# Bridging Political Economy and Phenomenology: Ideology, Intentionality, and Material Structures in International Relations

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## ABSTRACT

International Relations (IR) continues to face a persistent analytical divide between material explanations of global politics and interpretive accounts of meaning, identity and agency. This article develops a conceptual bridge between political economy and phenomenology by asking how material structures become politically effective through socially organized meanings, and how actors experience political objects such as threat, security, development, legitimacy and responsibility. Using conceptual synthesis and critical theoretical reconstruction, the article rereads historical materialism, ideology and Brentano's intentionality as connected levels of analysis. The analysis shows that material structures do not operate as mechanical determinants. They become practically effective when institutions, expert systems and hegemonic vocabularies translate them into categories such as risk, stability and competitiveness. Ideology is therefore treated not only as misrepresentation but also as lived mediation: a patterned organization of attention, valuation and practical judgment. Brentano's concept of intentionality clarifies how political objects appear to actors as threats, obligations, opportunities or limits. The proposed framework links four moments: material structure, ideological mediation, intentional formation and IR practice. This framework helps explain the reproduction of global hierarchies, the durability of common sense in governance and the conditions under which counter-hegemonic alternatives become thinkable. Methodologically, the article recommends historical-institutional analysis, critical political economy mapping, discourse/category analysis, practice-oriented inquiry and process tracing across levels. It concludes that IR research can explain international politics more adequately when material power and lived sense-making are kept in the same analytical field. The contribution is a critical-phenomenological political economy that can guide theoretical debate and future empirical research on hegemony, crisis governance and institutional transformation.

**Keywords**: Political economy; phenomenology; intentionality; ideology; International Relations

## INTRODUCTION

International Relations (IR) has long been organized around a recurring division: whether global politics is best explained by material factors such as production, finance, coercion and institutional power, or by the meanings through which actors interpret the world and justify action. The distinction is useful, but it becomes restrictive when it hardens into a choice between interests and ideas. Contemporary global politics shows why the division is inadequate. Climate politics, debt governance, security doctrines, development finance and digital infrastructures are all material arrangements, yet they operate through categories that make some policies appear rational and others unthinkable [2,5,21,23].

This article argues that political economy and phenomenology can be integrated to explain that double movement. Political economy clarifies how global orders are formed through historically specific relations of production, accumulation, institutional capacity and geopolitical hierarchy. Phenomenology clarifies how the world becomes meaningful for actors who perceive, value and act toward objects. The point is not to replace

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structural explanation with subjective experience. Rather, it is to understand how material structures acquire political force when they are mediated through ideology and internalized as practical orientations [6,13,16,26].

The central problem is therefore one of mediation. Global capitalism does not merely distribute resources; it also produces categories such as market confidence, national interest, fiscal discipline, resilience, risk and security necessity. These categories circulate through institutions, expert communities, legal vocabularies, rankings, maps and policy instruments. Once stabilized, they orient attention and evaluation. They help actors recognize what counts as a problem, which remedies are credible and whose suffering is politically visible [7,14,18,35].

The objective of the article is to develop a layered framework for IR analysis. First, it explains the contribution of historical materialism to understanding international order. Second, it reframes ideology as a mediating structure between material relations and lived orientation. Third, it uses Brentano's concept of intentionality to explain how political objects become meaningful. Fourth, it proposes methodological implications for research that connects institutions, discourse, experience and practice. The article is conceptual, but it aims to provide an operational framework for empirical work on security, development, global governance, crisis politics and hegemony.

The article is also motivated by a practical problem in contemporary IR scholarship. Many empirical studies describe the same phenomenon in separate vocabularies. Political economy research may show how debt, trade dependence, resource extraction or infrastructure finance constrain state choices, while interpretive research may show how identities, norms and narratives shape those choices. Yet the connection between these vocabularies is often left implicit. As a result, structural accounts can appear too distant from lived political judgment, whereas interpretive accounts can appear insufficiently attentive to the material conditions that make some meanings authoritative. The present article addresses that gap by treating mediation as the central analytical object rather than as a secondary bridge between already separate explanations [6,7,18].

