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Towards Postmodern Intelligence

ANDREW RATHMELL

Western intelligence services have had to operate in a rapidly-changing and fluid environment for the past decade and a half. Many in the Intelligence policy and studies communities have struggled to conceptualise the changes underway and to prescribe solutions to the Intelligence community’s evident problems.

Conceptualisations have emerged to describe and prescribe solutions to the community’s challenges but, by focusing on portions of the whole, such as the end of the Cold War, they fail to provide a meta-theory.

In an attempt to provide such a framework, this article explores postmodern social theory. The article explores whether postmodernism may be a valuable analytical tool, as it has proved in related disciplines such as military sociology.

It is argued that postmodernist perspectives do indeed capture important elements of the contemporary Intelligence environment. Further, recognition of these elements can be used prescriptively to shape future Intelligence policy.

While the concept of postmodern Intelligence may not, by itself, adequately characterise all facets of the contemporary Intelligence environment, the term does provide a valuable conceptual framework within which change can be managed and Intelligence sources and methods can be adapted to a new era.

Over the past decade, Western intelligence services have had to respond to a succession of radical environmental changes. Most dramatic was the end of the Cold War and subsequent revisions of roles and missions. At the same time, the ‘information revolution’ has challenged established sources, methods and institutional structures. In general, intelligence services have faced the problem of operating in an ever more chaotic and fast-changing global environment.

The pace of change has left many in the intelligence community struggling to adapt their practices and world-views, while many in the intelligence policy and studies communities have struggled to conceptualize the changes underway and to prescribe solutions to their evident problems.

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Conceptually, the developments affecting intelligence have often been seen as discrete trends — geopolitical change, technological innovation, budgetary and political pressures. Practically, in the rush of events, there is a tendency for the community to lurch from crisis to crisis.

It would be preferable to have a more systematic approach to conceptualizing this rush of change. The aim of such a conceptualization would be both to describe contemporary reality and to prescribe how contemporary changes can be managed to ensure the future success of intelligence. Several such conceptualizations have emerged but it is the argument of this article that, by focusing on portions of the whole, such as the end of the Cold War, they fail to provide a meta-theory that can be both descriptive and prescriptive.

In an attempt to provide such a framework, this article explores postmodern social theory. The use of social theory, let alone postmodernism, may seem unusual in the field of intelligence studies. This field tends to draw on the disciplinary perspectives of diplomatic history, international relations, strategic studies or public policy. In general, scholars and practitioners of intelligence tend to be wedded to the robust paradigms of realism, with little time for the generalities and perceived vacuities of social theorists.

However, this article seeks to demonstrate that postmodernism may be a valuable analytical tool. The argument is that postmodernist perspectives do indeed capture important elements of the contemporary intelligence environment. Further, recognition of these elements can be used prescriptively to shape future intelligence policy. While the concept of postmodern intelligence may not, by itself, adequately characterize all facets of the contemporary intelligence environment, the term does provide a valuable conceptual framework within which change can be managed and intelligence sources and methods can be adapted to a new era.

DEFINING INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence is a much-abused term, in both the scholarly literature and in official discourse. There are also genuine national and institutional differences of perspective that complicate the search for definitions.

This article does not advance any new definitions of intelligence but rather builds on established schools of thought. First, it does not accept the approach that conflates intelligence with secret sources and methods. Rather, it adopts Sherman Kent’s classic definition of intelligence as a kind of knowledge. Today, we need to broaden Kent’s scope so that intelligence serves not just a state’s diplomatic and military affairs. Nonetheless, the central concept is that the business of the intelligence community is the production of knowledge. Not just any knowledge, but targeted, actionable
and predictive knowledge for specific consumers. Secret sources and methods will contribute to this process but only as a part of the whole.

Second, the term Intelligence (consciously capitalized) is taken to include a variety of activities. Kent characterized these as being knowledge (the research process), organization (the institution) and activity (the process of estimating). This article adopts Dearth’s reformulation of Kent’s triad; namely, Process, Profession and Politics. Process refers to the elements of the intelligence cycle and its outputs. Profession refers to the organizations and organizational norms within which individuals work. Politics refers to the fact that ‘intelligence is an art relying on assessment and interpretation. Products are therefore subject to “political” influences.’ These influences include organizational, bureaucratic and party political pressures as well as individual or institutional cognitive filters.

