

## **Does 'intelligence studies' constitute a separate discipline in its own right?**

*The purposes of secret operations are those of state, but their substance is the relations between people.*  
- Christopher Felix<sup>1</sup>

The question of this essay is one of identity and direction. Intelligence is a field at the spear-tip of contemporary events. This is reflected in the fact that interest is growing fast in academic circles. Therefore this question is now relevant to ask, to see if the study of intelligence could and should qualify as a discipline.

This is an important question as there is a certain value attached to the notion of 'discipline' within the halls of academia, one that gives the practitioners and students of that field a sense of purpose and of belonging to a greater movement. Besides that there are measurable gains in terms of funding and organisational recognition.<sup>2</sup> But what does discern a discipline from more loosely organised fields of knowledge?

In this essay I set out to establish whether 'intelligence studies' could be seen as a 'discipline' in its own right. This will lead me to a short discussion about the contents of 'discipline' and a following reflection of the subject in three different aspects of 'discipline'. The essay ends with a conclusion and suggests perspectives for the categorisation of 'intelligence studies', and in connection with this, tries to evaluate how important a claim for 'discipline' is.

### **What is discipline?**

An inherent problem with theorising about theory is that one tends to build on sand, by basing definition upon definition. The question that this essay sets out to answer is no different.<sup>3</sup>

Before the notion of 'discipline' is even considered, a basic ontological presumption must be made: That it is possible to isolate specific parameters that in turn allow us to make basic boundaries between objects of study. That this is possible at all can be questioned, but disciplines are a very useful concept and in the following the term 'discipline' will be used in an essentialist, 'modernistic' sense. This will provide us with a starting point. However, the post-modern critique of 'discipline' will be picked up towards the end of the essay.<sup>3</sup>

To use disciplines as a boundary-maker, we must address the basic question of what is meant by 'discipline', that is, what components does it take to make a 'discipline'?

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<sup>1</sup> Felix (2001), p. 23

<sup>2</sup> Wallerstein (1995), p. 6

<sup>3</sup> Wallerstein (1995). For a short summary of the differences between post-modern and post modernity, see Rathmell (2002). I use 'post-modern' as a general term.

However the social science reference-works are curiously lacking a definition of "Discipline"<sup>4</sup>, so we will have to look to the philosophy of science.

Discipline (in education) [Lat. *Disciplina*]: [...] (1) Primarily, and in the large sense, systematic training through education. (2) Secondly, and in the restricted sense, the maintenance of authority by means of rewards and punishments. (3) A particular branch of study.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that we should narrow down and focus on (3). This concept of discipline has to be specified further - and using a more concise definition we find that a discipline consists of:

- procedure
- content
- and the result of an education that deals with primary knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

### **The procedure of 'intelligence studies'**

When studying the product of intelligence studies in for example the journal *Intelligence and National Security*, it soon becomes clear that there are a handful of approaches to the subject. Fry and Hochstein have identified four groups: historians, political scientists, practitioner-scholars and journalists – each group with their own methodology and approach.<sup>7</sup> And not surprisingly one finds that there does not seem to have evolved a kind of shared methodological framework.<sup>8</sup> Procedure must here be seen as the work process *that is linked to a specific theoretical approach*, like the historians' process of source critique.

On account of the lack of a common procedure it seems to suggest that we could readily dismiss 'intelligence studies' as a discipline in a strict sense. But there are two things that suggest that we should extend our patience and not judge prematurely:

- The worldview of current approaches
- The search for a theory

### *The worldview of current approaches*

Most of the work on intelligence has been done on an academic basis of political theory, more specific International Relations theory and the adjoining historical studies. This suggests that there is a general agreement on the school of thought that will contain the study of intelligence, namely the social sciences.<sup>9</sup> A notable subdivision here is between an idiographic (historical

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<sup>4</sup> Sills (1979), Kuper and Kuper (1996), Reading (1976)

<sup>5</sup> Baldwin (1901)

<sup>6</sup> Ritter and Gründer (1972) 'Vorgang, Inhalt, Ergebnis einer Ausbildung, die primär Wissen vermittelt.'

