

# The delocalisation of meaning

Zaki Laïdi

▶ **To cite this version:**

Zaki Laïdi. The delocalisation of meaning. Mandaville Peter, Williams Andrew J. Meaning and International Relations, Routledge, pp.38-50, 2003. hal-01027634

**HAL Id: hal-01027634**
**https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01027634**

Submitted on 22 Jul 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Edited by Peter Mandaville and Andrew Williams,**
***Meaning and International Relations*, London/ New York, Routledge, 2003**

# THE DELOCALISATION OF MEANING

**Zaki Laidi**
CERI/CNRS

## Introduction

Since the ending of the Cold War from the late 1980s onwards, what has been called the progressive regionalisation of the world has incredibly increased in speed. By holding on to partial and reductive statistics, we can for instance note that in the period from 1990 to 1995, thirty-three agreements pertaining to regional integration had been notified at the international level, while from 1980 to 1989, such agreements did not exceed a dozen (World Trade Organisation (WTO) 1995: 29). This cause-effect relation is particularly clear in the case of Eastern Europe that is, to our knowledge, the most stunning case of a reorientation of trade which has ever happened in a very short period of time, to cite but one aspect of the changes that have happened there. For the majority of cases in Eastern Europe, this reorientation of trade has been made to the detriment of the present Russia and has operated in favour of the European Union.

The purpose of citing these examples was not to enter into the technical aspects of the debate over the issue of regional integration in the world. Neither was it to establish a cause-effect relationship between the end of the Cold War and regionalisation. This is a relationship which will be returned to later on in this chapter. The purpose was essentially to demonstrate the fact that the regionalisation of the globe may bring us back to a reorganisation of the world in terms of structures and meanings. In so doing regionalisation constitutes both a new layer in the reorganisation of the world system, and as a source for the study and analysis of international relations, but equally a source of

production of meaning for political societies, nation-states and the world system. Regionalisation inaugurates a process of a delocalisation of meaning which needs to be understood as a part of a world process of the decentralisation of those spaces concerned with the production of meaning. This process is reinforced by means of a dialectical method, the development of mechanisms of uniformisation and centralisation of meaning, that is furthermore observable. The delocalisation of meaning is therefore an expression of globalisation and at the same time a mediation of this phenomenon.

It is to the production of meaning that this chapter is going to attempt to bring some elements of analysis, and this in two ways: on the one hand, by trying to identify these factors which, on the world scale, favour the process of regionalisation of meaning. On the other hand, there will be an attempt to formalise the conditions necessary for the emergence of these areas of meaning.

Before that, however, we will assign a specific definition to these spaces. They are considered to be *regional spaces where the frontiers are not always well defined, but which wish to be seen as being based on a collective ideal with the ultimate aim of a differentiated identity, political weight, economic rationale or internal political legitimisation.* The spaces of meaning are consequently social constructions which attempt to find what Charles Taylor called 'common meanings' (Taylor 1985). Common meanings not only refer to the ideas and values of identifiable actors, but also relate to the actors' efforts to agree among themselves and to avoid steps of confrontation. Creating such common meanings therefore implies a certain voluntarism, even if this often bases itself on pre-existing and informal constructions.

If the term ‘post-modernity’ had not been so overused, it might have been possible to argue without hesitation that these spaces of meaning could be placed within a post-modern dynamic. This dynamic is clearly marked by a confusion of meanings and of rationalities. It would be absurd, for example, to see within the world process of regionalism a linear process of supranational construction which will lead to the dismantling of the state.

More often, the process of regionalisation appears as a resource of meaning between a functionally inescapable globalisation, but one that is unsatisfactory as a form of popular identification, and a functionally inadequate national confinement which is nonetheless equally irreplaceable as an identity structure. The spaces of meaning are those symbolic spaces which transcend national spaces without being similar themselves to public transnational spaces. They are spaces that are *sui generis* that have to be studied as such rather than through a mere transposition of the exhausted model of national construction. This is, for example, the whole meaning of the discourse of the majority of

European actors who are in favour of the political construction of Europe. These actors advance the belief that only Europe could stand up to an overwhelming globalisation, one that could never be countered by single and isolated states.

