Chapter 13 Imagining the Future of Intelligence in Open Societies: Venturing beyond Secrecy and Scientific Prophecy as Totalitarian Modes of Modernity

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“Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are we waiting for? What awaits us?”—these are the questions with which Ernst Bloch ([1947] 1986, 3) introduces the reader to *The Principle of Hope*. They could not resonate more with a contemporary profound loss of certainty and security caused by a violent breakup of the current geopolitical world order. For Bloch, the future contains “what is feared and what is hoped for” (4). The human experience constantly oscillates between two poles: past and future, fear and hope. Bloch’s answer to this human condition relates objectivity to subjectivity, openness to closeness, uncertainty to expectation, and determinacy to the process of becoming and a *venturing beyond* on the ground of a dialectic tendency inherent in history.

Equally, Karl Popper’s critical approach to scientific inquiry encapsulates both, the indeterminacy of the future and the provisional status of all knowledge. Popper ([1945] 2013) was aware of the social aspects of the scientific method and culture, which stood model for his *open society*. An *open society* resembles a scientific community due their common commitment to the search for truth. In Popper’s view, the determinism particular for closed systems is destructive to the idea of creativity, the human ability to create something new. At the same time, Popper’s ([1957] 1964) criticism of historicism—sweeping historical prophecies, which attempt to render the future world controllable on the ground of past trends—implies a judgment about historicists’ poverty of imagination. An *open society* is a rational society when it is able not only to guarantee the plurality of ideas but to cope with this unstable and changing world, to which solutions and scientific theories always remain tentative and never complete.

While this chapter concentrates on the possible role of secrecy and intelligence *within* an open society like the United States, its overarching goal is a bolder one: it aspires to contribute to the research on *open society* in pointing out

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1 To which extent this model rather refers to a closed system, see Newton-Smith (2000).
that reflecting upon and safeguarding the values of an open society requires to
guide one’s awareness and thinking into matters of futurity. The pivotal attrib-
tute of an open society—its openness—designates as well, and even constitutes,
as its necessary condition an openness toward the future. The open society can
be regarded as a vibrant, if not daring, idea and political and social project,
whose members and decision-makers do not decide about their future solely
on the ground of their past but who move and venture beyond both, past and
present, toward the unknown and uncertain. In this sense, it requires citizens
and scientists who are prepared and even aspire to be contradicted by reality
in regard to their expectations, and who remain open toward encountering
the unforeseen, unintended, unpredictable, and unimagined in what the future
reveals. Therefore, this chapter revolves around the hypothesis that whether a
society will develop toward a closed or an open society depends equally on how
we approach the uncertainty, unpredictability, and openness, which, on a scien-
tific, political, and social level, we face in regard to the future.

Intriguingly, in practice, the task of forecasting the future and the “taming
of chance” (Hacking 1990) has been granted to social scientists and intelligence
analysts alike. This asymmetrical because top-down sharing of responsibility
and authority in the field has introduced one of the major contradictions within
an open society. The secrecy and power of intelligence agencies has been inter-
preted as antithetical to the values of an open society and has, historically seen,
often dramatically infringed the open culture of scientific practice and, in turn,
of open societies. At the same time, as I would like to stress, intelligence agencies
are one of those particular places within open societies that can inform us best
about the errors and fallacies of scientific attempts to rationalize uncertainty
and the future. As the apotheosis of an empire of chance (Gigerenzer et al. 1989),
they are the institutions to be studied in order to test some of Popper’s most
important premises of his ideal of an open society.

Furthermore, although neither scientific nor social progress can be achieved
if the free flow of ideas and information is jeopardized, this does not mean that
intelligence analysts would not be part of the scientific community. They, too,
assemble and interpret huge amounts of data employing scientific models and
theories, but they do so, as this chapter claims, not to integrate uncertainty as
a variable into their matrixes nor to use probability theories as a measurement
of ignorance but to downplay, and hence to govern both, ignorance and uncer-
tainty. As shall be shown in this chapter, the intelligence officer qua scientist
approaches the realm of future uncertainty in ways that are, due to their rigid
determinism, similarly at odds with Popper’s ideal type of an open society and
his definition of the responsibilities of the social scientist.