<sup>7</sup> Fry and Hochstein (1993), p. 14

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 16

<sup>9</sup> This is most profoundly the case concerning strategic intelligence and a 'theory of intelligence', as case studies naturally enough leans toward historical methodology.

and qualitative) and a nomothetic (timeless and quantitative) approach.<sup>10</sup> However it doesn't seem as if this is a split that divides the studies – more likely the historical studies tends to become source material for the nomothetic descriptions. In other words it seems that apart from the lack of a common theory, the basic assumptions of scholars are all derived from a social scientific point of view, and this is essential in regarding the next factor.

### *The search for a theory*

The recent years' writing on intelligence shows in abundance that the lack of a specific procedure of 'intelligence studies' is felt as a matter that should be addressed. A number of writers have tried to give their version, with varying degrees of depth.<sup>11</sup> But it seems that none of these have had any real breakthrough on a broader scale. Herman's work might be an exception, but due to its mainly descriptive character and lack of meta-reflection it could not quite be said to be a theory in itself.<sup>12</sup>

That they haven't succeeded yet, might also be Intelligence studies are a quite new concept and with a limited number of practitioners and a scarcity of material. In other words, intelligence studies might not have had its Ranke, Weber or Morgenthau yet – a revolutionary theory maker that fertilizes a torrent of subsequent critique and research.

Regarding the two points above, it is clear that intelligence studies does not at the time being live up to the stated definition of having a procedure of its own. But this is an observation of the state-of-the-art, and some things suggest that a distinct procedure and theory might not be unthinkable.

### **Content of 'Intelligence Studies'**

Based on Sherman Kent's groundbreaking work, Schulsky and Schmidt define intelligence as "information, activities, and organizations". Centrally they define the activity of intelligence as

the component of the struggle between adversaries that deals primarily with information (as opposed, for example, to economic competition, diplomatic manoeuvring or negotiations, or the threat or use of military force).<sup>13</sup>

Some authors stress that Kent's definition is good, but the subjects of the information that the intelligence process deals with has changed profoundly after the end of the cold war.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wallerstein (1995) pp. 1-2

<sup>11</sup> Rathmell (2002), Kahn (1993), Aldrich (2002) and to a certain extent Herman (1996). See further discussion below.

<sup>12</sup> Herman (1996) p. xi and p. 5. There seems to be a slight inconsistency here. Herman first states that he by theory means 'nothing more than concepts and generalizations that seek to explain things' but later says that his conclusions will be normative.

<sup>13</sup> Shulsky and Schmitt (2002)

<sup>14</sup> Berkowitz and Goodman (2000) p. 2

But it seems that there is a general consensus on exactly what 'Intelligence Studies' should examine, not surprisingly, as the study is relatively limited in scope, compared to, say, History or Politics. This might be one of the most compelling reasons to discern 'Intelligence Studies' as a discipline in its own right. The specific handling of 'intelligence' as a subject might be tricky, but intuitively 'intelligence studies' deals with all three aspects of intelligence.

### **'Intelligence studies' as a result of education**

This last category is also the most cryptic of them all<sup>15</sup>. It should be taken as a sociologic phenomenon as to describe those who deal with the procedure and content of the discipline – but it must be noted that these should not be confused with the operatives of the intelligence work itself.

As mentioned above there is no single academic procedure of intelligence, but a relatively firm content. This in turn means that there is a group of scholars who could all be defined as belonging to 'Intelligence Studies'. The existence of this sociologically defined group can readily be observed in the fact that there are specific journals with a number of recurring scholars writing.<sup>16</sup> Moreover there are a number of universities that offers studies in intelligence on all levels.<sup>17</sup> However small this group of intelligence scholars might be, it is still distinctly observable and on that account lives up to the definition of a discipline of 'Intelligence Studies'

### **Conclusion**

From the above it is clear that our definition of 'discipline' would accommodate 'Intelligence Studies' as a discipline in it's own right only so far as content and scholars are concerned. The lack of a unified procedure and underlying this, a shared theoretical framework, disqualifies it from being a discipline in its own right.