This confusion of meanings is accompanied by a confusion of rationalities. Most commonly, it is an economic rationality which is proposed in the process of the construction of spaces of meaning. But we well know that this essential dimension can never be separated from other rationalities that are more difficult to either express, recognise or share. We know for example that divisions of economic sovereignty are easier to get accepted than are divisions of sovereignty which are strictly political or military, and this independently of the concrete consequences deriving from the choice.

These same spaces of meaning, marked by the confusion of rationalities and meanings, are equally dominated by the same fuzzy logic. Among the numerous examples that demonstrate the prevalence of this fuzzy logic, it is essential to cite the example of frontiers. In all the regional construction, the demarcation of frontiers is the most problematic. This is found to be in Asia where one of the principal attempts at regionalisation in APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) brings together the states of the Pacific but not those that we can term ‘Asiatic’. This was done precisely so as to counterbalance more strictly Asiatic regional constructions. This problem is also found in Latin America where the construction of a Latin American space could be telescoped into the emergence of an American space. The fact that Argentina, one of the pillar states of the MERCOSUR (Mercado Comun del Cono Sur) economic organisational structure, tried to advocate a formal ‘dollarisation’ of the national currency, is to highlight again the ambivalence of the ongoing processes. Finally, this fuzziness is very marked in Europe where the demarcation of frontiers has evidently considerable implications for identities and politics. Therein lies the problem of how to admit a Turkish Muslim state into a European society that does not necessarily share its values. Methodologically, this taking into account of fuzzy logic is important. For this fuzziness is henceforth one of the forms of production of meanings within regionalisation rather than a sign of an insufficient ‘maturity’ (on fuzziness as a mode of production of meanings, see Delmas-Marty 1999).

After these introductory and general reflections we have to pose the problem of the process of the ‘regionalism of meaning’ in two ways. On the one hand, regionalisation should be seen as the expression of a world's plurality that is revealed through globalisation. On the other, it should be seen as a construction capable of addressing three conditions: as a deliberation, as a statement and as a performance.

## The pluralisation of meaning

It is not the intention of this chapter to dwell on the debates relative to the standardisation and the fragmentation of the international system. It will rather demonstrate that the emergence of spaces for meanings is part of a pluralisation of the world. This plurality is produced by three essential factors: the globalisation of the economy, the rise of cultural and ethical relativism and the dismanding of the blocs which were created during the Cold War. By this token, we have an intermingling of factors which are economic, philosophical and strategic. These factors facilitate, therefore, a decentring of the world which coexists with the processes of uniformisation of hegemonic centralisation.

### Economic internationalisation and the process of regionalism

In the first place, it is essential to stress that even though there is in existence a global economic structure, there are also more and more regional particularities. It is even possible to note that there is a growing desynchronisation between the different regions of the world. European growth, for example, is very much less reliant on the American one than it was in the 1960s. This simple fact reinforces the pertinence of concerted European activity. This is the origin of appeals for a revival of a Keynesian European policy, one that has been proposed by French Keynesians or by Oskar Lafontaine in Germany. It would be better to talk about American, European and Asiatic growth even if a more accurate analysis would show the existence of an Anglo-Saxon economic system that is out of joint from other regional systems. What is presented as a 'world constraint' is in reality nothing more than a socio-political form of conformism (Fayolle 1998: 91).

