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## EXPERTS OR IMPOSTORS? BLINDNESS AND INSIGHT IN SECRET INTELLIGENCE\*

What is an expert? What makes someone an expert? Expertise, to give at least a micro-definition, is being in the possession of a kind of knowledge and a capability that only few others share. What makes the expert unique is a depth of education and a degree of qualification and experience on a specific topic. Expertise, thus, is highly exclusive, which is what separates it from other forms of knowledge. What everybody knows or what everybody is able to do would hardly be called expertise.<sup>1</sup> The exclusivity of expertise gives experts a certain aura. They are valuable, highly esteemed (and very often highly paid) bearers of such knowledge. However, the problem arising with this exclusivity is how to appraise the individual quality of an expert's expertise. How can we distinguish an accomplished quantum physicist from an impostor who studied just long enough to pick up a couple of concepts and buzzwords? How can we distinguish a good doctor from a bad one? One would need to be a quantum physicist oneself, or a doctor, for that matter. In other words: Experts always need *other experts* to assess the value and quality of their expertise. This difficulty in the evaluation of an expert's qualification is intrinsic. It calls for certain administrative and epistemological structures and procedures, some of which we all know from the world of academia: academic exams and degrees, peer reviews before publishing, the exchange of ideas at conferences, criticism and reviewing of published research etc. The result of all these practises amounts to what one could call the academic 'reputation' or 'market value' of an expert – and this value is mostly constituted by the

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\* This contribution, which is rather oral in style, outlines facets of a topic that has been treated in more depth by the author in the sources listed in notes 5 and 13.

<sup>1</sup> For a general definition of the concept of expertise, see: *The Nature of Expertise*, ed. by MICHELENE T. H. CHI/ ROBERT GLASER/ MARSHALL J. FARR, Hillsdale 1988; for a broad overview over different aspects: *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*, ed. by K. ANDERS ERICSSON et al., Cambridge 2006.

opinion of other experts. The goal of these academic rituals and rules is the creation (and perpetuation) of exclusivity: It means (in an ideal world) excluding the unqualified, the non-committed or, worst case, the impostors from the serious business of being a real expert in one's field.<sup>2</sup>

However, we should not forget that academia is not the only field creating the specific exclusivity of expert knowledge. Very often, expertise is exclusive not only in order to safeguard its quality, but simply in order to limit its accessibility, mostly for economic (and sometimes political) reasons. Think, for instance, of patents (i.e. the legally acknowledged ownership of a certain type of technological idea or procedure). The registration of a patent enables its circulation, but restricts the technical and commercial use of this knowledge to those who pay for it. Think of business secrets (such as the recipe for Coca Cola) or of what one could call 'the tricks of the trade'. These secrets are highly treasured goods whose circulation must be limited precisely to preserve their value – or rather: their price. And so are the experts who produce them: They are highly paid and bound by secrecy clauses and other rules to not ever divulge their knowledge, even if they leave the organization. Thinking about the nature of experts and expert knowledge, we have to keep in mind these intrinsic limitations. Knowledge floating freely to whoever is interested in it might be an ideal of scientific exchange and cutting-edge research, but it is certainly not the regular case in the production, circulation and usage of expert knowledge.

The type of knowledge I would like to discuss here is a very specific kind of expert knowledge. As a matter of fact, secret intelligence is exclusive in a much more radical way than scientific, economic or technological expertise. That is why, despite the lurid associations one might have in mind when it comes to the world of espionage and secret agents, secret intelligence can be used as a paradigmatic example for the difficulties and fallacies arising in the creation, processing and assessment of highly exclusive knowledge. Certainly, not every expert is a secret agent, but every secret agent is definitively an expert, and very often in the course of his or her work gets trapped in the constraints and fallacies that the exclusivity of this type of knowledge produces.

For a long time, i.e. during the Cold War, intelligence services saw themselves as quasi-academic institutions researching the world for any kind of information that political or military decision makers might need.