This article considers how postmodern concepts can be applied to the process, profession and politics of the production of knowledge for contemporary states, that is of intelligence.

EVOLUTION OF INTELLIGENCE

Before exploring the future of intelligence it is important to sketch out where we are and how we got here.

Like the state structures and armed forces that it evolved to serve, intelligence is a product of modernity but in chronological terms a rather late product. The modern period can be characterised as, roughly speaking, stretching from the late seventeenth century until the mid/late twentieth century. In general, it refers to the ‘modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onward and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence.’ The central elements of modernity are generally taken to be the state, the industrial economy, capitalism, the class system and the nuclear family. Clearly, this broad definitional sweep subsumes a large number and variety of developments as well as analytical disagreements over the periodization and elements of modernity. Nonetheless, this broad periodization does allow us to see how the state and its armed forces evolved from the pre-modern era to the modern era of bureaucratic nation states and industrialized, mass warfare.

State-building and warfare both drove and reflected many of the developments that characterise modernity – whether these were successive industrial and technological revolutions or the development of centralised, hierarchized and bureaucratized states. It is interesting to note, however, that intelligence lagged behind these developments. Obviously, rulers and generals have always used intelligence. Intelligencers quite rightly hark back to Sun Tzu or the Ancient Greeks for texts to establish their heritage as the ‘second
oldest profession’. However, intelligence as a modern process and profession was remarkably late to evolve. The complex mix of bureaucratic structures, strategies and tactics, doctrines, procedures and cultures, professional ethos and outlook that characterize contemporary Western intelligence is largely a product of World War II and of the Cold War. Before the second half of this century intelligence emerged only gradually as a formalized activity along with the rise of nation states and of industrial-era warfare.9

In the early modern period, military and diplomatic intelligence was an ad hoc affair. Not all statesmen and generals agreed with Clausewitz’s complaint about the false and uncertain nature of intelligence in war but even the leading intelligence services of the early modern era were informal and personal affairs.10 Foreign intelligence became more systematized with the establishment of embassies from the seventeenth century as the post-Westphalian concept and practice of international relations evolved.11 Military intelligence only began to take on a modern guise in the Napoleonic era as the changing nature of war increased the requirement for militarily useful information. However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that leading powers integrated intelligence into their military staff functions and the accreditation of military attachés became a widely accepted practice.12

Technological, industrial and military developments around the turn of the century paved the way for an enhancement of the role of intelligence in the First World War. As military information requirements grew, so did the availability of technologically advanced means of collection and dissemination. These factors both enabled and required the development of more structured and bureaucratized intelligence institutions and processes that were integrated into nation state and military C3 (command, control and communications) systems.

The demobilization of intelligence between the wars however delayed the institutionalization of these structures and processes. This had to wait for 1939–45, during which the exponential leap in information requirements due to the global scale and the speed and scope of operations, combined with new technologies such as signals intelligence, imagery and radar, led to the creation of large permanent intelligence staffs serving both military and political consumers. At the same time, the coalition against Germany and Japan laid the foundations for the unprecedented emergence of an international intelligence community – embodied in the UKUSA structures.

The Cold War intelligence structures that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s deepened and widened this institutionalization of intelligence. For the first time, intelligence developed the characteristics of a truly modern process and profession. Interestingly, the emergence of ‘modern’ intelligence took place in an era when modernity itself was beginning to be challenged in the artistic and intellectual spheres.
The modern intelligence community that evolved out of World War II and the Cold War was a historically unique institution in that it involved garrison-state, standing intelligence bureaucracies with a global surveillance remit. This intelligence community shared the characteristics of other modern state and capitalist institutions. For instance, the concept of the intelligence ‘factory’ captured the similarity of intelligence to Fordist modes of production. The hierarchical and bureaucratized organisational structures of most intelligence institutions came close to the Weberian bureaucratic ideal.