Second, the evolution of the conditions of production in the world is not necessarily unfavourable to the emergence of regional spaces. Certainly, businesses can be seen as tending to delocalise their production and services that need lower levels of skill towards low-income states, while others seem to overcome time zones by 'tipping' their production from one zone to another through the use of computers. But this evolution is not unequivocal. Globalisation is also marked by the progressive abandonment of the Fordist model in favour of a more flexible model. For other reasons that it is not possible to develop here, the generalisation of a flexible long-term production is not that much in favour of a generalised delocalisation, but is rather more prone to a regionalisation of global networks of production. Two essential factors are incorporated in this evolution: flexible

systems are smaller consumers of labour than are Fordist systems. This means that the proportion of labour costs within the structure of overall costs is proportionally much weaker. Tendentiously it follows that delocalisation is not a process destined to become generalised because, conversely to some widely accepted beliefs, salaries as a proportion of the cost of products are constantly decreasing. From 25 per cent during the 1970s, salaries have today fallen down to almost 10 per cent as a proportion of production costs. Furthermore, flexible production imposes the criteria of proximity among producers, clients and retailers. As Charles Oman (1994) has stressed, the most probable schema is one leading to a delocalisation within the same region that has some not inconsiderable fiscal or wage disparities. This difference is essential because these disparities become respectively a source for the harmonisation, and thus for the construction, of a space of meaning as the current example of Europe can be said to demonstrate (Oman 1994: *101). Therefore it can be argued that within the process of regionalism there exists an economic rationality.*

The development of flexible production has another consequence for the relationship between internationalisation and regionalism. Because technology allows the development of a production adapted to the tastes of consumers (hence it is often called ‘customerised production’), every effort towards globalisation is accompanied by a parallel effort to adapt global products to the local context. Such examples range from the case of McDonald’s hamburger chain who, after having had to come to terms with the ban on the consumption of beef in India, has been led to promote the Maharajah Burger, made from mutton, to the case of the giant Western record labels who are constantly thinking about ways to better adapt to the tastes of their Asiatic customers. Even Hollywood film studios are starting to think about ways of adapting their products to local tastes. Television programmes do not escape from this localisation of globalisation that is called 'glocalisation'. Hence it can be easily noticed that on French television channels the proportion of purely American products is diminishing in favour of the Americanisation of French products. The biggest satellite television companies consider the local indigenisation of their programmes to be the essential condition for their successful implantation. It has also been observed that Star TV, located in Hong Kong without any precise national identity, has in India tried to recruit local talent in order to Indianise its programmes either by means of dubbing or by the launching of programmes in Hindi. It is equally the case that, through globalisation, Arab societies now possess the first TV chain that is independent of state political control, al-Jazeera, whose impact on public opinions has

grown exponentially.[1]

It is thus necessary to understand that the emergence of 'homogeneous products' does not lead to a homogeneous consumption of the same products. Two events in the 1990s illustrate this: the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and the film *Titanic*. These cases present us with two world events which have been of huge interest to the media. It is naturally too early to measure their impact. But it is already known that if Diana's death revealed the existence of a 'world community of emotion' as well as a sort of 'globalisation of feelings', it would be impossible to believe that the same emotion was felt and experienced in the same manner in Britain, where the tributes to Diana expressed a reaction of defiance *vis-à-vis* the monarchy; or in Egypt - Dodi al-Fayed's birthplace - where the accident was seen as a conspiracy of the British establishment against a princess on the verge of marrying a Muslim; or in Angola, where Princess Diana had been involved in a crusade against anti-personnel mines.

The film *Titanic* has also been subject to a number of very contrasting interpretations. The wreck of the ship could be seen as the expression of the strong social segregation among the passengers. Indeed the first-class passengers were evacuated to lifeboats before the second-class passengers, and third-class passengers were restrained behind metal gates during the evacuation of the more privileged. But this interpretation is not the only one. The shipwreck is equally the metaphor of an organised society coming apart in a violent desocialising shock as well as of the various individuals who compose it. Everyone is trying to find his or her own escape from the crisis. It is possible to see in this ultra-modern ship hitting an iceberg a metaphor of a power that is too sure of itself and swollen with pride to the point of forgetting and underestimating the constraints of nature. So we could see in this one event multiple explanations. The anthropology of the media has always focused upon this phenomenon by arguing that the *standardisation of lifestyles* does not lead to the *standardisation of lives.* This point has been developed in an effective manner by the Iranian sociologist Hamid Naficy (in Laidi 1997).

