

In the End It's All Ismália: a Story of Three Stories

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In Mid-July I was invited by graduating students to be the paronymph of the class. Here in Brazil, the paronymph has a mission to give one last piece of advice, one last lecture, before the students graduate. This speech takes place at the graduation ceremony and generally has an optimistic tone, after all the students are achieving a very important accomplishment, especially in Brazil, where university education has always been an option for just a few people. The invitation, sent by the University's ceremonial staff, included the information that the paronymphs would have to attend the event in-person at the university and follow safety protocols, such as masks and social distancing.

From the moment I received this invitation, the contradiction and the dilemma became evident: how would I offer an optimistic speech, talking about the various possibilities that opened from that moment, in a country where more than 570 thousand people have died from COVID-19, with a fascist government that is literally setting fire to everything it sees? How would I talk about opportunities in a country with more than 14 million unemployed people and with 125 million people experiencing food insecurity? This difference between the tone that is usually adopted on this type of occasion and the stark reality of our conditions had a great impact on me. After all, for the last year and a half we've had to reconcile the two. While we entered the (virtual) classroom to talk about the canon of International Relations about balance of power, polarity or the benefits of international cooperation, there were people dying without oxygen in Manaus, rich countries were throwing away vaccines, and Abya Yala and African countries are unable to advance their national vaccination programs due to lack of vaccines.

After reflecting on these dilemmas, I had this feeling that the best I could do was to highlight for graduating students the kind of world they were entering as “professionals” and the responsibility that they have as people with college education. This approach would be the most I could do. So, I urged the graduates that they had “a responsibility to be agents of true, just and revolutionary change. Change that is urgent, because the forest out here is on fire, and the fire is destroying everything it finds. Saving this forest is fundamental, because as Denilson Baniwa, indigenous activist and artist of Baniwa ethnic group, says: standing forest, fascism on the ground”.

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Standing Forest, Fascism on the Ground by Denilson Baniwa

I felt happy about the speech, but I think that the ceremony itself had a big impact on me. While I was in the auditorium, I sent a message to a colleague, Rafael Bittencourt, about the atmosphere of the graduation. Unlike what you expect in these moments, this ceremony had a different dynamic. Very few people were present, just a few graduates, honored professors and University broadcast and IT staff. We couldn't see the students' smiles. The atmosphere was one of sepulchral silence, interrupted only by the voices of the master of ceremonies and the students and professors who were giving speeches. It seemed that no one there was sure what we were doing or why we were there. As soon as the ceremony was over, everyone left, without greetings, hugging, or talking. The most normal graduation thing that I did at the ceremony was to take a photo with two graduates, the only students I had taught who lived in or near the city and who were able to attend the ceremony in person. The other students watched via YouTube transmission.



Graduates in International Relations and myself, 2021

I teach in the International Relations course at PUC Minas, Poços de Caldas campus. In 2018 I proposed a course entitled “Descolonizando as Relações Internacionais: violência epistêmica e emancipação no Sul Global”.² This course is now offered in the last semester before students graduate, a time when they are already thinking about what to do after earning a diploma and sometimes have a pragmatic approach to the classes they attend. I call to everyone’s attention that this will be one of the last moments they have to reflect deeply on what it means to graduate in Brazil and the various structures of marginalization and oppression in the country. In this sense, the course is extremely pragmatic, as it is in this racist, sexist, homophobic and classist world that students will join a labor market that simply does not have any vacancies.

After I teach this class, a class where we try to dialogue, widen our view, and perhaps resist westernized episteme, I go into the next classroom to discuss Defensive and Offensive Realism, Neoliberalism and Complex Interdependence – mainstream approaches in IR – on Tuesdays and, on Wednesday, positivism, causality, and rationalism in “true” scientific research in International Relations. At the end of the day it’s like *Ismália*³, a poem by the Brazilian author Alphonsus de Guimaraens called “Pastoral to believers of love and death” and a song adapted by Emicida that inspires this text: I want to touch the sky but end up on the ground. I enter the first classroom to discuss how to build relational alternatives, pluriversal futures and safe spaces with my students, and then I’m reminded in the next classroom that the field is still more interested in discussing a projectile’s trajectory than who it hits and why. Emicida, a great Brazilian rapper, reminds us: we still have “white skin and target skin”. He also reflects on racism in Brazil, stating that there is a manual on how the inferiorization of Brazilian Blacks occurred and still occurs today: “First you kidnap them, steal them, lie about them; Deny their god, offend, separate them; If any dream dares to run, you stop them; And send them to debate with the bullet that goes through them”.

I think *Ismália* perhaps represents the effort of creating a course that tries to engage with non-mainstream approaches to International Relations in an essentially westernized structure. And this is not a specific problem at the university I teach, which has several professors who dialogue in different ways with many plural, critical dimensions of International Relations, but a problem in the field. And this is why, for me, this project is so important.

Since Jonneke Koomen proposed this theme as a roundtable for ISA 2020, several ideas and possibilities have crossed my mind, but I have never been able to come up with a consistent proposal. From the moment the idea of transforming the ISA roundtable into a publication for this journal came up, this difficulty appeared again in my thoughts. Life went by, those moments were happening and in the back of my head I had a text, but

² The class is taught in Portuguese and might be translated as “Decolonizing International Relations: Epistemic Violence and Emancipation in the Global South”

³ The official *Ismália* music video can be viewed here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtN1jBk0ZQg

never on the page. Always on the verge of getting it written. I began to think about Criolo's Plano de Voo: "And as much as I try to explain; I can't make the abstract that only I feel concrete to you; it's like I stayed here in this corner; seeing the world turn into an abusive error".

And it was during this time that this text appeared, which I honestly do not know if it will be considered adequate to enter the issue⁴. As any young academic, or any academic at all, impostor syndrome affects me big time. Anyway, I think this difficulty of writing came perhaps because it has been too difficult to do International Relations as if people matter. And I think that to realize this, to write about it, to publish this, means to formalize a pessimism that academia is, again according to Criolo, fermenting dreams with tears. For a long, long time. Too much time.

And now, after telling you these three stories, I'm not sure how this text should end. My Monday class will start in 23 minutes and the text editor says I have 1468 words in the Portuguese version. I must write at least 32 more to send to others. Returning to Ismália, I remember that she went mad and only then began to dream. She saw a moon in the sky and a moon in the sea. It was in a dream that Ismália got lost and started to possess the moon in the sky and the moon in the sea. When trying to get the two, "her soul went up to heaven, her body went down to the sea". Dreaming was never Ismália's problem but rather trying to reach for the moon in the sky and the moon in the sea at the same time. And I think that the difficulty I had in writing this text has to do with this goal of trying to make International Relations as if people mattered when the "International Relations" that I have learned and teach daily is indifferent to people, most of the time.

Transcending this dichotomy requires things that I don't even know, but I know that for now, we're trying to look for the moon in the sky and the moon in the sea. And meanwhile, according to Emicida, Larissa Luz and Fernanda Montenegro, everything will be Ismália: we want to touch the sky, but we end up on the ground.

Class starts soon. Today we will discuss the English School... again.

⁴ If you are reading this text in the JNP page, it means that it worked!