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# Intelligence theories

a literary overview



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# Abstract

Intelligence is arguably the oldest profession in history. It has been said that the first business transaction reasonably must have been preceded by some form of intelligence analysis. Despite intelligence being such an old field, its theoretical basis is still very much at an adolescent stage.

How are policies that guide intelligence services formed? On what assumptions are they based? What is the intellectual and ideological divide? Theory guides us to find these answers and the study of intelligence must be conducted under a veil of theory to be explicit.

In this essay I provide a literary overview to illustrate the different theoretical standpoints in the field of intelligence studies; mainly in regard to abstract theory. I show that realism and positivism dominates the field and I argue that there is a lack of explicit meta-theoretical awareness among scholars. For contrast I also partially weigh these results against the academic field of political science.

*Keywords:* Intelligence, theory, research, overview

*De omnibus dubitandum.*

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# 1 Introduction

“Don’t worry, it’s a slam dunk!” (Tenet cited in Woodward 2004, p.249).

If former Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet had known that those six words he was about to utter that December morning would become a symbol for the greatest intelligence failure since Pearl Harbor, he might have chosen his words more carefully.

Many have asked what Tenet could and should have known. Just as many have asked whether or not he was influenced in his assessment by various groups of policymakers to the extent that he was forced to provide an answer he knew to be false. Fewer have asked what the limits of intelligence analysis are, and even fewer have asked what can be known and where the boundaries of knowledge are drawn in the field of intelligence.

The intelligence failures of 9/11, Iraq, London, Bali, Madrid and Istanbul have enforced the notion of intelligence as broken, defective and in urgent need of being fixed. Among scholars, this debate has given rise to a surge of activity and discussion and has led to the notion held by many that the field is conceptually weak and in need of theorizing.

How are policies that guide the intelligence services formed and guided? On what assumptions are they based? What is the intellectual and ideological divide? Theory guides us to find these answers, and the study of intelligence must be carried on under this veil to be explicit. Discussions about intelligence theory and the development of conceptual and theoretical thinking about intelligence are here to stay. These discussions are vibrant and sometimes difficult, as new thoughts and provocative ideas challenge how things are and should be done. Even if the contribution of theoretical thinking to the field of intelligence is questioned, it will by all means revolutionize and open up the academic field of intelligence analysis. Theory has become the new “in” in intelligence.

## 1.1 Aim and purpose

The purpose of this essay is to provide a literary overview of the theories of intelligence analysis. Although theories of intelligence analysis have existed in one form or another since the birth of the subject itself, it was not until recently that intelligence theory had gained substantial recognition among scholars.

Recent major intelligence failures have raised a number of questions about the field, increasing the amount of study being done, not only in the traditional fields

of intelligence history, organization and legal frameworks, but also in conceptual and theoretical thinking (Gill et al. 2009, p.1ff).

Theories of intelligence are important, as they explain what intelligence is, how it can be understood and where its challenges lie. David Kahn argued in 2001 that although intelligence has been an academic discipline for half a century and there have been repeated calls for a theory of intelligence, “none has been advanced.” (Kahn 2008, p.4). Similarly, in 2002 Michael Warner wrote that “one would expect to find a sophisticated understanding of just what [...] "intelligence" is [...] however, we search in vain. Historian Walter Laqueur warns us; so far no one has succeeded in crafting a theory of intelligence (Warner 2002).

While many authors in the field complain about the lack of intelligence research, they seem to miss the rapidly expanding field that does exist. Loch K. Johnson, a key figure in the debate, notes in a book review that “a further aspect of the book that I find weak is its inattention to the burgeoning scholarly literature that has crystallized around the subject of intelligence [...] [o]ne will search in vain here for findings of, or citations to, other leading scholars, such as Daugherty or Gregory F. Treverton [...] or to articles in the leading academic journals on intelligence: *Intelligence and National Security*, *Studies in Intelligence* and the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* (Johnson 2008, p.287).

In my eyes, this trend seems to extend beyond a single work to an array of recently published books and articles in magazines and popular literature. Quite a few authors seem unaware of the fact that there is a rather substantial amount of research available in this field. Compared to vast fields such as political science, intelligence analysis is both young and perhaps underdeveloped. That, however, should not marginalize any of the excellent work available.