Finally, there is a fourth element, which could easily be neglected with a too general abstract vision of globalisation, and one that is to do with the exceptional resistance of geographical proximity in all the dynamics of globalisation. Studies have demonstrated that the Canadian provinces trade among themselves twenty times more than with American states, even though the latter were of comparable economic importance and geographical proximity.

This compatibility between regional and global dynamics should still not lead us to forget

[1] *International Herald Tribune,* 6 July 1999.

the existence of exchanges between them. Numerous economists, and especially neo-liberals such as Jagdish Bhagwati, believe for example that the proliferation of regional free trade agreements and liberalisation of exchanges cannot be considered as the precursors of a generalised liberalisation of the world's markets. Taking his cue from the celebrated theses of Jacob Viner, Bhagwati estimates that such preferential agreements are not only discriminatory for third parties, but also equally prejudicial to the beneficiaries of the preferential agreement. He estimates, basing his assumption on some recent studies, that the preferential clauses agreed by Mexico towards the USA within the framework of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) entails for Mexico a drop in its earnings of $3 billion. In other words, privileged relations with a state or with a group of states deprive a member of other opportunities within the world market. In his view, preferential agreements such as NAFTA are by their very nature likely to reinforce protectionism under the guise of social, environmental or political conditionalities, ones that can hardly be imposed within a multilateral framework. Studies by the World Bank of MERCOSUR also end up coming to the same conclusions, and in so doing elict strong reactions from those states concerned.

Whatever the importance of these debates and the problems that they target, it is still the case that the dynamic of the spaces of meaning cannot be reduced merely to the advantages that are derived or that are obtained to the negative effects on trade patterns. Moreover it is here that the problematic of the spaces of meanings appears to be on more fertile ground than the classical analysis made in terms of regionalisation. Even if MERCOSUR presented, from a strictly economic point of view, some effects of trade diversion, its logic would already stretch way beyond the economic. The spectacular growth of exchanges between Brazil and Argentina has undeniably created a dynamic of political co-operation and perhaps has also done so at the cultural level, as the symbolic quality of MERCOSUR's first biennial event can be said to demonstrate. The spaces of meaning try hard to provide themselves with a 'regional imaginary'. This artistic dimension, too often neglected by political analysis, is nonetheless essential in order to understand this delocalisation of meaning. Until the beginning of the 1980s, the majority of world artists preached the idea of a universal art, in which local creations were considered to be mere vestiges of the past. Things have now changed. The expulsion of local art into a dark hinterland is no longer accepted. It is possible to observe, therefore, the emergence of a globalised art that seeks less to create a shared the meaning than to involve a wide public made up essentially of tourists. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is the perfect example of this. It is able to attract tourists from all over the world who have

the chance to admire modern creations coming from all the regions of the world - except perhaps those that are Basque or Spanish! For the local authorities, this is a secondary problem, since the main purpose is not to show Basque art but rather to modify the image of the Basque region as one of terrorism. World art is therefore a kind of art that ‘is made to be seen’ in a momentary and instantaneous manner. The Dokumenta of Kassel is a perfect illustration of this. It fits more into a logic of consumption than to a logic of contemplation. It rests on the sharing of emotions but not necessarily on the sharing of meaning.

However, parallel to the commercialisation of art on a world scale, we are now seeing a re-evaluation of local and regional arts which suggests that there is simultaneously a reaction against this globalised art and at the same time a need being felt to re-evaluate a local heritage that has been for too long underestimated. This re-evaluation can take different forms and multiple itineraries so that, contrary to certain received ideas, the teaching of art remains strongly a nationally specific phenomenon. The academies of fine art, which train the lecturers of the future, still follow strongly national trajectories, which explains the reason for the easy coexistence in the same country of both national and globalised art. Any re-evaluation of local art can take the form of a willingness to be admitted to the circuit of cultural globalisation. It is the local that aspires to be a part of the global and then mainly for essentially mercenary ends. Hence the tendency to 'folklorise' the local arts. Chinese, African or Cuban artists thus become an integral part of the global art circuit. But, beside this, we can also see the beginning of a communication between different creative sources on the basis of relative equality and mutual influence.

