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## **Hamlet's Crisis of Meaning, Mental Wellbeing and Meaninglessness in the War on Terror**

Vanessa Pupavac  
School of Politics and International Relations  
University of Nottingham  
vanessa.pupavac@nottingham.ac.uk

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### **Meaning and the emotions**

Interest is reviving in meaning and emotion across the humanities and social sciences. It has long been recognised that psychological well-being is influenced by people's sense of purpose (Frankl, 1992). A growing number of studies explore how common psychological disorders may represent acute forms of cultural insecurities (Bracken, 2002, Frosh, 1991). More recently the links between global security strategies and ontological security are gaining attention. The problem of meaning is becoming prominent in research into the War on Terror, as I will explore below.

The idea of emotions having meaning takes us all the way back to Aristotle's writing on the emotions. For Aristotle, emotions are sensations with thought and are involved in what matters to us. Emotions arise from what is meaningful to us, but also influence what is meaningful. Emotions engage us with the world and inform what we think and care about.

If professional psychology and the social sciences have generally neglected the relation between the emotions and meaning, the theme has remained fundamental to artistic work. Philosophical and sociological writings on the emotions have continually sought insights from literature and art, from C. Wright Mill's reading of Balzac to Richard Sennett's reading of Dostoyevsky to Kenan Malik and Raymond Tallis' interest in Renaissance art to understand human subjectivity historically. The philosopher Charles Taylor has specifically written against psychological models, which neglect human meanings (Taylor, 1985). Taylor's seminal *Sources of the Self* (1991a) extensively draws upon novels and poetry in his historical account of the individual.

Modern Western understanding of the self and human emotions is heavily indebted to literature's insights. Literary genres themselves reflect changing human subjectivity. The novel's rise in the eighteenth century was propelled by *novel* emotional sensibilities (Watt, 1987). Importantly women like the novelists Charlotte Bronte or George Elliot, effectively excluded from most professions until the twentieth century, explored individual psychology through their fictional writing. Consider William Wordsworth's exploration of self-development in his poem *The Prelude* or Bronte's powerful account of the child Jane Eyre's breakdown. Literature was elaborating theories of psychological development and psychological problems long before modern psychiatry was founded. Great nineteenth century thinkers from Freud to Marx were avid readers of literature for insights into the human condition. Most familiarly, Freud developed his core psychoanalytical concepts such as the Oedipus complex from literature.

Shakespeare's contribution to the modern understanding of the self was profound. From the Romantic philosophers to contemporary philosophers like

Harold Bloom and Agnes Heller, Shakespeare's writing continues to be mined for insights into human psychology. Above all, Shakespeare's Hamlet is considered close to us and to speak to our contemporary problems.

### **Hamlet's crisis of irreconcilable meanings**

Why does Shakespeare's Hamlet seem so close to us? Why does Hamlet speak to our psychological problems? Shakespeare's drama takes us to the historic juncture between the old feudal order and the rise of the modern, and their conflicting values. Drama is quintessentially about crisis, here a crisis created by an uncle's murder of his brother and usurpation of the throne. Hamlet's psychological crisis is precipitated by his inability to act against his uncle King Claudius and reconcile contradictory normative imperatives: the ancient warrior's honour, Christian ethics, Machiavellian secular politics and faithfulness to himself.

Hamlet the soldier inherits the warrior's honour of old King Hamlet as his father's son, prince and heir apparent to the throne. Hamlet the faithful son must avenge his father's murder and release his father's tormented ghost from limbo, but thereby contravenes the divine monopoly of vengeance. Hamlet the scholar, student in Wittenberg, home of Martin Luther's edicts against the Catholic Church, pursues the strict protestant practices of self-interrogation. Hamlet the prince, following Machiavellian discipline, seeks to pierce through the appearance of power and virtue. Machiavelli's treatise instructs Hamlet the prince to defend the kingdom against his uncle King Claudius' personal intrigues and indulgent excesses. The neighbouring Norwegian Prince Fortinbras senses the new king's weakness and is menacing the throne. The country itself under the usurper is consumed by oppression and dread. The king has ordered guards posted on constant watch, shipwrights to build warships, but neglects the art of war himself and relies on foreign mercenaries to guard his person. Hamlet has good cause against his uncle, but cannot invoke the law since his sovereign uncle embodies divine right through his very violation. Thus Hamlet cries out against his fate that requires him to act:

The time is out of joint, O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!

Should Hamlet fulfil the conflicting moral duties of blood revenge, the Christian ethic of not killing and leaving vengeance to God, the political duties of Machiavelli's Prince, or be true to himself? And what does being true to himself mean? Shakespeare's genius is to have Claudius repeatedly invoke the codes he has broken, thereby reinforcing our sympathy for Hamlet's crisis and cause against his uncle. The divinity of kings, the warrior's honour, filial love and duty, religious piety, political responsibility and finally sincerity are all voiced by Claudius. He even plots a father's revenge, declaring 'revenge should have no bounds' (Act, IV, Scene 7, line 8), to get rid of Hamlet and another potential contender to the throne. So Claudius induces Laertes to revenge, asking whether he loved his father or only gave the appearance of love:

Laertes, was your father dear to you?  
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow.  
A face without a heart (Act, IV, Scene 7, lines 7-10).

