

REVIEW

Thinking Difference, Internationally

Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

Priya Dixit  
American University, Washington DC, USA

1. This book urges us to recognise and deal with difference in ways different to those traditionally enacted in the discipline of International Relations (IR). Inayatullah and Blaney argue that difference in IR has commonly been obliterated, contained or assimilated (pp. 2-3). The other is represented as inferior and uncivilised, needing reclamation or removal. As an alternative to this, Inayatullah and Blaney's recommendations are to illustrate recessive themes present in dominant discourses and to move towards an "ethnological" IR where the other can be used as a means of self-reflection (pp. 9, 13-14, 166-168). They advocate alternative ways of studying international relations and write that these ways can be found "beyond the European imperium" as well as in recessive strands of western socio-political thought (p. ix). "Institutionally," they write, "we call for an IR based on the creation of conversations among cultures; theoretically, we call for a practice that, while taking seriously both global structures and the meanings and intentions of actors, also focuses on the actual history of cultural contact." (p. 125).

2. In chapter two, the authors use examples from scholars to illustrate that the commonly-accepted narratives in IR, for instance about indigenous peoples, are about obliterating or assimilating differences. However, Inayatullah and Blaney show that there are often recessive subtexts within conventional versions of what theorists wrote. But, ultimately, such subtexts (or different readings) are subsumed within universalising visions of "Christianity, natural law and/or commercial civilisation" (p. 91). However, at this "contact zone" (before universalising notions of humanity and/or Christianity take over), there is also an alternative moment which allows opportunity for difference to emerge and for us to acknowledge or converse with the other within (p. 91). Following their illustration of how indigenous peoples are depicted, in chapter three, the authors discuss major proponents of the modernisation theory and how, in IR, modernisation theory tried to eradicate difference through making inside/outside and tradition/modernity binary oppositions, without taking into account the fact that others may have different ways of looking at things (p. 95). They criticise the practice of comparison based on the notion of humanity as being the same everywhere in the international system. This type of comparison is negative, Inayatullah and Blaney write, because it assumes humanity is the same everywhere while then attempting to compare differences with respect to a specific version of humanity. Here, the dialogue's purpose is limited and it is usually used to break down barriers rather than reveal difference or even potential conflicts (p. 122).

3. After offering their views in the first three chapters as to how difference is part of the constitution of IR, Inayatullah and Blaney go on to study difference in contemporary IR. In chapter four, they discuss international political economy (IPE) and its role in maintaining difference. Comparison is not a fact of nature, but a social practice, they write (p. 132) thus questioning the notion of comparison. Also, they criticise the IPE practice of putting self before society (p. 156). They end the chapter by reiterating their view (oft repeated in the book) that the other is both external and internal. There are two ways of knowing this—through experience and through dialogue (p. 158). The authors often refer to Todorov and Ashish Nandy and to their notions of dealing with difference. Nandy, for Inayatullah and Blaney, showed how C.F. Andrews and Gandhi were able to "uncover the other within the self..." (p. 168). The other, here is not just for self-knowledge but also for future conversations and therefore the process of discovery is open-ended. The dialogue necessary for conversing with others is seen by the authors as an ethical imperative (p. 168). In their discussion of overlapping sovereignties in chapter 6, Inayatullah and Blaney write that older understandings of how property was viewed can provide "a corrective" to current understandings of sovereignty (p. 190). However, they do not provide reasons for why older understandings are necessarily more corrective than current or future understandings. Could it not be that older understandings are just different instead of corrective? Also, while the authors advocate the need for "commons" to facilitate discussion (pp. 216-217), a missing question is that of the kind of commons they are proposing. Furthermore, without an analysis of power, is it not possible that the commons might end up being narrowly defined, under conventional assumptions of power? In the Epilogue, the authors reiterate their call for a dialogue of traditions and for the oppressed to find recessive strands in dominant discourses so they can begin and continue dialogues (pp. 219-220) as such dialogues are necessary for alternative visions of IR to flourish.

