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Confessions of a premature constructivist

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I

In his book *Small World*, David Lodge has the globe-trotting Maurice Zapp explain the revolution that had taken place in academic life during the 1970s. Two things had become more portable – information and people – and three things had made this possible 'jet travel, direct-dialling telephone and the Xerox machine'. As long as you have access to these, Zapp explains, 'you're plugged into the only university that actually matters – the global campus. A young man in a hurry can see the world by conference-hopping'. That is the theme of Lodge's book. He likens the academic conference to the pilgrimages of Medieval Christendom 'in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austerely bent on self-improvement.' So at one extreme there is the site by the Mediterranean where a select few gather for the occasional morning plenary while at the other, with which Lodge opens, there is the setting of a British provincial university. He describes the discomforts of halls of residence with lumpy beds and no ensuite facilities, and the food in which 'all trace of flavour had been conscientiously removed by prolonged cooking at high temperatures'.[1]

I could not possibly comment on the facilities or the catering at the early BISA conferences, or begin to convey the drama – the sheer glamour – of those pioneering days. I do recall a sense of some excitement as a young and expanding branch of the profession, guided by a few great stars, came together to assert the need to look outwards and to rise above national parochialism. I do still have vivid memories of the personalities that made this possible. When I started to think of this talk to be frank most of what came to me was a painful sense of loss – the irrepressible Susan Strange, Hedley Bull, mischievous and Olympian at the same time, the rabbinical Jo Frankel, the urbane Peter Nailor, and the craggy Alastair Buchan, who as I recall both helped to found BISA and only lived to see one conference. And most of all in this reflection of a profession that has been deprived far too often of its brightest lights at an early age I find myself thinking of two close friends John Vincent, who I first met at BISA 30 years ago on his return from Australia, and Gerry Segal. Every time I start to take myself too seriously I think of John's ability to puncture pomposity and pretension with such charm that few victims realised what was going on.

My title has no better justification than it is one I have sought to use for some time. It derives from an evocative article by Bernard Knox that was printed in

[1] David Lodge, *Small World* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984).

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2001.[2] It described how from Cambridge Knox ended up in Spain as part of the international brigade during the civil war and what he did when he got there. It was this activity that got him labelled a 'premature anti-fascist' in the US after the Second World War. Knox, who was (like David Lodge) to become a professor of English, claims to have been taken aback when he first heard the phrase. 'How', he wondered, 'could *anyone* be a *premature* anti-Fascist? Could there be anything such as a premature antidote to a poison? A premature antiseptic? . . . If you were not premature, what sort of anti-Fascist were you supposed to be? A punctual anti-Fascist? A timely one?' In fact it was an FBI code-word for 'Communist'. To have taken up arms early against the fascists was to demonstrate disturbing political sympathies.

No such distinction attaches to being a premature constructivist. The connection between Knox's article and this lecture is tenuous though not entirely absent, for the relevance of the Cold War ideological struggle to our understanding of our scholarship, and how we should go about it, is at the core of my argument. I chart the move from the class struggle of the interwar years, when commitments seemed unavoidable, to the more disoriented setting of thirty years ago when the first BISA conference was held and then on to the end of the Cold War. I'm afraid that this is a little autobiographical although I certainly don't want to claim that my own political or intellectual journey is either representative or special. But I do know that things that bothered me as I moved through my undergraduate and graduate studies bothered many others.

The confessions, of which there are few, will come as something of a disappointment. I was a premature constructivist because constructivism describes how I have always tended to approach issues, though it was not a label I thought about until Peter Katzenstein offered it to me a decade ago. Actually he described me as a realist constructivist, which if anything is slightly more sinister than a premature one. Even earlier than that, someone had observed that I was clearly dabbling in semiotics without realising it. In both cases I felt like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain who discovered that he had 'been speaking prose all my life, and didn't even know it!' So my constructivism was premature because I engaged in it without knowing. If only I had understood the need to give it a label I might have made a name for myself as an innovative theorist. The approach, however, came rather naturally to anyone who had studied sociology over that period.

II

The sociology of knowledge is the most dangerous area of the social sciences to enter, requiring protective clothing and regular health checks. To refuse to enter damns you as a naíve empiricist or a mindless eclectic. A lack of precautions takes you on a terrible journey towards epistemological despair. With your first steps you are struck at once by the limits of positivism and the dispiriting revelation that to call our studies science does not necessarily make them so, at least as the term is understood by the natural scientists. Step further in and the air becomes thinner and the brain starts to pound. Are statements about any aspect of society at all valid? The very notion of an objective reality on which we are able to report has evaporated. Every

[2] Bernard Knox, 'Confessions of a Premature Anti-Fascist', *Los Angeles Times*, 23 July 2001. This was based on a lecture originally given at New York in July 1998.