Hamlet cannot escape the kingdom and his identity as prince. He is not a free agent as the king and other courtiers make clear (Act I, Scene 3, lines 17-25). Hamlet is popular in the country and remains a potent threat to his uncle's rule. The king seeks to keep Hamlet under his control at court (Act I, Scene 2, Lines 106-22) and later to assassinate him abroad. Hamlet therefore either usurps the

king, or accepts the king's authority to determine his fate. As my children's Ladybird history of King John observes, the historical fate of kings' nephews with claims to the throne was to be murdered before they could challenge their uncles, notwithstanding any royal promises against harm or appearances of affection (Peach, 1969, p. 10). The historical precedents were before the Shakespearian audiences.<sup>1</sup>

Hamlet experiences psychological crisis from not knowing what is the right course of action:

To be, or not to be, that is the question,  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep....

He is paralysed by fear of making the wrong moral or political decision. Hamlet's predicament anticipates the modern condition where we do not just follow given moral precepts, but have to determine moral values for ourselves. Here Hamlet has to decide between two strong all-encompassing moral frameworks in conflict with each other, and an emerging secular framework of realpolitik, alongside yet another moral code of sincerity requiring individual integrity and inward truthfulness. The latter internally-orientated moral code insists the self pursue constancy of beliefs and practice, not just outward conformity. In the poet Swinburne's words, 'the signal characteristic of Hamlet's inmost nature is by no means irresolution or hesitation or any form of weakness, but rather the strong conflux of contending forces' (Swinburne in Jump, 1968, p. 36).

Could not a prince adopt a pragmatic approach to contesting codes, following the code that best suited the occasion, and 'not make himself uneasy' (Machiavelli, 1993, p. 119)? Machiavelli would advise Hamlet, although commendable for prince to demonstrate all the virtues in theory:

A prince, especially a new one, cannot observe all those things for which men are esteemed, being often forced, in order to maintain a state, to act contrary to fidelity, friendship, humanity, and religion. Therefore it is necessary for him to have a mind ready to turn itself accordingly as the winds and varieties of fortune force it, yet, [...] not to diverge from the good it he can avoid doing so, but, if compelled, then to know how to set about it (Machiavelli, 1993, pp. 139-140).

The idea of being politician, soldier, scholar and artist was not necessarily incompatible historically, nor in Shakespeare's drama. Ophelia observes that Hamlet had possessed, 'The courtier's soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword' (Act III, Scene I, Line 152). From Geoffrey Chaucer to Thomas More and John Locke, major intellectual figures were closely involved in both the state politics and scholarship of their times. The English Tudor Henry VIII was recognised as soldier, monarch, scholar, and indeed 'defender of the faith'. The Medicis, central figures in the Italian Renaissance, were engaged in scholarship, soldiery, religious and political authority. Indeed Machiavelli's life encompassed being a diplomat, soldier, political theorist and dramatist, writing a highly admired play *Mandragolo*, a comedy extolling the self-made Renaissance prince and the idea that the ends justify the means. Even in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet's non-Machiavellian scruples stand out against Prince Fortinbras' sanguinity about mass killing in war for political ambition (Act, IV, Scene 4, lines 60-63), or Laertes' readiness to violate religious sanctity for revenge (Act, IV, Scene 7, line 126).

For Machiavelli, the appearance of virtue is ultimately more important than unflinching adherence, since human conditions do not actually allow consistent practice of all the virtues, 'they can neither be entirely possessed nor observed' (Machiavelli, 1993, p. 118). Virtues may be opposed to each other. What is a virtue or a vice depends on the circumstances and is therefore blurred in practice. Hamlet's tragedy is that he is *possessed* of conflicting moral belief systems, that is, they are integral to him, not simply external. Hamlet is overwhelmed by the competing virtues. To choose one moral belief over another, for the uncompromising Hamlet is to deny part of himself. His internalisation of conflicting moral beliefs and vain struggle to resolve them foster his psychological disintegration.

Hamlet aspires to follow opposing virtues, but will not be satisfied with the appearance of virtue, declaring 'I know not "seems"'. But Hamlet, confronted by circumstances, where he is forced to compromise between co-existing moral codes within himself, doubts his own integrity. Hamlet's harshest words are repeatedly against false appearance. Hamlet rails against a world of appearance, with its smiling villains and painted words (Act I, Scene 5, lines 6-9). He demands of his friends whether their visit is 'free visitation', of their 'own inclination' (Act II, Scene 2, lines 274-275). His inability to be true himself fosters his doubt over the sincerity of all those around him. Hamlet viciously attacks his mother and Ophelia for only appearing to love and be virtuous. Hamlet continues to demand that beliefs and actions are true to each other, even as he is aware that he adheres to opposing moral codes. His insistence on not compromising eventuates in him killing hastily and erroneously, leading to more compromises and more unintended victims. Ironically his unintended first killing is of Polonius, the courtier-diplomat practised in the art of painted words, who instructs Ophelia not to believe Hamlet's appearance of devotion.

Hamlet cannot live without committing murder, but he cannot live with himself if he murders. Hamlet is unable to adopt the pragmatism of Machiavelli's Prince and seize the throne. Ultimately even the cunning Claudius cannot deceive himself of his crimes and is unable to repent in good conscience, however much as sovereign he may manipulate the law (Act III, Scene 3, lines 59-60). Bold practical resolution quakes at the dread of the unknown beyond death:

...the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought (Act III, Scene 1, lines  
78-85).