One example of this can be seen in the 1989 exhibition of "The Magicians of the Earth" at the Pompidou Centre, an attempt to gather artists from different countries to deny the idea of the supremacy of ‘Western white man's art’. In so doing there was clearly opposition expressed to the ‘formalist’ exhibition organised a year earlier by the Museum of Modern Art in New York where African and Oceanic arts were appreciated for their conformity to the canons of Western arts. There was thus a kind of universal communication, based on a respect of difference, that can be seen as anticipating the construction of a decentralised artistic universe.

**The relativism of values**

If we accept all the above hypotheses, we will naturally be led to question the consequences that these dynamics have and will have on what we could call the redistribution of truths across the world. In fact, as soon as we talk about the emergence of a more balanced world, we will naturally be led to ask ourselves if, from this balance, we do not risk sliding into a relativism of truth and also if, from this relativism, we do not risk falling into the trap of incommunicability or into what philosophers call the 'incommensurability of truths'. What is certain is the fact that we are already living in an era of profound renegotiation of what we mean by the universal and that this is happening under the impact of three powerful but equivocal processes:

- the rise of relativism within those Western societies who have themselves raised high the banner of universalism
- the development of a planetary diversity either in the form of competing universalisms or in the form of 'differential strategies' (as in the claim that Asiatic values are not compatible with Western ones)
- finally, an intensification of globalisation that brings out defensive strategies as the crossbreeding of cultures becomes intensified.

It is the interaction between these three processes that needs to be taken into account in order to go beyond the static cleavages between abstract universalism and radical relativism.

The debate over relativism is naturally very old. But it has re-emerged in the West by way of a misunderstanding: through the publication of Kuhn's book, at the very beginning of the 1960s, on the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Against the then dominant epistemology, Kuhn argued that scientific theories could not be just universal but also incommensurable. What he meant by this was that each theory expresses itself in its own language and that consequently theories could be hardly compared point by point. Only paradigms could naturally lend themselves to dialogue or comparison. But no paradigm could ever impose itself over the other in the name of a positive truth (Bernstein 1991: 87-8). This hypothesis is fundamental because it permits the justification of the idea by which languages, experiences, expectations or theories are 'imprisoned' in a corset which makes them incapable of universalisation. Given the number of fields called into question by Kuhn's analysis, linguistics is particularly noteworthy, with the 'linguistic

turn' developing in a very Wittgensteinian direction towards the idea that there is no unity of language but rather islands of language, with each governed by different rules and untranslatable into the others. Step by step, this philosophical relativism, under the influence of pragmatism, came to oppose itself to the prevailing Western epistemology defined by Descartes, Locke and Kant, a hermeneutics that challenged the idea of commensurability among discourses, values and references. As Rorty argued, 'the terms used in relation to a particular culture are considered as equivalent in their meanings or in their references' (Rorty 1979: 316). The consequence of this hypothesis is thus the rejection of the idea of the existence of the 'ahistorical conditions of possibility' posited by Kant, and a strong challenge to what Putnam had defined as 'the universal trans-cultural rationality'.[2] If we consider Rorty's position, and he is without doubt the emblematic figure within this relativist tendency, we can clearly see how such a position can easily be transcribed into indications within the problematic that concerns us here, that of *spaces of meaning.*

The first such indication is to say that there exists no common basis for humankind, because the idea of a basis refers to a metaphysical vision of the world. It follows that there can be no common human nature, but rather a 'gigantic collage' among contingent special-temporal affiliations. Therefore it would be above all as 'Westerners', 'Asiatics', 'Muslims', 'Africans', etc., that we would express ourselves. In this way of reasoning, the affirmation of a universal and transcendent 'We' is no longer tenable. This general hypothesis is largely compatible with the idea of spaces of meaning in the sense that the disappearance of a definite meaning, decreed from on high by 'the few' is no longer acceptable in today's world.