A few books to date have tried to collect some of the main work in the field, a few conferences have dealt with the issue and a number of articles observe the field. But so far, to my knowledge, there has been no article or essay that aims to provide a literary overview of the work available analyzing and structuring the field of intelligence theory.

This essay attempts to do just that—to provide the foundation to such an overview of the conceptual and theoretical thinking available within this field. I will then attempt to structure and analyze this overview to offer insight into what has and what has not been done. To provide contrast, I will weigh my results against theoretical developments in political science.

## 1.2 Theories for and of

I am humble and do not pretend that I have managed to study everything ever written in regard to conceptual and theoretical thinking in the field of intelligence. From the onset of my research I was made aware of how vast and varied this field is, despite the opposite often being voiced. To be able to complete this overview

within the different frames provided, I have had to limit it in a number of ways. Research Professor Peter Gill writes in a RAND report:

”To develop intelligence theory, it is important to first ask: “What is the point?” Is the point to develop theories *of* intelligence to help academics research intelligence, come to understand it, and better explain it to students and the public? Or should theories *for* intelligence relate immediately to the needs of practitioners—gatherers, analysts, and managers, along with consumers, politicians, and other executives? In one sense, there is no conflict between these two. A good theory *of intelligence* should, by definition, be useful *for intelligence*.” [origin. italics] (Gill in Treverton et al. 2006, p.4).

Gill thus asserts that we should distinguish between theories that explain what intelligence is and theories that aid intelligence in achieving its goals. This divide is shared by quite a few scholars (cf. Davies 2009, p.186). I will use this method of classifying the theories dealt with in this overview. I have chosen to pay more attention to theories *of* than theories *for* intelligence. The reason for this is that whereas there has been a substantial amount of work done on theories for intelligence, there has been less work done and the divide today is larger, in my opinion, concerning theories *of* intelligence. But, as Gill notes above, there is no vast divide between the two and they overlap more often than not. I have, however, had the ambition to keep my overview on a “high” level of abstraction (cf. Lundquist 1993, p.63), focusing on the contemporary scholarly work dealing with fundamental, almost meta-theoretical, theories *of* intelligence. How do we define intelligence? What assumptions lie behind those definitions and what consequences do they have? These are the questions on which my overview primarily focuses, as I consider them the cornerstones of intelligence theory.

### 1.3 Method and material

I have had the desire to study the most recent material in this field. To some extent, I am certain that I have failed since my lack of understanding of all research outside of Swedish and English is very limited. I have managed to get some insight into this field through references in other works, but it is clear to me that a lot of research has been beyond my reach.

Furthermore, since there is no continuously updated list where all literature in the field is cataloged, I have had to research this matter the traditional way. Through the usage of library databases, journal indexes, references in articles and general Internet searches I have tried to get as good a grasp of this field as possible. Despite all this work, I am sure I have missed much substantial thinking. If anything, intelligence studies teach us this about the human mind.

Finally, I have had to be selective in my reading because of the usual constraints of time. I have only briefly studied material not found in any

references and only vaguely related to the field. It is possible that this method of selection has made me overlook relevant material.

As a starting point, I have utilized *Intelligence Theory: Key Questions and Debates* (Gill et al. 2009). This collection of essays provides an excellent point of departure for the study of intelligence theory. I have used this collection of work as a first layer and then slowly worked my way out to all other material that I have come across.

## 1.4 Disposition

Changing the way things are done, I have decided that the list of references should be the entrance point into my academic writing. Explicit method is what defines research; the sources and references should therefore not be hidden but proudly portrayed as pillars of science guarding the entrance.

Beyond my placement of references, my work follows a traditional structure where I first introduce my subject and discuss method and limitation. I then provide an overview of current research about theories of intelligence. This overview is finally analyzed and weighed against another field of study for contrast.