### **Modern world of competing meanings**

Hamlet's psychological crisis is caused by the strong competing frameworks of meanings, which confronted individuals emerging from traditional society. Moral uncertainty and psychological fragility has been treated as an inherent tendency of modernity. Durheim, Marx, and Weber's founding sociological writing identified psychological problems of alienation, anomie and disenchantment under modernity. Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* traces the anxieties of the modern individual released from the bonds of traditional society back to the Renaissance. Yet earlier psychological anxieties were precipitated not simply by

traditional society's fragmentation, but by being compelled to choose between powerful irreconcilable political or religious meta-narratives, and having to negotiate a place in the dramatic sweeps of history. We can cite the individual agonies of the seventeenth century religious wars or the twentieth century political wars, which both forcefully united and sharply divided individuals. Many people who found themselves caught between the great political divisions of the twentieth century would have cried out with Hamlet against their fate in a time out of joint, whether in 1930s' Spain or 1980s' South Africa.

Freud's psychoanalytical theories are informed by relations in a world of strong moral, social or political meaning. His psychoanalytical world, outlined in *Civilization and its Discontents* and elsewhere, is still a world of dread where individuals have internalised potent moral cultural values and feel intense guilt if they transgress norms. Their efforts to carve out a space for themselves in society are bounded by powerful political and social institutions, and they risk social ostracism. These themes are addressed in some of the most powerful nineteenth century fictional creations like Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* who still identified with the social conventions her love had defied and consequently suffered under the ostracism of the social circle she believed she belonged to. Consider too the heroine's tragic indecision in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* or tragic decision in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, consumed by conflicting value systems of personal love and high society recognition and material affluence.

Indicatively Freud's psychoanalytical approaches informed by a world of strong social moral meanings lost professional and cultural popularity as the past systems of meaning eroded without being replaced by equivalent frameworks. Instead looser Rogerian-type non-directive approaches have gained prominence in a world where ideas and beliefs lack compelling social force.

### **Postmodern world without meaning**

If Hamlet's crisis is being overwhelmed with too much meaning, the twenty-first century problem is of meaninglessness. The Post-Cold War world has not created sources of meaning comparable to the competing Cold War ideological frameworks, as Zaki Laidi's *A World Without Meaning* perceptively analyses (Laidi, 1998). Cold War rivalry required the Western and Soviet powers to elaborate comprehensive visions of modernisation to win the hearts and minds of the newly independent developing countries and politically secure them to their blocs (Pupavac, 2005). The Cold War struggle to demonstrate the superiority of one's own way of life against the competing international models enhanced nationalism and domestic sources of meaning (Laidi, 1998). Potentially any area of life could become significant under international competition: from scientific advancements, artistic and sporting achievements, space exploration to architecture and educational attainment. The Cold War period was therefore filled with meaning as the competing powers projected grand visions internationally to secure international influence (Laidi, 1998). Their promises of a better life raised people's expectations internationally, and orientated proponents and opponents alike. Tangible, but uneven, material social progress in the postwar period made aspirations seem graspable and fostered political struggle where blocked.

The Berlin Wall's collapse was initially greeted euphorically as the West's victory over political alternatives (Fukuyama, 1992), but the celebratory mood was short-lived. The era of TINA ('there is no alternative'), to borrow Margaret Thatcher's phrase, was quickly marked by pessimism. The Cold War politics had given Western societies a sense of purpose, invigorated progressive politics and checked cultural tendencies towards disenchantment, trivialisation and meaninglessness already evident, which have now come to the fore (Hammond,

2007). Societies were disorientated by the demise of rival grand transformative visions. Older nationalisms weakened lacking the invigorating international dimension felt during the Cold War. Narrower, more narcissistic ethnic nationalisms surfaced out of national life's fragmentation, embodying the pettiness of small differences rather than the universal internationalist dimension associated with past national self-determination struggles (Laidi, 1998). The Cold War divisions were removed, but for all the reference to a global community, international inequalities have become stronger than ever.

Previous sources of international meaning were destabilised, but Western states immediately found it difficult to project a global vision and have continued to do so. The American dream no longer holds the international enchantment it did historically and has been compromised as belief in the United States as an exceptional moral progressive power has dissipated. Anti-Americanism or anti-Westernism has been embraced as a global identification (Sadar and Davies, 2003), linked to the crisis of meaning, but is distinct from past anti-imperialism. Anti-Americanism today commonly expresses broader disillusion with humanity and human progress and rarely elaborates an alternative progressive politics. While the alternative European dream, embodied in the European Union, remains a technocratic bureaucratic project distant from ordinary people (Laidi, 1998; McLaren, 2006).

Political leaders represent globalisation and integration into the global economy fatalistically as an inevitable process to be adapted to without meaning or enchantment (Laidi, 1998). The loss of a transformative vision of the future has shortened the policy timeframe, narrowing international and domestic politics to managing the present (Laidi, 1998). The shrunken vision has led to policy priorities becoming 'securitised', that is, determined negatively by crises or anticipated crises under the precautionary principle (Duffield, 2001, 2007; Laidi, 1998). In this vein, international development aspirations have been reduced to enhanced survival under human security models (Duffield, 2007; Pupavac, 2005). The economic rise of the Asian powers of China, Japan and India has re-invigorated belief in economic advancement, but has not so far translated into new sources of international political meaning (Laidi, 1998).

The weak framework of meaning internationally and the erosion of meaning domestically reinforce each other. Western values for the last two decades have appeared fragile from internal weakness, rather than any strong external threats (Furedi, 2007; Hammond, 2007). Former sources of meaning and their institutional or communal associations have deteriorated. Governments consciously seek policies to affirm national purpose and values, but tend to displace the problem such as new citizenship classes in schools. Yet the substance of values to be taught and learnt remains elusive. Public institutions appear in constant flux as external or internal reformers seek to reinvent their civic purpose (Moran, 2007; Needham, 2007).

