

# Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/crossings-and-candles/>

PETER VALE, JAN 21 2017

**This is an excerpt from *International Relations* – an E-IR Foundations beginner’s textbook. Download your free copy here.**

*‘It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness’*

W. L. Watkinson 1838–1925

An old lesson teaches that endings are more difficult to write than beginnings. This may be so, but I have found it difficult to even begin writing about the world International Relations (IR) makes without reflecting on a near-forty-year career in both the theory and practice of IR. This is because my intellectual engagement in IR is indivisible from who I am. To make the same point in a slightly more elevated mode, although trained in the tradition that a scholar’s gaze is objective, my academic pilgrimage has been one of continuous crossings between the personal, the political and the professional. My early professional life was conducted during a particularly nasty period of apartheid in South Africa. Not only was the minority-white-ruled government cracking down on all forms of political dissent, it was also wedded to a fierce anti-communism. In these circumstances it was difficult to exercise academic objectivity when it came to thinking about the world. Those years taught me a valuable lesson in life and learning: to believe that there is a totally objective or value-free view in IR is to call up the old Russian saying that ‘he lied like an eye witness!’ We all come to understand the world through our own experiences. Because of this, even the most objective person has predetermined understandings about the world.

A standard dictionary definition of international relations runs that the term ‘is used to identify all interactions between state-based actors across state boundaries’ (Evans and Newnham 1998, 274). This is certainly suggestive of the scholarly field of IR but unhelpful in explaining the international relationships that fall between the cracks of the discipline’s many boundaries and the personal anxiety and fear around these issues. After all, at the height of the Cold War there was real fear that the entire planet would be destroyed by nuclear warfare. In these circumstances, it was difficult not to be anxious about the future or fearful for one’s family. So we ought to require, perhaps, that a definition does something more than simply demarcate boundaries. A more reflective gaze points to what it is that we, the prospective student or emeritus professor, actually do when we ‘do’ academic IR and why it matters to us.

### The four-minute mile

To understand why it matters to me, I will begin with a story of a crossing – a very recent one – between my colonial boyhood and my late-middle-aged self. This particular one took place not in South Africa, the country in which I was born and of which I am a citizen, but in England.

To explain why the crossing between past and present matters to my own understanding of IR, some personal background is required. Growing up in colonial South Africa, my home was littered with the culture of England – a country that my South African-born mother never visited until she was fifty. In addition, the boarding school that I attended was loosely modelled on the English public school tradition. So, we were encouraged to participate in the forms of organised sport that were England’s ‘gift’ to the world. Understandably then, my earliest thinking about what

# Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

made the international was set by the cultural authority of England and the political sweep of the British Empire. Given this, the story of Roger Bannister's sub-four-minute mile had a particular appeal for my young self. To explain: the measured mile became an important test in competitive athletics in the early 1950s. It was long believed that no person could run a mile in under four minutes. But, in the aftermath of the Second World War, when physical training and nutrition techniques improved along with the instruments for timing, the four-minute mile came closer and closer to being conquered. Indeed, breaking the barrier became a sort of milestone competitive goal for both individual athletes and the countries they represented.

My initial fascination with the four-minute mile was ignited by an edition of the *Eagle Sports Album*, which had been sent to the school library from London. In its pages, much was made of the importance of Bannister's feat for Britain and Britons like my family, who were located in distant parts of the world. The drama of the event whetted a life-long interest in athletics. Finally, while on a trip to Oxford in October 2015, I visited the field on the Iffley Road where Bannister ran the famous measured mile. Like many a pilgrimage, the visit was exciting, elating and enlightening. As I stood on the 'Roger Bannister running track' – as the field is now called – I looked for the church flagpole that Bannister had spotted seconds before his famous run. When a young man carrying spiked running shoes walked by, I remembered, if only for a fleeting moment, the thrill of competitive running. But more important than the rush was the slow realisation that what had happened on that famous day offered lessons in how I had first come to know and understand the world of IR.

