

WISC-IRIIS Exploratory Workshops
**“Alternative Cosmologies & Knowledge Systems in International Relations:
Voices from the Global South”**
New Delhi, January 11-14, 2016

A Personal Summary

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For the better part of a week in mid-January, 2016, I was tremendously fortunate to participate in the WISC-IRIIS Exploratory Workshops in New Delhi, India. As a series of relatively small gatherings, the workshops provided opportunities for scholars from a great range of specializations to intensively engage one another's work, provide each other feedback, and also to think together about larger questions of shared concern and interest. Indeed, it was highly gratifying to see various threads of common conversation (often all-too rare in professional gatherings) emerge within this forum – between scholars who otherwise deal with such disparate subject areas as gender and conflict in Kashmir, Indian political thought and metaphysics, Islamic political traditions, Indigenous American thought and politics, the legacies of Confucianism in East Asian politics, amongst many more. To my mind one of the great unifying threads of this conversation was the problem of difference: how do we think about what is at stake in particular instances of difference? How do we do justice to difference in our writing?

Precisely how we are to think about questions of difference and “other ways of thinking and being” is certainly a problem of longstanding (if not, indeed, constitutive) importance for international relations scholarship, and one that has received no small amount of attention from critical camps over the years. How one understands, frames, and resolves this question will likely go some way in shaping the kind of IR one endeavours to practice, what one takes IR scholarship to legitimately be, and so on. One of the noteworthy features of the WISC-IRIIS Exploratory Workshops in New Delhi was the particular theoretical register in which this problem received consideration. As the [Call for Papers](#) of these workshops made clear, a “central premise” was that “the globe is indeed home to different cosmologies with diverse knowledge systems and, each of these may have different ways of knowing and, often these are indeed constitutive of different realities.” In addition to *cosmologies* and *knowledge systems*, a central (and connected) theme in workshop discussions was the meaning and role of *ontology* – and the possibility of thinking in terms of and in light of “the inherent multiplicity”

of ontologies. How might such a context provoke us in our thinking generally, and in doing IR more particularly?

This focus was timely on a number of fronts. It is arguably timely given the kinds of political struggles and stakes at play within the contemporary world – not least in sites of colonialism and struggle, as e.g., between settler states and Indigenous peoples in the Americas and elsewhere. The WISC-IRIIS workshops also provided an opportunity for IR scholars (particularly those who are engaged in the complex sites of the Global South) to engage a theoretical turn (a renewed focus on ontology and the multiplicity of ontologies) that has been receiving attention across a number of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences in recent years. A shared suspicion at the Delhi workshops was that the complex realities of the Global South form particularly rich contexts in which to think through these matters and their political ramifications.

To my mind, the WISC-IRIIS workshops were especially well organized to facilitate a serious and sustained discussion of these matters. Participants at the workshops included a number of interdisciplinary voices that helped to make aspects of relevant debates from other disciplines (e.g., anthropology and philosophy) available to more IR-focused discussions. In addition, a supplementary workshop on “Seeing the World/Cosmos through Multiple Ontological Lenses”, led by Dr. Tamara Trownsell (*Universidad San Francisco de Quito*), focused on relational ontology and the consequences of thinking with/through such a way of understanding the world. This provided a marvelous opportunity for attendants to debate, experience, and consider in fresh ways what different ontologies (and a theoretical framework grounded in the multiplicity of ontologies) can “do”.

With a view to continuing and sharing (and publishing) some of the promising conversations begun here, the “Delhi Group: A Forum for International Relations in the Global South” was established at the conclusion of the main workshop. It may be happily anticipated that fruits will be borne from this meeting for years to come!