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statement, including this one, has been conditioned by social position and political ideology. What then is the point of so-called independent study and research? How are we to distinguish between good and bad work? Stagger forward and the language becomes more obscure as all meanings become signs and all concepts are contested. In the blur, knowledge transforms itself from input to output. What we know does not shape our worldview but our worldview shapes what we know. You began this journey supposing you could say useful things about society and politics; now you realise that such claims explains no more than the underlying political stance of the claimants or even factors for which no correction can be made, such as gender, sexual orientation, colour, class and creed.

Now you have been warned, we are ready to begin, taking the most perilous route as we explore the politics of the sociology of knowledge. There is one final health warning. I will by necessity refer to the very unEnglish category of 'intellectuals' to include people like us. This is because many of the debates to which I will refer involved people who were not employed by universities or research institutes. Moreover the issue which I will be addressing has long been framed in terms of whether intellectuals acquired special political responsibilities because of their learning and erudition.

This story begins with the problem that the sociology of knowledge posed for scientific Marxism. Confidence in the contradictions of capitalism as being bound to result in class warfare and proletarian victory were a great source of reassurance but they left nagging doubts about the purpose of political activism, especially as it was Marx who had urged the move from merely interpreting society to changing it. If the course of history was to be accelerated, this required developing an advanced revolutionary consciousness among the working classes. For the intellectuals, who provided a good proportion of the political activists, this provided them with an opportunity and a challenge. The resultant debates within Marxism were particularly intense and fruitful during the economic and political aftershocks of the First World War, with intellectual-activists such as Rosa Luxembourg, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci and of course Leon Trotsky to the fore. Even those who were not Marxists were drawn in, if only to explain why they were avoiding direct affiliation and total commitment to the class struggle and seeking a form of detachment that might allow a greater analytical objectivity. On these debates great life choices depended – the sort made by my premature anti-fascist, Frank Knox.

A non-Marxist who made a major contribution was Karl Mannheim. Before he fled to Britain – and the LSE – to escape the Nazis, Mannheim had been taught in Hungary by Lukács. Lukács made his name through his analysis of 'false' consciousness as an objective consequence of the class situation. Such consciousness was grounded, he insisted, in the economic set-up and so was not 'arbitrary, subjective nor psychological'.[3] Mannheim, by contrast, saw the impact of social context on thinking yet also took a more pragmatic view of knowledge, and looked well beyond the falsity or otherwise of consciousness. His work demonstrates a tension between an appreciation of the social construction of knowledge and recognition that this does not render it wrong, or that understanding cannot be improved through a deeper engagement with social processes. Though he believed that sociology offered the best means of grasping the totality of social processes, and so could become 'the

[3] Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Books, 1967 [1920]).

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master science of political practice', he could never quite pin down what sort of political practice this might mean.[4]

III

Mannheim in turn influenced the American C. Wright Mills, who was by far my favourite sociologist during my undergraduate days. Although he died aged 45 in 1962, Mills provides a link between the intense debates of the interwar years, often conducted in the dense abstractions of German philosophy, with the emerging New Left of the United States in the 1960s. Like Mannheim, Mills believed that it was the task of sociology to connect private troubles with social and political structures. If an individual was unemployed that was a private trouble: if 20 per cent of the population was unemployed that was a structural issue and thus a task for sociology. He was fascinated by the structures of power: how it was in modern corporate America that the elite that no longer needed brute force or coercion to sustain its power but could instead rely on manipulation. His most lasting contribution came with *The Sociological Imagination*,[5] in which he derided what he saw to be the two false paths of mainstream sociology. On the one hand there was Grand Theory, whose self-importance he famously deflated with translations of pages of the obscurantist prose of Talcott Parsons into a few lines, and on the other there was Abstracted Empiricism, full of microscopic studies that remained marginal to the big questions of the day. His own creed was established in an appendix on intellectual craftsmanship. He was certainly not against facts and acknowledged that they could be better established through painstaking research. He believed a sense of history essential because that was how one could gather the direction in which events were moving, and, having studied Mannheim carefully, he was determined that his interest in the origins of knowledge should guide his work without overwhelming it.

Unlike Mannheim, his style was direct and refreshing, though the line between analysis and knockabout polemics was regularly blurred. One piece of advice was that 'any writing that is not imaginable as human speech is bad writing'. Mills did follow Mannheim in believing that sociology could be the master discipline of politics, that the sociological imagination could feed the political imagination. 'Before you are through with any piece of work, no matter how indirectly on occasion,' he insisted, 'orient it to the central and continuing task of understanding the structure and the drift, the shaping and the meanings, of your own period, the terrible and magnificent world of human society in the second half of the twentieth century'. Mills was particularly concerned with the nuclear arms race and put some effort into explaining how the military component of the policy elite was pushing the country towards a catastrophic World War III.