Until the visit, it never occurred to me that what had taken place on the day of the event was a quintessential moment of modernity – the conquering of space by time. In IR, of course, the control of territory through the instruments and techniques of administration and the control that follows is the very essence of the discipline. So, the idea of the international has no meaning unless territory is under the control of sovereignty. As a result, bringing ungoverned places into the idea of the international is the very first order of business in international relations. The notion of sovereignty, which is the enabling force of IR, follows upon this demarcation of space opening towards the exercise of control along a boundary-line between 'the international' and 'the domestic'. Technology, in the form of maps and their making, helped to make 'permanent' such boundaries in the minds of rulers – especially colonial ones (see Branch 2014).

Strictly speaking, without boundaries there can be no IR. But, the divide between the boundaries drawn by the instruments of modernity are not the tightly patrolled frontier with its technology of control – passports, visa, immigration documents and the like. It is a liminal space where inclusion and exclusion is negotiated continuously. So, there were – as there remain – forms of interaction between groups who have resisted incorporation into the command and control that orthodox IR insists is the gift of statehood. This betwixt-and-between space has been a site of great tragedy, as the migrant crisis in Europe that began in 2015 shows. In many places, outside of the authoritative gaze of modern media, frontiers were killing fields. European colonisation, which drew the furthest corners on the planet into a single political whole under the banner of civilisation and Christianity, was extremely violent. If killing was one dimension of this, another was the disruption to the ways of living of millions upon millions. This violent disruption in the lives of people continued into the 1960s as the idea of the international spread across the world.

One example was a 1965 agreement in which Britain gave an archipelago of islands in the Indian Ocean to the United States. The residents of these islands, known collectively as the Chagos islands, were forcibly moved. In the past fifty years, the islanders themselves and their descendants have made numerous unsuccessful legal attempts to overturn this decision. Generally speaking, tragedies like these – which occur at the margin of the world – have been ignored in IR – although anthropologists, historians and international lawyers have explored them.

The second issue that occurred to me was the power of who pronounces on these matters. In literature – and increasingly in social science – this is the issue of 'voice': who gets to speak, how they get to speak and why this happens. At the policy end of IR, alas, the issue of voice is seldom considered a priority issue, notwithstanding the path-breaking insights that feminists have brought to the discipline. They have exposed the multiple ways in which women experience the international differently to men and how they are silenced in the story of the international despite the significant roles they have and continue to play in its creation.

# Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

Two signs on Iffley Road declare Bannister's triumph. The first, which is mounted on a stone gatepost, is informational. It reads, 'Here at the Iffley Road track the first sub-four-minute mile was run on 6th May 1954 by ROGER BANNISTER. Oxford University.' The second is positioned above a wooden fence facing Iffley Road. Under the crest of Oxford University, it reads, 'Here, on 6 May 1954, Roger Bannister set a new World Mile record of 3 minutes 59.4 seconds. The first Mile ever run under 4 minutes.' If the first sign informs, the second proclaims Bannister's achievement as truth. Here, in the historical conquest of space by time, there is no room for ambiguity.

Let us be clear about several things. Of course, the Iffley Road field was the site of the first 'timed', 'authenticated' or 'measured' mile run under four minutes. But – and this is why critical questioning is important in IR, as it is in all forms of knowledge – it seems unlikely that nobody else, anywhere else, across human history had ever run this distance in under four minutes. Indeed, medical science today suggests that humans with particular kinds of physiological traits are able to run faster over distance than those without them. For our purposes of understanding my appreciation of IR, this signage – its declaration and its claim to authority – is rooted in a white, Western, male-dominated world. This is the world into which I was born and raised. Outside of this, nothing is worthy of recognition. It confirms that the late-imperial gaze of the early 1950s, when Bannister ran his famous mile, had little understanding of, or interest in, the non-West.