## The end of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War is the third variable leading us to an understanding of the dynamics of regional meaning. In fact, by its very nature, the Cold War privileged international affiliations far more than regional ones. It might even be said that the Cold War had been the effect of dividing regions much more on the ideological and political level than on that of identity. 'There was a liberal democratic Europe on one side and a communist Europe on the other, a pro-American Asia and a pro-Soviet Asia. The

[2] In order to sum up the philosophical debates where the understanding of phenomena of regionalism seems to be essential it is worth looking at Jean-Marc Ferry (1999) *Philosophie de la communication,* Paris: CERF.

division of Germany and Korea symbolised the extremities of this ablation, one that established political and ideological primacy over geography, history and culture. Moreover, the existence of a bipolar system reinforced the process of anti-regionalism because of the decisive role played by the superpowers and their ability to guarantee security to their allies. The security of Germany, of Korea and of Japan was guaranteed by the United States, as was the security of Angola, Cuba and Vietnam by the former Soviet Union. The sponsorship of the superpowers thus impeded the process of regionalism of security by regional actors themselves. We can therefore see in the end of the Cold War the beginning of the rediscovery of the region by the states and societies who make them up, either because their sponsorship has now disappeared (as was the case of the satellites of the former Soviet Union) or because they assumed a far less crucial character. The most spectacular example is certainly that of an Eastern Europe that was subjected to a forced process of regionalism by the Soviet Union for more than forty years. The end of communism has meant for Eastern Europe, therefore, a return to Europe, now seen not only as a geographical space but also in a spatial-temporal dimension from which they felt excluded. There has been a kind of reinsertion into a history and temporality from which they had been artificially excluded.

This historical normalisation is equally present in Asia, where two phenomena had reinforced each other to slow the process of regionalisation. The first phenomenon is related to the communist issue that divided the Asian states until the beginning of the 1980s, even though hostility towards communism was the original rationale for the creation of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). The second phenomenon follows on from the trajectory of Japan which, in spite of the long-established regionalisation of its economic power, had difficulty considering itself an Asian power for three reasons at least: its modernisation had been experienced by looking to the West and at the same time by turning its back on the rest of Asia; its insertion in the society of Western democratic nations had been predicated as a break with its former aspirations to regional hegemony; and, finally, its fear of the Soviet Union that had led Japan to see its alliance with the United States as the alpha and the omega of its international strategy. The Cold War did not radically change the dilemma, but equally this event served to deny a pure and simple maintenance of the status quo. The reduction of the Russian threat, perhaps in favour of a potential Chinese menace, has forced Japan to reconsider itself in its own terms within the regional context. Although Japan does not exclude privileged relations with the United States, these relations can no longer be based upon a pure and simple subcontracting of their security *vis-à-vis* China. What is more, the emergence of multiple

poles of wealth in Asia has forced Japan to negotiate its place in the Asian space much more precisely.

At the same time as the Cold War has unlocked geostrategic constraints, the end of the Cold War has allowed the decentralisation of the geostrategic stakes, as well as ideological ones, towards trade and culture. In fact, although the end of the Cold War has not put an end to rivalries among nations, it has probably reduced the symbolic and instrumental value not so much of war itself, but of inter-state war. The ‘discovery' of the fact that war among nations is more and more unthinkable in the classic mode of massive military confrontations between regular armies, is probably fundamental in defining new spaces of meanings. This is very much marked in Latin America where Brazil and Argentina have both symbolically renounced nuclear weapons. This evolutionary tendency naturally does not merely mean the disappearance of localised armed conflicts. They exclude even less the risk of social deregulation in a military-mafia mode. But even if these processes are prejudicial for the cohesion of societies, it does not follows that they will contradict the emergence of regional spaces of meaning. For, if an inter-state conflict renders impossible the creation of a public regional space of debate, social deregulation can nonetheless facilitate the emergence of those spaces through the experiencing of common or similar problems at a particular time.