Mills was an unattached radical. He had all but given up on workers' movements and was instead looking to students as the new agents of change, which perhaps helps explain why he was so popular on the campuses of the 1960s, especially as the freedom rides into the segregationist South and then the burgeoning campaign against the Vietnam war gave this notion credibility. But in Eisenhower's America, in

[4] Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1936). On Mannheim, see Colin Loader, *The Intellectual Development of Karl Mannheim* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
[5] C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

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which he wrote his best work, revolutionary consciousness was not high. One of the most challenging books as the 1950s turned into the 1960s, which appalled Mills, was Daniel Bell's *End of Ideology*, which suggested that the great battles which had divided Western societies in the past had been resolved in a melange of markets and planning, welfarism and liberal democracy.[6]

For Bell the logic of the new situation was that social scientists would become almost technical experts, devoted to dealing with the second-order problems that had not yet quite been solved. As the political context become more intense as a result of Vietnam, Bell's judgement on the End of Ideology looked increasingly out of touch (a fate that Fukuyama's End of History suffered almost three decades later). The critiques of mainstream social science, which had even been relabelled 'behavioural science' to avoid any hint of socialism, took on a harder edge.

Bell was a natural target for Noam Chomsky's withering critique of the irresponsibility of intellectuals in a famous article in the *New York Review of Books* in February 1967,[7] which was also a centrepiece of his trenchant, *American Power and the New Mandarins*.[8] I suppose it is another confession that this book also made a big impression on me as a student. Though Chomsky's academic distinction lay elsewhere he is now amongst the most read single figure on the international affairs of our time and according at least to the magazine *Prospect* the world's top public intellectual. His remorseless critique of American foreign policy has now acquired something of a routine and at times self-parodying quality, but its initial impact was huge.

The original article was not just about exposing the falsehoods and rationalisations spread by the intellectuals supporting and in some cases conducting the war – the New Mandarins in question – but how they had allowed themselves to get into this position. The problem was not that ideology was dead but that intellectuals had become too comfortable to retain an interest in 'converting ideas into social levers for the radical transformation of society'. The 'free-floating intellectuals of the past' were being replaced by 'scholar-experts'. Those who had 'already achieved power and affluence, or who sense that they can achieve them by ''accepting society'' as it is and promoting the values that are ''being honored'' in this society' had made a Faustian bargain that required them to abandon moral sensibility. Meanwhile their claims to expertise were fraudulent. This Chomsky believed, had been exposed by Vietnam:

> if there is a body of theory, well-tested and verified, that applies to the conduct of foreign affairs or the resolution of domestic or international conflict, its existence has been kept a well-guarded secret. In the case of Vietnam, if those who feel themselves to be experts have access to principles or information that would justify what the American government is doing in that unfortunate country, they have been singularly ineffective in making this fact known. To anyone who has any familiarity with the social and behavioral sciences (or the 'policy sciences'), the claim that there are certain considerations and principles too deep for the outsider to comprehend is simply an absurdity, unworthy of comment.

The implication of Chomsky's critique was that the intellectuals must rediscover their vocation as social critics and challenge the very foundations of mainstream thinking.

[6] Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York: The Free Press, 1960). Republished by Harvard University Press, 2000.
[7] Noam Chomsky, 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals', *New York Review of Books*, 23 February 1967.
[8] Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: New Press, 1969). This was republished in 2002.

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He did so in the direct, forceful prose of a pamphleteer, and as a dogged empiricist, collecting facts that exposed the lies and crimes of the policy elite. Chomsky is notoriously impatient with critics who challenge him on sources and evidence yet there is an undoubted problem when the course of advocacy is so clearly set and the facts are then expected to fit.