This starting point has consequences for how the article understands explanation. Explanation is not limited to identifying an independent variable that causes a dependent variable. It also involves reconstructing the conditions under which a political object becomes recognizable, legitimate and actionable. A sanction becomes an instrument of order only when it is linked to legal authority, financial infrastructure and a narrative of responsibility. A development program becomes persuasive only when it connects funding, expertise, indicators and an imagined future. A security threat becomes urgent only when it is embedded in doctrines, institutional routines and affective expectations. These examples show why material power and intentional orientation should be examined together [5,11,22,31].

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Historical Materialism and Global Political Economy

Historical materialism begins from the premise that social and political orders are grounded in historically specific relations of production and reproduction. The material is not limited to resources or technology; it includes the social relations through which labor, property, surplus, risk and authority are organized. In international politics, this means that trade regimes, financial institutions, infrastructure corridors, security alliances and development frameworks are not neutral mechanisms. They are historically formed arrangements that distribute power and vulnerability unevenly [6,21,30,36].

A non-reductionist use of historical materialism is essential. Material structures condition what is feasible, credible and enforceable, but they do not mechanically generate political outcomes. Institutions, legal forms, expert knowledge and political coalitions mediate the relation between structural conditions and action. This is visible in climate governance, where ecological vulnerability is material but its translation into policy depends on legal narratives, responsibility claims and institutional authority [2,22]. It is also visible in infrastructure politics, where investment, debt and geopolitical strategy are connected to ideas of modernization and development [36].

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The importance of historical materialism for this article lies in its account of structured possibility. International actors rarely begin from an open field of options. Their choices are shaped by fiscal capacity, military alliances, debt exposure, supply-chain position, technological dependency and access to authoritative knowledge. These conditions do not remove agency, but they distribute agency unevenly. Some actors can set standards, fund institutions and define policy vocabularies; others must respond to frameworks already stabilized elsewhere. This is why political economy remains indispensable for IR theory: it keeps analysis attentive to the material organization of power behind apparently neutral forms of cooperation, governance and expertise [3,6,21].

At the same time, historical materialism must avoid a simplified base-superstructure model. In international politics, law, expertise, public communication and professional training do not merely reflect material interests after the fact. They help organize the terrain on which material interests become recognizable. For example, climate governance depends on measurements, attribution claims and institutional narratives that translate ecological disruption into questions of liability, adaptation and responsibility. Financial governance depends on ratings, models and expert judgments that convert complex social relations into categories of risk and credibility. These mediating practices are not external to political economy; they are part of how political economy functions [7,18,22].

**Ideology as Mediation and Subject Formation**

Ideology is often understood as misrepresentation, propaganda or elite deception. This meaning remains important, especially in domains where strategic narratives and mediated deceit normalize domination or conceal geopolitical interests [15]. Yet ideology also operates more deeply. It forms the common sense through which social reality is perceived, organized and reproduced. It tells actors what kind of subject they are, which obligations they carry, what counts as evidence and what forms of action are responsible or irresponsible [12,24].

The formation model of ideology is particularly important for IR because international order depends on consent, legitimacy and routine compliance as much as coercion. Hegemony stabilizes a world order when institutions, education, media, law and professional practice make a particular arrangement feel normal. Studies of legitimation in international organizations and cases of minimal hegemony show that authority is maintained through contested but durable vocabularies of justification [11,28]. The relevant question is not only whether claims are true, but how they become socially compelling.

This view broadens the meaning of critique. If ideology were only an error, the primary task would be to correct false beliefs. However, if ideology is also an organizing condition of perception, critique must examine how institutions train actors to recognize some objects and ignore others. In development finance, for instance, vulnerability may be translated into indicators that attract funding while deeper forms of dependency remain unnamed. In security politics, a threat may become visible because it fits established doctrine, while slower forms of harm remain peripheral. Ideology therefore works through attention as well as assertion, and through habits of judgment as well as explicit argument [12,15,27].