## 2 A literary overview

In his now classic work, David Kahn (2008) takes a traditional positivist view on what an intelligence theory should consist of. In the traditional scientific approach Kahn has set his mind for a theory that can be falsified and preferably adhering to the law of parsimony; Occam's razor if you will. Therein also lays his main critique against other theoretical frameworks. Kahn writes; "no one has proposed concepts that can be tested" (Kahn 2008, p.4). Loch K. Johnson shares that same positivist foundation arguing that "[g]ood theory should have explanatory power, parsimony, and the attribute of falsifiability." (Johnson 2009, p.33). Johnson writes that although "[i]ntelligence scholars should resist physics envy, longing for a grand field theory of intelligence." (Johnson 2009, p.51f) it will still be possible "for us to unravel the secrets of intelligence behavior" (ibid). Other scholars are more modest in the possibility of finding a grand intelligence theory, Richard K. Betts argues that most theorists today have resigned from the idea of a grand theory and accepted the notion of a marginal process, "to improve the 'batting average' – say from .275 to .301 – rather than to do away altogether with surprise" (Betts 2009, p.104).

What can be noted today is that the role of theory and its opportunities and limitations is being scrutinized by scholars to determine if the role of intelligence theory should be to seek a grand overarching theory or to accept that such an endeavor might not be possible and instead focus "to generate theoretical bases for a number of key areas of inquiry." (Phythian 2009, p.54).

### 2.1 Why intelligence theories?

"Intelligence, if we understand it, might some day be more clearly a force for good. If intelligence is ever to be a force for good, then it must be studied. We can bet that, if we remain ignorant of it, intelligence will certainly be a force for ill." (Warner 2009, p.29f)

Michael Warner, a prominent scholar and historian, argue that intelligence must be studied so it can one day be a force for good, if not it risks turning into a force for ill (Warner 2009, p.29f). The notion that intelligence needs to be studied out of some self-preservation is an extreme in the debate. However, the general notion is that the field is important and could have major impact on intelligence. Intelligence studies professor Peter Gill note, referring to Sheptyki (2009, pp.166-172), that if for an instance the dominating realist perspective would be exchanged for a human security paradigm such a rethink would have important

consequences for the intelligence community. Gill argues that theories matter and have a large impact on the intelligence services as well as on the scholarly work being done in the field (Gill 2009, p.209). Michael Warner follows the same line; on the need for a theory of intelligence he states:

“Why does this matter? Various agencies have gotten along well enough for many years, thank you, without a suitable-for-framing definition of intelligence. One can add, moreover, that providing them with such a thing is hardly likely to revolutionize their work. And yet, the definition I just proposed could assist the growing number of scholars who study the field and might ultimately help the Intelligence Community in several respects.” (Warner 2002).

Loch K. Johnson shares Warner’s belief to some extent, also arguing that a theory of intelligence is needed to guide the policy makers and the intelligence community primarily in regard to be able to answer the question of when intelligence is likely to succeed or fail? (Johnson 2009, p.34). RAND argues along the same line in a report from 2005 that a theory of intelligence might at the very least lead to a better understanding of intelligence (Treverton et al. 2006, p.4ff).

Jennifer Sims, professor in security studies, stresses that intelligence cannot be reformed without a good and thorough understanding of the theory behind the definition of intelligence, what it is and should be. But, she says, “[u]nfortunately, intelligence theory is in its infancy – even definitions are contentious.” (Sims 2005, p.15). Sims argue that a good theory should offer reduction and prediction, but above that explanations – insight into why things behave the way they do. Theory, Sims believe, can therefore be a tool to answer many of the larger questions of intelligence. What is it? Why does it exist? Why do states retain it? To generalize and find causation, she argues, we need theory. Theory would then be useful to the scholars studying intelligence, to the profession it self as well as to the larger world around it (Sims 2009, p.152ff).

“So, though theories of intelligence should ideally guide efforts at its reform – and not emotions or politics of the moment – governments plagued by surprise and failure seem to have few intellectual tools to guide them” (Sims 2009, p.151).

Being useful for intelligence seems to be a main theme for all the scholars that address the subject, even among those scholars who are skeptical to the idea of a theory of intelligence (cf. Davies 2009).

To summarize; there seems to be a general agreement among most scholars that intelligence theories can be useful for intelligence studies. Some argue mainly from a perspective that theories will shed much needed light on the field, while others mainly argue that theories can provide a tool to conceptualize causal mechanisms. The need for theories on and about intelligence is not solemnly meet by positive praise. Some are skeptical as well, arguing that theoretical work within intelligence risk creating disorder within, stealing energy from more important work (cf. Davies 2009).