In addition, the organization and practices of this community were shaped by the particular geopolitical and technical requirements of the Cold War. Three characteristics of the Cold War were crucial.

First, the scale of the perceived threat, that is, existential ideological struggle overlain by the threat of nuclear annihilation: this overarching threat meant that, although substantial intelligence effort went into other regions, such as the Middle East, and other issues, such as post-colonial insurgencies, these activities did not shape the process and profession in the way that the ‘Soviet target’ did.

Second, the hardness and the militarized nature of the target: These characteristics meant that there was a concentration on acquisition of ‘tangible’ technical military, scientific and economic indicators through clandestine and specialized collection mechanisms.

Third, the predictability of the geopolitical context: Although there were numerous surprises during the Cold War, the core intelligence task – the monitoring of the USSR’s strategic and military posture – remained within predictably limited bounds.

These characteristics shaped the modern intelligence community that emerged from the Cold War – secretive and divorced from society, emphasising clandestine and often technical collection and comfortable with linear predictive reasoning.

REFORM AND REVOLUTION

As they were shaped by the Cold War, so the end of the Cold War led to pressures for change in the West’s intelligence communities. Although it was the collapse of the Soviet threat that spurred much of the debate over intelligence reform, this debate has sometimes referred also to concurrent developments such as the ‘information revolution’ and the rise of transnational, non-state threats.

There has been no shortage of critics calling for radical reform. These ‘revolutionary’ theorists emphasize factors such as the expanded range of security threats that face Western governments since the end of the Cold War and the ‘information revolution’ which has supposedly ushered in an ‘Information Age’. These observers have argued a range of positions, from
minimal reform of target sets to root and branch overthrow of the intelligence community.\textsuperscript{16}

Unsurprisingly, actual reforms have been dominated by a spirit of ‘evolutionary realism’ that has taken account of the more obvious pressures for change.\textsuperscript{17} Reforms have included shifts in the roles and missions of the intelligence community and the gradual adoption of new practices and approaches.\textsuperscript{18} Western intelligence services have shifted some of their resources to studying issues previously seen as of lesser importance, including arms proliferation, regional contingencies, terrorism, organized crime and drugs trafficking, even environmental and humanitarian problems.\textsuperscript{19} At the same time, new technologies have been incorporated, as with the US Intelink and the exploitation of digital open source information.\textsuperscript{20} Additionally, there has been a limited breaking down of institutional barriers. On the one hand, defence intelligence organizations have begun to cooperate with law enforcement, on the other hand Anglo-American and NATO services have begun to cooperate with PfP and the NATO invitee nations.\textsuperscript{21}

These evolutionary changes – in focus, technology and cooperative structures – have been welcome in ensuring that the intelligence community continues to serve its customers. However, on the whole these reforms have tended to be conceived as ad hoc reforms to external pressures – whether geopolitical or budgetary. This approach appears to have generated a concern in the intelligence community that it is consistently behind the curve and running to catch up with a fluid and unpredictable environment. The fact that this perception is not uncommon amongst institutions and individuals in the wider world indicates that there may be a broader context within which intelligence reform can be conceptualized. This context can loosely be defined as postmodernity.

POSTMODERNITY AND POSTMODERNISM

By self-definition, there can be no overarching definition of postmodernism or of postmodernity. Quite apart from the fact that the concepts remain bitterly contested, on its own grounds postmodernism ‘rejects epistemological assumptions, refutes methodological conventions, resists knowledge claims, obscures all versions of the truth, and dismisses policy recommendations’.\textsuperscript{22} It is therefore hard to see how these concepts can contribute to a description of an activity as policy-oriented and ‘realist’ as intelligence, let alone provide a prescription for intelligence reform.

This section nonetheless seeks to lay the groundwork for just such an application. It does so by providing a brief overview of the intellectual genealogy of the concepts, distinguishing between postmodernity and postmodernism and identifying key themes of relevance to intelligence.
As noted above, the concepts of modernity and modernism are generally taken to refer to the European social, economic, cultural and political forms that developed between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. The term postmodern first emerged in the 1930s but only really began to be used in the West in the 1950s and 1960s to refer to cultural developments. It was not until the 1970s that the term emerged into the intellectual mainstream and began to be applied more widely across all intellectual disciplines and also to social theory.