The concept of hegemony is especially useful here because it links material leadership to moral and intellectual direction. Hegemony is not simply domination by a powerful actor; it is the organization of a world in which subordinate actors can recognize their own interests through categories that reproduce the wider order. This is why hegemonic projects require institutions, narratives, educational pathways and professional standards. They make a particular configuration of power appear administratively reasonable and ethically defensible. The phenomenological question is how that reasonableness is lived: how it becomes the horizon within which actors feel that some futures are practical and others are irresponsible [11,12,28].

**Intentionality and Political Object Formation**

Phenomenology contributes to IR by clarifying how political objects appear as meaningful. Brentano's concept of intentionality holds that mental phenomena are directed toward objects. To fear, desire, judge or perceive is

always to be directed toward something as something. Translated into IR, this means that a border, treaty, sanction, debt agreement or climate event becomes politically significant through a structure of directedness. It is encountered as threat, opportunity, obligation, risk, loss or responsibility [16,26].

The article does not use intentionality as a private psychological variable. That would reduce politics to individual perception and would weaken structural analysis. Instead, intentionality is treated as socially and institutionally patterned. Actors learn what to notice through training, metrics, doctrines, professional routines, models, technologies and narratives. A security expert is trained to perceive danger in certain patterns. A development officer is trained to see indicators and beneficiaries. A financial regulator is trained to evaluate stability and risk. These orientations are not merely personal; they are social products [18,25,31].

Intentionality is therefore useful because it directs attention to the form of political experience, not only to its content. Actors do not encounter a neutral world and then add interpretation. They encounter objects already shaped by institutional vocabularies, technical devices and shared expectations. A border may appear as a line of sovereignty, a humanitarian corridor, a commercial checkpoint or a security vulnerability depending on the organized field of attention in which it is encountered. A climate event may appear as disaster, risk, liability, adaptation challenge or development opportunity. These variations are not arbitrary; they are structured by social practices and material relations [1,16,26].

This point also clarifies why phenomenology does not have to be anti-structural. The lived world of political actors is historically produced. It is shaped by archives, models, maps, legal categories, algorithmic systems and professional routines. When IR scholars study intentionality in this sense, they are not retreating into individual consciousness. They are studying the social production of directedness. This makes phenomenology compatible with political economy: both are concerned with how worlds are organized, but they focus on different dimensions of that organization. Political economy asks how power and resources are structured; phenomenology asks how those structures become meaningful for action [14,29,33,35].

**Theoretical Controversies**

The proposed bridge engages four controversies that recur in IR theory. The first is the tension between economic determinism and the relative autonomy of meaning. The second is the debate over whether ideology is best understood as misrepresentation or as subject formation. The third concerns agency under global structural constraint. The fourth concerns the risk that phenomenology might be misused as psychologism. Table 1 summarizes these controversies and identifies how the article reframes each one.

The controversy between economic determinism and autonomy of meaning is not a false debate. It persists because both sides capture part of the problem. Materialist explanations are necessary because international politics is deeply shaped by uneven development, capital mobility, military capacity and institutional dependence. Interpretive explanations are necessary because actors never respond to these conditions as raw facts. They respond through categories of interest, identity, legitimacy and threat. The problem arises when each side claims explanatory sufficiency. A mediated framework avoids this problem by asking how material relations narrow the field of plausible meanings and how meanings in turn organize the practical response to material constraint [5,6,23].

The debate over ideology is equally consequential. Treating ideology only as deception can be analytically useful in cases of propaganda or strategic manipulation, but it cannot explain why political orders remain durable even when their contradictions are widely known. Many actors comply with international norms, fiscal rules, security doctrines or development benchmarks not because they are simply deceived, but because those frameworks organize competence, legitimacy and future expectation. Ideology therefore shapes the conditions under which actors recognize themselves as responsible, modern, secure or governable. This is why the article links ideology to intentionality: ideology works by stabilizing the objects toward which actors are directed [12,15,28].

The question of agency becomes clearer once ideology is understood in this way. Agency is not the absence of structure, and structure is not the absence of agency. Actors can transform international politics when they

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reconfigure both material arrangements and the meanings through which those arrangements are perceived. A counter-hegemonic project that changes language but not institutions may remain symbolic. A material reform that leaves existing categories intact may be absorbed into the old order. Transformative agency requires a double movement: building coalitions, resources and institutional capacities while also redirecting attention toward different harms, responsibilities and futures [7,17,24,32].