### 2.1.1 P. H. J. Davies slaps everyone

The need for theories on and about intelligence is not solemnly met by praise. P. H. J. Davies is very skeptical about the work being done. Davies argues that the whole concept of a theory of intelligence is a dire idea - he writes:

“Examined on its own, the American ‘theory of intelligence’ appears an entirely reasonable idea and something worth emulating – until one looks at the matter comparatively and asks what net benefits and costs of intelligence theory comparatively and asks what the net benefits and costs of intelligence theory actually appear to be [...] one is forced to conclude [...] that [...] *the development of intelligence theory and the achievement of intelligence order and coordination are actually inversely correlated.*” [origin. italics] (Davies 2009, pp.189-191).

Finally Davis sets off the air-raid sirens stating that it is hard to imagine anything more blood-chillingly alarming than intelligence practitioners trained and working with social science theory – practitioners arguing about the relative merits about different theories while advising the supreme command of nuclear states (Davies 2009, p.200). On these theories, those that may chill your blood, the rest of this essay will focus on. Next section will deal with two different ways of classifying theories. The subsequent sections will then explore these theories in detail.

## 2.2 The strife over a definition of intelligence

I want to argue that the main theoretical dispute today concerns how to define intelligence, a view shared with Richard K. Betts. He states that it is this field that needs to be explored together with normative aspects:

“Case studies of intelligence failures abound, yet scholars lament the lack of theory of intelligence. It is more accurate to say that we lack a positive or normative theory of intelligence. Negative or descriptive theory – empirical understanding of how intelligence systems make mistakes – is well developed” (Betts 2009, p.87).

The need to find a suitable definition for intelligence is shared by many scholars. Professor Wilhelm Agrell argues that a working definition of intelligence is needed in a time when everything seems to have become intelligence:

“There is an old saying from the debate over the drawbacks of a closed intelligence culture in the 1960s and 1970s: “When everything is secret – nothing is secret.” The meaning of every concept is in the limitation. A word for everything is a word for nothing specific. Intelligence analysis runs the risk of ending up here. When everything is intelligence – nothing is intelligence.” (Agrell 2002).

P. H. J. Davies calls this theory ‘Agrell’s limit’. He uses Agrell’s theory to direct some critique against David Kahn, who’s work on an historical theory of intelligence Davies describes as “a little more than trivial” (Davies 2009, p.198). I will therefore start there, with David Kahn, on my overview of the theoretical definitions available.

### 2.2.1 David Kahn

Kahn defines intelligence as information, in its very broadest sense. It is this that Davies criticizes as too broad of a definition (Kahn 2008, p.4; Davies 2009, p.198), we will return to that later though. Kahn, however, also argues for a theory of intelligence. Whether he likes it or not, this definition of intelligence, actually also defines intelligence as a concept. Kahn’s theory of intelligence is based on three principles.

First, intelligence optimizes ones resources, this is the fundamental and ultimate purpose of intelligence according to Kahn as it sets the null hypothesis and explains what a commander does when he has none or faulty intelligence; “[h]e creates a reserve.” (Kahn 2008, p.8). Second, intelligence acts as an auxiliary; it is not a primary weapon in war. An idea similar to Keegan’s theory that war is not an intellectual activity but a raw physical one where the strength of the military matters more than accuracy of intelligence (Keegan 2005, p.341ff). Third, intelligence is essential to the defense but not the offence. Intelligence exists in both cases, but acts in different ways (Kahn 2008, p.9f). The idea with Kahn’s third principle is that intelligence is a fundamental part, an integral aspect of defense, while only a supporting element of victory. Kahn argues that an army can only await a blow if it expects one; hence he asserts that there can be no defense without intelligence. The offence acts, while the defense reacts (Kahn 2008, p.9ff). Although Kahn argues that these principles can be tested, but as Gill argues, there seems little doubt that these principles are restricted to the idea of the traditional battlefield (Gill 2009, p.210f). As mentioned P. H. J. Davies criticizes Kahn heavily on the notion that his definition of intelligence is so wide it becomes only a little more than trivial. Davies also argues that Kahn’s principles of intelligence are trivial and gives examples of how they can be proven wrong. Davies writes “[...] how many exceptions can they sustain before they are no longer useful as generalizations?” (Davies 2009, p.198f).