It seems obvious that prejudices like these need to be challenged, but this is difficult because mainstream IR has elevated its denial of the non-Western world to an art form. For many, the business of IR remains mortgaged to the commonsense understandings of race, class and gender that marked the early decades of the twentieth century when IR emerged as a formal academic discipline. As a result, in many corners of the world, IR is called a 'mutant' discipline (Vale 2016a). This is because IR seems to have no conceptual capacity – no grammar or vocabulary, as social theorists might say – to explain the everyday lives of people who live beyond or beneath sovereign borders. And, because it has no adequate category to include them, IR fails to understand them.

## Servant of empire

There is an obvious link between the claims of the signs on Iffley Road and how it is that the voice of authority is used to preserve and sustain social orders. In the Iffley Road case, the claims to authority and the making of history aimed to position British authority in a quickly changing world. After the Second World War, the United Kingdom scrambled to reassert its global positioning in the face of the rising post-war profile of the United States. Roger Bannister's achievement and the authority offered by one of the world's great universities, Oxford, was one way to do so. At the time, the four-minute mile was linked to another attempt to reposition the United Kingdom internationally – the summiting of the world's highest mountain (Everest) by a British-led expedition, which had taken place almost exactly a year before events on the Iffley Road track.

The dilemma that the British faced in the world was best captured by US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who famously pointed out that 'Great Britain ... [has] ... lost an empire and has not yet found a role' (1962). Although no longer an imperial power, the United Kingdom's hold on the imagination of the world – and how it is organised and studied, through IR – continues via its culture and language. It appears, however, in some quite perverse ways. This outcome was foretold in the late 1960s by Richard Turnbull, the governor of the colony of Aden (now part of Yemen). Turnbull informed a future British cabinet minister, Denis Healey, 'that when the British Empire finally sank beneath the waves of history it would leave behind only two monuments: one was the game of Football, the other was the expression, "Fuck Off"' (Healey 1989, 283). Though a vulgar phrase like this is seldom heard in IR, British cultural imperialism lingers in the discipline, which explains why English is its tongue. In no small part this is because the language of global culture is increasingly English – a fact readily attributed to the global reach not of the United Kingdom but of the United States. This suggests another relationship between IR and modernity. The third instrument of modernity, after time and space, is language. Like the other two, the English language has set the borderlines for inclusion and exclusion in the world and in its study through IR.

The place of language and culture in fostering international relationships is explained by the idea of Soft Power (Nye 1990). This concept helpfully drew the issue of culture towards the centre of IR but was silent on the dimensions of language. This is because, as we have already noted, English has been proclaimed a 'global language' and therefore

# Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

objective in its views of the ways of the world. But no language is neutral. Two further points suggest the limitations of having a monopoly of one language in IR – and, indeed, in other social sciences. The first draws upon the thinking of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein – who pointed to the conceptual limitations of language – and is caught in his famous phrase, ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of my world’. So, however commanding language is as a tool to access the social world, its vocabulary sets limits on our understanding. Second, if English remains the language of IR, the discipline will not only be the domain of a global elite but will continue its long history of serving and servicing insiders. Those who have no knowledge of English are excluded from IR, or they can only access the discipline by developing a professional competence in the language. This is plainly discriminatory. There is also the challenge of the English language unable to grasp concepts that lie outside of its vocabulary. For instance, the Sanskrit word ‘dharma’ is translated as ‘religion’, but dharma in the Hindu cosmology includes a range of practices and conceptions of rights, duties, law and so on, which are not divinely ordained, as in Christianity. Other important terms in the vocabulary of IR – such as ‘state’, ‘civilisation’ and ‘order’ – are sometimes lost in translation.

## World-making

One of the great disciplinary shibboleths is that IR is to be celebrated because it is a neutral instrument of restoration – IR does not so much ‘make’ the world as ‘restore’ it (Kissinger 1957). According to this logic, the discipline provides helpful tools – and, sometimes, a hopeful heart – that a world devastated by war can be restored by the discipline’s science. But here too there is a need for a contrarian view. Largely absent from this optimism are the interlinked questions: who has the right to remake the world and whose interests will be served by any remaking? These questions would not have troubled those responsible for making – or remaking – the international community on three previous occasions: at the end of the South African War (1899–1902); at the end of the First World War (1914–1918); and at the end of the Second World War (1939–1945). Certainly, each of these moments presented as a time of despair interlaced with feelings of hope for what might come; each was marked by a particular configuration of politics, both local and global; and each was held captive by the vocabulary of the moment. Let’s consider each event in turn.