IV

While Chomsky was protesting on the steps of the Pentagon a different sort of dissent was being heard within the Soviet bloc. One of the leading voices arguing for basic political rights was Leszek Kolakowski, who in 1968 was expelled from Poland for his troubles, eventually to move to All Souls in Oxford. In the 1950s Kolakowski had been the closest there had been to a New Left intellectual in the Soviet bloc. As a student of religious doctrine in Poland he quickly came to see the parallels with the malign influence of Stalinist doctrine as an enforced and bureaucratised system of thought that allowed for no challenge and no admission of error. His 1956 essay *What is Socialism?*, censored by the authorities, contained a list of things which socialism should not be, though clearly was in Poland at the time. This included 'a state whose government always knows the will of the people before it asks them . . .' and 'thinks freedom amounts to obedience to the state'.[9] This was a year of political upheaval in Poland and East Germany, which concluded with Nikita Khrushchev's speech to the Twentieth Party Congress. In acknowledging the Stalinist terror, Khrushchev caused chaos and confusion in the ranks of the international communist movement from which it never recovered. This meant that Marxism as an approach to both scholarship and politics increasingly began to develop in the West independently of the communist party line, in many cases as part of the 'New Left'. Although this was something of a liberation, it did not stop the increasing divergence between radicals in the West who still focused on issues of inequality and militarism and those in the East who were by now more preoccupied with basic political rights.

Kolakowski made his views clear on the perils of state socialism but he did not renounce Marxism and remained a member of the party. In 1957 C. Wright Mills visited Poland and met Kolakowski, and adopted him as a kindred spirit from the other side of the Iron Curtain. Although Mills was not a Marxist he acknowledged the actual and potential contributions of the tradition, independent of the baleful consequences of the Soviet experience. The two men conferred about how Marxism might eventually be assimilated into Western thought without having constantly to assert its singularity. When the next year, 1958, Mills spoke of his 'contempt for the indifferent professors and smug editors who so fearlessly fight the cold war' in the United States, he added for good measure 'the cultural bureaucrats and hacks, the intellectual thugs of the official line who have abdicated the intellect in the Soviet bloc'. In asserting this equivalence of contempt for the servants of the two blocs who threatened the world with a nuclear disaster, he added that 'Leszek Kolakowski will understand where I stand'.[10]

[9] I first came across Kolakowski in some collected essays, Leszek Kolakowski, *Marxism and Beyond: On Historical Understanding and Individual Responsibility* (London: Pall Mall, 1969).
[10] C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958), pp. 128–9.

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By the time he left Poland, however, Kolakowski was taking a more jaundiced view of Marxism and Marxists. He did not see an equivalence between the struggles in his country and elsewhere for basic political rights and those in the West who already had their rights to exercise and were doing so in a way which could be construed as letting his oppressors off the hook.

Another leading light in the post-1956 New Left, also in touch with Mills but this time from Britain, was the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson. Thompson retained a vigorous and sentimental attachment to the Marxist tradition, or perhaps more accurately a Marxist tradition all of his own. This combined a vision that was generous and humane with deep suspicion of alternative forms of Marxism, especially perverse continental imports. In 1973 Thompson lamented in an open letter that while in 1956 he and Kolakowski had both been communist revisionists, now Kolakowski was giving succour to anti-communists who opposed all that they once stood for.[11] Kolakowski's reply was withering, charging Thompson with empty assertions of the possibility of goodness and a reluctance to recognise that the problems exhibited by the states which claim to be socialist were more than the errors of Stalinism. There was no evil associated with capitalism – 'exploitation, imperialism, pollution, misery, economic waste, national hatred, and national oppression' that these countries had not managed. Worse they added some of their own, including economic inefficiency and 'above all, the unrestricted role of the omnipotent bureaucracy, a concentration of power never known before in human history'.[12]

V

We have now reached 1975, the year of the first BISA conference. What I have tried to do thus far is argue that the sociology of knowledge was from the start about the political role of intellectuals. At the start, after the First World War, the issue was about the extent to which intellectuals should affiliate themselves to class-based parties. The decline of the ideological zeal that once animated these parties meant that this issue lost its salience and the intellectuals either contented themselves with second order tasks or railed against the stultifying complacency of mainstream social science and its celebration of the status quo. With civil rights and Vietnam a political voice was rediscovered and social science acquired a critical edge. Part of this edge involved a direct challenge to the more obnoxious government policies of the time but it also led to a demand to look at the underlying assumptions which informed policy and the biases that appeared to be built in to the established structures of power. In the West this had led to campaigns against bad policies; in the East however it led to campaigns against bad systems.

The foundation of BISA came halfway between the end of the Second World War and today. For a number of reasons, not all apparent at the time, this was a turning point in contemporary international affairs. One reason, we might have argued, was that the Cold War had just concluded. Of course we now know that the Cold War did

[11] 'Open Letter to Leslek Kolakowski' first appeared in the 1973 *Socialist Register*. It was republished in E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978).

[12] Kolakowski's reply, 'My Correct Views on Everything' was printed in the 1974 *Socialist Register*. It is the title essay of his collected essays, *My Correct View of Everything* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2005).