Table 1. Core theoretical controversies and the bridge proposed in this article.

| Controversy | Risk if Unresolved | Bridge Proposed | IR Payoff |
|---|---|---|---|
| Economic determinism vs. autonomy of meaning | Structures or meanings are treated as self-sufficient explanations. | Material structures condition meaning while meanings organize practical response. | Explains why similar constraints generate different policy trajectories. |
| Ideology as misrepresentation vs. subject formation | Critique becomes limited to exposing false claims. | Ideology is treated as lived mediation of attention and valuation. | Explains durable consent, legitimacy and common sense. |
| Agency under structural constraint | Agency becomes either impossible or overly voluntarist. | Agency is reorientation within institutional and material limits. | Clarifies counter-hegemonic change as both material and interpretive. |
| Intentionality vs. psychologism | Phenomenology is reduced to private belief or preference. | Intentionality is socially patterned through training, metrics and institutions. | Links lived experience to global governance practices. |

The controversies matter because they reveal the limits of additive pluralism. Adding ideas to interests, or discourse to political economy, does not yet explain how structures operate through meaning. A stronger framework must identify the mechanisms through which material organization becomes experiential orientation and then becomes practice. This is why ideology is treated as lived mediation: it links institutional conditions to the formation of political objects in consciousness and action [1,7,12,17].

The risk of psychologism is addressed by locating intentionality within social practice. The article does not claim that international politics can be explained by private mental states. Instead, it argues that actors' directedness toward political objects is patterned by institutions, technologies and professional formation. This distinction is important. A private belief may vary from one individual to another, but an intentional orientation can be reproduced across a bureaucracy, expert community or international organization. When many actors learn to see stability, credibility or threat in similar ways, intentionality becomes a feature of institutional order rather than merely a feature of individual psychology [16,18,26].

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

### Four-Layer Framework

The article proposes a four-layer framework consisting of material structure, ideological mediation, intentional formation and IR practice. The layers are analytical rather than chronological. They separate different explanatory tasks while showing how each task depends on the others. Figure 1 presents the framework visually and highlights the feedback between practice and structure.

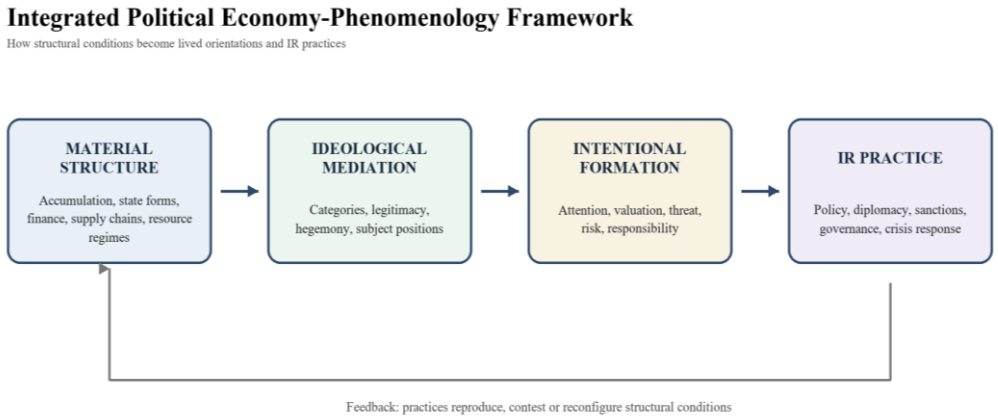


Figure 1. Four-layer framework linking material structure, ideological mediation, intentional formation and IR practice.

The first layer identifies historically specific conditions of possibility: accumulation regimes, state forms, geopolitical dependencies, infrastructure systems, supply chains, resource regimes and patterns of social reproduction. The second layer examines how these structures become politically intelligible and normatively defensible through categories such as stability, resilience, responsibility, competitiveness and security. The third layer asks how ideological categories become lived orientations of attention, valuation and expectation. The fourth layer studies how these orientations are enacted in diplomacy, sanctions, humanitarian intervention, development governance, technological regulation and crisis response [3,6,9,11,18,21,28].