The South African War (also known as the Second Boer War) was fought between the United Kingdom and the peoples of European descent on African soil known as Afrikaners. This is because the Westphalian state – and the diplomatic routines developing around it – had migrated from its European heartland to Africa. It was the culmination of many contestations for the positioning of an alien social form, the modern state, on a new continent. As recent work has shown, the making of the world after the South African War was concerned with reorganising the British Empire, which was then the dominant form of international organisation. The idea of shifting understandings of what constituted sovereign identity away from an imperial setting towards a species of ‘inter-nation’ exchange, primarily between Britain and its four settler-ruled vassals – Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa – had gained salience in the years following the First World War. If the three other dominions showed that the local and the international could be seamlessly realigned, South Africa – with its diverse peoples – was a harbinger of the messy world to come. Hence, for the theoreticians of the empire, the reorganisation of the colonies in southern Africa into the single state of South Africa foreshadowed a model for the dismembering of empire. Thus, the chosen path was the idea of an ‘organic union’, a system that gestured towards the importance of sovereignty within the semblance of an imperial brotherhood – in modern terms, it was a particular strain of multilateralism.

The later incorporation of white-ruled India into this organisation would end in the British Commonwealth. Out of this, in the 1930s, grew the idea of a white-dominated ‘World Commonwealth’, sometimes called a ‘World State’ (Curtis 1938). The thought crime – there is no other phrase for it – in this world-making was that all the imaginings of the international excluded other racial groups except in the sense of ‘trusteeship’. After the First World War, this status was awarded to states that could be ‘trusted’ to control foreign spaces in the interests of those who were deemed to be lower down the Darwinian ladder (Curtis 1918, 13). The legacy of this move remains the great unexplored story in IR as an academic discipline because it continues to suffer from the arrogance of defining the international by the optic provided by wealth, race and gender.

In the lore of IR, the restoration of the world after the First World War is sacred ground. The discipline’s celebrated tale is how the international codified as science would build a better world. The discipline’s institutionalisation was the

# Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

founding of an academic chair, named after Woodrow Wilson, America's twenty-eighth president, at what is now Aberystwyth University in Wales. As Ken Booth (1991, 527–8) has pointed out, 'when David Davies founded the Department for International Politics at Aberystwyth in 1919, he became the midwife for the subject everywhere.' The genuflection to the United States suggests that the establishment of the discipline was in recognition of America's importance in ending the 'war to end all wars'. Not only did Wilson help to deliver victory, he also offered the League of Nations as an instrument for securing a future of international peace. But this was not to be. In the 1930s, the League failed to prevent another war – the idealism of early IR, around which the discipline was founded – was in tatters. The failure of this resolve, both institutionally and theoretically, is well documented in the chronicles of IR.

The construction of a new world was sought mainly through the idea of embedded liberalism, which could marry free trade, strong government and multilateralism (Ruggie 1982). But an inconvenient truth remained: global apartheid was entrenching itself. Absent in the great councils of peace were the voices of those who were situated in the outer reaches of world-making and excluded by IR's founding bargain. The truth was that sovereignty, and the passport it offered to statehood, was only available to those privileged by birth and by skin colour. The scientific task of understanding those who were excluded was for not IR, but for other academic disciplines, especially Applied Anthropology (on this, see Lamont 2014).

