

Meaning and International Relations

Edited by
**Peter Mandaville and
Andrew Williams**



Routledge Advances in International Relations and Global Politics

Meaning and International Relations

- Are we, after the Cold War, living in a world ‘without meaning’?
- How do we define ourselves in a world seemingly devoid of ideological struggle or clear foundations?

This innovative volume brings together specialists in international relations to tackle a set of difficult questions about what it means to live in a globalized world, where the purpose and direction of world politics are no longer clear-cut.

Taking a cue from hermeneutic philosophy, the contributors examine a diverse set of topics including the localization of meaning in a globalized world; expressions of the ‘spirit of the age’ in photography; ideology in a post-ideological age; nihilism and the European project; feminist precursors to the crisis of meaning in international relations; performances of ethnicity in the context of conflict; the shifting meanings of Islam in European migrant communities; the turn to religion as a source of meaning in world politics, and the debate over a ‘clash of civilizations’.

A shared framework built on hermeneutics and the interpretation of experience provides this wide-ranging volume with a high degree of coherency.

What emerges from these essays is a very clear sense that while we may be living in an era that lacks a single, universal purpose, ours is still a world replete with meaning. The authors of this volume stress the need for a pluralistic conception of meaning in a globalized world, and demonstrate how increased communication and interaction in transnational space works to produce complex tapestries of culture and politics. *Meaning and International Relations* also makes an original and convincing case for the relevance of hermeneutic approaches to understanding contemporary international relations.

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1 Introduction

Andrew Williams

This book is an attempt to come to terms with one of the most elusive of all concepts in philosophy, and indeed in life as it is lived by most people, that of ‘meaning’. It is our contention that there is a great deal to be learned by the stimulation of a debate between those philosophers, especially those who are collectively referred to as being interested in the ‘hermeneutic’ and those within the discipline of international relations (IR) who have become inspired by the revival of interest in such philosophers. As I say in the introduction to my own chapter in this book:

. . . the philosophical and political thinking that has informed much of this book draws on a huge and rich series of traditions of ‘meaning’, from the phenomenological and existential thinkers of twentieth-century Europe and the work of the linguistic scholars of the Oxford School (such as Wittgenstein) through to the often non-European thought and a ‘world of multiple meanings’ that should be celebrated not mourned.

In so attempting we could easily be accused of perpetrating yet another ‘pomo joke’ on our long-suffering students and indeed the wider community of international relations, including as it does a majority of those interested in ‘real world’ phenomena – wars, the environment, revolutions, globalisation etc. – and little concerned with yet another bunch of obscure thinkers being disinterred from their graves in the interests of furthering the careers of sensation-seeking academics. We would suggest that those involved in this book are on the contrary all very committed to the ‘real’ world, most of them have gone into print or onto the academic hustings on a number of occasions to denounce the ever more mystifying excesses of what we loosely call ‘post-modernism’. If not searchers after ‘truth’, which probably all of us would agree is an elusive and possibly impossible dream, we are all searchers after understanding and meaning, or ‘hermeneutics’ as some of us would explicitly put it. This is therefore our attempt to put our collective thoughts on paper to say why we think that an exploration of hermeneutic approaches to IR might actually reconnect us to reality in a significant way, and not distance us further from it.

International relations in the 1980s, and of course significantly before the end of the Cold War led to the end of many seeming certainties, was a field with little

questioning of the basic elements that made up its main foci. There was some tilting at the windmills of 'positivism', the state was declared to be on dodgy ground as a category of analysis, we started to broach the idea that gender might have an impact on what we studied and how we studied it. The main elements of refocusing that we were then seeing was in the rediscovery of the notion that ethics might have a part to play in the study of IR, with seminal contributions from Mervyn Frost, then Chris Brown and groups like the Ethikon Institute based in the United States. There has clearly been a seismic shift, in Britain and to a lesser extent in the United States, from 'positivistic' approaches. Out of this has emerged a new quasi-orthodox elite that embraces 'critical' theory, 'post-modernism' and a host of other 'isms' and has taken many down the narrow tracks of contemporary continental philosophy and epistemology so that Barthes, Foucault and Kristeva have, in some settings, become as common on reading lists of IR theory courses as Kenneth Waltz or Hans Morgenthau used to be.