The framework is best understood as a diagnostic sequence. It begins by asking what material arrangements make a problem possible and durable. It then asks which categories translate those arrangements into policy language. It then asks how actors are oriented toward the resulting objects, and finally how those orientations are enacted in practice. The sequence is diagnostic because it helps researchers locate where reproduction or transformation is occurring. A policy field may change at the level of rhetoric while leaving material dependencies intact. It may alter technical indicators while preserving the same political object. Or it may generate a crisis that destabilizes the whole chain from structure to practice [2,7,18].

The feedback arrow in Figure 1 is crucial. Practices do not simply express prior structures; they reproduce or modify the structures that made them possible. Sanctions can reinforce financial hierarchies by deepening dependence on particular payment systems. Development programs can reproduce categories of vulnerability that make certain populations governable. Security practices can stabilize threat perceptions that justify further institutional expansion. Conversely, practices can generate contradictions: failed interventions, visible injustice, ecological damage or technological opacity may disrupt established meanings and create openings for alternative orientations [9,23,29,31].

**Methodological Translation**

Because the article is theoretical, its evidence is argumentative and literature-based. However, the framework is designed for empirical use. It can guide researchers to combine historical-institutional analysis, political economy mapping, discourse and category analysis, practice-oriented inquiry and level-crossing process tracing. Table 2 translates the framework into research questions, evidence sources and methodological moves.

Table 2. Methodological translation of the four-layer framework.

| Framework Layer | Analytical Question | Evidence to Examine | Methodological Move |
|---|---|---|---|
| Material structure | What constraints, dependencies and asymmetries organize the | Accumulation regimes, finance, supply chains, | Historical-institutional analysis and political |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | field? | institutions, resource regimes | economy mapping |
| Ideological mediation | Which categories translate structures into legitimacy and common sense? | Policy texts, legal categories, expert reports, media narratives, indicators | Discourse and category analysis |
| Intentional formation | How do actors learn what to notice, value and prioritize? | Training materials, manuals, interviews, workflows, risk models | Practice-oriented phenomenological inquiry |
| IR practice | How are orientations enacted and reproduced in governance? | Diplomatic decisions, sanctions, interventions, development programs, crisis responses | Level-crossing process tracing |

This methodological design is especially useful for cases in which a material shock becomes politically actionable only after it is mediated through institutions and categories. A debt crisis, climate disaster, supply-chain disruption or security incident can be traced across the four layers: from structural constraint, to ideological framing, to intentional perception, to policy practice. This level-crossing design helps demonstrate the bridge between political economy and phenomenology rather than merely asserting it [2,10,22,30].

A practical research design could begin with archival and institutional mapping to identify the historical development of a governance domain. The researcher would then map the actors, resources and dependencies that structure the domain. The next step would be category analysis: identifying recurring terms, indicators and classifications that make the domain administratively legible. Finally, interviews, training materials and workflow analysis could be used to reconstruct how practitioners learn to recognize objects within that domain. The result would be a layered explanation of how a field of action is produced and stabilized [6,7,16,31].

This design also allows comparison. Researchers can compare cases where similar material pressures produce different political outcomes because ideological mediation differs. They can also compare cases where similar language circulates across different material contexts but produces different effects. Such comparison is useful for studying climate adaptation, debt governance, energy transition, migration, digital regulation and security cooperation. It prevents the analyst from assuming that the same category performs the same political work everywhere. A term such as resilience, credibility or responsibility may organize different intentional fields depending on institutional history and distributional conflict [2,20,21,35].

## DISCUSSION

The framework addresses the controversy between economic determinism and the autonomy of meaning by refusing both extremes. Material structures matter because they shape incentives, capacities and dependencies. Meanings matter because structures operate through categories that define what actors perceive as rational or necessary. This relation is especially visible in climate, security and economic governance, where material shocks only become actionable when they are interpreted through institutional vocabularies of risk, responsibility and feasibility [2,5,22].