In addition, being the common denominator of both, the open as well the
closed society, the work of secret services appears as particularly problematic
for the former, while often constituting one major pillar of the latter. Secret ser-
vices are situated at the very line between closed and open societies constantly
endangering the latter to transform into the former. The questions to which this
chapter tries to provide tentative answers are: What makes intelligence agencies oscillate toward the extreme of a closed and totalitarian model of society? What would allow them to perform an acceptable function in an *open society*? Next to the problems of power and secrecy, this chapter takes in particular a critical look at the collection and interpretation of data, which plays thereby a significant role. Thomas Richards (1993) notes in *The Imperial Archive* that data “has no inherent function and can just easily lend itself to open societies as closed ones” (73). Richards stresses the fragmented character of all information and its impossibility to be totally assembled. In our data sets, there always remains a gap of epistemic uncertainty, an inherent epistemic incompleteness. Trying to deal with this relative absence of data and knowledge, “probabilistic knowledge is loosened to incorporate assumptions about that which is merely possible” (Amoore 2013, 31). This chapter assumes that secret services tend to disguise this interpretative uncertainty, that is, that future actions and events are only “merely possible.”

Finally, does this mean that secrecy and intelligence agencies are the clear enemies of an open society? While Popper himself remains remarkably silent in this respect, this chapter takes a more realist stance by treating intelligence—despite all the previous criticism—as a necessary evil of *open societies*. In line with the arguments of Edward Shils ([1956] 1996) that secrecy as part of security system “is an imperative imposed by the need of society to preserve itself and the values which it embodies” (208), this chapter makes use of Popper’s criticism of the historicists’ striving for historical prophecies and prediction as a cornerstone for imagining the future of intelligence services within *open societies* by limiting their perils and recognizing and integrating their errors.

**Information Wars: A Strategic Turn toward Radical Openness**

In *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Robert Jervis (1976) departed from the criticism that US deterrence policies produced self-fulfilling prophecies. The unintended consequences of the Cold War security dilemma were, according to the critics, dangerous self-perpetuating misperceptions: “The United States misperceived the Soviet Union as aggressive and, by acting on this belief, led the Soviets in turn to view the United States as a grave threat” (xiii). For Jervis (2009), intelligence continues to be influenced by these processes of perception and purposeful deception. This dilemma has equally haunted the critical assessment of Russia’s war plans against Ukraine in 2022.

On February 24, 2022, Russia decided to invade Ukraine after a period of indecision and military provocation. However, already on December 3 and 4, 2021, respectively, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* made public information that they had obtained by having been granted access to unclassified

2 In this respect, Shils’s attitude toward secrecy resonates with more contemporary arguments like those of Pfahl-Traughber (2010).
US intelligence documents. Like Michael Crowley (2021), their colleague of The New York Times, Shane Harris and Paul Sonne (2021), both experts in US intelligence and national security, revealed in their article in The Washington Post that US intelligence had found the Kremlin was planning a “multi-front offensive as soon as early next year involving up to 175,000 troops, according to US officials and an intelligence document.” According to US and Ukrainian officials and military analysts, Russia was preparing a large-scale invasion drawing on its strategy of the 2008 invasion of Georgia (Harris and Sonne 2021).

As much as intelligence might have failed in the past, the future proved these analysts and forecasters to be disastrously right this time. However, the Biden administration’s tactic to deny the element of surprise to Russia was weakened through the prevailing uncertainty about Putin’s real intentions, which resulted in a strategic limbo and divergent interpretations concerning Russia’s “hybrid war.” Between early December 2021 and Russia’s attack on February 24, 2022, the interpretation of Russia’s military maneuvers at its border to Ukraine differed strongly among prominent experts and scientists. Burton Gerber, former chief of the CIA’s Soviet section, for instance, was skeptical that Putin planned a big war. To Gerber’s conviction, he was following an old-school playbook of strategic ambiguity: “A prolonged, slow-boil conflict that never quite boils over but keeps everyone guessing will eventually make them grow tired of doing so” (Weiss 2022).

In particular, Gerber worried that “America has publicized too much of what it knows—or thinks it knows—about Russia’s war plans” (Weiss 2022). Under attack was the White House’s information strategy to “leak” military plans and intelligence reports to the public (Lillis, Bertrand, and Atwood 2022). Respectively a former CIA officer showed himself concerned about the long-term credibility of US intelligence in regard to the amount of declassifications: “If it turns out to be wrong, or partially wrong, it undermines how much our partners trust the info we give them, or, frankly, how much the public trusts it” (Toosi 2022).

For Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper (2022), the White House was playing a highly unusual gambit: “the extraordinary series of disclosure—unfolding almost as quickly as information is collected and assessed—has amounted to one of the most aggressive releases of intelligence by the United States since the Cuban missile crisis.” According to the authors, the Biden administration pursued thereby various goals ranging from the attempt to delay an invasion and winning time for diplomacy to disabling Russia to use any of its disinformation for possible justifications of war.

Although these newly adopted strategic revelations should allow the United States and the West to remain a step ahead regarding Moscow’s information

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3 For a definition of the term, see Galeotti (2019). Galeotti still believed that “the real threat to the West is not hybrid but political war . . . : achieve your objectives by aggressive and sometimes violent political operations that still stay below the true threshold of outright military action” (108).
warfare, this preemptive use of intelligence, as stressed by David E. Sanger (2022), a White House and national security correspondent, was certainly not without risk:

But the disclosures also raised the issue of whether, in trying to disrupt Moscow’s actions by revealing them in advance, the administration is deterring Russian action or spurring it on. … Democracies are usually terrible at information warfare, and American officials insist there is a difference between what they are doing and the dark arts that Mr. Putin made famous.

The tactic of forecasting war could not only trigger unintended consequences like an actual provocation but reveal crucial information about the CIA’s sources and, as the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, strongly worried, display and provoke an “unnecessary fear” (Barnes and Cooper 2022).

One might conclude that the problem of intelligence in an open society is neither simply a question about right or wrong forecasts nor about disclosing or keeping secret certain information. As shown, diverse actors worried that the disclosure might not only weaken the security services but prematurely provoke fear and uncertainty among the public or lead to a general distrust in regard to the reliability of the information obtained. It hints at what intelligence services rarely openly admit: intelligence data and interpretations thereof are prone to mistakes; sources are only to a certain degree fully reliable and, as it happened in the past, intelligence analysts may err with their forecasts; their results remain provisional. As a consequence, the solution to the problem of intelligence within an open society lies not simply in a radical opening and general accessibility of the output of intelligence.

Open Societies at the Crossroads of National and International Security

In general, openness and transparency are endangering the work of intelligence agencies. Their functioning within open societies appears to be a contradiction in terms. Democracies proclaiming to be open societies can find themselves in a systemic disadvantage when it comes to information warfare. One of the earliest accounts on this matter directly addressing the notion of open society is possibly Walter Laqueur’s A World of Secrets: The Uses and Limits of Intelligence. For Laqueur (1985), the question of how “secret services function in free societies, and how well they can function, given the constraints of their own political and social frameworks” (201) remains less clear under conditions of openness.

These disadvantages concern equally inter-systemic ones. Already during the Second World War, the sharing of sensitive intelligence information among the Allies revealed further weaknesses of open societies in comparison to a closed society like the Soviet Union. For John Lewis Gaddis (1989), the “intelligence
revolution” (191) had a decisive impact on the US Second World War strategies. Remarkably, the sharing of secret information among the allied forces—which from June 1941 included the Soviet Union—was unprecedented in scale. Retrospectively, this might come as a surprise, the more, as Moscow was clearly the great profiteer of this unusual exchange receiving a substantial amount of secret information.

This trust toward the Soviet Union remains even more puzzling given the fact that the Russians were grudging partners and displayed little willingness to submit to the rule of reciprocity. The result was that the Soviet Union was able to establish its own equivalents of US intelligence covert operations. After the war, this led to a strong disadvantage on the Anglo-American side to conduct covert operations within the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. As they had to operate under a “double disability of having to penetrate a closed society at a time when their own internal security had been severely compromised” (199), their work could hardly be successful. As a consequence, during the first half-decade of the Cold War, the Soviet intelligence was superior to its Western counterparts mainly because of the Soviet Union’s “‘built-in’ advantage of having relatively open societies as their target” (200).