**Spaces of meaning: public space**

If the public space is meant to be a symbolic sphere of representation and debate founded on citizenship and conveying the idea of a transnationally constituted civil society, spaces of meaning do not, for all that, signify regional public spaces. Even in the context of the European Union, where this issue has been very much debated, and where the surpassing of the national framework is the most institutionally advanced, those who agree on the existence of a public European space are rare. In reality, discussions of the transposition of the public sphere to a regional or a supranational scale end up irremediably with the issue of citizenship. Certainly, it could be argued that a European citizenship exists at the juridical level and that it has been consecrated by the Treaty of Maastricht. But this existence remains largely symbolic because it lacks links to duties and rights. Rather than thinking to what degree the notion of public space could be compatible or transposed to the international level, it might be better to understand the novel forms of meaning that are being created at a regional scale. In this perspective, a

space of meaning will be defined as the place where the three following dynamics become entangled:

- The establishment of a deliberative space where public and private actors - states, NGOs (nongovernmental organisations) and corporations - intervene in order to solve problems demanding common solutions relative to this space. Such issues abound today, from the reduction of tariff barriers, to the equivalence of educational diplomas, to respect for human rights and the harmonisation of international policies. This deliberative space will certainly grow more significant as it involves a growing number of stakes and actors.
- The production of common meanings is relative to this space within the global game (the defence of the European social model or of 'Asian values').
- The capacity to convert these preferences and debates into political performances. This is what we can call the 'evaluation of results'.

The space of meaning is, therefore, deliberative, annunciative and performative.

**Spaces of meaning: deliberative space**

It can be repeated that deliberative space is disconnected from any idea of a regional or transnational citizenship. It is above all a space of debate which nevertheless supposes the existence of institutions capable of refereeing the internal collective debate. Very often, in the majority of spaces of meaning, the starting point for debate is in the intergovernmental field. But almost everywhere it is possible to observe the development of forums of debate or of expression that depart from the domain of a solely intergovernmental logic.

Of course, the autonomy or the power of these forums is extremely variable. But the most important thing is the existence of such institutions. The origin of a deliberative space derives not merely from an a priori agreement on any particular matter among the actors of this space, but agreement on the fact that the regional dimension might be the most appropriate cadre for sorting out those problems that arise at a particular time. Generally, the access to a deliberative space comes from the impossibility of setting problems in a context that would be purely national and even more so to pose them in a supra-national dimension. It could be argued, for instance, that the issue of a social Europe perfectly

relates to this picture. In the first place, social concerns are excluded from the debate in a way that leads some actors to condemn and fight Europe on the basis that it allows such exclusion. These same actors then demand the inclusion of the social issue in the European debate. This inclusion is then taken seriously, even if the different state and social actors diverge fundamentally on what meaning to give to a social Europe or to the solutions to be promoted. The social issue has now become a part of the European field of action and deliberation. That was recently recognised by a representative of the Confédération Générale du Travail (a French trade union) who argued that the issue is not merely one of being in favour, or indeed against, Europe, but rather with the consideration of the social dimension as the most necessary for the creation of Europe.[3]

In all spaces of meaning, the presence of this deliberative space is essential because the debate over one subject matter is always followed by debate over other issues. MERCOSUR, for instance, has ceased to debate exclusively about purely commercial matters by moving towards the discussion of the politics of culture. In Asia, ASEAN is no longer a purely geopolitical forum in favour of trying to tackle the ensemble of problems affecting Southeast Asia. With the exception of this region, where the starting point has been exclusively geopolitical, it is for the most part the logic of the market, in other spaces, that is a useful point of departure in the setting up a deliberative space.