Kahn, however, also sees all-encompassing and ever-ending problems; how to foretell the future and how to get statesmen and generals to accept information they do not like. With a word of encouragement Kahn brings forth that the ultimate good of intelligence is that it brings peace to man as it reduces uncertainty and relaxes tensions among states (Kahn 2008, p.10ff).

Kahn might have taken water over his head in regard to his second and third principle as they are vulnerable to empirical challenge as Davies has shown. Still his first principle is a theme that has gained support, albeit in different forms, as the next chapters will show.

## 2.2.2 Michael Warner

Michael Warner argues that intelligence still means roughly the same as it did in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, “a counselor to sovereign power, a type of privileged information, and the activity of acquiring, producing, and possibly acting on the information.” (Warner 2009, p.16).

Warner identifies two main camps in which proponents of different definitions of intelligence group themselves. One camp argues that intelligence is information for decision makers in that it aids and help the leader decide what to do about an adversary. The other camp argues that intelligence can be defined as warfare by quieter means. The difference between the two is that one camp sees intelligence as information that informs and guide while the other camp sees it as clandestine activity which both informs and executes. The quest for intelligence therefore depends on its explanation. One camp would hold that it is to enhance knowledge and understanding, the other that intelligence is a power tool used to rule and control (Warner 2009, p.17).

Michael Warner uses these two explanations to build a new explanation of what knowledge is for sovereign states. Warner outlines that intelligence is not a product, but a process and interaction between leaders and subordinates.

Kristian J. Wheaton and Michael T. Beerbower (2006) notes that intelligence is basically a process that uses information and is focused externally. But beyond that, intelligence is something that happens, not something that just is. The goal of intelligence should be to reduce uncertainty for the decision-maker (Wheaton & Beerbower 2006). Wheaton & Beerbower also agree that intelligence is in support of decision-making in a fluid and even dangerous environment where finding a true answer is never the ultimate goal, that goal is to be able to make better decisions than the adversary (Warner 2009, p.17f).

The dilemma Warner puts a finger on is how to separate intelligence from other information activities in support of government. British author Len Scott asserts that it is the veil of secrecy that distinguishes intelligence from other functions that support decision makers. Intelligence scholars Peter Gill and Mark Phythian agree with Scott that secrecy is the defining key in understanding intelligence. They assert this through Foucault’s concept of surveillance; “a term to denote the interrelationship between power and knowledge as sought and employed by states” (Scott, Gill and Phythian in Warner 2009, p.18). For states intelligence can then be understood as surveillance that deals with security, secrecy, and resistance Warner asserts (Warner 2009, p.18).

In short Wheaton & Beerbower defines intelligence as a tool to reduce uncertainty to produce comparative advantage. Gill & Phythian add the covert nature of intelligence to this definition. Warner also takes note of Frank Knights distinction between risk and uncertainty. Risk being a known chance, and uncertainty being a mystery - something for which we can predict neither outcome nor probability (Warner 2009, p.20). From these definitions Michael Warner deduces that:

“Intelligence is a service or interaction with leaders to help them manage, by privileged means, the hazards they face in dealing with rival powers [...] the locus of intelligence is not the state as such but rather sovereignty. [...] [Intelligence] manages risk and uncertainty by reducing the probability of setbacks, controlling their impacts, or both. In practical terms, intelligence informs and executes decision; it helps to make leaders more confident that they know the risks around them and their regimes [...]” (Warner 2009, pp.19, 24).

Michal Warner has created a theory of intelligence which is rather narrow, especially in regard to Kahn’s wide definition (cf. Kahn 2008, p.4).

### 2.2.3 Jennifer Sims

Jennifer Sims theory “purports to explain why states go to war when calculations of raw power suggest they will lose and why some states win contests despite being militarily inferior“ (Sims 2009, p.154). According to her theory, intelligence is “the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information for decision-makers engaged in a competitive enterprise” (Sims 2009, p.154). Above all she underlines that good intelligence is not so much “about getting ‘it right’ as getting it more right than the opponent. It is about winning.” (Sims 2009, p.154f; Sims 2005, p.15ff).

