supermarket) or looking for medicinal herbs to prepare teas. One reason might have been that, in the Global North, we dismiss the opinions and knowledge coming from elders, first nations or even our grandparents, and instead believe blindly on the messages we receive from mass media.

To exemplify how easy it is to lose focus of the real issue at hand (and the proper mechanisms to tackle environmental issues) is the growth of the vegetarianism and veganism movement in the Global South. In my perspective both movements represent a distraction from the real problems that are the cause of the current environmental crisis. Instead of going against the unsustainable production, distribution, and consumption practices in the food sector, these movements demonize meat, and created a new market. As long as the decision of going vegan or follow a vegetarian diet is not based on medical reasons, the argument claiming becoming vegetarian – or vegan – contributes to saving the planet, loses relevance. Encouraged by economic globalization, these changes in diet make us forget that our food habits of old have been healthy and environmentally friendly.

For instance, specifically in this region it is common to have a snack before eating called "jicama", a juicy, crunchy, with a slightly sweet and nutty flavor fruit. Original from Asia, we have some before eating, or in parties and reunions. We add some lime, salt and pepper powder [always optional]. This simple snack is full of prebiotic fiber, which is good for your gut bacteria. Additionally, the lime we add contributes to alkalize the body helping to improve your health. Another example of a healthy dish, traditional in this region, are boiled beans (frijoles de la olla), which at the same time can be completely vegan (if you don't want to add cheese). Here, in Zapotlán el Grande, we add avocado and *chile de uña* (a chopped salsa made with tomato, tomatillo, carrots, radish, onion, hot pepper [that is optional], marjoram, salt, and sour-orange juice) to a plate of boiled beans.

These examples, among many others, that exemplify how easy it is to follow a healthy diet and take care of the environment, without the need to take pills or buying processed food. I came to realize that the strong influence of veganism and vegetarianism enjoyed in the past few years, further challenges the power of discourses when they come from the Global North. Meat is not the problem itself. Despite the prevailing discourses around the issue, the main problem is the way meat is processed, packed, commercialized, and even consumed. Have we ever stopped for a moment to think about all the plastic used in vegan and vegetarian food production? And the greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions its elaboration and distribution generate? Same applies to the market for organic food. Shouldn't they be a human right? Shouldn't organic fruits and vegetables be the normal thing in our lives?

The current global pandemic, caused by COVID-19, exhibits the strong dependency from transnational companies in the food, and medicine, supply. Maybe it is time we start encouraging the cities' natural capacity toward food sovereignty. This means prioritizing the creation and conservation of green areas and their importance within our society. This also means the promotion of community projects, like the examples mentioned above, that contribute to the access to organic ingredients. Furthermore, the current sanitary emergency challenges our own perceptions of who holds most of the power in the world's food and medicinal system? Is it the people, governments, or transnational corporations? Applied to the study of IR, maybe it could be useful to think moving away from the idea

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that power can only originate from states and international organizations. Particularly, in the way international pharmaceutical companies and transnational companies control the food and health system.

Should we, IR academics, start thinking about epistemic decolonization when studying global governance and power? By asking this question, I do not encourage young scholars to follow another trendy theoretical perspective in the field. My intention is limited to the promotion of a diversity of approaches in the discipline that enriches debates and encourage us to ask new and different questions. These ideas come from contrasting the core assumptions of traditional approaches in the field and the empirical evidence in world politics. Perhaps it is one of the reasons the discipline keeps a certain level of blindness and lack of accuracy between the analysis produced and reality.

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José-Manuel Leal is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Ottawa. His research interest includes the study of the contribution from the existing global economic system to the current environmental crisis. His current research involves the study of Transnational Climate Change Governance, and the influence of foreign actors in local environmental politics, with a focus in Latin American cities. He also holds a Master in International Economic Relations and Cooperation, as well as an Honor's Bachelor in International Business. José Manuel has collaborated in research projects with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) from the United Nations and the Latin American Union of Municipalities (UIM). His professional experience also includes the design and coordination of environmental cooperation projects and academic collaborations developed during his time at the Foreign Affairs Office from the State of Jalisco, Mexico, the University of Guadalajara, and in FIDALE, a Mexican-Spanish NGO. You can follow him on Twitter: @JoseManuelLeal.