4. Overall, Inayatullah and Blaney's call for a more ethnological IR, though not fully-described as to its meaning, is a worthy one in a field which remains defined by its commitment to "science" (under a rather rigid understanding of science as relating to quantitative measurements) and finds talk of culture rather vague. By focusing on culture, Blaney and Inayatullah have started a conversation, which can remain open to participants from different outlooks, both within and outside of IR. Their advice (to "the oppressed") of being aware of the need to talk in the language of the powerful (p. 220) is important and will, in these days when scholars and students are often boxed into theoretical cages, remind us of the need not to talk past each other or to assume everybody talks in similar ways. Also, their point that comparison, especially in modernisation theory, has been used as a tool for differentiating others (as less developed or as being part of a same, homogenous humanity, based on the researcher's own viewpoint—pp. 99-102) is well-made and a reminder to us, as scholars, to keep in mind that our ways of viewing the world may not be the same as everyone else's.

5. However, while the authors refer to works by Todorov and Nandy a great deal, they do not acknowledge that non-IR disciplines and non-United States-based scholars have been writing books on difference and trying to come to terms with it for the past decade, if not longer, in ways they advocate. For example, I doubt whether a historian or even somebody who graduated from a non-US university in the past few years would find much new in Inayatullah and Blaney's book, especially in its examples and in its exhortation to make a contact zone where differences can be played out. Other fields (for instance, literature, history, especially postcolonial history, and anthropology) have been grappling with these issues for a while or at least since the 1990s. Also, difference is not a naturally-given subject either and while the authors do a good job of describing how a specific type of difference has been part of IR, it is not clear whether this difference changes as locations and times change. An acknowledgement of other fields where difference (or, differences) have been problematised and a discussion about how work has progressed there could have enriched Inayatullah and Blaney's book. This would have also led to the formation of a contact zone among IR and other disciplines and fostered further conversations between IR and other fields. As it is, most of *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* feels rather outdated in terms of the works cited and also because it feels more like a collection of different journal articles (which it is) rather than a book with connections between its various chapters.

6. It is praiseworthy that Inayatullah and Blaney are not advocating that dialogues within a contact zone will eventually lead to an understanding of self and other since the future remains uncertain. Instead, they are aware that differences, conflicts and contrasts may become more evident, but there is no mention of what may happen after this. It seems as though the authors, on the one hand, want to point out that differences may emerge in contact zones and, on the other, think dialogue will necessarily be a good thing. In their view, the other is somehow good or has resources not possessed by the self and which will help the self become whole (see especially pp. 219-221). They, following Todorov and Nandy, argue that equality (between self and other) is needed for dialogue to occur (p. 167), but is it not possible that inequality (as long as we are aware of its social construction) can be a means of dialogue too? After all, being that social relations are always relations of power, being aware of how such networks are configured and the strategies in operation to produce (and sustain) a specific type of IR is also important. While Inayatullah and Blaney succeed in showing how difference has been constituted and maintained in IR, they seem to limit the possibilities for dialogue inherent in the way the field is now. By doing so, they fall into a pattern of domination/oppression construction rather than looking at self-making (or "crafting selves" as anthropologist Dorinne Kondo called it) as contextual and historically-positioned strategies within power relations. After all, self is not permanent and unitary but is changing.