Sims excludes covert action from her definition of intelligence because, she argues, covert action is better understood as secret policy-making. Intelligence may be a support function to covert action, but no more of a support function than it is for diplomacy or war. The overthrowing of regimes she argues is different from the intelligence, which is basically information gathering, analyzing and dissemination. “Thus, while some intelligence agencies execute policies of terror on behalf of a tyrant, such policies are not intrinsic to the function of interest here.” (Sims 2009, p.159).

On the other hand, Sims excludes secrecy in her definition of intelligence. It is argued that inclusion of everyone, from diplomats to commercial attaches, risks diluting the concept of intelligence. Sims, however, argues that excluding people who do not have the right profession or title is contra productive. “Secrecy is not integral to the concept of intelligence and it is certainly not a defining characteristic of all intelligence systems.” (Sims 2009, p.161).

### 2.2.4 Other scholars

Michael Herman (1996) goes back to Sherman Kent and his *pièce de résistance* (*Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*). Kent defined intelligence as “a kind of knowledge”, “the type of organization which produces the knowledge” and “the activity pursued by the intelligence organization”. This intelligence organization is defined as organizations in government with *intelligence* in their name. They live, breath and produce intelligence Kent asserts (Kent cited in

Herman 1996, p.1ff). Herman adopts this theory of intelligence, but reading his work one understands that Herman also adds secrecy, news, information and perhaps covert action to Kent's theory – even if one naturally could argue that those already were components of Kent's theory (Herman 1996).

Wilhelm Agrell (1998) discusses intelligence as a concept (and ambiguity) in *Konsten att gissa rätt*. Agrell finds that intelligence agencies themselves define intelligence as the resulting product of collection, evaluation, analysis, integration and interpretation of all available information regarding issues relevant to foreign policy. He also takes note of Sir Francis Bacon's definition, *intelligence is the light of your state*, and Roy Godson's *intelligence is information for action* (Agrell 1998, p.21ff).

Mark Lowenthal (2006) highlights secrecy as a defining factor and what makes intelligence unique in regard to *information*. Lowenthal further underlines that intelligence is “information that meets the stated or understood needs of policy makers and has been collected, processed, and narrowed to meet those needs.” (Lowenthal 2006, p.1ff).

The list could go on and on and on. A large part of all works on intelligence contain definitions on intelligence - all aiming to find the right answer. I do believe that I have given a fair account of the ideas around theories for the definition of intelligence available out there, using some of the most prominent scholars in the field. Next chapter will try to provide a conclusion from this overview.

## 2.2.5 Conclusion

Kristan J. Wheaton and Michael T. Beerbower (2006) are upset because there is no one definition of intelligence:

“The U.S. intelligence community employs hundreds of thousands of people and spends approximately forty billion dollars per year [...] [y]et, nowhere is there a single agreed-upon definition of intelligence [...] [t]he intelligence community, quite literally, does not know what it is doing.” (Wheaton & Beerbower 2006).

Wheaton and Beerbower thinks that “this vagueness should seem ridiculous. Definitions are basic stuff. Every schoolchild knows what a spy is.” (Wheaton & Beerbower 2006). As a solution, they naturally offer a definition of their own.

This is the problem it seems like, that almost all scholars lament the lack of a definition and offer their own definition – not too different but still distinct. The definitions range from simple and broad as *information*, to complex and narrow such as in support of decision and policy, using information from secret sources, designed to reduce the level of uncertainty for a decision maker, aimed to provide relative advantage; sometimes through the use of clandestine operations.

My goal here is not to go any further. To tell you what is right and what is wrong. I will however in the next section show how an invisible hand of “meta-theory” has impact on this definition - seemingly in a fashion unaware to many

scholars. In my analysis, I will weigh this against what is going on in political science, for contrast and thought.

## 2.3 A sort of meta-theory

What lies beyond theory? Meta-theory by all means, but where should the line between theory and meta-theory be drawn? Meta-theory traditionally deals with ontology, epistemology and axiology (Lundquist 1993, p.67f). I have, however, chosen to use “meta-theory” in this case to describe the theories behind the definitions of intelligence to make the distinction clear.

Definitions are based on presumption about the world, more often than not these presumptions are not vocalized but assumed in the quiet making it difficult for the reader to evaluate an author’s motive behind a definition. These presumptions are of great importance to understand why certain definitions prevail. They also answer the question of why we have intelligence, why we need it, what its purpose is and how it should be used. In all, “meta-theory” is of great importance to the study of intelligence.