As the political visions and distinctions of political parties have eroded, so public participation has become less critical and continues to decline. Voluntary commitments have declined along with other aspects of communal life and values, as social capital research has documented (Hetherington, 2006; McClaren and Baird, 2006; Putnam, 2001). Voluntary work's character has also changed and become more individuated towards personal career development. The sense of identity through work has also diminished with economic changes leading to de-professionalisation and more flexible short-term work patterns (Sennett, 1998, 2007). Similarly trade union membership and activities have decreased numerically and qualitatively. Religious communal ties have also eroded, particularly in the United Kingdom where regular churchgoing among the majority

has plummeted below rates of religious observance among minority ethnic groups, mainly non-Christian (Heelas, 1998; Aldridge, 2007).

The erosion of communal life has encouraged mistrust of fellow citizens. Sociology has studied the cultural anxieties underpinning moral panics over marginal social groups historically (Cohen, 2002). But cultural anxieties have become more diffuse and free-floating and encouraged ever-expanding risk management of ordinary life (Furedi, 2002). An endless, petty micromanagement of individuals substitutes for a grand vision of society which might engage citizens. However individuals continue to become disengaged from national public life.

Political elites, in the absence of positive shared sources of meaning, have attempted to engage the public negatively against the few remaining moral absolutes of the relativist age (notably against child abuse or the holocaust), or security threats since 9/11. The search for legitimacy has drawn Western elites to the international sphere, but an incoherent 'something must do done' approach has risked treading roughshod over international law and destabilising the international system, and further exacerbating international crises and the numbers of victims.

### **Psychological crisis of meaninglessness**

The twenty-first century crisis of meaning is distinctive from Hamlet's crisis with its own psychological consequences. Recovering meaning today involves different problems from societies in transition from feudalism or under the previous more politicised modern conditions. The postmodern world threatens to become a world emptied of meaning for individuals who do not simply choose between meanings but are now faced with finding meaning when compelling external references are absent. The indifferent shrug of 'whatever', rather than Hamlet's anguished cry, is characteristic of an age emptied of compelling meanings. But again Shakespeare's genius is to anticipate the spectre of meaninglessness through Hamlet:

Weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world (Act I, Scene 2, lines, 133-134).

Hamlet doubts human purpose where humanity is reduced to the old bones and dust of the grave.

A sense of futility is hardly unique to contemporary society. There are historical precedents for people, in the poet Coleridge's words, 'seemingly accomplished for the greatest actions...whose existence is nevertheless an unperforming dream' (Coleridge in Jump, 1968, p. 31). Consider nineteenth century Russian literature's 'superfluous men' in Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time* or Turgenev's stories, would-be Romantic heroic figures, unable to find purpose in their lives. But their sentiments were not representative and commonly confined to a small privileged minority in society. The difficulty of finding meaning and purpose is a more general problem across Western societies today.

Ironically the erosion of communal sources of meaning has encouraged contemporary problems to be understood from the perspective of individual psychology. Government strategies treat emotional self-esteem as the cause of and solution to the spectrum of social problems from teenage pregnancy to unemployment. Emotional well-being is given central policy relevance, but too often comes to be treated by psychosocial management strategies as an independent variable, shorn of actual social experience and meaning (Nolan, 1998; Furedi, 2001). If poverty is tackled as a problem of hope, what does hope



mean without a social vision for the future? Interventions tend to neglect the relation between emotion and meaning, despite the growing body of studies linking psychological problems with meaning.

The philosopher-psychiatrist Patrick Bracken's *Trauma: Culture, Meaning and Philosophy* (2002) has written insightfully on how common psychological problems in contemporary society relate to cultural ontological insecurity, bringing together philosophical and sociological writing of the last decades on existential anxiety over meaninglessness. It has long been observed that every age and society has its particular character type and characteristic pathologies (Lasch, 1979; Frankl, 1992). In this vein Bracken has perceptively explored Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a disorder of meaning and 'an extreme form of the contemporary crisis of meaning' (Bracken, 2002). Bracken argues that since past frameworks giving people's lives purpose and coherence, have weakened, individuals experience more anxiety over the direction of their lives. Bracken is not alone in noting how 'conditions that are supplied by contemporary culture are not conducive to the formation of a deep and integrated sense of secure being' (Frosh, 1991, p. 63). Diverse disciplines have proclaimed the death of public man, the death of the hero, the death of character, and the death of the subject, and along with the decline of community and social solidarity (Heartfield, 2002). Popular professional models understand individuals in terms of vulnerability (Bracke, 2002; Frosh, 1991), and individuals themselves are culturally attracted towards self-identities based on diagnosis or wounded attachments to a traumatic past (Brown, 1995; Furedi, 2001; Nolan, 1998; Shaw and Woodward, 2003).

If we have identified psychological problems arising from cultural meaninglessness, how may individuals recover meaning? Psychological writings on meaning like Viktor Frankl (1992) implicitly see recovery through some form of religious belief. Taylor has recently addresses this theme (Taylor, 2007). But religion in the postmodern world cannot offer the comprehensive meaning it was able in stable traditional societies (Heelas, 1996, 1998). This is not just the fate of modern Christianity, but other religions today, including Islam. As Taylor acknowledges, contemporary personally chosen meanings are qualitatively different from past traditional or political sources of meaning, which were externally given, publicly institutionalised and claimed individual obedience (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 1991, p. 491; Taylor, 2007). The search for meaning today inevitably has a more arbitrary idiosyncratic character. Even if people find sources of meaning, they lack social force or cultural affirmation and risk trivialisation. Freud's higher consolations of artistic endeavour or the pursuit of knowledge are trivialised without a future vision and are further undermined by instrumentalism where in Oscar Wilde's witticism, we seem to 'know the price of everything but the value of nothing' (Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 1995, Act 3). Thus art is sought as a commercial investment and the artist courted as yet another celebrity, while scholarship is valued for the research income it generates.