This space of debate is disconnected, as has been argued, from the idea of citizenship. On the other hand, it has seemed difficult to imagine its form without the existence of a positive pluralism. In other words, the deliberative space cannot actually exist without minimal democratic guarantees, unless it is limited to an intergovernmental debate. MERCOSUR might not have ever existed if democracy had not returned to Latin America (Dabène, in Laidi 1998a). Conversely, it could be legitimate to argue that the lack of democratic guarantees represents a fundamental obstacle for the emergence of an Islamic space of meaning. This is, moreover, the reason why public debate in the Muslim world lacks virtually any mention of Islamic issues. That said, it must be understood that the identity of these spaces is not synonymous with the territory of these same spaces. We are seeing the emergence of forms of a *delocalisation of meaning* that are but one aspect of the production of spatial meaning that can emerge outside these spaces, and this is notably due to the growing role played by diasporas or immigrant communities.

---

[3] *Echoes,* 5 July 1999.

## The creation of common meanings

The creation of preferences represents the second condition for the emergence of a space of meaning. By a ‘creation of preferences’ is meant that particular capacity to produce the concept of ‘Us’ or ‘We’ as opposed to the rest of the world: "We, the Asians", "We, the Muslims", "We, the Europeans", etc. The creation of preferences thus entails the search for an identical discourse that is more or less formalised and internalised. At this point, the definition of space becomes very tricky as it encounters many difficulties. Among these, there is the realm of legitimacy by those who express the ‘We’ (societies, status and enterprises). There are also the rhetorical or non-rhetorical features of this discourse and finally the difficulty, at a time of globalisation, of defining those identities on a no longer purely defensive basis. Furthermore, as Eric Fassin has put it, it can now be accepted that beyond all of these difficulties and contradictions, in each space of meaning there potentially exists some terms of debate which are its very own (Fassin in Laidi 1998a:123).[4] Hence it could be argued that the matter of ‘social cohesion' is typically European, even though European views differ on its content and even though other spaces position this issue differently.

In the different regional debates about globalisation, it is therefore possible to find translations of regional preferences. So we could say that, contrary to some generally accepted ideas, the notion of ‘social cohesion’ is not purely declamatory. A comparative study of European and American systems demonstrates that European social systems as a whole are more redistributive than the American system (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 1995). Moreover, a more in-depth analysis of the reforms of social security systems in Europe highlights how the ideological dilemma between ‘strong social protection and high unemployment rates' is rendered simplistic by the very variety of the social situations experienced and the solutions envisaged to deal with these situations. In Europe, the Scandinavian regions are the ones which bear the closest resemblance to US employment and productivity levels. However, this result has derived from conditions diametrically opposed to those found in the United States, and where there are high levels of taxation and massive state interference in society.

The most exhaustive studies by the European Commission envision the possibility of preserving a ‘middle way’ European model between social flexibility and the status quo. This middle way will emerge through a reduction of employment protectionism and

the maintenance of high levels of social protection for those who lose their employment (European Commission 1998).

**Spaces of meaning: performative space**

The third condition for the existence of a space of meaning depends on its capacity to achieve a certain number of objectives. This can be seen when (as with the creation of the euro or common views on the Kosovo crisis) Europe feels like it ‘exists’, and when a contrary feeling is encouraged whenever there is a division or a failure of intentions (as in the case of the Balkans).

For the time being, it seems that it is the creation of market spaces on a world scale that constitutes the principal achievement of spaces of meaning and that this is due to at least three reasons: the first relates to the pre-eminence of the market in world politics; the second relates to the visibility of the concrete and measurable effects that are so generated (it is easier to measure the creation of economic spaces than cultural ones); the third, finally, relates to the fact that the political and symbolic costs in the construction of market spaces are generally less difficult to assume for societies organised as nation-states.

But the European example tends to demonstrate that the virtuous link between a logic of the market and a logic of politics not only is assured but also is likely to become more and more difficult. This is due to the persistence of divergent interests but more fundamentally because the concept of the ‘common good' is today still a concept in suspended animation.

[4] Fassin insists on the ambivalence of the term ‘division'. Division is what separates and what is shared in common.