Furthermore, as the sociologist and co-founder of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists and Minerva,4 Edward Shils ([1956] 1996), has analyzed in The Torment of Secrecy, the right equilibrium in American post-war political culture between privacy, secrecy, and publicity was highly fragile. Being a severe critic of the misuse of publicity by populist radicals of the McCarthy era, Shils warned that this equilibrium was strongly endangered by a new “irrational” dependency on both secrecy and publicity and their simultaneously political exploitation:

The past decade has been the decade of the secret. Never before has the existence of life-controlling secrets been given so much publicity and never before have such exertions been made for the safeguarding of secrets. … The United States has been committed to the principle of publicity since its origin. … American culture has become “wide open” (36ff.)

In this sense, an excess of openness can likewise infringe the well-functioning of an open society. As argued by Gregory Kaebnick (2007), simply more openness does not necessarily lead to better results. At times and in certain domains, secrecy can serve an open society more than radical disclosure.

The form of openness incorporated in the “transparent man” is a further step toward the closed society. The pressure of “maximum loyalty” (214) through clearance practices for the sake of totally reliable guardians of secrecy weighed heavily on values like freedom and privacy. This delicate balance between

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4 About Shils’s involvement in the atomic scientists’ movement and science policy, see Weinberg (1996).
secrecy, disclosure, and security concerns has reached new dimensions since the Second World War and the military-industrial complex surrounding the invention of the atomic bomb. Especially the latter, according to Shils, became a catalyst of a “pseudo-crisis,” which was generated by fears of subversion, secretly working forces, and conspiracy theories. This crisis was even further deepened through a radicalized notion of publicity and secrecy deployed by what Shils called “populist radicals” and their “irrational hypersensitivity” (64) toward such possible threats.

However, the main point in getting back to The Torment lies especially in Shils’s vision of science and society. It echoes Popper’s philosophy of science and its relation to open society. For Shils, there exists a high affinity between science and the pluralistic society because the scientific method and the ethos of scientific research are based on a particular form of relationships among scientists, “which is the prototype of the free society. In a microcosm, the scientific community mirrors the larger free society. … The community of science is built around the free communication of ideas” (64). Scientists possess the authority of the judgment over falsehood and truthfulness of research results; their culture is guided by “observation and analysis freely made and freely communicated” (180) and is based on “a system of publicity far from the populist tradition of publicity” (180). Finally, Shils differentiates between two types of secrecy: a symbolic and a functional one. The former he regards as part of populist dangerous war of fantasy fostering a “pseudo-crisis,” the latter as an indispensable part for national security. The distinction between these two forms appears as a first necessary, though by far not sufficient, condition for defining a realm in which secrecy within open societies could function.

At the same time, Shils’s view of the functioning of the scientific culture resonates strongly with Popper’s (1947) severe criticism of the so-called sociology of knowledge, which Popper attacks in The Open Society and Its Enemies as a wrong doctrine: “Under the name of ‘sociology of knowledge’ or ‘sociologism’, this doctrine has been developed recently (especially by M. Scheler and K. Mannheim) as a theory of the social determination of scientific knowledge” (201). Popper rejected the premises of a sociology of knowledge because, in his eyes, it failed to account for the “social aspects of knowledge” (205), which Popper saw as being part and parcel of the scientific method. Like for Shils, for Popper the scientific attempt at reaching scientific objectivity could only become relative success not when a single individual tried to be “objective,” but when many scientists decided to cooperate, communicate, and exchange their results. Scientific objectivity hence resulted from the “inter-subjectivity of scientific method” (205) and the “publicity of scientific method” (206); this means free public criticism, open expression of opinions in public, and the public character of the testing of observations and experiments.

These similarities between the two scholars are not a coincidence. In the 1940s, when Shils worked in London for the Office for Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor of the CIA, he became acquainted with prominent émigré
intellectuals and a highly influential group of scholars, to whom belonged not only Michael Oakeshott, Michael Polanyi, or Isaiah Berlin but also Friedrich Hayek and Karl Popper who distanced themselves continuously from Karl Mannheim’s arguments (Turner 1999, 131). Shils deepened these contacts with this circle of scholars further after his appointment as a reader in sociology at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1946. It was precisely at LSE where both, Hayek and Popper, developed their “critique of Mannheimian planning” (Pooley 2007, 366). According to Jefferson Pooley, Hayek, Popper, and Polanyi had a much more significant influence upon Shils’s writing than has been ascribed to Oakeshott or Berlin.