The problem is that much of this serves to confuse, not to elucidate, the contexts in which these thinkers and their philosophies emerged historically, even sociologically. Many of our students, indeed many of us, feel afloat on a sea of mutual incomprehension, an incomprehension which leads to a boycotting of IR conferences and a growing dissatisfaction all round.

This book has the lofty aim of suggesting that we have in places to go a step further than any of these very worthy new directions, to look at the very idea of 'meaning' itself in the study of IR. The central reason for this is that, on the one hand, the phenomenon that we call globalisation does not, by definition, stop at frontiers, and neither do the collective structures of meaning of which globalisation is the vehicle. Borders do not stop meanings becoming universalised, for better and for worse. Correspondingly we are now more aware than ever, due to such (arguably) diverse counter-phenomena as 'religious fundamentalism' and the assertion of cultural particularities of all kinds, that there is a reassertion of localised frameworks of meaning by individuals and peoples who feel threatened by globalisation's homogenising and culturally deadening hand.

Why do we believe that it is necessary to refer to the hermeneutic philosophers in order to do this? The main reason is that the insights of hermeneutic philosophy – 'the branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation' in the words of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (COD) – have been left neglected in the study of IR. However we are aware that, as any biblical or other textual scholar will know, there are as many interpretations of 'meaning' in the COD sense as there are interpreters. We nonetheless think that there are significant nuggets of wisdom to be unearthed of a very useful kind in this kind of philosophical inquiry. And it is worthwhile pointing out that we are not alone in so thinking. One of the areas that Steve Smith picked out in his 1996 paper on the state of international theory as 'particularly promising' for future 'post-positivists international theory' was hermeneutics (Smith in Smith *et al.* 1996: 25).

This area he indicated was most influenced by Dilthey, Husserl, Weber, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Gadamer, a roll call not immediately accessible to the average IR scholar. As Smith points out, hermeneutics is a complex field, and

encompasses more than one focus. But what all these writers sought to explore was the question of why the world is the way it is and why we believe the things we do in the way we do. It asks, in other words, the ultimate ontological questions about 'being' and not just about 'how do we know what we (think we) know', the domain of epistemology. To put it crudely, it asks what as teenagers we used to refer to as the 'mind-blowing questions'. But how can we in fact come to terms with such questions – is not awe the best reaction, followed by getting on with our lives? After all, the answer to Steve Smith's proposal in the book he edited was one of total silence – there is no chapter on hermeneutics, whereas there are chapters of all his other categories of 'promise'. Mainly such ideas are bundled in with other 'reflectivist' or 'reflexive' thinkers, in the words of Ole Waever and as such encountered great opposition within the American IR academy (Waever in Smith *et al.* 1996: 149–85).

It might be argued, as I think I would personally on some occasions, that to ask such questions is in itself both impossible and unproductive. An extreme version of this viewpoint could be asked both by those who strongly deny the existence of some absolute, even theological truth, such as the logical positivists (such as A. J. Ayer in Britain)¹ or equally by those who deny our ability to know the unknowable God, such as the mystical Christian theologians. This pragmatic approach has much appeal in Anglo-Saxon societies, and partly explains the difficulty that much 'continental' philosophy has had in making any inroads into British, or indeed American, social science. In social science it is difficult to entertain ideas that are by their very nature not verifiable or refutable, a position that a 'positivist' like Ayer would defend. Yet British IR has, as the late Michael Nicholson points out, also been somewhat sceptical of 'positivist' thinking, and Ayer's stance did not receive over-enthusiasm even at the height of its dominance of British philosophy. Karl Popper and other theories of scientific analysis have certainly been taught on IR courses in Britain, and it would be true to say that there was a translation of that kind of thinking into such concepts as the 'inter-paradigm debate' of the 1980s, but not a clear embracing of the extremes of mathematical modelling (still) popular in IR in the United States (see Nicholson in Smith *et al.* 1996: 128–45).