As it emerged into the mainstream in the late 1970s, the concept evolved two distinct but inter-related components, postmodernism and postmodernity. Postmodernism refers to the emergence of new approaches towards knowledge and the processes of creating knowledge. Those who used the term in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s referred mainly to new aspects and forms of culture and the arts, notably architecture. However, Lyotard’s 1979 survey of the state of the academy crossed disciplinary boundaries and identified an emerging postmodern state of knowledge and of science. For Lyotard, postmodern approaches to knowledge reject the modernist legitimacy of meta-narratives and celebrate and emphasize different perspectives. In relation to the social sciences, postmodernism challenges the privileging of the ‘objective’ scientific method, arguing that ‘truth’ is contextually dependent and culturally determined.

The postmodern cultural and epistemological condition did not, however, arise autonomously. A succession of theorists has sought to identify linkages between the changed cultural forms and intellectual processes identified by postmodernism and the social and economic conditions of the contemporary environment. Jameson, for instance, sought to correlate ‘new forms of practice and social and mental habits … with the new forms of economic production and organization thrown up by the modification of capitalism … in recent years’.

Postmodernity, therefore, ‘refers to an object of study – postmodernity is the study of the temporal and spatial organization, and the complex interaction, of economic, political and cultural processes in the late twentieth century’. Three broad theoretical perspectives emerge from the literature on postmodernity.

First, critics of the concept of postmodernity argue that there are more historical continuities than discontinuities in the contemporary era and that theorists of postmodernity have not explained the dynamic or the nature of the supposed epochal break between modernity and postmodernity. Rather, these critics argue, the contemporary era represents a sub-phase in modernity, which some label ‘high modernity’. In this phase, the modern structures of the bureaucratic state and capitalism are intensified and
combine to eliminate the last vestiges of traditional society. A notable critique of postmodernism, for instance, is that contemporary economic globalization is merely an intensification of processes in train since at least the sixteenth century.

A second perspective is that society is in the process of transition to a postmodern era. In this transitional phase, there co-exist traditional ‘pre-modern’, modern and postmodern forms. This transitional perspective reflects the recognition that radical social change occurs unevenly and over very long periods.

A third perspective is that society has already entered a truly postmodern era which marks a radical break from the past. Proponents of this view disagree over the periodization of this epochal break, with Peter Drucker putting it as far back as sometime between the 1930s and 1950s for the United States.

Whichever perspective one takes, most analysts agree that there are significant economic and technological changes underway that are impacting on social structures and on individuals. At the macro level, industrial-era political and economic systems are fragmenting and restructuring from capital intensive mass production, urbanized nation states into knowledge intensive, dispersed and globalized systems. The key features of this new landscape are:

- **Post-industrialism.** This concept highlights the way in which the balance of the workforce and economic value have shifted from fabricating goods in industries to processing information in the service sector. Daniel Bell, the earliest theorist of this development, argued that the emergence of the service economy reduced the significance of industrial-era factors of production, such as labour and capital and increased the significance of information and knowledge as factors of production. At the same time, this era is characterized by a shift from machine technology to intellectual technology.

- **Post-Fordism.** This concept highlights the decline of the mass-production model epitomized by the Taylorian ideal. In the post-industrial economy, products are differentiated and niche-marketed and workers are more involved in the production process.

- **Globalization.** This concept emphasizes the notion that, since social, economic and informational processes take place on a planetary scale, modern units such as states and corporations can no longer control them. The global electronic financial system is often cited as the paradigmatic instance of this trend as it has eroded the ability of national governments to manage their finances.
It is also generally accepted by social theorists that these components of postmodernity are fuelled by technological developments. Indeed, some observers go so far as to identify electronic communications media and the digitization of information as the predominant drivers of change.35