Despite these contacts, there is little mention in Popper’s work regarding the possibility and function of secrecy within open societies. The rare moments that Popper invokes the secret services like the Secret Police make it, however, clear that he regards them as an enemy of the open society—an enemy that he enumerates, alongside the Inquisition and gangsterism, as belonging to “the heroic age of tribalism” (Popper [1945] 2013, 189). For Popper, it is tribalism that enables the closed society to suppress reason and truth, and which Popper opposed to the open society. The lack of reference does not mean, however, that a parallel reading of Shils and Popper would not bring us a bit closer to a tentative solution in regard to intelligence agencies’ work in the modern world. Their common idea of the social aspects of knowledge suggest that objectivity, whether in science or intelligence, can only be achieved through open communication and critical testing of research results. As shall be shown in the next part, in particular Popper’s critic of prophecy and historicism can contribute in this respect, next to Shils’s more direct answer, to a more nuanced understanding of the right scope of agency of secret services within open societies.

The Threat of Totalitarianism: Intelligence as Scientific Prophecy

The Yale historian Sherman Kent is often referred to as the father of intelligence analysis. Together with the Harvard historian William L. Langer, he founded the CIA’s Office of National Estimates (ONE), which was designed as the heart of national intelligence operations:

ONE was tasked with creating National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) – the wide ranging [sic] strategic intelligence documents produced by the CIA for policymakers. Through his position, Kent established the basic theory of intelligence analysis that served the agency throughout the Cold War. Kent’s intelligence theory and methodology revolved around the collection of the “basic-descriptive” facts and current

5 For a systematic comparison of Popper’s and Hayek’s work and mutual influences, see Hayes (2009).
events of a targeted state. From here, ONE would complete the process by producing a “speculative-evaluative” report on the possible actions of the state and deliver it to policymakers who would then act on it. (Bohland 2013, 17)

Despite this direct acknowledgment of the speculative side of this analytical intelligence work, Kent understood intelligence as scientific through and through. For him, intelligence followed a clear and systematic scientific method. It stemmed not only from a positivistic view of history but above all from the social sciences, which Kent situated closely to the method of the physical sciences. He defined intelligence as “high-level foreign positive intelligence” achieved through “unromantic open-and-above-board observation and research” (Kent 1965, 4) being a fruit of careful surveillance and research operations. Surveillance for him needed to be “vigorous and aggressive” (154) allowing to expose a maximum number of phenomena.

The research implied also the “finding of new leads—out of all of which emerges a proposition which seems the truest of all possible propositions. … In wartime it produces the knowledge of the enemy strategic capacities, enemy specific vulnerabilities” (155). Hence, next to a descriptive form of information, the second form of information was concerned with the future, its possibilities and probabilities. The latter defined the very core of the National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) produced by ONE. As Chester Cooper remarked in 1972, the “estimates are, by their very nature, a projection into the future: ‘What will be the effect of …? What are probable developments in …? […] What emerges reflects a mass of distilled information’” (Cooper 1972, 224).

Positivism remained at the heart of the early Cold War social sciences. Dominating their falsification and verification methods, it did neither stop at the threshold to the intelligence services. Already during the Second World War, social scientists became, like Shils at the OSS, involved in intelligence work (Backhouse and Fontaine 2010, 186). After the war, they aspired to free science from ideology by trying to attain the highest possible degree of objectivity. As a consequence, they increasingly relied upon positivism putting their trust in numbers and algorithms (Porter 1995). This tendency found its echo in the rise of decision and rational choice theory, game theory, and cybernetics, which were an attempt at de-ideologizing politics: “They seemed to offer nonideological languages of sovereign decision that eschewed the need for democratic decision-making” (Bessner and Guilhot 2019, 14). Against these aspirations, however, the numerical models rather reminded of a totalitarian mode of scientific modernity—a supreme “Matrix code of the West” (Abella 2008, 13)—that found its way into the realms of science, policy, security, and intelligence.

Trying to identify causal relationships in human behavior, the social sciences turned toward “a harder, analytical style that used quantitative methods to test hypotheses. They began to treat social systems much like physical systems—that is, subject to discoverable natural laws” (Scoblic 2018, 108). This newly emerging
Cold War rationality (Erickson et al. 2013) was based on models that tried to calculate the options available to a certain actor faced with a decision in a situation of high uncertainty. Nothing has become more of a target for Popper than the attempt if not to predict than at least to control change. This control through large-scale planning constitutes for Popper the actual threat to a democratic society; its actual totalitarian moment.