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not really conclude until 1989 but in the mid-1970s it was already being spoken of in the past tense. The year 1975 saw the surge of treaty-making and confidence-building activities, collectively known as 'détente', which had begun in the late 1960s, more or less complete its course with the adoption in Helsinki of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. This confirmed the durability of the status quo, dividing Europe into the three distinct spheres of NATO, the Warsaw Pact and the Neutral and Non-Aligned. With Berlin sorted and everyone promising not to attempt to change borders through military means, the risk of a hot war seemed to be drastically reduced. If there was no risk of a hot war could we really talk about a Cold War? After all, when things got tense again Fred Halliday wrote about a second Cold War.[13]

Related to the sense of calmer great power relations was the embarrassing American exit that year from Vietnam. The Vietnam syndrome, if that refers to a reluctance to risk lives and commit resources to foreign wars, was already established. The previous decade's image of American aggression, messing up the Third World out of a paranoid fear of communism, gave way to an image of a fallen giant, traumatised by the Watergate scandal, suffering, like all Western countries, under the harsh economic conditions of the time and clearly not up for a fight. The loss of Indo-China to communism combined with the impact of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the subsequent hike in fuel prices led to the United States gaze, certainly in relation to military policy, shifting from East Asia to the Middle East where it has remained ever since. Prior to the mid-1970s the big tests for US foreign policy outside of Europe had been Asian – China, Korea and then Vietnam. Afterwards it was the Middle East – Iran, Lebanon and Iraq.

Against this broad geopolitical background different sorts of changes were underway. The study of international affairs was inevitably influenced by the big problems of the day, but they are also influenced by the wider intellectual currents of the time. Two in particular seem to me to be important. The first relates to the exhaustion of the left after the heady days of the student revolutions and the general militancy of the early 1970s. The enthusiasms of the earlier period had been stifled by the dead hand of sectarian Marxism. The early radicalism of the 1960s lacked theory and focus and Marxists could provide both. Discussions of strategy became dogged by close examination of sacred texts which those who did not know their Marx from their Foucault found to be something of a turn-off. As significant, the great moral battles of the 1960s had either been won or no longer seemed so clear-cut. Bourgeois politics, after all, had seen the Americans extract themselves from Vietnam and Nixon driven from office, while the miners had done for Edward Heath in Britain. It was possible to argue that much could be done within the system. More seriously it was by no means clear that the left had good answers or even good analysis of the problem of stagflation then confronting Western countries. The collectivist solutions to which socialists were naturally inclined were at one level at odds with the logic of the 1960s, which in the social and cultural sphere at least stressed the value of individual freedom. Moreover there was a developing economic critique of contemporary capitalism, which came from the right more than the left, which stressed the importance of individualism and free markets and objected to the overbearing power of the state. The libertarian aspects of the 1960s challenged traditional conservative

[13] Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1983).

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values, especially those which stressed self-discipline and family life and deplored drug-taking and extra-marital sex. They certainly also challenged racism, homophobia, and surprisingly belatedly, sexism. But they were not at all inconsistent with an anti-statist economic policy.

Furthermore the question of greater human rights at home raised questions of human rights abroad. This again had always been one of the fault lines in the New Left. Exciting as May 1968 had been in Paris, August 1968 in Czechoslovakia was even more challenging and, to its participants, more dangerous. In this sense also, 1975 was a turning point, though again its full significance was not fully appreciated at the time, for the 'basket three' of the CSCE Final Act gave for the first time legitimacy to those who argued that the denial of human rights breached a central requirement of European security. The European left was profoundly ambivalent to this development. In principle of course all favoured greater human rights for all, but there was anxiety that taking this agenda too far would risk the gains of détente and the consequent stabilisation of international affairs. Nobody had pretended, for example, that the Vietnamese communists were democrats in any Western sense but their excuse was that they were nationalists, and that gave them the right to fight imperialists. The evidence of what this might mean in practice, in Vietnam and even more terribly Cambodia, only became apparent during the later part of the 1970s. The Soviet Union, as events in Czechoslovakia and also Poland had demonstrated, was seen as deeply repressive, but the argument was that its power had to be recognised, and that the suppression of the rights of central and East Europeans was a small price to pay for the avoidance of a catastrophic third world war.

VI

I now want to rewind back to the 1960s and consider how very broadly the conduct of social – or more specifically political – science was influenced by these developments and how, much more narrowly, they affected me. The challenge posed by C. Wright Mills was to pull social science back towards difficult and even dangerous topics. The political radicals may have assumed that once this was done, and done honestly, then the conclusions would fall into place, but need this have been so?