Since the end of the Cold War we have thus been left with a battlefield littered with the corpses of that war, which in theory terms has been the so-called 'realist' tradition, or rather its American 'neo-realist' counterpart, old-fashioned Marxism, largely discredited by the end of the Soviet Union, and a final skirmish by the survivors around the battleflags of post-structuralism and epistemology. It might be suggested that this ignores many of the really important questions that students of IR really care about. There is, in short a danger that IR will disappear up its own theoretical fundament.

It would be undeniable that all of those who have contributed to this book would either vehemently defend their religious belief (as would I for example) or have definite views about being through some other form of spiritual stance, or deny the possibility of belief itself. But what all of us could subscribe to, along with the various branches of hermeneutic philosophy, is the idea that we are embedded in our historical experience, and that we have as a preliminary duty to attempt, if not necessarily succeed, in interpreting that experience for ourselves and those around

us. In other words we all have acknowledged our unacknowledged belief in the need to try to explain the ultimate truths of existence. This naturally gets to the question of who are ‘we’? ‘We’ are in this volume a disparate band, who have come together in the most unlikely way. Most of the contributors to this volume (I hope that they will not be offended by this) consider themselves to be on the fringes of some of the main theoretical debates in IR as those are epitomised by the new elites within the discipline. But all of us have a passion for interpreting what we see as the real ‘truths’ that the contemporary world has to offer.

‘Meaning’ in this book is therefore used as a key to unlock the differences that lie below Smith’s categories and to explicitise the questions that we believe actually unite them. If we had to isolate what these questions are, the list might look as follows:

- Who are we?
- What are we becoming, individually and in our various groupings, under the influence of such overwhelming forces as those of globalisation?
- What tools can we use to unlock these newly apprehended realities (that are also in some senses old realities, as with the impact of technology on our lives, a great concern of Heidegger for example)?
- How might we fit the study of meaning into the wider concerns of IR theory and practice?

Chapter outlines

Andrew Williams asks some basic questions about how meaning might be useful to the student of IR using the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. As a first step, he traces the debate about whether we have, in Zaki Laïdi’s (1994a) initial use of the term a ‘world without meaning’ or whether, after Nicholas Higgins, we have a world of ‘multiple meanings’ (Laïdi 1998a, 1998b; see also the review of Laïdi, by Higgins 1999: 656–7).

Williams attempts to show how the various schools of traditional IR might draw usefully on some of the broad insights that Heidegger contains by asking what we actually ‘Mean by “Meaning”’ and how Heidegger uses the term. He then suggests that Heidegger’s ontology might have some important lessons for the world in which we now live and that one of the key ones among these, and not unique to Heidegger, is a return to an emphasis on historical method. We are, similarly to Heidegger, living in a moment of flux when established ideas are being replaced by something possibly much less agreeable. Williams makes some suggestions as to how this might be done, drawing on some writers, like Christopher Coker and Stefan Rossbach, who have used history in interesting and productive ways in their writings on IR, particularly through the exploration of the power of myth and the contexts of war.

Christopher Coker expands on his previous work on war and the fate of the ‘West’ in an analysis of the *Zeitgeist* in all its poetic and historical possibility. He looks in particular at the way that the term can be used to investigate the European historical reality and compare it with that of Asia over the last hundred years, through an analysis of the medium of philosophical thought. Coker shows how

Europe's self-conscious superiority started to crumble first in India and then in China. The main insight for IR theory is that a clearer understanding of these 'local' histories in Asia would have enabled Europeans to understand the errors of their own feelings of superiority and possibly to avoid some of the worst, and usually self-destructive, results of these feelings. He asserts that we in fact 'see' in these civilisations not what is true but what we want to see and that in the end we choose what we perceive to be the underlying frameworks of meaning in these societies not in their terms but by looking for what is meaningful for us. The implications of this for the study of IR are clearly immense (Coker 1994, 1998).