At the level of individual social organizations and of persons, postmodern society pushes states and corporations into periodic crises as they struggle to manage the changing environment. Meanwhile, for both social groups and individuals, the process of constructing individual identities is increasingly a self-reflexive activity as traditional certainties dissolve. More generally, modernist conceptualizations of identity, community and the place are being undermined by the emergence of multiple identities, the merging of man and machine and the emergence of cyberspace as an alternative space-time.36

Using both postmodern perspectives on epistemology and postmodernity as a description of contemporary society, it is possible to draw out five core postmodern themes:

- **The end of grand narratives.** A central theme of postmodernism is the rejection of modernist thinking that searches for grand, unified theories of society and knowledge and for comprehensive explanations of social activities. Postmodernism replaces the grand narrative with alternative discourses and provides access to fragmented world-views. Furthermore, whereas modernity emphasised linearity and progressive historical advance, postmodernism substitutes non-linearity, recursiveness and chaos.

- **The end of the search for absolute ‘truths’.** Postmodernism rejects the notion of ‘objective’ truths and instead acknowledges the role of the researcher as an agent and participant. Rather than making ‘observations’ of a unified reality, postmodernism provides ‘readings’ that take account of the social and linguistic structures underpinning the creation of knowledge.

- **Absent centres and uncertain identities.** Postmodernism challenges the most fundamental underpinnings of modernist thought relating to individual identity. Postmodernism deconstructs the socio-linguistic constructions that underpin binary opposites such as male/female, human/machine, local/global. Theorists argue that their analysis reflects contemporary society in which technological, social and economic changes are breaking down these binaries.

- **Fluid boundaries.** Linked to the above is the notion that the hard-edged boundaries of modernist thought are becoming permeable. At the level of meta-narrative, rival modernist approaches (political economy-technological determinism-social constructivism; liberalism-Marxism)
are being replaced by more fluid and multifaceted explanations. At an empirical level, the boundaries between states, regions, cultures and corporations are becoming more blurred as a result of economic, technological and social change.

- The knowledge economy. Economists and cultural theorists agree on the emergence of a knowledge economy and the demassification of production in emerging post-industrial societies. This development has far reaching implications for the ‘disorganization’ of society, ranging from the replacement of hierarchical structures by networks, and the replacement of broadcast media by interactive personalized media, to the end of corporate loyalties and the rise of the autonomous ‘knowledge worker’.

POSTMODERN INTELLIGENCE

The analytical perspectives and conceptual frameworks of postmodernism have been applied to a range of social phenomena, including the arts, commerce, societal relations and government. Recently, there have been efforts to explore the utility of these concepts in relation to institutions that, on the face of it, represent the essence of modernity, such as the military. The debate over postmodern militaries provides a useful perspective on intelligence since the institutions in question share many characteristics.

Scholars engaged in the debate over postmodern militaries are seeking to ‘assess the relevance of … postmodern concept(s) as a tool of analysis in the study of present-day military institutions’.37 This debate is an attempt to go beyond the use of one-dimensional analytical constructs such as ‘post-Cold War’ to describe the changes being experienced by contemporary armed forces in West Europe and the United States. The search for a conceptual framework, within which to analyze these changes, has been made more pressing by increasing evidence of significant changes in the roles, missions and organizational structures of armed forces. These changes are taking place at a time when the role of nation states in conflict appears to be decreasing and Western militaries are becoming ever more marginalized from their societies.

Among sociologists of the military there is little consensus on the usefulness of applying concepts of postmodernism to contemporary armed forces. Indeed, two prominent scholars suggest that ‘it may be more appropriate to argue that the military, as a conservative organization, has resisted some of the changes towards modernity... but is now moving more strikingly into modernity from a more primordial organizational form’.38

In light of the close historical and institutional links between Western armed forces and Western intelligence organizations, it is tempting to read
across from the debate over postmodern militaries to intelligence. After all, are not both institutions classic representatives of the modern, bureaucratic state? Moreover, many of the issues surrounding post-Cold War roles and missions are similar for military and intelligence institutions. There certainly will be lessons to be drawn, especially when considering those portions of the intelligence community that have the closest relationships to the armed forces, such as the service and defence intelligence organizations.