The developing critique had three parts to it. The first came directly from the radicals. The status quo had been celebrated while surface superficialities had been mistaken for enduring qualities of the American system as if it represented a pinnacle of political and economic development. The second part of the critique was that this was in part the responsibility of mainstream theory and methods, and in particular the futile attempt to mimic the natural sciences, which narrowed the field of study and provided an excuse to avoid normative issues. At this point Thomas Kuhn's work on the structure of scientific revolutions was making an impact, demonstrating that even the laws of science were socially constructed and sustained through the politics of the scientific profession as much as the scientific method.[14] As no amount of experimental data could explain everything theories – or paradigm – were developed that provided the best possible interpretations of the data available and which could sustain the

[14] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

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greatest consensus in the scientific community, until they were undermined as anomalies started to appear in the evidence that could not be explained by the prevailing paradigm. Kuhn was not saying that paradigms were impervious to evidence. The drama comes from the interaction between the evidence and the paradigm. This gets to the third point, which was the importance of underlying assumptions and the consequent need to look beyond what the economist Kenneth Galbraith had described in his book *The Affluent Society* as the 'conventional wisdom', that is those 'ideas which are esteemed at any time for their acceptability'.[15]

The same arguments were at work in political science as in sociology. Critics charged that political science had become political silence, as it had passed quickly by the civil rights movement and paid scant attention to economic inequalities. It had become a way of failing to achieve science while avoiding that dangerous subject politics.[16] It had limited itself by dealing only with the conspicuous and measurable. Perhaps it was possible to say some interesting things about why people with certain opinions behave, for example in elections, but not so much why they held these opinions. There was little sense of the historical or social conditions that made patterns of behaviour recur to the point where they were claimed as virtual laws. Power was evaluated only in its surface manifestations – to be judged only who won or lost when an issue got to the fore rather than its underlying structures. Peter Bachrach, in a famous 1962 article with Morton Baratz, addressed the question of how the sociologist view of power being wielded by an elite (as Mills had argued) could be squared with the pluralist view in political science that power was much more diffusely held and its exercised denied any group domination. There were, they argued, 'two faces of power':

> Of course power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. But power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences.[17]

They argued for the study of the 'mobilization of bias' in institutions and dismissed the objection that this was a fruitless approach because it involved looking at 'unmeasurable elements' as if because they could not be measured they were unreal. To take this stand meant that the pluralists were vulnerable to the same charge they had levelled against the elitists: 'their approach to and assumptions about power predetermine their findings and conclusions'.

This fundamental insight carried both a methodological and political message that was radical in two senses. The political radicalism lay in warning that the American political system had not solved the problem of power; the methodological radicalism lay in urging scholars to dig deep, to look at agenda-setting, the way that issues were defined before they were decided, how political victories became institutionalised in

[15] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958).
[16] J. Peter Euben, 'Political Science and Political Silence', in Philip Green and Sanford Levinson (eds.). *Power and Community: Dissenting Essays in Political Science* (New York: Random House, 1970).
[17] Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, 'Two Faces of Power', *The American Political Science Review*, 56:4 (1962), pp. 947–52.

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the routines of organisations, to consider what was taken for granted in the background as well as what was disputed in the foreground.

VII

As a student I bought into this completely – and I still do. Here I should confess that I have never taken an undergraduate or postgraduate course in either international relations or international history. My interest in nuclear issues was stimulated by Roger Williams' course on the politics of science and technology while I was an undergraduate at Manchester. This led to the case studies I chose for my later graduate work but in this case my interest was less in the strategic choices facing governments but in the way that scientific expertise was used to structure these choices. At this stage if I had to describe myself it would have been as a political sociologist, and for that reason had been engrossed by the debates I have just been describing.

My paper at the first BISA conference was a critique of Graham Allison's work on bureaucratic politics, which, it seemed to me, had borrowed directly from pluralist study of domestic American politics and brought it into foreign policy analysis. For my part I was applying the sort of critique that flowed from Bachrach's work.[18] This paper was, as is often the case, a discarded chapter from my thesis, which was also completed in 1975. The topic was the way that the United States assessed the Soviet strategic threat, which seemed to me to be a good way to explore the underlying mind-set that influenced foreign policy and led me to employ what would now be called a constructivist approach.[19]

Although intelligence agencies are in principle dedicated empiricists, I was also considering their forward projections. On the basis of what they knew, say, in 1956 (which was not a lot) how did they project forward to 1961 or 1966? This mattered because decisions on future weapons programmes, with lead times of a decade at least, were supposed to anticipate the future threat. Because they could, not I was able to demonstrate that the institutional biases of the agencies affected their projections. Practitioners and students of intelligence alike were fully aware of the consequences of fragmentary information and the need to speculate, and the challenges and temptations this created. In this context a constructivist approach was not, as we say in the fields of epistemology and cognition, 'rocket science'. In arguing that intelligence estimates emerged out of a political process, and explaining how worst-case thinking might take hold, my thesis showed traces of my earlier radicalism, but to be frank they were no more than traces.