7. Overall, there was a lack of clarity about what Inayatullah and Blaney wanted to do with difference. Do they want differences to dialogue (as they say they do) but, at the same time, want us to be aware that competition (and isn't dialogue a form of competition too?) is not natural but a social practice (p. 132)? The positive aspect is that, contrary to neo-realists, most of whom assume competition is natural in the world, hopefully there are fewer people working in IR (or in other fields) today who look at competition as natural and not socially-constructed, especially after reading this book. But, confusion over the terms and roles of difference and equality remains—if self and other are to be on equal footing within dialogue (p. 168), what does this mean? What do they mean by "equal" here (for, if equal meant same then there would be no point in self and other dialoguing since they would lead to sameness)? A forerunner of liberal thought Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out that equality can lead to sameness and homogeneity and that is bad because it negates differences and, for him, makes human beings prone to generalisations (and universalisations). He cautioned against these negative effects of equality and advocated face-to-face interactions to renew selves and to live with difference (Tocqueville, 1988, pp. 444, 645, 692). This seems similar to what Inayatullah and Blaney want, as well. Can it not be that by being aware of one's positionality within current relations of power in IR, there can be possibilities of renewal and dialogue? To do so, focusing on how difference itself is not negative and there can be many differences could be a means to start conversations across selves. After all, the way IR has been constituted is only one of many possibilities; being aware of that, and working within it by making scholars with different viewpoints aware of the need to discuss the implications of their ontological and epistemological assumptions, would be beneficial. To their credit, Inayatullah and Blaney partly do so by advocating the oppressed to learn the language of the powerful. I would add they should have recommended a multi-way opening up spaces for discussion and dialogue and not just attempting to talk to the powerful. After all, talking to the "powerful" (however they are characterised) is not going to be enough if the powerful are not willing to listen!

8. Another area Inayatullah and Blaney could have expanded upon is the book's treatment of self and other. Inayatullah and Blaney write that the self is never whole until it recognises its internal and external others (pp. 220-221), but then they also discuss how British and Indian selves would benefit from interacting with their own (and the other's) recessive selves (page 167). Does this mean that there are uniquely British and Indian selves with uniquely dominant and recessive themes respectively? I would assume they would say no but their examples of Gandhi and C.K Andrews among others, illustrate otherwise. Selves (in the plural) can be seen as strategic positionings of power relations based on sociocultural resources available at specific times and within specific contexts. By reducing them to dominant/oppressed or dominant/recessive, Inayatullah and Blaney are positing binary oppositions themselves, a practice they decry throughout the book. Binary oppositions are tied to narratives of modernisation and it is rather surprising that the authors reify them without analysing the implications of such practices since, by doing so, they are reifying categories—rather than describing how different selves can and are constituted in different historical and social periods and, often, in different contexts in the same period.

9. Following on from this, the book could have benefited from a stronger description of the historical conditions under which modernisation theory, IPE, etc became strategically important. What makes IR the way it is now are resources, languages and tools from the past. After all, it is unlikely Gandhi, even with his use of "recessive" themes of non-violence in Indian and British selves, would have been successful (or even become public) if he had not positioned himself (and been positioned) at a specific time and place in history. A hundred years before that, he'd most likely have been shot dead by the British before he became popular. In "his" time, he was heard and managed to use resources at his disposal in specific ways, due to his awareness of the socio-political contexts within which he was operating at the same time as he was also constrained by them. Or, speaking more generally, for the "oppressed" to speak and be heard, the dominant or oppressors have to be willing to listen. Inayatullah and Blaney do not discuss this problem and instead figures like Gandhi and C.K Andrews appear to be acting autonomously, within non-political contexts. In the end, the book is written from a specific point of view and for a specific audience. The audience being academics working in IR and especially within US-based IR, where this type of thinking seems to be new (and different).

10. However, this does not mean that the book is not useful or important, especially in its call for recognition of differences and its open admission that the future is uncertain and unpredictable (p. 217). In the end, I am aware that, by engaging with their texts, by raising questions and by using liberal, Enlightenment-era thinker Alexis de Tocqueville, I am trying to do what Inayatullah and Blaney urge us to do—engaging with the dominant texts and attempting to put forward my views on them. While they may disagree with the points I've raised, while my reading of their book might (and obviously is) different to theirs (and others'), by supporting my views with textual data and by re-reading some of their arguments, was there not the creation of a contact zone? I leave open the possibility of further dialogue in the future.

**Priya Dixit is a PhD student in International Relations at the School for International Service, American University, researching security discourses and constructions of identities in Northern Ireland and Nepal. Email: [pdixit1978@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:pdixit1978@yahoo.co.uk)**

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