IR folklore holds that the international system is indebted to the triumph of American idealism. An end to American isolationism in the 1940s beckoned the world's most powerful country towards a reincarnation of its 'manifest destiny' – rooted in the nineteenth-century belief that settlers were foreordained to spread across North America. It was a belief shot through with understandings of white superiority, as this quote from the Maryland Democrat, William F. Giles, in 1847 suggests:

We must march from ocean to ocean. ... We must march from Texas straight to the Pacific Ocean, and be bounded only by its roaring wave. ... It is the destiny of the white race, it is the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race. (Zinn 1980, 153)

The call now was towards making 'the international' as it had made the national – with technology, violence and self-belief. Hopes for this future were transmitted through the increased force of culture, especially American. The sense of 'freedom' that this sentiment conveyed was infectious, and it spread increasingly to all spaces – including colonised ones. In doing so, it fostered 'a period of optimism' throughout the world, as the Indian social theorist Ashis Nandy (2003, 1) put it. Interestingly, for all the celebration of the idea of freedom, the discourse suffered terrible amnesia: the story of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), the only successful slave revolution in modern history and a powerful example of black people making a state, conducting diplomacy and practising freedom, was excluded from the emerging narrative.

But American optimism and the future it promised arose in the very age when the conquest of nature by science promised to deliver much to the world. It is difficult today to underestimate how 'the endless frontier' – as America's chief scientist, Vannevar Bush (1945), called natural science – was received in the final years of the Second World War.

Demonstrably, the atom bomb, the quintessential product of science, had brought the war to an end – even though the surrender cry from Japan's emperor foreshadowed different understandings of what science had delivered to the people of Japan and to the world. Speaking after the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, Emperor Hirohito surrendered with these words: 'We have resolved to endure the unendurable and suffer what is insufferable.'

Conventional IR history has it that both politics and science – acting both on their own and together – speeded the desire of peoples all over the world for liberation, thus ending formal colonialism. This is certainly nominally so, but the reach of this freedom was, once again, to be framed within the sovereign state. If freedom was one dimension of an American-inspired post-1945 world, it was complimented by a series of international bureaucracies that aimed to manage the new world in the making. These drew sovereign states – both newly independent and well established – towards the bureaucratic authority insisted upon by modernity with its technical know-how and techniques of social control. The international community in the making was to be what anthropologists call an 'administered community'

# Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

– both states and individuals would be controlled even as they celebrated their freedom.

So, the celebrated multilateral structures of post-1945 – the United Nations and the Bretton Woods family; the International Monetary Fund; the World Bank; and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade – were controlling institutions even if they were intermittently cloaked within a rights-based discourse. The archetype of this was the UN Security Council where the power of veto was vested in five states – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. This ‘override power’, which aimed to control any threat to the interest (or interests) of an already advantaged group, remains a symbol of an international structure that is fatally unequal and grossly unfair.

In academic IR, the reconstruction of the world after 1945 is the story of how the United States appropriated and adapted European ‘understandings’ of the international for the challenges it faced as ‘leader of the free world’. The evidence supports this explanation: at least 64 first-generation émigré scholars (mostly from Germany) taught political science and IR in the United States. More than half of them came from law, including figures such as Hans Kelsen, Hans Morgenthau, John Herz and Karl Deutsch, who would command IR. The ways of the world that they transmitted – culture, diplomacy, law – remained essentially white, Western and male. In disciplinary IR, the non-West was deliberately silenced by exorcising two of the most important issues – decolonisation and racism – from its theoretical concerns (Guilhot 2014). It was this legacy that led the late Stanley Hoffman, who was born in Vienna, to declare that IR was ‘an American Social Science’ (1977).

The ghastly – but truly historical – advent of nuclear weapons certainly raised the question that awakened ethical concerns within IR, the most important of which has already crossed our paths: could humankind destroy the planet? Yet the counter-factual question on this issue, the question that should have mattered but which was never asked or answered, is: would the United States have atom-bombed a white Western country? At the centre of IR was – and remains – the ideology of white supremacy. This is undergirded by the understanding that only Europeans – and whites, to sharpen the point – live ‘within’ history: all others, as Ashis Nandy (2003, 83–109) has argued, ‘live outside’ of it.