However, the intelligence community as a whole cannot simply be read as an analogue to the military. There are two main differences. First, the historical emergence of the two institutions was not contemporaneous. Today’s armed forces evolved gradually over centuries whereas today’s Western intelligence community essentially sprung into being in the late modern period of the mid-twentieth century. Second, since the very essence of intelligence is the production of knowledge, there is a prima facie case for it to be more affected than the armed forces by the trends that postmodernism identifies. As outlined above, these trends are rooted in transformations both in the nature of knowledge and in the institutionalization of knowledge activities.

To examine the usefulness of postmodernism in understanding contemporary Western intelligence it is enlightening to match the five postmodern themes noted above with changes taking place in the intelligence business:

- **Fragmentation of targets, roles and missions.** Intelligence’s ‘grand narrative’ ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now, the intelligence community has to understand multiple, overlapping and often contradictory narratives. Just as post-modern literature has ‘discovered’ the voices of excluded and marginalized social groups, so postmodern intelligence has begun to ‘discover’ previously marginalized targets. Furthermore, the Cold War focus on the USSR enabled the intelligence community to relax intellectually – developments were apparently incremental and linear. Today, the community must understand a world that appears chaotic and developments that display the properties of non-linear, dynamic systems.

- **‘Mysteries not puzzles’.** Joseph Nye’s phrase captures an aspect of the problem identified by postmodernism in its critique of the modernist scientific method.39 Whereas Cold War intelligence knew the problem and could envisage an objective reality that it was seeking to comprehend, contemporary intelligence is in the position of not even knowing if there is a single objective reality out there that it is trying to capture.

- **Identity.** At the micro level, intelligence personnel follow the rest of society in finding their identities challenged from multiple directions.
Indeed, in the technology-rich world of intelligence, the human/machine dichotomy is particularly under threat with the rise of cyborg concepts and automated systems. At the macro level, identities are also under question. During the Cold War there was no doubt for whom and against whom the Western intelligence community worked. This is changing as it becomes unclear for which government department, for which state, for which multinational organization or, indeed, for which corporation, intelligence is being produced.

- **Fluid boundaries.** Interestingly enough, the UKUSA Sigint community meant that, in certain respects, Western intelligence was ‘globalized’ long before the term came to be widely applied. Nonetheless, during the Cold War there were clear and fairly impermeable boundaries within which the community worked. In the contemporary environment, these boundaries are becoming fluid and permeable. On the one hand, horizontal knowledge networks are beginning to rival vertical national structures as means for generating knowledge and producing intelligence. On the other hand, boundaries of loyalty and professional expertise are being eroded. The free flow of previously classified technologies and expertise to the private sector and the increasing use of commercial off-the-shelf technologies and expertise by the intelligence community highlight this transformation.

- **The end of the intelligence factory.** The classic concept of an ‘intelligence factory’ is as dated as its industrial counterparts. The knowledge economy, driven by technology and social change, is changing the intelligence business just as it is changing commerce, government and the armed forces.

**OPERATIONALIZING POSTMODERN INTELLIGENCE**

In order to ground this discussion, it is helpful to consider some concrete ways in which the contemporary environment challenges the intelligence community. All four examples used here are instances of the changes that characterize postmodern society.

**The Information Revolution.** It is not yet clear whether telematics and digital technologies are ‘merely’ transformative technologies that will change social, economic and political structures, as did the car, telephone and television earlier this century, or whether they truly represent an information revolution along the lines of the adoption of the Roman alphabet or the introduction of moveable type. Advocates of the concept of an ‘Information Age’ would have us believe the latter. They argue that, as with previous information revolutions, the widespread adoption of cyber and digital technologies will revolutionize our societies in ways we cannot yet conceive.
Even if we take a more cautious view, however, and see information and communication technologies (ICT) as merely transformative, the implications for intelligence are profound. Two implications are perhaps of most significance – organizational and cultural. Organizationally, the information revolution poses challenges to existing structures and bureaucracies. Existing intelligence organizations, just like corporations and armed forces, emerged in the industrial era on the factory model. They are hierarchical, stove-piped, replete with middle managers and relatively inflexible. Contemporary ICTs both enable and require the adoption of flatter, networked and more flexible, task-oriented structures.43

Culturally, the implications of the ICT revolution are profounder, if as yet harder to conceptualize. As knowledge increases in importance as a factor of production compared to capital and labour, so knowledge workers become empowered. Although it represents the epitome of a knowledge industry, the intelligence community is only gradually coming to grips with the implications of this profound cultural and structural transformation.