As the nuclear debate picked up during the late 1970s I found myself on what was considered to be the liberal side of the argument, critical of those who exaggerated the Soviet threat and sought technical fixes to what seemed to me at the time intractable though intriguing problems of nuclear deterrence. Mutual Assured Destruction appeared to describe a terrible condition not a strategic choice. In this I was at odds with the group already known as 'neo-cons'. Yet there was something in their analysis that gave me pause for thought. Neo-conservatism was an outgrowth of splits within the Democratic Party, with the traditionalist Cold War wing horrified

[18] Lawrence Freedman, 'Logic, Politics, and Foreign Policy Processes: A Critique of the Bureaucratic Politics Model', *International Affairs*, 52 (1976), pp. 434–49.
[19] Lawrence Freedman, *US Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

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by what they saw as the anti-defence and essentially appeasing attitudes of the McGovernite wing. Anti-militarism is a traditional left-wing virtue, at least in the West, and after Vietnam there was an understandable distrust of any allegations that the military and its supporters might make about Soviet threats. The neo-conservative critique, to start with, was undoubtedly focused on the folly of arms control and the claims that the Soviet Union was still committed to advancing its totalitarian ideology by force if necessary. This conviction that national security was in peril became a consistent theme of this political tendency and consistently overdone. But even if one did believe that the balance of terror was a contribution to a war-preventing stability, as I did, this was hardly a satisfactory basis for security. It also carried high political costs. Here the charge was that whatever the Soviet Union might do in the future as its military power continued to grow, its existing power was sufficient to lead the West to stifle objections to its abhorrent current practices. This was an issue that came to the fore over the question of the linkage between the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate and the trade agreement, and also President Ford's unwillingness to meet Alexander Solzhenitsyn when he was in Washington. When President Carter wished to demonstrate that he was taking the US on a new moral course in foreign policy it was human rights he stressed, even though he did not, at least initially, buy into the neo-con's national security agenda.

VIII

This aspect of the debate came to the fore at the end of the decade as a new European-wide anti-nuclear movement gained strength. This was in response to a series of nuclear decisions, most notably that taken by NATO in December 1979 to introduce US missiles into five European countries, which was followed almost immediately by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, raising international tension by a number of notches. Thinking I was on the left I had used a set of arguments to challenge the anti-deterrence notions of the right, their exaggerated political claims and fascination with technical fixes promised by new weapons systems. I felt unable to take a different approach just because the next set of simplistic critiques came from the left, this time with exaggerated claims about western motives and a belief that fewer weapons, as a result of disarmament, could have a transformative political effect.

The most prominent of the anti-nuclear groups was the European Nuclear Disarmament campaign (END). To the fore was E. P. Thompson, now playing the Chomsky role, with a brilliant pamphleteering style and withering scorn (I recall being described as a 'compliant cowboy', a label that fortunately failed to stick).[20] In line with his sympathies Thompson damned eastern Stalinism as much as western militarism, and lumped them together as part of a common 'exterminism'. In this respect he ensured that END avoided the equivocation of the CND of two decades earlier, in which there was a definite communist influence and therefore often a reluctance to condemn the workers' bomb with the same fervour as the capitalists'. Instead the END appeal, drafted by Thompson, proposed a nuclear-free zone from Poland to Portugal to be achieved through dissolution of the blocs. This approach was profoundly misleading, assuming that the blocs had a malign equivalence, an

[20] I think this was in E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith (eds.), *Protest and Survive* (London: Penguin, 1980).

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equal capacity for dissolution, which could be achieved through nuclear disarmament, or that having dissolved a benign harmony would spread across Europe and bind it together.[21]

In this once again it was the leading central and eastern European intellectuals who challenged Thompson most directly. Vaclav Havel accepted what he called a 'prerational' sympathy with those who put the general good ahead of private interest. But he was as ever sensitive to the political use of language and warned how the rhetoric of 'peace' had been so abused by Soviet propaganda as to be treated with the deepest scepticism. Meanwhile, he insisted, 'The cause of the danger of wars is not weapons as such but political realities . . . No lasting, genuine peace can be achieved by opposing this or that weapons system because such opposition deals only with consequences, not with reasons.' To Adam Michnik, writing from a Polish prison, the idea that 'arms are more important than people' was part of a 'Soviet pattern of thinking'.[22]

IX

In the event the Cold War concluded with the implosion of European communism, with disarmament negotiations as something of a sideshow. This story began with communist intellectuals gearing themselves to undermining the false consciousness of the masses but at the end it was anti-communist intellectuals speaking out for bourgeois freedoms that were to the fore in the velvet revolution. The ideological struggle, which had been at the heart of the Cold War, had a clear victor, whose proponents were imbued with classic liberalism. It made the final end run, having left the pacemaking for years to socialists. Moreover this proved to be a truly transformational ideology, adopted by the people, which served as the basis of European unity. As the ideology of the most powerful countries and with the counter-ideology having evaporated, there seemed few barriers to taking the good message to those suffering under less enlightened regimes.

