

Critical Intelligence Studies ? A Contribution

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Abstract

This article addresses two issues: the nature, status and sense of articulating a 'critical intelligence studies' project, and an introduction to a critical methodology, termed analysis by contrasting narrative (ACN), that is relevant for the practice of intelligence analysis. The two topics relate dialectically to each other as the former situates the latter, and the latter further substantiates the former. Over the last three decades uncertainty and the complexity of the intelligence process have increased. Several intelligence failures led scholars to call for reform or a 'radical revolution' in intelligence but refrained from explicitly articulating the theoretical roots of new thinking in philosophical terms. And therein lies an opportunity to clarify and advance debates in intelligence studies. In this article a specific way of using the term 'critical' is promoted: a self-reflexive attitude that problematizes the essence and workings of 'intelligence' within a socio-political context. ACN integrates theoretical components of sociological securitization and critical discourse analysis to enable identifying different narratives in distinct social orders and analyzing them in terms of securitization efforts. The critical nature of the approach is partly reflected in that the strategic narrative of the intelligence consumer, which situates the intelligence practice, is integrated in the analysis. This requires ex durante cooperation between intelligence analysts, working level policymakers, and possibly trusted outside experts.

Keywords: intelligence analysis, narratives, critical discourse analysis, securitization theory, critical realism

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The Study and Practice of Intelligence

This article¹ aims to contribute to the emerging critical theoretical debate in intelligence studies by advocating the value of a new methodology for analyzing complex intelligence problems. This is not only valuable for the academic study *of* intelligence, but also relevant for the study *for* intelligence, i.e. the practice of intelligence analysis. Adopting the critical theoretical stance such as outlined further on in this study has profound implications. It leads to a fundamentally different view of intelligence than the way intelligence is traditionally perceived in the Western world: rather than “telling truth to power,” intelligence should strive to consider “the most relevant truths” to serve power.

In order to address this new approach, the present article is structured as follows: first, the development of the dominant positivist paradigm in intelligence is clarified. Second, a definition of “critical” (as advanced in Critical Security Studies) is explained, and various critical contributions to the intelligence literature are surveyed. Third, critical realism and its position on causality is outlined, and the theoretical components of critical discourse analysis and securitization are introduced; these enable to develop the methodology of *analysis by contrasting narratives* (ACN) that is valuable for the intelligence practice.² Fourth, possible objections to implementing ACN in the intelligence practice are addressed. Lastly, the academic status of critical approaches to intelligence is discussed.

Reflecting upon the development of the dominant positivist paradigm in Intelligence Studies (IS) is a prior requirement in order to fully understand the contribution of critical approaches. The academic field concerned with “the second oldest profession,” with its expert practice of intuitive operational and analytic tradecraft, is relatively new.³ Only since the Second World War did Western intelligence become more fully institutionalized in agencies that served as comprehensive “libraries for national security”.⁴ Parallel to the bureaucratization of intelligence, technical developments such as the invention of radar or programmable crypto decoding machines had a significant impact on the field. The mathematicians and other academics that were hired to work with (signals) intelligence contributed to an academic professionalization of intelligence.⁵ Parallel to various social sciences, the scientific ideal of the natural sciences was pursued in intelligence: for example, by incorporating a numerical standard for intelligence assessments, or the iconic mathematical threat assessment model (*threat = estimated intentions x estimated capabilities x observed activities*).⁶ The ultimate aim was to find the objective ground truth. Until today, this positivist empiricist paradigm of discovering truth has remained dominant in the practice and study of intelligence.⁷

But intelligence is different from positivist science. First, there exists a tension between the scientific positivist ideal as it is traditionally adopted in IS, and