**Open Source Information:** Open Source Information (OSINF) has risen to prominence as a result of several factors. These include: geopolitical changes that have freed up sources of information; the ICT revolution that has transformed the collection, collation and dissemination of information; and the expanded range of targets that have to be covered which have made many of the intelligence community’s existing databases obsolete. These factors have ushered in a situation where OSINF can provide the baseline for all intelligence work and where many intelligence questions can be answered from open sources.

OSINF raises fundamental questions regarding intelligence process and structure. In an OSINF environment, just what is intelligence and what is the added value of intelligence products? Traditional trade-offs between timeliness, accuracy and comprehensiveness need to be re-examined when policy-makers receive instantaneous reporting via satellite television and combat troops can download and analyse high resolution commercial satellite imagery onto their laptops. OSINF exacerbates the structural challenges posed by the broader information revolution. Information and knowledge required by the intelligence community increasingly resides in horizontal, transnational, unclassified knowledge networks, comprising both datasets and individuals. These horizontal knowledge networks undermine existing approaches that privilege vertical integration, compartmentalization and classification.

**Information Operations:** Information Operations (IO) provide a particularly problematic instance of the trends outlined above. Offensive IO and perception management require long-term, in-depth and timely cultural, psychological and political knowledge. Generating actionable intelligence
on these subjects requires a multi-faceted approach that considers all sides of the issue and deconstructs a range of linguistic and sociological discourses to comprehend the target. Furthermore, the requisite knowledge often resides more in non-intelligence communities and networks than it does within established intelligence organizations. Intelligence Preparation of the IO Battlespace will therefore require novel methods and structures for collection and analysis.44

Defensive IO, or strategic information assurance, meanwhile, requires comprehensive, real-time monitoring of cyberspace including public, private and transnational networks. This is an activity which cannot be carried out by existing departmental or national intelligence structures but which will instead involve a new paradigm of information sharing between the public and private sectors as well as between and across state boundaries.45

Dynamic change: The fact that human affairs represent a dynamic system characterized by non-linear and chaotic behaviour should come as no surprise to any student of history. There are three reasons why this feature has recently gained more systematic attention.

First, in national security terms, the Cold War provided a reasonably predictable and linear framework. This has disappeared and has been replaced by a ‘chaotic’ global environment where ‘unexpected’ change is the norm.

Second, advances in information theory and complexity theory, based on work in the physical sciences, may give us a framework for conceptualizing and understanding seemingly chaotic events.46

Third, the information revolution and associated revolutions in military and media affairs have accelerated the pace of decision-making. The challenge of accelerating the political and military OODA (observation, orientation, decision, action) loop is testing existing systems to their limits.

Intelligence is responding to this challenge by exploring alternative approaches to predicting, forecasting and identifying possible futures. One approach developed in the UK has been to focus on exposing analysts to alternative mindsets in order to inculcate a more flexible approach towards forecasting and trend analysis.47 The challenge is to ensure that intelligence comes to terms with the ‘fact of continuing change’.48

RIDING THE WAVE

The discussion above has used aspects of postmodern theory to examine and describe the changing environment and nature of intelligence. The same perspectives can be used to derive prescriptions of ways in which intelligence can ‘go with the flow’ of change in order to ensure that its institutions, structures and practices are adapted to a new era. The intention is to enable the intelligence community to ride the wave of change rather
than falling into the trap of being ‘scientific and technological revolutionaries, but political and institutional conservatives’.49

Prescriptively, a postmodern analysis would lead to the conclusion that intelligence needs to embrace sometimes painful bureaucratic and cultural upheavals but that failure to do so will make existing intelligence organizations and processes increasingly irrelevant to the needs of their consumers. There are three key concepts with implications for the intelligence business.