### 2.3.1 The realists

“The nation is at peace because we in intelligence are constantly at war” (Robert Gates in Phythian 2009, p.54).

“The RAND workshop report as a whole is clear in its depiction of the international state system as a Hobbesian war of all against all.” (Sheptycki 2009, p.170)

These two quotes illustrates a view I have and share about the bulk of intelligence theory and research – namely that a great many scholars share the realist perspective on world order. This view is shared by Sheptycki; he outlines that a dominant intelligence paradigm prevails, the ‘national security intelligence paradigm, “this paradigm is predicated largely on the assumptions of international relations realism” (Sheptycki 2009, p.166).

Mark Phythian writes that realism rests on two basic assumptions “that the international system is anarchic and that states seek to survive. It does not assume that states always act rationally.” which Phythian believes heightens the need for good intelligence (Phythian 2009, p.59).

Phythian recognize that we have intelligence to attempt to “uncover ‘impossible’ knowledge, and thus to provide advance warning of any trouble ahead and so reduce fear.” (Phythian 2009, p.60ff).

Hence, the idea is quite simple. If the world is dangerous and anarchic, intelligence serves to protect us from that world. The impact on the definitions of intelligence could be quite profound. I will try to illustrate that better in the next section.

### 2.3.2 The alternatives

Sheptycki argues that if intelligence will remain “stuck in the National Security Intelligence Paradigm, the underlying structure of self-perpetuating insecurity remains intact” (Sheptycki 2009, p.170). His idea is that a realist perspective is self-perpetuating and creates insecurity because everyone is looking for insecurity. Instead Sheptycki offers a perspective of his own entitled the human security intelligence paradigm. This perspective is quite the opposite of realism:

“Whereas national security focuses on the defense of ‘the state’ and is organized especially around the fear of an external attack directed against the state, human security is about protecting individuals and communities from any form of political violence and, in its broadest conception includes both freedom from fear and freedom from want” (Sheptycki 2009, p.171).

If the world is not seen as a threat, and the obligation to protect individuals goes before that of states, then this could arguably influence how intelligence should be defined. Sheptycki offers no real solution to this, but the thought is provoking.

Mark Phythian displays a good grasp of how “meta-theories” can influence and contribute to the definition of intelligence. He shows how constructivism, poststructuralist and realism can inform thinking about intelligence. However, Phythian uses theories as tools to highlight certain aspects of intelligence following stereotypes of what areas these theories are usually used to study. I believe this to be a theoretical trap – in the next chapter I will bring this together to try to tie a knot.

### 3 What can be learned from this?

Peter Gill (2009) writes that if we cannot agree on what we are discussing then maybe at least we can develop an understanding of the different positions so “that scholars may talk to rather than past each other” (Gill 2009, p.213f).

I think Gill is onto something important here. Namely that it is not so much about getting the definition of intelligence “right”. Most scholars seem to have capitulated from the idea that intelligence can produce truths. The question is then, why should they, the scholars, be able to produce a definition shared by all?

I therefore disagree with Wheaton and Beerbower (2006), definitions are not basic stuff. It is no easier to define intelligence than it is to define a threat. There will always be different ideas and opinions.

In political science the thought of a *one for all* definition has been given up long ago. Today, many scholars in political science don't seem to struggle towards finding a way to define politics, rather Olof Ruin and Lennart Lundquist argue that politics as such, in its broadest definition, is what political scientist study. To further define politics it is necessary to look at its sub-disciplines etc. Lundquist asserts that the effect of multiple disciplines studying the same subjects is a positive one, that a great innovative potential is activated in this cross-fertilization (Lundquist 1993, p.30ff).

In 1908 Max Weber wrote that the only thing science can produce is a reflection over the utmost axioms which should, and must, provide the foundation for any scientific quest (Weber 1991, p.100). Weber meant that the social sciences cannot find a *true* answer. Their role is rather to provide explicit theory and method which is fair and honest in its meta-theoretical standpoints, so that others may decide whether or not you are inconsistent in the arguments and ideas brought forth.