One implication is that IR theory should treat interests as historically formed rather than naturally given. Interests are often presented as preferences that actors bring into political interaction, but the framework developed here suggests that interests are produced through material location and intentional orientation. A state may appear to have an interest in investor confidence because its fiscal position, debt exposure and institutional commitments make that object politically salient. A government may appear to have an interest in military escalation because security institutions and threat narratives make coercive response appear credible. Interests therefore emerge from a relation between structure and object formation [5,6,31].

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The framework also reframes the debate over ideology. If ideology is only misrepresentation, critique becomes a matter of exposing falsehood. If ideology is also subject formation, critique must examine the practices and institutions that organize perception itself. Sportswashing, for example, can be criticized as mediated deceit, but its effectiveness also depends on audiences, media systems and affective investments that make the spectacle persuasive [15]. Similarly, hegemonic orders endure because institutions repeatedly produce subject positions that make compliance appear sensible [12,28].

This reframing changes the meaning of legitimacy. Legitimacy is not merely a belief that an institution is appropriate. It is also a practical orientation that makes institutional authority usable. International organizations often maintain authority through vocabularies of neutrality, technical competence and procedural responsibility. These vocabularies are linked to material capacities such as funding, access, expertise and agenda-setting power. When legitimacy struggles occur, they are not only contests over public approval. They are contests over which objects will count as relevant, which evidence will matter and which actors can speak as competent authorities [11,18,23].

The controversy over agency is addressed by understanding agency as reorientation. Actors do not act on a blank field. They act through object-meanings that have already been shaped by institutions and material pressures. Nevertheless, agency remains possible when actors alter what is noticed, valued and considered feasible. Counter-hegemonic politics therefore requires more than alternative information. It requires alternative infrastructures of meaning: new metrics, new expertise, new mandates, new pedagogies and new coalitions capable of stabilizing different objects of concern [7,17,24].

The same argument helps explain why many reform agendas remain fragile. A reform may introduce new language while leaving the infrastructure of attention unchanged. For instance, a development program may adopt the language of sustainability while continuing to evaluate success through growth-oriented indicators. A security agenda may include human security language while retaining institutional routines that privilege military threat perception. A climate policy may recognize historical responsibility while relying on financial mechanisms that reproduce dependency. In each case, the reform fails to transform intentionality because the practical tools that organize judgment remain largely intact [2,20,22].

Finally, the framework avoids psychologism by treating intentionality as social rather than private. Political subjectivity is formed through language, institutions, technologies and professional practice. Digital platforms, blockchain imaginaries, artificial intelligence systems, rankings and mapping technologies increasingly shape what becomes visible and governable. They are infrastructures of attention, not only tools of representation [14,29,33,35].

The increasing role of digital and algorithmic systems makes this point especially urgent. Automated rankings, platform curation, predictive analytics and risk scoring systems do not only process information; they influence which objects are made visible to institutions and publics. When such systems are embedded in governance, they can amplify existing political-economic hierarchies while appearing neutral. Their opacity matters because it obscures how attention is organized. A critical-phenomenological political economy can therefore contribute to debates on AI and digital governance by showing how technical systems mediate between material interests and practical perception [14,29,33].

The article's contribution is therefore not a new grand theory that replaces existing IR traditions. It is a framework for relating traditions that are often kept apart. It asks political economy to become more precise about experience, and it asks phenomenology and interpretive IR to become more precise about material structure. The resulting approach is useful for studying problems that are simultaneously institutional, economic, discursive and experiential. These include debt crises, climate litigation, geopolitical infrastructure, platform governance, humanitarian intervention and security escalation. In each domain, the question is how power becomes meaningful and how meaning becomes practical [3,9,18,36].

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**Future Research Directions**

Future research should move from the study of discourse alone to the study of infrastructures of sense-making. International governance increasingly depends on indicators, risk models, rankings, audit frameworks, maps and algorithmic systems. These tools do more than describe reality. They define what becomes visible, comparable and actionable. Research on AI opacity, technological determinism and mapping practices is therefore relevant to the politics of intentionality because it shows how technical systems shape attention and autonomy [29,33,35].

A second direction concerns polycrisis. Climate stress, debt distress, public health emergencies, military escalation, supply-chain disruption and energy transitions interact in ways that cannot be understood through a single causal register. A critical-phenomenological political economy can examine how structural crisis tendencies are translated into competing object-meanings: security-first, market-stabilization, green transition, humanitarian emergency or developmental sovereignty. Comparative studies can then ask why similar shocks generate different policy trajectories across regions and regimes [2,20,21,23].