If these three moments of reconstruction – the South African War, the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 which concluded the First World War, and the ending of the Second World War in 1945 – represented the remaking of the world, what about the ending of the Cold War? It is difficult not to believe that the ending of the Cold War has been one of continuity rather than the much-anticipated fundamental rethink of the nature and idea of the international. The moment was certainly marked by a new vocabulary, of which the word globalisation promised new horizons. However, it quickly became an encryption for the celebration of neoliberal economics and a ‘thin’ form of democracy that was characterised by Francis Fukuyama as ‘the end of history’ (Fukuyama 1989). In essence, Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy and capitalism had proved itself superior to any other social system. This theory was seized upon by IR scholars who had, embarrassingly, failed to predict the ending of the Cold War. For IR theorists, the bipolarity that had characterised the Cold War was a stable system for both superpowers. They therefore saw no reason for either power to seek to end it. What they did not envision was that an internal collapse of the Soviet economy matched with the rising opposition of subjugated peoples in Eastern Europe would break the Soviet system from within. This was just one of the reasons that the critical turn in IR theory began around the end of the Cold War and IR began to look beyond the state towards the individual.

However, not long after this embarrassment there was a return to triumphalism. A US president, George H. W. Bush, declared that the ‘West had won’ the Cold War – but even this was not enough. What lay ahead was a new challenge that one disciple of realist thought called a ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington 1993). Let me insert a personal story here. Just after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 – the event that symbolised the beginning of the end of the Cold War – I was invited to participate in a high-level panel organised by one of the big think tanks in the world, the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations. My co-panellists included former members of successive American cabinets, a former director of the CIA, and many academic luminaries from the IR community. During the course of several meetings, it became clear to me that Islam was being constructed as a threat to America’s ‘global interests’ and that it would be targeted. This kind of thinking created a kind of intellectual swamp that gave rise to successive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and, dangerously, for IR a tendency to focus disproportionately on such ‘threats’. What this does to how the world is made remains to be seen.

# Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

## Industrial IR

No academic development has had a greater impact on IR's recent history than the rise of think tanks. This is a big claim, to be sure, so let me illustrate it with a story from my own country. In the post-apartheid years, the emergence of a think tank called the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) shifted the hopes of the immediate post-apartheid years from the high idealism of the Nelson Mandela presidency towards a security-centred society. This, in a country where some ten million children – over 54 per cent – live in poverty. Elsewhere, as others have shown (see Ahmad 2014), think tanks have and continue to play a critical role in making the case for war against Islam in the United States, and in pushing the UK's Blair government to enthusiastically support the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (on this, see Abelson 2014).

Rather than viewing think tankers as neutral and disinterested parties in the making of IR, we must take them seriously. As the German-born critical thinker, Hannah Arendt (1970, 6), put it in her book, *On Violence*:

There are ... few things that are more frightening than the steadily increasing prestige of scientifically minded brain trusters in the councils of government during the last decades. The trouble is not that they are cold-blooded enough to 'think the unthinkable,' but that they do not think.

In the economic-speak of our times, think-tankers are 'norm-entrepreneurs'; protagonists for one or another position on policy and its outcomes who, while claiming to provide objective analysis, are in fact complicit in pursuing particular agendas: political, economic and social.

Invariably, think-tankers are well schooled in the repertoire of IR; they have mastered its vocabulary and are familiar with its disciplinary traditions. Using this, think-tankers are encouraged to promote the current policy fashion by drawing uncritically on the prevailing meta-narrative. During the Cold War, for instance, think tanks in the West promoted the 'threat' posed by the Soviet Union (and its allies) in much of their work, which was also embedded within different shades of realist thinking.

Early in my own pilgrimage I worked for one such think tank: the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) which, nowadays, calls itself the country's 'premier research institute on international issues'. It was never branded as such when I worked there – perhaps that was because I was one of only two academic professionals on the staff. The other professional was John Barratt, my boss, who was a former South African diplomat. He had not studied IR, but read modern history at Oxford after taking a first degree – also in history – in South Africa. The watchwords for our work were 'facts' and 'objectivity' – to seek 'truth' in the way that practitioners in the natural sciences do. In this view of scholarship, knowledge was neutral and the role of SAIIA was to present as many opinions as possible in international affairs so that the public could make up their own minds. This was in the 'non-political' spirit of London's Chatham House on which the SAIIA was modelled.