In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper ([1945] 2013) asks: “Is it within the power of any social science to make such sweeping predictions?” (xlii). His answer seems to be clear: it is not the task of the social sciences to announce long-term historical prophecies through an alleged discovery of historical laws. Still, in *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper’s ([1957] 1964) reflections are more nuanced: a scientific prediction is by far not a historical prophecy of the kind that Popper termed historicist. The important point about a scientific prediction is that, in order not to become historicist in nature, scientists should proceed deductively. Scientists should start from the problem and not the data before they test their theories against reality and public criticism (Popper [1957] 1964, 124).

Popper’s fight against totalitarianism rested upon his rejection of induction as a scientific method and his quest for objective knowledge through deduction, which is based “on the belief that the prior probability of a law must equal zero” (Redman 1994, 68). The relation between scientific prophecy and totalitarianism has equally been raised by Hannah Arendt (1973):

Totalitarian propaganda raised ideological scientificality and its technique of making statements in the form of predictions to a height of efficiency of method and absurdity of content because, demagogically speaking, there is hardly a better way to avoid discussion than by releasing an argument from the control of the present and by saying that only the future can reveal its merits. (346)

Arendt analyzed the connection between these scientific predictions and the rise of the masses “who hoped for the appearance of ‘natural laws of historical development’ which would eliminate the unpredictability of the individual’s actions and behavior” (346).

At the same time, especially Marxists from the Frankfurt School started to address the “‘totalitarian’ effects of modernity” (Suny [2006] 2008, 28). The “blind capitulation to the ‘facts’ was a leitmotif of the Frankfurt School’s critique of positivism. … Positivism was criticized by critical theory both for its ‘ahistorical appeal to raw facts’ and for its ‘construction of alleged laws from such data’” (Stockman 2021, 55). For Horkheimer, for instance, this process reduced “the objective basis of our insight to a chaos of uncoordinated data’, culminating in the identification of ‘scientific work’ with ‘the mere organization, classification, or computation of such data’” (54). Adorno and Horkheimer argued in their critique of the concept of Enlightenment that “mathematical procedure became a kind of ritual of thought” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 19). They attacked
Enlightenment’s “numerical totalitarianism” warning of the unintended consequences of replacing natural causes by rules and probability.

Leaving the so-called positivism debate here aside, this authoritarian conception of reason, and the objection to the tyranny of reason and its rules, is only to a certain extent shared by Popper. For him, the “rational society” is not at all a totalitarian one but finally the goal to aim for: namely the open society—“a society that tolerates doubt, diversity of views and ways of life, and criticism, and sustains individual liberty, reasonableness, humanity, justice and democracy” (Maxwell 2017, 295). As argued by Nicholas Maxwell (2017), Popper’s ideas about science and reason are crucial in this regard. Not only is imagination essential for the scientific method but as well reason “is at loss without imagination” (296). More importantly, a rational and open society necessitates plurality of ideas, the freedom to imagine and to criticize authority and dogma, whereby, however, the scientific method does not deliver “certainty, but rather uncertain progress, improvement, development, growth” (296f.), and degrees of increasing verisimilitude.

This does not mean, as already mentioned, that Popper remained uncritical of the methods of the social sciences. For Popper ([1969] 1976), all science or knowledge “does not start from perceptions or observations or the collection of data or facts, but its starts, rather from problems. … This means that knowledge starts from the tension between knowledge and ignorance” (88). Furthermore, this means that, although some tentative solutions may be gained, this tension is never fully overcome; a certain epistemological uncertainty remains and is healthy for “rational societies.” All justifications of knowledge can only be provisional, but, at the same time, “our tentative solutions cannot be shown to be probable (in any sense that satisfies the laws of the calculus of probability)” (90). Popper regards this method as the critical approach, which, in strict contrast to any estimation of the future, does not “begin by collecting statistical data, to proceed, next, by induction to generalizations and to the formation of theories” (90).