A third direction concerns counter-hegemony and program design. If ideology shapes intentionality, then alternatives must build durable infrastructures of meaning. They require institutions, metrics, expertise and pedagogies that redirect attention toward neglected harms and different futures. This is visible in climate litigation, sustainable livelihoods, green business models and political struggles over innovation, where the challenge is not simply to state an alternative but to make it institutionally credible and practically orienting [3,20,21,22].

A fourth direction concerns professional formation in international governance. Future studies could examine how diplomats, development experts, security professionals, financial regulators and technology specialists are trained to identify relevant objects. Training programs, manuals, simulation exercises, audit templates and evaluation criteria are not merely administrative details. They are sites where intentionality is reproduced. Studying them can reveal how actors learn to see a population as vulnerable, a state as risky, a technology as innovative or a protest as disorder. This research direction would connect phenomenology to institutional ethnography and critical policy studies [6,16,25,31].

A fifth direction concerns comparative historical research on category change. Categories such as development, stability, resilience, responsibility and security do not remain fixed. They shift across crises, institutional reforms and geopolitical struggles. Future research can ask when a category becomes exhausted, when it is renewed and when it is replaced by an alternative vocabulary. This is especially important for studying periods of transition, where old categories still organize practice but new realities make them less convincing. A layered approach can show whether category change is merely rhetorical or whether it is accompanied by changes in material coalitions, institutional mandates and practical orientation [1,2,23,34].

Finally, future research should test the framework through carefully selected case studies. Possible cases include the securitization of migration, the governance of climate loss and damage, the politics of debt restructuring, the regulation of AI systems, and infrastructure development in the Global South. Each case would allow the analyst to trace how material constraints, ideological categories, intentional formations and governance practices interact. Such research would strengthen the framework by moving from conceptual synthesis to cumulative empirical analysis. It would also help identify where the framework needs refinement, especially in cases where multiple ideological formations compete within the same material field [22,29,33,36].

# CONCLUSION

This article has rewritten the relation between political economy and phenomenology as a problem of mediation. International politics is neither a purely material system nor a field of free-floating meanings. It is a historically structured domain in which material arrangements become effective through ideological categories and lived orientations. Historical materialism explains the conditions and contradictions of global order.

Ideology explains how those conditions are translated into common sense and subject positions. Intentionality explains how political objects become meaningful in practice.

The proposed four-layer framework offers a way to analyze the reproduction and contestation of global politics without reducing meaning to material interest or detaching meaning from power. It shows why certain hierarchies persist, why alternatives often remain difficult to imagine and how transformative politics requires both material reorganization and reorientation of attention. For IR research, the bridge is valuable because it keeps resource control, institutional power, experience and practical judgment in the same explanatory field.

The expanded argument also clarifies what is at stake methodologically. IR research should not only ask what actors want or what structures compel. It should ask how actors come to recognize particular objects as desirable, dangerous, legitimate or necessary within historically organized fields of power. This requires moving across levels of analysis without collapsing them. Historical materialism identifies conditions and contradictions. Ideology explains mediation and subject formation. Phenomenology explains how object-meanings become lived orientations. Practice analysis shows how those orientations are enacted and reproduced. Together, these levels offer a fuller account of international politics as both material and meaningful.

The article therefore contributes to IR by offering a vocabulary for studying the politics of sense-making under material constraint. It shows that global order is maintained not only by control over resources, institutions and coercion, but also by control over what can be perceived as reasonable, urgent and possible. Conversely, transformation requires more than critique of domination; it requires the construction of alternative material supports and alternative infrastructures of meaning. A critical-phenomenological political economy can help scholars and practitioners diagnose where existing orders are reproduced, where they are vulnerable and how new political horizons may become institutionally durable.

**Ethical Approval**

This article is a conceptual and literature-based study. It did not involve human participants, animals, clinical materials or field data collection; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

**Conflict Of Interest**

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the preparation or submission of this manuscript.

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