This is a descriptive analysis, but it seems to be appropriate to do an analysis of potential as well.

The sense of 'theoretical anomie' can be identified in almost all of the literature that reflects upon the theory of intelligence. This contrasts very starkly to the same writers' conviction that intelligence should be studied to a much larger extent than is the case today, as it has a profound impact on the conduct of international politics and war.

This conflict between gravity and apparent theoretical inaccessibility lies in the very heart of the study of intelligence – and is only strengthened by the secrecy surrounding the study's empirical objects. That this dilemma persists is being explained by most theorists as being partly the result of the study's young age, as explained above. The inherent wish in this assumption is that

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<sup>15</sup> The original sentence in German: 'Ergebnis einer Ausbildung, die primär Wissen vermittelt'. Ritter and Gründer (1972)

<sup>16</sup> Most obviously *Intelligence and National Security* and *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*.

<sup>17</sup> Herman (1996), p. 2

with time the groundwork will be laid that allows intelligence studies to blossom into a discipline in its own right, and that this would be preferable.

That the conditions might be existent for intelligence studies to achieve this is shown in the existence of some common assumptions among the scholars of the studies, as shown above. In other words, an analysis of potential shows that 'intelligence studies' could very well happen to find a more consistent procedure and method, thereby moving it closer to a concept of 'discipline'. In the following the essay will try to take the essay's question into a normative realm and see what implications this might have on 'intelligence studies' as a discipline in its own right.

### **Perspectives for 'Intelligence Studies' as a discipline**

As stated above, the approach to 'discipline' as a concept has so far been from a 'modernist' angle. But some factors suggest that we should try to take the 'post-modern' approach into account. This will in turn lead to a comparison with International Relations theory, to explore possible inspirations for 'intelligence studies'.

#### *Discipline and the Post-modern*

As mentioned above, the notion of 'discipline' as an objective and viable phenomenon can be questioned. Most obviously this has been done by the thinkers broadly labelled as post-modern, led by notable figures such as Lyotard.<sup>18</sup> The post-modern approach is not coherent, but a few common demeanours can be identified. Of these the 'death of the grand narratives' is one of the most profound.<sup>19</sup>

The 'death of the grand narratives' means that the modernist notion of unified and all-encompassing theories is rejected. It focuses on the inherent value-laden definitions in such grand narratives and points out that it is impossible to find an 'objective truth', the traditional goal for 'disciplines' of science. Post-modern theory provides 'readings' instead of 'observations'.<sup>20</sup>

This also rubs off on the divisions in social science. The notion of otherwise established borders between disciplines and areas are put under pressure and are shown to be too narrow or too wide. 'Post-modern' approach holds that these boundaries are the product of a historical and cultural process, more than the results of a systemic imperative.<sup>21</sup>

If this approach is embraced, it has some significant implications for the study of intelligence.

Instead of hoping that this 'discipline *in embryo*' will mature into its own right, and seeing the multidisciplinary and fragmented rag-tag of voices on

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<sup>18</sup> Lyotard (1979)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 63 and Rathmell (2002) p. 95

<sup>20</sup> Rathmell (2002), p. 95

<sup>21</sup> Wallerstein (1995), p. 1

intelligence as a transitional phase, the incoherency of procedure should rather be embraced.

Such a profound change in the attitude towards objective truth and well-established theoretical ideals in the academic *study of intelligence* would curiously enough mirror an ongoing change in the working conditions in the *profession of intelligence*, where the post cold-war era and the so-called information revolution has proven a new environment for intelligence agencies.<sup>22</sup>

Post-modern thought offers a new road, that allow us to avoid even pondering if the 'intelligence studies' should be seen as a 'discipline' in it's own right, as those categories loses their claim to objectivity. But a major lacunae in the post-modern approach suggests that we should not altogether leave the 'modernist' stance: the post-modernist approach is an intellectual current that is very young in itself and it has been scorned for its failure to present constructive theories and only deconstructing the old.<sup>23</sup>