Sustaining this position in the South Africa of the 1970s was bizarre. The apartheid government had cracked down on internal dissent with the result that censorship was pervasive, even in universities. There was, for example, no access to the vigorous debates on the liberation of South Africa that were taking place amongst exiled groups. More seriously, the country's black community had absolutely no voice in the management and the affairs of the SAIIA: they did serve the tea, however. In the 1970s I often thought that the good and the great who gathered in the SAIIA classical-styled headquarters were of the view that those on the other side of apartheid's cruel divide had no imaginary, or, indeed, experience, of the international.

John Barratt was often as frustrated by this state of affairs as was I, and we made several efforts – mostly unsuccessful – to cross the divide. What the corporate sponsors of the SAIIA would have made of these efforts is unknown. What I do know is that on many occasions I faced the raised eyebrows of the white liberals – and the not so liberal – who gathered, say, to deliberate on whether South Africa's outreach to independent black states was compatible with the policy of apartheid, or the unquestioning fealty of the white state towards the West in the face of sanctions (Vale 1989).

# Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

We need to pause here and return to Hannah Arendt's concerns: who stands to benefit from the work of think tanks? In the main, the funding is linked to the business sector. The assumption is that the work of think tanks – publications, public commentary, conferencing – reflects the interests of their sponsors and the status quo. Certainly, the conservative inclination of the SAIIA, when I worked there, was a reflection of the interests of South African business in the 1970s, as successive waves of critical scholars, including myself, have been keen to point out. This personal experience confirms four things. First, access to the discipline – certainly in South Africa, but elsewhere too – was a closed shop. IR was an elitist pursuit. Second, the conversations were limited by particular vocabularies. Certainly, they were not critical in the sense of asking deep questions and, in the press of the everyday, reflecting on what we were doing. Third, a particular meta-narrative – the Cold War – framed all the analysis. But mostly, and fourth, think tanks are what sociologists have called 'total institutions' – institutions with tight regimens, tight supervision and rules that 'routine' professional behaviour. These observations were confirmed when, a few years later, I spent some time as a research associate in a more cosmopolitan think tank community at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London.

As the Cold War ended, the meta-narrative of IR shifted. Today, the almost pre-packaged understanding of the 'advantages' of liberal reform – often simply a code for economic austerity – is stock-in-trade for contemporary think tanks. While neoliberal economics as an instrument of social engineering, both domestically and internationally, has increasingly hovered over the discipline, security and geopolitics remain the staple diet of the policy end of IR. In fact, threading these together is not new. The most famous example (yet notoriously overlooked in IR circles) is the Nixon administration's intervention in Chile in September 1973. This coup against the democratically elected government occurred almost at the mid-point of the United States' two-decades-long direct involvement in this country. Driven by Cold War anti-communism, the United States was determined to keep the Marxist-inclined government of Salvador Allende in check. The successful right-wing military coup was a precursor to a policy of social control, which gathered force from 1975 onwards, and was based on neoliberal economic policies. But in its more recent incarnation, under the utopian guise of globalisation, there is a sense that a 'neo-liberal corporate takeover ... has asserted America's centrality in the world' (Buell 2000, 310).

Three further points on think tanks need to be aired. First, as the discipline has become a popular academic subject, more and more IR graduates have entered the work place, and think tanks are significant places of employment. Indeed, it is possible to talk about IR as an academic 'industry' grounded in think tanks. This is linked to the second of my points, that there exists a triangular relationship between think tank, sponsors and the press or social media. Finally, the interaction of people trained in the same grammar and vocabulary often produces groupthink and a closed insider terminology. It becomes impossible to see beyond closed and often self-selecting groups – called 'experts' – who are pre-destined, almost, to repeat the same ideas to each other. Can any of these practices be conducive to sound policy outcomes? This is where the 'critical turn' in IR, which began in the early 1980s and spread in the course of the decade to several of its sub-fields, is especially important for understanding the future of IR and the world it makes. The arrival of critical theories opened up a space to question legitimately the theory and practice of an inner sanctum in the discipline. It certainly enabled me to be self-reflexive of my own thinking and to ask searching questions about the theory and practice of security in southern Africa (Vale 2003).