First, the concept of a Knowledge Industry: Intelligence should embrace its essential nature as a knowledge industry. In the digitized age, this has significant implications, including delayering, the end of the intelligence factory and altered processes and cultural norms.

Second, the concepts of Absent Centres and Fluid Borders: Intelligence should embrace the fluid set of mutating identities that are being thrust upon it. There is no longer a single answer to the question of who are intelligence’s customers. These will be in constant flux, as indeed will be the organizations and individuals who make up the intelligence community. Therefore, the Cold War model of a closely knit and exclusionary intelligence community must be discarded. Horizontal knowledge networks need to be embraced, even at the expense of vertical integration. Knowledge must be sought where it resides, whether by topic (on obscure geographic regions, on Cyberia, on cults etc), or by source (NGOs, corporations, other governments or other departments).

Third, there should be a recognition of the Fact of Change: entwined with all the above themes is the fact of continuing change that is dynamic, non-linear and accelerating. This change characterizes all areas of interest to intelligence – politics, society, technology and economics. It is perhaps the hardest of postmodern developments to comprehend, let alone to analyze. This development has profound implications for the ways in which intelligence carries out its collection, assessment and forecasting functions.

OPENING THE DEBATE

The aim of this article has been to explore the applicability of postmodernism as a conceptual framework for understanding the changes affecting contemporary Western intelligence organizations. It has been argued that several key themes within postmodern epistemology and social theory do indeed capture the experience of contemporary intelligence. Moreover, it has been argued that characterization of these changes as postmodern provides an analytical framework within which prescriptions can be drawn up that will enable intelligence to meet the requirements of the new environment.
Inevitably, there are many problems with drawing on postmodernism as a tool for description, let alone for prescription. Three caveats stand out.

First, there is the obvious point that postmodernist thought and social theory do not form a coherent body but are rather, in many respects, incoherent. It is possible to argue that this article has privileged certain aspects of postmodern thought at the expense of other, equally valid components. Therefore, unless the content of the term postmodern is strictly defined, in practice application of the concept may serve more to confuse than to enlighten.

Second, postmodern thought is concerned with sweeping societal change over decades, rather than with short-term geopolitical shifts, such as the fall of the Soviet Union. Postmodernism privileges broad, generic social forces over historically specific events. This problem is encountered whenever postmodern theorists are challenged to periodize the modern and the postmodern – typically a very wide range of dates are put forward for the start of the transitional era. Therefore, any application of the concept will have to distinguish carefully between the more ‘obvious’ historically specific reasons for many of the changes in the business of intelligence and the less obvious but longer term reasons for change.

Third, as with militaries, intelligence bureaucracies in contemporary Western societies tend still to be bastions of modernist meta-narratives of state power, state sovereignty and national security as well as being formalized modern hierarchies. These characteristics are being eroded but Western intelligence remains a quintessentially modern institution, albeit one that is operating at the cutting edge of postmodernity in seeking to understand contemporary societal, political, economic and technological change. This paradox perhaps explains some of the problems faced by contemporary intelligence but it also highlights the difficulties faced by intelligence reformers.

These caveats all point to the difficulty of operationalizing the concept of postmodern intelligence. They do not however detract from the argument that postmodernism provides a valuable perspective on the changes affecting contemporary intelligence. If used cautiously, the framework can also assist in the formulation of prescriptions for the future of intelligence. The task now is to examine more thoroughly the benefits and drawbacks of the postmodern approach and to engage in a debate over postmodern intelligence that can draw on the vibrant debates surrounding the application of postmodernist thought to other institutions.

NOTES

1. The use of the construction ‘postmodern’ rather than ‘Post-Modern’ is designed to highlight the continuities between epochs. Even if we accept that the emerging contemporary epoch is ‘postmodern’ in many respects, there will be no clean break. The future emerges out of the present which in turn emerges from the past; primordial forms persist in later epochs. S. Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1997, 2nd ed.) p.viii.
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4. On these characteristics of intelligence, see R.V. Jones, Reflections on Intelligence (London: Heinemann 1989).


14. Herman (note 11) passim.


47. DERA, *Strategic Assessment Methodology*, private presentation.