Zaki Laïdi (1994a, 1998b) also builds on his previous work on meaning and globalisation to suggest that the process of regionalisation gives more clues about how this is happening. These processes are changing what Charles Taylor (1985) calls our 'collective signifiers' (*significations communes*) in quite profound ways. Regionalisation in this reading of the term provides a way of giving populations a sense of collective meaning that falls between the changed idea of the state and the not yet accepted idea of globalisation. This is shown by changing views of economic identity and by changing perceptions of what 'frontiers' now represent. This is true not only of Europe, but also of the rest of the world and we have yet to fully perceive what these economic imperatives will have as result in terms of cultural consequences. We can already see that uniformity of 'styles of living' has not led to the 'uniformisation of life itself'. This might in turn lead to a rethinking of the meaning of globalisation. As with Coker, Laïdi asks what can be seen in terms of the Western view of the non-West. Laïdi also asks if in this new global dawn we need to pursue a different form of theorising in IR or if we must accept that there never has been, and never will be, a commonly understood framework of meaning, even if we can claim that there is an increasingly universal economic framework within which we are all forced to work.

In his chapter, Gerard Delanty resumes an old debate about the 'end of ideology' in the new context of the present period. He asks whether we can now, in a globalising world, definitively declare this process to be finished. In the context of our discussions on meaning, might we now say that ideologies no longer help us understand political reality, if ideology is to be defined as a 'system of communication and meaning' and as providing 'a synthesis of the cultural dimensions of modernity, the cognitive, the aesthetic and the normative'? This unity, so central to the modernist project, gave us hope that we could at least attempt to grasp the world in its totality and supposed unity as ideology was or is convinced of its own centrality and aspires to create a 'homogenous social order'. Delanty gives us a number of elucidations of the various ways in which we ascribe meaning to, and derive it from, ideological constructs. He posits that 'identity' has replaced ideology as the central pillar of our frameworks of meaning, but that does not mean that ideology has entirely lost its force as a framework but rather that it has to be seen in a different light, given shifting patterns of intellectual, economic and political power in post-modernity. Ideology remains a powerful force in a more simultaneously individualised and globalised world system. It is this new relationship and its implications for ethics and politics with which we must now come to terms.

Stefan Elbe looks at the literature that has emerged throughout the twentieth century on the meaning of Europe. He reflects on the accusation that Europe has not provided the framework of meaning that many feel is essential for it to survive as a new entity in IR. His feeling is that in striving for 'spiritual vitality' Europe may achieve the opposite result, and that it would be better to follow Nietzsche and his judgement on the nature of European nihilism. In so doing Elbe also engages with some of the other writers in this volume, notably Coker and Laïdi.

Annick T. R. Wibben's chapter draws on both critical theory and feminism, now well known to theorists of IR, to give access to the hermeneutic tradition. She bases her insights on a reading of Gadamer and a study of feminist perspectives on meaning. In so doing she shows how the multiplicity of text can give us a deeper understanding of the silences of IR.

Tarja Väyrynen builds on her theoretical and practical work on conflict resolution and uses the works of philosophers like Ernesto Laclau who have explored the *problématique* of identity in the post-Cold War world. She examines the way in which we construct life-worlds for ourselves as individuals and intersubjectively in groups. Using hermeneutic analysis as a base she builds on and 'beyond' hermeneutics by bringing in Foucault's warnings about the power structures that underlie stated meanings. This is done by an analysis of how language functions (through 'speech acts' after Judith Butler) in ethno-political conflict situations. This is then extended to show how in the global conjuncture, made up of three essential elements – the nation-state, capitalism and the media – identity tries to control expressions of meaning.