Yet in doing so it became apparent that alternative ways of thinking were extraordinarily resilient. Recent conflicts have had cultural as much as economic roots, with questions of ethnicity, religion and language at their heart, and in which intellectuals have often played a dangerous role as the constructors of divisive identities. Sometimes they did this as part of the backlash of communism's failure, in an attempt to substitute nationalist themes for socialist. The views they promoted were exactly of the sort that the intellectuals of the past had deplored and saw it as their task to expose as dangerous mystifications, detracting from true class consciousness. Liberals also saw the risks as either dooming their adherents to subjugation or else inciting violent conflict with people with whom they really had a lot in common. Is it the duty of the scholar to point this out and work to change beliefs and forms of behaviour? Or does this compromise scholarship while patronising its objects, especially at a time when we are discouraged from 'privileging' our beliefs over others and encouraged to celebrate cultural diversity.

[21] Lawrence Freedman, 'A Criticism of the European Nuclear Disarmament Movement', *Armament and Disarmament Information Unit Report*, 2:4 (1980), pp. 1–4.

[22] See George Weigel, 'Light from the East: Peace, Freedom, and the Civil Society', *American Purpose*, 1:3 (March 1987) <http://www.eppc.org/publications/pubID.1704/pub_detail.asp>.

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At any rate, given the frustrations of past purveyors of a true consciousness, what hope is there to provide guidance from outside? As conflict takes hold opinions harden and group solidarity becomes a political imperative. Divisive structures demonstrate great resilience once established. Warning against primordial concepts of ethnicity, and demonstrating how forms of ethnicity are social constructions, makes them sound easier to change than if they were physical facts. This is less helpful politically than one might hope. These constructs are not fragile but are often remarkably robust. Deconstructing the enemy can be a tough call.

The ethnic nationalists of the 1990s could, along with the communist philosophers of the 1920s or the 'peace' campaigners of the 1960s and 1980s, claim a form of political leadership based on their intellectual grasp of events and their consequent capacity to raise the consciousness of ordinary people. But without the class – or ideological or national – struggle that provides a ready means of demonstrating political commitment intellectuals struggle to make themselves heard against a cacophony of voices. In addition there is also the question of whether such a leadership role, including in campaigns against the particularly obnoxious policies of an otherwise legitimate government is compatible with scholarship. As Hedley Bull observed in the introduction to *The Anarchical Society*, good scholarship is likely to be subversive of all causes, good or bad.[23]

Yet, particularly when debates are intense, political distance is hard to achieve. Even innocuous statements are seized upon as being loaded with ideological meaning or are apt to be seized on by activists as evidence of where your sympathies really lie. As citizens we can use our knowledge to make contributions. In particular it seems to me that we can offer context. We can explore the background and unspoken assumptions of political protagonists, and explain how their thought patterns have been shaped by the conflicts of years past, perhaps reflecting the legacies of otherwise forgotten academic scribblers. We can challenge propensities to dubious reasoning through analogy and the abuse of sources of evidence. We can note how worldviews have become embedded in the culture of institutions, or carelessly developed and bowdlerised through media commentary. To neglect all this because it is hard to measure or to be absolutely sure of its correctness, to meet exacting standards of falsifiability is to deny access to vital avenues of analysis and important contributions to political life. If you take precautions, of which self-awareness if the most important, epistemological despair can be avoided and useful knowledge can be generated. Understanding how this knowledge is socially constructed need not lead to a loss of confidence in its validity. Lastly as important as the construction of knowledge is its effective communication. Here we can recall that two of the key founders – Alastair Buchan and Susan Strange – were both former journalists. I am not sure how much they worried about the theory of language but they sure knew how to use it.

Such lectures tend to end with advice to others about how to go about their business. I don't think that would be appropriate. In *Small World* David Lodge has those sipping cherry at the opening reception at his conference in the University of Rummidge, disappointed not so much by the lumpy beds or the terrible food, which they expect, but by the small turnout and the undistinguished nature of the participants. It is a measure of how far BISA has come in three decades that we can have no such complaints.

[23] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

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