BRILL

Introduction

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Decentring Agency in World Politics: Writing for Reflexivity as a Collective Experiment

How can we help each other, through our writing, in challenging the potentially harmful perceptions we have unconsciously acquired? How can we assist readers in becoming more reflexive about the things we write about? How can we foster in each other, through our writing, a reflexive process that enables us to observe the many ways in which we have learned to perceive and relate to the world, and challenge our socialisation? Do we give ourselves the means to achieve this objective through our writing practices, and if so, how?

This running theme takes these questions as a starting point. I started asking them myself when I was writing my PhD. It was at that time that I realised that I had never thought of myself as a writer; I rather imagined my job to be the role of a thinker. Simply put, I had never been socialised to reflexively, critically, and creatively engage with my writing practices. More precisely, while my undergraduate programme in the humanities placed the relationship between the writer and the readers at the core of many of its teachings, this relationship was marginal in the conversations I was having as a junior social scientist. I felt isolated, largely unaware of a growing conversation happening across academia about the subject.[1] I experimented with writing on my own and looked for peers with whom I could exchange. Over the years, I pinpointed problematiques that deserved more specific attention, such as the one we explore in this running theme.

Here, we build bridges between the methodology of reflexivity and the methodology of writing, focusing on writing practices that aim at fostering

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[1]   Cassuto, Leonard. 2024. *Academic Writing as If Readers Matter*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024); Hamilton, Cait. 2024. "Blog." Hamilton Editorial. February 29, 2024. https://www.hamiltoneditorial.com/blog.

reflexivity within our readers. Together, we combine our personal experience as researchers and writers, conceptual frameworks, and case studies to explore the relational aspects of writing – reflexively within the self and between the writer and the reader. To bring coherence to this creative exercise, our initiative focuses on:

– one field of study: world politics,
– one reflexive process we aim to foster: decentring,
– one thing we aim to foster reflexivity about: the denial of non-Western agency.

Namely, we hope that our contributions will help (at least some of) our readers to decentre the way they perceive who is represented as an agent of world politics and become more reflexive about the Eurocentric denial of agency that exists in and beyond International Relations (IR). This collective experiment aims to tackle discourses of denial of agency in the context of the collective problematization of Eurocentrism occurring in IR. It is also a practical attempt at conceiving how to write in order to help readers reflexively account for these perceptions via decentring. Our contributions do not offer any final or prescriptive solutions. Rather, they illustrate and unpack practical attempts to support a more structured and collective conversation.

The running theme starts with two illustrative case studies, for which I asked the contributors to revisit empirical projects they have been working on through the lens of writing for reflexivity. Through the case of anti-military base struggles in Okinawa, Carmina Untalan uncovers the multiple agencies denied when it comes to US hegemony and US-Japan relations.[2] More precisely, her writing interchanges autobiography with standalone accounts of the respondents involved in anti-base struggles to show how the agents of anti-military base movements have transformed bases into sites of struggles that move beyond being prisoners of the American empire and to invite readers to reflect upon their perceptions of US relations with military base hosts.

Felix Anderl takes as a case study the Global Justice Movement to investigate how transnational activists working in North-South solidarity networks are trying to establish ways of working that strengthen the participants in such networks, while evading typical problems of earlier transnational movement networks such as paternalism and the centring of agency in the hands of Northern NGOs.[3] He critically reflects on his own attempts at contributing to

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2   Utalan, Carmina. "Writing to Unravel Multiple Agencies in Anti-Military Base Struggles in Okinawa." *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* 5 (1) (2024).

3   Anderl, Felix, Decentering Agency in North-South Solidarity: Arguing with my Past Self." *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* 5 (1) (2024).

this project and the possibility that these may have undermined "non-Western" agency in the course of trying to facilitate it. Through an auto-ethnography exploring the postcolonial discourse he has been socialised into, he critically reflects on the limits of the strategies he developed based on "critical whiteness", and demonstrates the benefits of the writing practice he calls "arguing by experience" in which he argues with his past self about what it means to be an implicated subject and thereby to decenter agency in transnational solidarity projects.

In the third article, I position the running theme in the existing literature and provide the conceptual foundations for this research agenda.[4] I define the concepts of writing, reflexivity, decentering, denial of agency and Eurocentrism. I share my experience in experimenting with writing for reflexivity. I also share the guidelines I provided to the other contributors to set up the project in case other researchers or teachers wish to take the experiment beyond our small team/running theme.

Finally, critically reflecting upon his experience as a writing advisor in an academic writing centre, Paul Beaumont concurs that writing practices are indeed a blindspot for critical scholars and discusses how each of the contributors bend and sometimes break the writing rules he once preached.[5] Theorising the tacit tactics employed by the contributors' Beaumont suggests that each generates authority through humility, which he argues is generally underappreciated in writing traditions within and beyond anglophile academia. However, noting that the case study contributors' autoethnographic writing proves apt for generating a relationship of trust with the reader, Beaumont expands Alejandro's argument regarding the diversity of ways one can write for reflexivity, and suggests that the repertoire of writing for reflexivity could be fruitfully expanded to include subversive structures in addition.

Acknowledgments

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4 Alejandro, Audrey, "Writing as Social Practice, Decentring and Denial of Agency: From Researchers' to Readers' Reflexivity." *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (forthcoming).

5 Beaumont, Paul. "Conclusion: Expanding the Repertoires of Writing for Reflexivity." *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (forthcoming).

PARISS's Editors-in-Chief for their questions, feedback and conversations, which helped position and rethink the running theme.

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