Peter Mandaville offers something like a 'case study' of how meaning travels, transforms and adapts itself (or is adapted) by transnational and globalising processes in the context of Muslim communities in the West. His chapter explores how interpretations, understandings and the meanings associated with Islam and Muslim practice shift when they enter into new sociocultural circumstances. When Islam is 'transplanted' from a world in which 'Muslimness' (and, moreover, a very particular idiom of Islam) is a standard feature of the cultural landscape to an environment in which religious difference figures as a sign of marginality, then the role and function that individuals ascribe to their faith system often undergoes significant transformation. Mandaville demonstrates that within any given culture or community we find various and often competing conceptions of what that identity is and what it means. The politics of identity is therefore based not only on the presence of an external other (e.g. Western society/Christianity) against which communities and cultures may define themselves, but also on the process of negotiation and debate taking place *within* a given community. This is especially the case when we are dealing with a cultural form such as Islam whose global sociocultural jurisdiction is extremely wide. For example, in the archetype of what Mandaville terms 'translocal space', the global city (such as London), Islam is forced to contend not only with a vast array of non-Islamic others but also with an enormous diversity of Muslim opinion as to the nature and meaning of Islam. In such spaces Muslims will encounter and be forced to converse with interpretations of their religion which they have either been taught to regard as heretical, or with which they are wholly unfamiliar. This chapter demonstrates that such instances of 'travelling culture', to

invoke James Clifford's (1997) term, can be experienced – on the one hand – as loss, dislocation and disruption; however, they are equally representative of new opportunities and spaces for the creative reinterpretation of meaning. Mandaville argues, for example, that Muslim discourse in the West contains some of the most innovative and creative reformulations of Islamic thought available today.

Andrea den Boer ventures where in truth the rest of us have feared to tread, into the realm of religion as a key framework of meaning. Her focus is on the post-phenomenological philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. What she does for Levinas that has originality is to look at how his work can be seen as going beyond the state-centric discourse that still dominates much of IR and how Levinas also pushed back the frontiers of a wider 'Being'. In so doing den Boer suggests that we should attempt to see the 'other' as being our responsibility, that to talk of justice is hollow if we do not see that responsibility through in the applied pursuit of justice.

Finally, Stephen Chan reminds us that the West has always tried to impose its 'meaning' on the rest of the world in the name of enlightenment or 'civilisation'. He takes particular issue with the latest version of this trend with a swingeing attack on Samuel Huntington's (1996) *Clash of Civilizations*. He targets not only Huntington's lack of 'historical judgement' but also his 'sociological assumptions'. This leads Huntington into a claim to universality when in fact he aims to stigmatise much of the rest of the world as 'other' to civilised behaviour. In so doing he generalises and distorts the unity of both the West and the 'rest'. Chan makes an appeal for a truly multicultural approach to the study of IR. We hope, along with him, to make a small contribution to his wishes in this book.

Note

- 1 See for example a comment on Ayer that he had a life-long commitment to 'slaying metaphysics and cutting back on our ontological commitments', that we could only justify making any statement that could be empirically demonstrated, in Rogers (1999: 220). This of course ruled out any religious belief as well and Ayer sympathised with Camus's belief that life was essentially meaningless (Rogers 1999: 197), although there were glimmers of dissension from this extreme position towards the end of Ayer's life.

2 Meaning and international relations

Some thoughts

Andrew Williams

Introduction

This chapter emerges from three linked concerns. The first is that, when my students ask me the basic question: ‘What is the meaning of . . .’ (for example the massacres in Rwanda, or the manic depression of the vast majority of the population of the former Soviet Union), I have to fall back on unsatisfactory explanations based on common-sense reasoning or inadequate social science. The second is that although it has become a commonplace to say that we are at a crossroads in our understanding of what international relations are all about, we are still lacking any new road map about where we might be headed, although the process of reassessment is under way. A third is prompted by the debate that has emerged about what Zaki Laïdi (1994a, 1998b) calls a ‘world without meaning’. Is it true that we now have a ‘crisis of meaning in international relations’, where ‘power and purpose’ are at such variance with each other that we now have a crisis not just for the West but also for the whole planet (Laïdi 1994b)?