So this approach would probably not be the perfect solution for a discipline that still tries to establish common ground and has not even found a firm form yet. But with Wallerstein a post-modern approach could further the overlapping in the sociological dimension, i.e. cooperation between the practitioners of intelligence studies. An active collaboration might bring about the identification of common themes and illuminate these from several angles. This would be a third way between modernity and true post-modernity. It might not provide intelligence studies with a claim to be a discipline, but instead it offers the epistemological justification that could unite the diverse theories within the studies, and perhaps even include those not fitted into it today.<sup>24</sup>

The abandonment of a search for a unifying theory and procedure has a deep effect on intelligence's connection to the intellectual legacy of International Relations and especially the notion of realism. This will be shown in the following.

### *Intelligence and International Relations*

Intelligence is generally connected with the study of International Relations, and for obvious reasons.<sup>25</sup> At least on a strategic level it is observable that intelligence can deal with the interaction of states. Despite this fact, intelligence has received too little attention in IR academia in many scholars' opinion. However, there persists a strong link between intelligence and IR.

The study of IR is in many ways dominated by the thought of realism, presently elaborated by the neo-realists. This approach has been very strong,

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<sup>22</sup> Berkowitz and Goodman (2000) among others.

<sup>23</sup> Brown (2001) p. xi

<sup>24</sup> Fry and Hochstein (1993), p. 16

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

and even its opponents have had to take it into account as a powerful explanatory tool.

However there seems to reign a general doubt whether IR could be called a discipline on its own or instead a field of enquiry between several disciplines.<sup>26</sup> In this aspect it is very similar to the discussion of intelligence as a discipline. The theoretical implication of the breakdown of the bi-polar world, the end of the cold war and the information revolution has been instrumental in questioning realism's role in IR. Its failure to foresee or explain these developments has helped to undermine it as the all-dominant paradigm.<sup>27</sup>

This crack in the realist paradigm is exposed by a line of post-modern critique that shows to what large extent realism and the entailing 'realpolitik' are 'grand narratives' and that these might have explanatory power, but only because they have managed to dominate the debate on inter-state politics.<sup>28</sup> It is shown that a lot of observations that seemingly affirm realist theory in a clear-cut positivist scientific manner only do so because the scientific parameters themselves are realist. This critique can be described as the linguistic or even the rhetorical turn in IR.<sup>29</sup>

This general onslaught on realism suggests that the field of IR will see a fragmentation of approaches; here intelligence might come in handy.

Fry and Hochstein outlines a way where the study of intelligence could inform the study of IR and I find that this is an interesting twist to the discussion of 'intelligence studies' as a 'discipline'. They suggest that the two communities of study are very far from each other in what here is called the sociological sense, despite the proximity of fields of enquiry. But they also argue that the re-evaluation of IR theory could be made from an intelligence viewpoint, thereby informing both studies:

In this view, one would begin to consider the possibility that intelligence does not merely describe the world in which the state operates, but in fact actively 'creates' that world for each state.<sup>30</sup>

This is a post-modern view indeed, even though the authors don't mention that themselves. And in suggesting a heightened collaboration between scholars from the two fields, they echo Wallerstein's suggestions above.

Fry and Hochstein's suggestion opens a new view on intelligence as a discipline in its own right. Instead of either despairing over the lack of common procedure or working single-minded for intelligence studies to have such a common ground, scholars of intelligence could see themselves as part of a movement to broaden the view on IR. Situated in a bustling intersection between states, intelligence offers itself to a multitude of studies that could not

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Brown (2001), p. 1-7

<sup>28</sup> Beer and Hariman (1996)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 25

be contained in the strictly realist worldview – things such as ethics, flow of information, policy-making, relationship between individual and state and the impact of non-state actors and soft security issues.

Instead of defining itself as a distinctive discipline, the reform of IR might be an opportunity for 'intelligence studies' to voice its own distinct field, and in the process form a more consistent core.

So even though this essay finds that 'intelligence studies' do not to form a 'discipline' in its own right as it is, it suggests post-modern academic reform both as a possible means and an end for solidifying a more consistent core within the observable field of study and community that already exists.

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