One common theme is the need culturally to re-affirm humanism and its faith in ordinary humanity along with other core modern sources of meaning, which have become enfeebled (Hammond, 2007; Heartfield, 2001; Koch and Smith, 2006; Malik, 2000; Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 1991). Family and friends remains a core source of meaning, notwithstanding divorce rates and instrumental pressures on interpersonal relations. The more short-term commitments of many adult relationships are partly compensated by the cultural elevation of child-parent relations. However meaning through ordinary life is undermined as the cultural ideal of the common man has dissipated along with communal solidarity (Collins, 2004). Past celebratory representations in the vein of Aaron Copland's 1942 'Fanfare for the Common Man' no longer resonate in cultural, professional or

political thinking about the man or woman on the street. Rightwing crowd theories were clearly mistrustful of the masses, leaving their traces on social psychology (Herman, 1995). However leftwing counter-culture theories became increasingly sceptical about their own population, disillusioned by their political failures (Marcuse, 1964).

Representations of ordinary people have become degraded along with the demoralised representations of Western culture itself (Koch and Smith, 2006). Consider how the dominant lifestyle programmes or reality television shows consistently portray people negatively to be censured and reformed by expert management. Or consider the revulsion towards the masses expressed by artists like Peter Howson. His exhibitions, such as *The Common Man*, are no warm portraits of the masses, but grotesquely muscular and engorged figures whose exaggerated physicality implies latent brutality. The overdeveloped, caricatured fleshiness of his figures emphasise the human body as meat over soul, their physical intrusiveness dehumanising people and making them beastlike objects of revulsion rather than subjects to pity. Here there are echoes of Shakespeare's grim graveyard scene in *Hamlet* (Act V, Scene 1). Yet *Hamlet* paradoxically resurrects the human spirit against his failure to discover humanity in the stench of bodily decay. Conversely Howson's works convey a misanthropic view of humanity, as opposed to solidarity or compassion.<sup>2</sup> Anti-humanist strands are evident in terrorist responses, which I explore in the next section.

### **Crisis of meaning and the war on terror**

The superfluous men of the nineteenth century novel commonly (and sometimes their authors!) found meaning through action, including dangerous or violent action: the hero's soldiering or duelling (the death of Turgenev's Rudin on the Paris barricades in 1848) or self-sacrifice (the guillotining of Dicken's hero in *Tale of Two Cities*). *Hamlet's* rash impulse to strike the hidden Polonius appears driven by a desire to break through his psychological impasse, having not struck the kneeling king (Act III, scenes 3-4). The idea of overcoming existential crisis through a defining act appears in existential theories. But decisionism may lend itself to the idea that an act's decisiveness is achieved through its violent break with the everyday, whose absurdity the Nobel writer Albert Camus explored in his novel *The Outsider* and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Taylor discusses how people may adopt a polarised stance and embrace violent action from 'a need to give meaning to their lives':

one recovers a sense of direction as well as a sense of purity by lining up in implacable opposition to the forces of darkness. The more implacable, even violent the opposition, the more the polarity represents an absolute, and the greater the sense of separation from evil and hence purity. (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 1991, p. 518).

Decisionism has been linked to fascism and other political extremism. Taylor's analysis concerns polarized political ideologies, but is relevant to contemporary polarization without ideology. The search for direction through adopting implacable polarised positions and embracing violent action is evident in contemporary global terrorism and the War on Terror.

Initial commentary assumed that the terrorists who carried out attacks against the West must have been radicalised in the Middle East or Asia. But subsequent research on the terrorists reveals how the majority of Al-Qaeda figures belong to a globalised, secular-educated middle class, they are well-travelled individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds, who have often studied abroad

(Sageman, 2004). As global citizens, their radicalisation developed during their Western experiences, not exclusively outside the west, and their relation to Islam or an Islamic community tends to be idiosyncratic (Devji, 2005; Furedi, 2007; Hammond, 2007; Sageman, 2004). Strikingly close family and friends may have little inkling of their cause. Today's typical globalised terrorist is not under state instruction and has become radicalised through the weakening of national authority around the globe, rather than its strength (Devji, 2005; Hammond, 2007). They may not even be accountable to a political group. Global terrorist actions are typically detached from any specific community or specific political programme, and reflect the demise of mass political movements. Their common thread is their avowed anti-Western sentiment or anti-Americanism (Sardar and Davies, 2003). Anti-Western feelings have a long history, associated with anti-imperialism. But today's terrorists express wider disillusion and cynicism about humanity. Studies since the 2005 London bombings are exploring the extent to which contemporary terrorism is a home-grown phenomenon and how their radicalisation reflects Western self-disenchantment. Various studies explicitly link contemporary terrorism to the crisis of meaning, for its destructive rejection of the present without a future social vision (Durodie, 2007a, 2000b; Furedi, 2007; Hammond, 2007; Koch and Smith, 2006).

Today's globalised terrorists, like Western elites, have sought purpose in the international sphere, and claim personal authority to act globally, outside any specific polity or political mandate, here on behalf of a global community of Muslims. Their violent actions on behalf of an imagined global community evade political accountability, and the patience, support and responsibility required to painstakingly build a political project with fellow citizens. Destructively rejecting the present, they vainly hope their gesture will inspire Muslim uprising, but the objectives of an imagined uprising are left un-addressed – ironically echoing US policy hopes, highlighted below. As such their actions represent individualised gestures, characteristic today of both political radicalism and mainstream political leadership (Hammond, 2007, p. 147).