I think this is the key here, that rather than to find a *one for all* definition of intelligence, the role of intelligence studies must be to explicitly show the entire scientific chain of thought behind a definition – so that a reader can clearly identify the reasons for a definition and it's consequences.

I don't want to argue that intelligence scholars of twenty years are unaware of their meta-theoretical stance and background, that they don't understand why they define intelligence one way or the other. I will, however, argue that most (if not all) research I have studied so far has not been explicit in this regard.

Meta-theory – that is in its true concept defined as ontology, epistemology and axiology – must be seen like “a skin not a sweater”, that is to say that meta-theory cannot simply be chosen at the will of the researcher (Marsh & Furlong 2002, p.17). A person might develop and change his mind over time, but at any given position, that person needs to adhere to one position if she wishes to be coherent. As such ontology, epistemology and axiology cannot simply be chosen and

changed rapidly. That is why I mentioned earlier that I believe it is theoretical trap to think that certain theories only can be used to study certain fields. There must, I want to argue, be a deeper understanding and explicit account of how theory and meta-theories are related and in the end produces the results. This I find is lacking in current intelligence research.

Beyond what has been noted already, political science is rich in theories, from Realism, Liberalism, System theory and Marxism to Constructivism and Relativism. Intelligence is, as we have seen, dominated by realism with a significant lack of other theories. The free reign of realism have placed it as a dominating theory, making virtually all other theoretical attempts frowned at, to different degrees, as without merit. Such narrow minds will hardly improve the field (cf. Phythian 2009, p.63ff; Davies 2009, p.187; Warner 2009, p.17). There are attempts to widen the field, but they are few and far between (eg., Rathmell 2002).

### 3.1 What is unknown?

Unknown in the work studying the theories of intelligence is primarily the explicit accounts I called for above. Related to this, and also unknown, is a much more detailed account and understanding of how theories and meta-theories influence and produce research. Naturally this is largely individual, but theories are prone to carry conclusions and this should be researched to a much greater extent.

### 3.2 Who produces the knowledge today?

Jennifer Sims notes how scholarship has been slow to catch up with the public interest for intelligence, largely sparked of by the 2001 terrorist attack on Washington and New York. Of the 96 PhDs awarded by the top 13 universities in the U.S. during 2001-2006 in the field on IR; none was related to intelligence. Further more, only ten percent of the articles in the top scholarly journals mention intelligence terms while significant fewer have intelligence as their primary topic (Sims 2009, p.151).

Aside for the apparent lack of new PhDs in the area, many, maybe as may as half of all prominent currently active scholar has been active in the field of intelligence. Many as intelligence officers and many within various branches of government intelligence, such as policy and oversight. Compare this to political science, without any statistics at hand, a reasonable thought is that political science is dominated to a far greater extent by academics rather than by professional officers and personnel having turned to academics.

I don't want to pretend to know or understand, what, if any, implications this might have for the field. One idea is that this characteristic might bend the field

more towards empiricism than theory. This, however, is changing as explanation, interpretation, concepts and theory become more central topics – something which could be called the loss of innocence for the field; as suggested by Matthew C. Pritchard and Michael S. Goodman (cf. Pritchard & Goodman 2009).

## 4 Conclusion

“Intelligence, if we understand it, might some day be more clearly a force for good. If intelligence is ever to be a force for good, then it must be studied. We can bet that, if we remain ignorant of it, intelligence will certainly be a force for ill.” (Warner 2009, p.29f)

To conclude this literary overview is far from easy. I have shown that realism and positivism dominates the field, argued that there is a lack of explicit meta-theoretical awareness while trying to illustrate the different theoretical standpoints, mainly in regard to abstract theory.

Further research is needed to broaden and develop a more thorough understanding of the field based in meta-theoretical awareness. As Warner indicates above, intelligence needs to be studied, and should be studied if we want it to be a force for good. Perhaps overviews like this one can provide the inspiration for a more complete literary overview to clear the way for theoretically aware research that, in the end, might lead to better intelligence.

There is still much to discover in this young field. Positions are not as entrenched as they are in political science and other academic fields. Let this be a starting point for creative research and understanding between theoretical positions within. We can expect the new and upcoming generation to challenge the paradigm of the old guard. These will inevitably lead to theoretical conflicts. Let it be for the good of intelligence studies.