Conclusion

Facing a threat, political decision-makers and leaders need to rely upon intelligence in moments of distinct uncertainty, which, however, can demand from them highly consequential decisions, so that, as Jervis (1976) argues, “getting it right is crucial to them” (xvii). Intelligence, in turn, has been designed to serve exactly that goal.

However, while “uncertainty remains a prominent factor both on the battlefield and in international affairs” (Jackson 2010), the final output of intelligence analysis rarely discloses what cannot be known and what remains uncertain. Following a positivistic, probabilistic, and inductive approach to data,
intelligence services rather tend to “eliminate the uncertainty of opinion about how to weigh what information one has, and therefore, about what course of action to pursue” (Gigerenzer et al. 1989, 286). In the words of Louise Amoore (2013), while intelligence seeks to govern “possible futures” (5) by incorporating unknowability and profound uncertainty into urgent decision-making, “contemporary security practice works on and through the emptiness and the void of that which is missing: inferring across the elements, embracing uncertain futures … across the gaps of what can be known” (3).

The parallel strong recourse to positivism, inductive forms of inference through probability, and rational choice or game theory appears anachronistic. To a certain extent, it is an unreasonable step backward to a statistical calculus of the “eighteenth-century probabilists [who] took the conduct of prudent men as an index” (Daston 1988, 107) relying upon inductive inference. In particular, as Gigerenzer et al. have shown (1989), the history of mathematical probability and statistics was often guided by an illusive attempt to escape judgment by probability statements, which facilitated a straightforward yes-no decision:

Whereas probability once aimed to describe judgment, statistical inference now aims to replace it. … These expectations are fed by ignorance of the existence of alternative theories …, and above all by the hope of avoiding the oppressive responsibilities that every exercise of personal judgment entails. (288)

Among the most severe critics of this type of ignorance based on inductive inference was, as has been argued here, Karl Popper.

It must be remembered that Popper ([1935] 2002) did not reject probability statements as such but was highly concerned with them being “in principle impervious to strict falsification” (133) and searched for a new probability theory, through which “a statement of ignorance … can be empirically tested and corroborated” (138). This entails Popper’s (1947) idea of falsification, namely that scientists should not look out for confirmation but for “facts which may refute the theory” (247). Predictions are only valuable and can be regarded as truly scientific if they have been exposed to unsuccessful attempts of falsification. At the same time, Popper repeatedly argued that social scientists need to study the unforeseen, unwanted, and “unintended repercussions” (90) of human actions. Like historians, social scientists need to recognize “the play of the contingent and the unforeseen” (346).

Moreover, at the core of Popper’s critical rationalism is an attitude of intellectual openness that “everybody is liable to make mistakes” (224). This kind of rationalism implies tolerance and emerges, according to Katharina Thalmann (2019), as “the only antidote to authoritarianism and forms the basis of democratic societies” (42). Although no ultimate truth can be reached, for Popper,
the search for it necessitates the learning from trial and error, and therefore the criticism of others for the identification of mistakes. In regard to the question of governance and secrecy, one might want to follow Steve Fuller’s (2018) suggestion that “fundamental to the governance of science as an ‘open society’ is the right to be wrong” (151), and one might want to add, speaking with Popper ([1969] 1976), that “the logic of knowledge has to discuss this tension between knowledge and ignorance” (88).

A truly scientific and acceptable functioning of intelligence services within an open society would make a new “intelligence revolution” imperative. Not only a change in method, like from induction to deduction, would be necessary but one concerning scientific ethics and a renewed culture of open communication, responsibility, accountability, and trust. Certainly, Popper’s critical method as the method of trial and error poses particular challenges if one attempts to transfer it to the contemporary work of intelligence agencies. At the same time, as has been discussed, a radical openness of intelligence can strongly backfire.

Nevertheless, if the intelligence officer qua scientist is considered as part of the scientific community, which adheres to rules outlined by both, Shils and Popper, then finally nothing prevents those scientists to follow the same path of trial-and-error elimination through open communication and criticism. To avoid the risk of radical openness, a phased openness might be a partial, though still unsatisfactory, way out of the dilemma. The whole scientific community as the prototype of the open society could have a gatekeeping function over decision about intelligence disclosures. Members of scientific community might contest intelligence predictions prior to their public or political use. This privileged role of the scientist and expert in an open society would remain, of course, an unsolved riddle.

Bibliography


