

The Study Group Where I Find Myself

Rafael Bittencourt Rodrigues Lopes¹

When I was an undergraduate studying International Relations, I attended two study groups, one focused on African studies, the other on South Atlantic studies. I enjoyed the space to read and discuss authors and topics related to international relations, but the texts were very different from those I was required to read in courses on IR Theory. The study group texts focused on Latin American, African and some Asian countries, instead of only the USA and Western European countries. And the authors focused on people(s), not just states, as relevant actors in world affairs. The texts explored multiple forms of inequality (income, gender, race and ethnicity to highlight some). They discussed violence; not just the violence of wars but the violence of everyday life. The study group discussions helped me to think of these issues not as domestic concerns, but as problems that stem from Portuguese colonialism and as issues of international relations.

Years later, in 2019, I moved to a new city, Goiânia, where I was hired as a temporary contract professor. Even before I arrived there, I was included in a WhatsApp group for students and professors who were planning to start a new study group focused on postcolonial readings. Why did they create this space to study postcolonial perspectives? This was one of our first conversations. Isabela told me that, during her studies, she had been assigned many readings in different disciplines which appeared to assume a world where countries like Brazil aren't relevant. Yet Brazil was the place where she had lived her whole life and from where she studied IR. Valéria told me about being a Black Brazilian woman in IR. She said the violence she sees and fears every day is not a topic in disciplinary discussions of security, just as the inequality she faces as a Black woman is not a topic in academic discussions of development. Postcolonial approaches offered Isabela and Valéria possibilities to think about their existence as something that matters in international relations.

After we shared these understandings, expectations, and desires, we began to read texts that dialogue with issues important to us. We didn't worry about whether the authors "fit" in the discipline. We read Black women like bell hooks, Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins, decolonial authors such as Aníbal Quijano and Ramón Grosfoguel, Brazilian Black and Indigenous leaders such as Lélia González, Abdias do Nascimento and Ailton Krenak, among others. We also included some of our own writing, such as final works

¹ Rafael Bittencourt Rodrigues Lopes holds a PhD in International Relations from the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (Belo Horizonte, Brazil), is a lecturer at the same university, and also taught at the Federal University of Goiás (Goiânia, Brazil). His main research interests are critical approaches to development, pluriversal and decolonial International Relations, Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian thought, Latin American and African studies. He can be reached at bittencourt.ri@gmail.com or via Twitter @rafa_fael_22.

by undergraduate students, ongoing doctoral projects and recently published articles that brought up themes such as resistance in territories affected by extractive mining, state building on the African continent and the role of Atlantic slavery in the 19th century in the construction of the idea of ‘international’ at sea.

My conversations with Isabela and Valéria helped me to reflect on my own experiences studying IR. I am a Brazilian, a Black man, a grandson of migrants from the rural exodus, a son of a policeman. I grew up in a lower-middle class neighborhood in Belo Horizonte, close to some of the city’s large favelas, but outside of them. My story had felt of little relevance to International Relations, when I understood it to be just a field dedicated to the politics of great powers. Talking with Isabela and Valéria helped me to think about how my life and my experiences in Belo Horizonte might matter to IR and connect to the experiences of people in other places, including Goiânia.

The group started meeting with four or five people but in March 2020 our classes were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Isabela, Valéria and I decided to take our study group online. Our online group soon became a meeting place for lots of people, students of IR and students of other disciplines, students in Goiânia and other cities in Brazil, and people without any relationship to any university. Big numbers were never our goal, but after six months we had 1,000 followers on Instagram.

When Valéria, Isabela and I saw many people attending the meetings, especially during the first year of the pandemic, we reflected on the purpose of the group. I was curious: why are there so many people interested and why is there so little space in our courses for these readings? Until the study group exploded, I had viewed postcolonial readings as just one of several avenues to study IR. I had assumed that only a few colleagues and students would be interested in these dialogues. The group showed me that, even if that is true, people need a safe space to share their thoughts, experiences and texts that connect to their lives. In the second year of the study group, the number of attendees fell, but the online dialogues continued. I felt renewed by these meetings. The group reminded me not to lose heart in the face of the difficulties of the pandemic, the Bolsonaro government, and my own struggle to combine teaching and writing my doctoral dissertation.



Some of the participants of the group offered Instagram videos with reflections from the meetings (shared with permission of all pictured).

If I can pick a recurring theme from all our meetings, it is our need to imagine an IR where we matter. I haven't been able to answer the question I asked earlier: why do we have so little space in our IR courses for these readings? But this short story has helped me think about the first part of that question: why are so many people interested? In the study group, I encountered many people who shared the same frustration and the same hope: We are tired of reading the same stories about the same people. We want to see, study, read and write about a world where people like us exist.