Anti-democratic disdain for politics accords with their disdain for ordinary people's lives. Past political terrorists accountable to a mass political movement sought to maximise their political objectives and might be politically pressured to minimise their violence, if its use could damage rather than advance their cause. Consider the use of violence in the Northern Ireland Conflict. What was considered a legitimate target was fiercely contested within the Irish republican community, notably the 1987 Enniskillen bomb, which killed and injured dozens of civilians (Darby, 1994; Moloney, 2003, pp. 340-343). There was an expectation that Irish republican bombers issue warnings so civilians could evacuate. Indicatively political disorientation later in the Northern Ireland conflict led to targets becoming more desperate, arbitrary, irrational - and violent. Notably the 1998 Omagh bombing, causing the worst civilian casualties in the three decades of conflict, was carried out in the conflict's latter days by a splinter group with little communal support.<sup>4</sup>

Today terrorists apparently feel little compunction about deliberately targeting ordinary people: whether the 1995 Oklahoma bombing, the 2001 Twin Towers attacks, the 2004 Beslan siege, and the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings, the 2009 Peshawar market place bomb or the various recent failed terrorist actions. Their lack of compunction contrasts with Hamlet's soul-searching over killing. Violent spectacle supersedes formulation of a political project. The London or Glasgow bombers, for example, were evidently not interested in building a political movement and winning their fellow citizens to a political programme. Otherwise, why target ordinary London commuters or Scottish family holidaymakers, when opinion polls have repeatedly shown the majority of British

people do not support the war in Iraq and other key aspects of the war on terror? Meaninglessness is evident in how the terrorists' political goals remain hazy, notwithstanding their decisiveness in annihilating life, whether the 2004 Beslan siege or the London bombings. Terrorists' desire today to kill ordinary people exhibits contempt for humanity and represents an extreme form of the cultural demise of belief in the common man and ordinary life. Even in Iraq, suicide bombers have deliberately targeted ordinary Iraqis, not just US coalition forces or perceived collaborators. Violent suicidal gestures to kill their peers are the logic of a nihilistic outlook that has abandoned humanist belief in the possibility of constructing a better world.

To borrow from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, nihilistic terrorism exhibits 'sound and fury, signifying nothing' (Act V, Scene 5, lines 29-30). Their attacks are closer in character to the earlier US Weatherman bombings or recent school killings, than mass independence struggles. The close parallels between the suicide bombings and the high school killings are evident in the tragic case of the Finnish teenage high school killer, Pekka-Eric Auvinen, who shot staff and students in November 2007. We can see how his self-identity corresponds to the contemporary crisis of meaning when the teenager declares himself a 'cynical existentialist, anti-human humanist, anti-social social Darwinist, realistic idealist and godlike atheist' with his 'one man's war against humanity' (Auvinen, 2007; O'Neill, 2007). Contemporary terrorist declarations are much like Auvinen's bleak and pretentious personal manifesto, presenting post-festum ultimatums, revealing no tangible political objectives or possibilities for political negotiation (Furedi, 2007). Compare Hamlet's dying words which seek to ensure peaceful succession for his country (Act V, Scene 2, lines 349-351). Ironically their attraction towards violent spectacle over political substance perhaps owes more to Hollywood and a Western celebrity culture than they would care to admit in seeking instant notoriety rather than enduring reputation. Their self-identities correspond to the archetypal Western counterculture rebels without a cause who violently reject mainstream society.

Since current terrorists have no political project and are not mandated by a mass political movement, their actions cannot seriously threaten Western states. Their killings of ordinary people are shocking, but do not endanger states to the degree that, for example, Irish republican actions imperilled the territorial integrity of the British state. Terror tactics rely on maximising fear, yet Western responses have tended to aggravate terrorism's impact in the War on Terror, not least the 'oxygen of publicity' that past counter-terrorism strategies sought to deny.

What is the meaning of declaring *War on Terror*? A declaration of war signifies the gravity of the security threat. It marks an implacable line between good and evil. Governments regularly declare wars against all manner of social problems from poverty to crime to drugs and obesity, so it is unsurprising that terrorism is treated as war (Furedi, 2007). But how appropriate is the paradigm of war? How can you go to war against enemies who destroy themselves? How can you go to war against the suburbs of High Wycombe or Leeds? If the aim of terrorists is to maximise their impact, a danger of declaring war is actually to amplify the import of individual terrorist incidents (Furedi, 2007).

Compare, for example, how Britain sought to minimise the Irish republican threat. British officials symbolically and reassuringly referred to 'The Troubles', as if a grandmother discussing some family dispute or grumbling medical complaint ('The troubles I have with my...'). The term itself emerged earlier in the century from Irish republican circles reflecting communal stoicism in the face of political strife. But Irish republicans later defiantly spoke of the 'Irish War' and fought to be accorded the status of prisoners of war against their depoliticising status as

ordinary criminals. Against such historical precedents, the declared War on Terror immediately elevates individual bombers to the status of international actors rather than criminalising and demeaning them to the level of messed up high school killers. The declaration of war symbolically joined up what were incoherent, marginal, fragmented actions to a global cause (Furedi, 2007). Disaffected individuals could now imagine themselves as a network of globally significant actors and could capitalise on other ill-thought or unprincipled policies. Concentrating terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay, for example, unintentionally gave detainees an identity as international political martyrs, although formally denied the status of prisoners of war.