As in every discipline, and in every facet of life and knowing, sources of certainty have to be questioned continuously and critical perspectives have freed the space for doing so in IR. The constant challenge in our professional lives – especially in IR – is to negotiate the space between understanding what questions are intellectually interesting and which will truly make the world a better place.

## Talk, text, technology

Technology matters in the world that IR makes – it always has and it always will. This is because it helps us understand and explain the world and also helps to shape it. So, the same kinds of technology that have helped to develop drones that are killing people in the Middle East and elsewhere have also enabled the delivery of more effective health care in remote parts of the world. Today, technology seems – irrevocably, perhaps – to have changed how scholars and students access information and how it is processed and published in an acceptable and professional way. This is because technology is changing faster than are understandings of the world that IR is



# Crossings and Candles: A Reflection on the Discipline of International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

making.

Technology also constantly changes the very 'stuff' of IR. For example, the complex and still unresolved relationship between IR and the idea of globalisation may well be the result of IR's failure to understand the fact that new technologies have eroded the discipline's central tenets – those of sovereignty, order, power and the very idea of 'the international'.

Technology may well have finally shattered any hope of a detached, or objective, search for truth that the academic discipline of IR once hoped to tap from the practices of the natural sciences. Can IR scholars pretend to be objective on an issue when technology (media, internet) regularly reminds us that in some distant place, bodies are piling up?

Notwithstanding IR's undertaking to provide understanding and rationality, technology seems to have widened conceptual cracks at the social, political and economic levels. As I write these words, there seems no end to the erosion of this order and the headaches that will follow. Consider three technology-generated issues that immediately knock against IR's busy windows. First, as viruses like Zika, Ebola and HIV/AIDS spread, the invariable question is whether technology can halt this. Second, packaging its ideological message in bundles fashioned by technology, the Islamic State group continues to wreak havoc and draw in supporters globally. Finally, the global monetary system is flummoxed by bitcoin – technology's reimagining of what money is, and can be, at the global level.

Is one tradition of storytelling in IR – that of the state, sovereignty and an international system – at an end? In earlier times, the making of the international was slow and ponderous as letters and directives travelled slowly between the metropole and periphery. Today, this is an instantaneous process – the international is being made and remade by bits, bytes and blogs. The discipline is challenged to respond to this new way of knowing – which makes the book in which this chapter appears – with its presentation in various formats and its open access – an investment in IR's future.

## Conclusion

I draw to a close my reflections on the 'doing' of IR by returning to the epigram at the head of this chapter from W. L. Watkinson, an English Methodist minister. It is also the motto of Amnesty International. If the idea of 'crossings' in the title comes from my confession, made at the beginning, that the personal, the professional and the political have been interwoven in my approach to IR over four decades, the other image in the title encapsulates a belief that IR – especially in its critical mode – is a kind of candle that casts light in often very dark places.

There is a paradox which stalks the discipline of IR: as it speaks of peace, the principle of sovereignty, which is at the centre of its world view, looks out upon messy – and often very violent – social relationships. These pages have suggested that there are no uncontaminated places in the making and remaking of these social relationships; there is thus no space where IR can escape the hot breath of compromise, concession or conciliation. However, the task, which lies beyond the pages of this book, is to recognise that despite all that we are taught, this is still a largely unexplored world. It remains a place of infinite possibilities and a site of great hope.

*\*Please consult the PDF linked above for any citation or reference details.*

---

## About the author:

**Peter Vale** is Director of the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study & Professor of Humanities at the University of Johannesburg. He is also Nelson Mandela Professor of Politics Emeritus, Rhodes University.