One way of showing this might be to take on areas of current and historical concern and show how some key writers have already brought the idea of ‘meaning’ into their considerations of the twentieth century. There are certainly reasons for doing so – the philosophical and political thinking that has informed much of this book draws on a huge and rich series of traditions of ‘meaning’, from the phenomenological and existential thinkers of twentieth-century Europe and the work of the linguistic scholars of the Oxford School (such as Wittgenstein) through to the often non-European thought and a ‘world of multiple meanings’ that should be celebrated not mourned (Higgins 1999: 656–7). One such distinguished catalogue might start with Spengler and pass by Toynbee and Fukuyama to Hobsbawm. In a sense we could say that the whole of our century of musing about IR has been taken up in a search for ‘meaning’, especially given the horrors that have accompanied our collective or separate journey. However, that would be an entirely different chapter, indeed a much larger book. So my purpose is practical and pedagogical: what can be done to bring the problematic of ‘meaning’ into IR so that it might be made part of a teachable curriculum?

In 1998 I attended a workshop ‘celebrating’ the 350 years of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. Westphalia is often seen as the crucible of the modern nation-state,

and thus of the basic problematic of IR, but it might also be seen as the beginning of the thinking that led to the world wars, the Holocaust and many other waking nightmares (Hobsbawm 1994; Mazower 1998). The twentieth century has seen the true horror of what humankind can do to itself and to the planet in ways that could only have been imagined in the seventeenth century, even after the Thirty Years War. The same period has seen the 'death of God', announced by Nietzsche, and the creativity and destruction wrought by capitalism and the rise of mass culture. In short it has seen what gives us our present parameters of mental and material 'meaning'.

The different main schools of international relations have been sensibly summed up by Michael Doyle (1997) as emerging from long traditions of political thought, which he groups together as 'realism', 'liberalism' and 'socialism.' All have their origins in the pre-modern period but '[e]ach begins with the modern predicament – masterless men in modern society – and tries to speak across history to all who share it' (Doyle 1997: 10). But it has often been argued that during the Cold War the dominance of a 'sanitised realism' tried to evacuate the philosophical, and normative, content from studies of IR so that the discipline often skirted round what the original founders of the modern discipline of IR wanted for it, especially after the First World War (Doyle 1997; Brown 1992). I take this to have been the creation of an alternative to war as well as the creation of frameworks to understand and therefore to ameliorate the human condition, not just for prosperous Europeans but also for all those who inhabit the planet. This is a propitious moment to so reflect, as we are now largely convinced at the end of the Cold War that the European (or more accurately the Anglo-Saxon) version of history has more or less triumphed (Williams 1998).

The purpose of this chapter is therefore to try to tease out a few areas where the discipline of IR might benefit from a consideration of the category of thinking that we can call the 'search for meaning', possibly as a way of showing the ultimate continuities which exist in all human thought about how we should conduct our political affairs on a global level. In so doing, it takes on the concept of 'meaning' on a number of levels that will no doubt shock the philosophical purist, but that can be identified without too much deformation as useful for IR.

The first part of the chapter will address what I mean by 'meaning' and the relationship that meaning and IR might conceivably have for each other. The second part will consider, necessarily rather briefly, a few categories of historically interesting thought that we might marshal to operationalise the idea of meaning for the study and teaching of IR. If I had the space and the time to do so I would in particular consider some of the literature on war, peace and suffering (which are the main concerns of most sentient humans), with a special emphasis on the use of memory, while touching on the notion of 'ending' and 'decadence'. Since I cannot I shall try to suggest some approaches in rather more broad terms, but the aim is ultimately more inclusive. This lack of modesty will no doubt raise a few hackles, but I should like this chapter to be understood as a mere think piece and far from being finished reflection.