What is the meaning of declaring war against *terror*? How can you declare war against the emotion of extreme fear and those who promote it? Meaning is crucial to emotion, as we have analysed, but meaning has been neglected in the War on Terror. Security or military technological approaches have dominated over a battle of ideas to win heart and minds. The military strategist Clausewitz developed understanding of the dialectical interrelation between emotion and meaning in war, whether conventional conflicts or insurgencies. His classic *On War* advances how wars are won not simply through the technical means of force available to each party, but what they believe is at stake for them. How passionately engaged are the parties in the cause they are fighting? Clear agreed political objectives encourage rational, military strategies, while passionate belief energises commitment to a cause. But Western political incoherence continues in the War on Terror. Just as short-term initiatives have displaced long-term strategies in domestic politics, so the War on Terror flounders on short-termist decision-making.

Presumably in declaring the War on Terror, US officials sought to repeat the Cold War experience of enhancing domestic coherence through an external enemy. The conservative thinker Leo Strauss was influential among US Cold War advisers for suggesting that heightening fear of Communism among the population would help the United States win the Cold War. In some senses, any declaration of war involves mobilising fear against a threat, but in the War on Terror we have the rather contradictory and potentially self-defeating mobilisation of fear in the name of fear. The Soviet bloc offered a comprehensive political vision against which the West could define itself. Conversely the political incoherence of the terrorists has reinforced the West's incoherence and inability to find meaning through the War on Terror. If Hamlet was paralysed by the unknowns of the afterlife, Donald Rumsfeld's fears in the face of earthly 'unknown unknowns' expresses more incoherence.

Disorientation has encouraged Western policy-makers to fallback crudely onto past responses, without remembering the underlying strategic thinking which informed them. In this vein, policy-makers have applied old Cold War analysis, identifying state-sponsored terrorism and then looking for states to target, singling out Afghanistan and even more incoherently targeting Iraq, despite being a secular regime hostile to Al-Qaeda, while ignoring the terrorists' stronger personal connections to Saudi Arabia. The invasion of Iraq stands out in its destructiveness, US policy-makers, apparently wanting to fight the last war, to be seen to do something, as they struggled to develop strategies to address the present threats. Iraq seemed an undemocratic regime potentially easy to topple and kick start a wave of democratization in the Middle East. US policy-makers optimistically hoped that their destruction of the Afghan and Iraqi regimes would lead to grateful liberated populations spontaneously rising up to create Western-friendly democracies. The vainly anticipated dominoes-effect across the Middle East and Asia ironically echoes Al-Qaeda hopes for spontaneous Muslim uprising through their violent actions. Instead both sides compound political fragmentation

and the sense of a global world without meaning, analysed so perceptively by Laidi (1998). The West is actually losing the War on Terror, precisely because it is managing to destroy meaning, not build meaning (Durodie, 2007a, 2000b; Furedi, 2007).

Here Western policy-making has failed to follow the classic injunctions of Machiavelli and Clausewitz to know your history. Policy-makers have forgotten past counter-insurgency experiences, which endorsed Clausewitz's stress on the importance of politically and emotionally engaging populations. Past counter-insurgency strategists discovered they had to mobilise people's beliefs in a better future and propelled the ambitious international development plans of sixty years ago. When Western forces or humanitarian agencies today try to win over Afghan tribal leaders through aid projects or aid handouts, their assistance is no longer symbolic of a social vision seeking to materially transform Afghans lives so they enjoy the same living standards as people in Western standards. Psychological warfare, even when practised today, inevitably takes narrower, more short-termist forms, because it cannot appeal to strong background sources of meaning like belief in progress previously available.

Hamlet's revenge becomes so destructive because Hamlet cannot find a right course of action. Incoherence compromises Western responses and fosters their destructive, inhumane character. Nevertheless strong emotions engendered by terrorist attacks do not necessarily have to be damaging: they can energise people to curb terrorism's destructive impact, as the responses of ordinary people demonstrate.

### **Humouring terrorism?**

The authorities have been fearful over people's responses to terrorism. First there have been concerns that people will panic and cause additional needless casualties. Nevertheless the recent terrorist attacks show how people's responses belie pessimistic professional models of their behaviour. Overall people acted calmly and capably, spontaneously helping each other, whether in the World Trade Centre or London attacks (Furedi, 2007). Second the authorities have been fearful that people's outrage would lead to revenge attacks against minority ethnic groups. But official fears have fortunately not materialised. Overall ordinary people have shown more sense and measured responses towards Muslim minorities than officials have given them credit for, despite official policies unwittingly encouraging separate lives (Mirza et al, 2007). Official mistrust of ordinary people's responses speaks perhaps to declining belief in the common man, rather than the reality of people's behaviour. The general population seems better able to take terrorist attacks in their stride compared to the more alarmist Western government responses (Durodie, 2007a, 2000b; Furedi, 2007).

Unfortunately risk management approaches may inhibit the cultural responses that reduce terrorism's impact. Citizens are culturally expected to be vulnerable. Popular Western psychological models have tended to pathologise stoicism and the proverbial stiff upper lip (Bracken, 2002; Summerfield, 2001). While more emotional openness has been encouraged in recent decades, the emotion of anger is viewed with greater suspicion and become the site of growing anger management programmes. Yet anger may energise us to act - and to act against injustice. Citizens are discouraged in so many areas of their lives from making decisions or facing experiences without professional guidance or support (Nolan, 1998; Furedi, 2001, 2007). Even some psychological models, which assume the need for professional intervention to promote resilience, may unintentionally reinforce learned helplessness. If citizens are culturally inhibited from intervening in ordinary situations and encouraged to wait for official action, then they are also

culturally discouraged from taking the initiative when confronted with extraordinary situations. Strikingly nobody acted upon any suspicious behaviour and confronted the London bombers before they detonated their explosives in 7 July 2005.

Individuals may ignore contemporary norms and become exemplars of alternative responses. Consider the tube passenger Angus Campbell who confronted one of the bomb plotters of 21 July 2005. The authorities were slow to capitalise on his courageous, moral stand. The cultural responses to the attempted Glasgow airport attack of 30 June 2007 did depart from vulnerability models, helped no doubt by the fact that deaths were averted, but not solely. John Smeaton, a baggage handler at Glasgow airport, who attacked one of the attempted bombers, became widely celebrated as the 'Glasgow airport terrorist hero' across the Western media and internet. Smeaton's robust and humorous comments, or attributed comments, affirm ordinary people's vitality and solidarity against terror. Observe how the popular down-to-earth responses assert a city identity and its citizens' capacity for tough personal action independent of the authorities. Here is a flavour of the responses:

'All other members of the public would do the same as me.'

'Only in Glasgow do suicide bombers need rescuing from the locals by the police.'

'Only in Glasgow do terrorists need protection from the general public.'

'Glasgow has no respect for international terrorism.'

'Glasgow really isn't a good place to do terrorism.'

Other jokes have been doing the rounds, ridiculing the terrorists' threat: 'They were doctors, for God sake, why didn't they just go around shaking hands with people. They would have killed more' or simply 'Our Harold Shipman could kill more.' Culturally-knowing jokes contribute to a sense of belonging to a strong community.

Shakespeare's own use of earthy humour in the midst of tragedy broke with the older classic aristocratic tragic tradition and affirmed ordinary humanity and the continuity of everyday life. The comic scenes gave an opportunity for ordinary people to comment wryly on the affairs of the great and mock their privileges. As the humble graveyard digger ironically observes, 'the more the pity that great folk should have countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves' (Act V, Scene 1, lines 6-8). Grim graveyard humour in Hamlet points to a world where king and peasant are equal. As Hamlet reminds King Claudius, 'a king may go through the guts of a beggar':

A man may eat fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm (Act IV, Scene 3, lines 26-30).

The popular Glasgow responses show how ordinary people have capacity to resist terrorism, underestimated in contemporary Western politics and risk management models. Such humour punctures the terror of terrorism rather more successfully than many an official intervention has so far been able. The psychologist Gordon Allport observed over fifty years ago, 'The neurotic who learns to laugh at himself may be on the way to self-management, perhaps to

cure' (Allport quoted in Frankl, 1992, p. 127). If Western governments want to combat terrorism and defend their societies, they could take a cue from their citizens' humour.

Western elites' isolation from their populations has heightened their sense of vulnerability and tendency to exaggerate and exacerbate the terrorist threat (Furedi, 2007). Western political leaders must overcome a vicious cycle of isolation and mistrust of their citizens, which is leading to the abandonment of civil rights and freedoms – that is principles that should be fundamental to Western liberal societies. They should begin by affirming belief in their citizens and not, like Hamlet in his mad despair, suspecting everybody of being frail, corrupt or abusive. Western societies cannot hope to recreate shared values without confidence in their citizens. Furthermore current official strategies are undermining these very values (Koch and Smith, 2006). Official strategies need to be reversed and need their damaging Western societies can strive to reconstruct wider social meaning and revitalise civil rights and freedoms in practice. To paraphrase Frankl, we may be afraid of terrorism, but we will only be destroyed by meaninglessness (Frankl, 1992).

## **Conclusion**

It is welcome that professional psychiatrists and psychologists as well as the humanities and social sciences are returning to literature's insights on meaning and emotion. And where better to start than Shakespeare's Hamlet? In doing so they are effectively returning to their roots. Discussion of emotions' meanings takes us beyond the psychiatrist's couch and involves engaging with potential contested frameworks of meaning in society. As literary interpretation is open ended, so too is the social construction of meaning. Just as contemporary society has difficulty in framing meaning today, so too will professional psychiatrists. But professional psychiatry's growing recognition of the problem of meaning today may develop better understanding of common psychological problems today and the challenges to address them. It may too point to more meaningful responses to address the problem of terrorism today.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth I executed Mary Queen of Scots, despite her long reluctance to execute her cousin, since Mary became the focus of plots against Elizabeth's reign. Another play, Schiller's tragedy *Maria Stuart* addresses Elizabeth's psychological crisis and psychological deterioration when her cousin's ultimate defiance pushes her to order her execution.

<sup>2</sup> Howson was Britain's official war artist in the Bosnian war and his work exemplifies Ugresic's observation on her former country becoming a site for foreigners to project their own preoccupations and revulsion against humanity. Howson has subsequently discovered religious faith and reformed his life, and now admits existential despair and cynicism that informed his exhibitions in the previous couple of decades.

<sup>3</sup> Camus extensively explored human creation of meaning in a world without meaning. *The Outsider's* anti-hero, like Hamlet, refuses the world of appearance, a stance, which is shown to be untenable in the prevailing world. His ruthless honesty about his feelings or lack of them imperils his life and eventuates in his execution. Incidentally US President George Bush's choice of Camus' novel for his 2006 summer vacation reading created a flurry of media interest and ironic comment. As one commentator observed 'Does his experience in Iraq push him to read works replete with themes of angst, anxiety and dread?' (Dickerson, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> My thanks to Chris Gilligan, Aston University, for his insights on the Northern Ireland conflict.