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<sup>2</sup> The Psychology of Expertise. Cognitive Research and Empirical AI, ed. by ROBERT R. HOFFMAN, New York 1992; JULIA EVETTS/ HARALD A. MIEG/ ULRIKE FELT, Professionalization, Scientific Expertise, and Elitism. A Sociological Perspective, in: The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance, p. 105-123.

Intelligence, as one of its most influential theorists, Sherman Kent, defined it, is the threefold operation of gathering, interpreting and evaluating information, and then feeding it into the political process in the form of situation analyses, risk evaluation or preventive information on specific threats to the security of a country.<sup>3</sup> At first glance there is, structurally speaking, very little to distinguish intelligence from scientific research. Intelligence theorists themselves have thus often couched the specific problems of their knowledge production in the terms of theories of science, basing themselves on Karl Popper, Paul Feyerabend or Imre Lakatos.<sup>4</sup> This academic approach to intelligence defines it as a discipline in the general field of empirical social sciences, political science and area studies. It appears to be the prototype of applied science. However, even if the vast intelligence administrations that have been established after World War II might see their work as a kind of research and may even at first glance resemble think tanks or universities, a thoroughly academic idea of intelligence misses the true nature and origin of this particular type of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

The origins of secret intelligence are to be found in war, not in academic research. Sun Tzu, a Chinese strategist of the fourth century B.C., and probably one of the most brilliant theorists of war and espionage, was the first to strongly recommend the use of spies in the preparation of a battle. His basic advice is: 'Know the enemy and know thyself.' Intelligence is the art of gathering reliable information on the enemy to prepare for a battle – or even to avoid the battle, as Sun Tzu puts it: 'To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.'<sup>6</sup> Ever since, intelligence has become an indispensable tool, if not the basis of warfare: It implies the reconnaissance of the battle terrain or of zones of conflict and the spying out of the enemy's troops, weapons, fortresses, resources and – often most importantly – the enemy fighters' morale. In other words: A spy – the expert we are talking about – is essentially a warrior; intelligence is a kind of knowledge that is deeply rooted in war, conflict and violence, even if, ever since the Cold War, conflict may not always lead to an all-out battle. Intelligence is the knowledge of the enemy, be it an exterior enemy or an invisible, potentially internal enemy such as terrorists.

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<sup>3</sup> SHERMAN KENT, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*, Princeton 1949.

<sup>4</sup> ISAAC BEN-ISRAEL, *Philosophy and Methodology of Intelligence. The Logic of Estimate Process*, in: *Intelligence and National Security* 4/4 (1989), p. 660-718.

<sup>5</sup> For a general theory of secret intelligence, see EVA HORN, *Knowing the Enemy. The Epistemology of Secret Intelligence*, in: *Grey Room* 11 (2003), p. 59-85.

<sup>6</sup> SUN TZU, *The Art of War*, Oxford 1963, p. 77.

The kind of knowledge needed in a situation of conflict or imminent danger has two basic characteristics that distinguish it from other types of knowledge: First, it must be produced and communicated very quickly and second, it must be gained (i.e. very often: stolen) and kept in utter secrecy. Information on the enemy is valuable only as long as you have it *before* the attack, and only as long as you have it without the enemy *knowing* that you have it. Secrecy and velocity in the gathering, processing and interpreting of intelligence data are thus vital to the value of the information produced.

Experts in this kind of business must therefore be, first and foremost, fast and clandestine. Their expertise must act on two very different, sometimes heavily conflicting levels: On the one hand, they may be experts of a certain specialization, say nuclear physics, weapons systems or fortification architecture. They must be able to understand the kind of information they are gathering or trading, as do scientists or military experts, and to assess the value of this information. On the other hand, in order to obtain the required data (which is, as a matter of fact, always illegal) they must be experts in what one could call the skills of dissimulation – a psychological form of competence. These skills include, for instance, the art of lying, of make-believe and persuasion, but also of cultural mimicry and psychological manipulation. Persons gathering secret intelligence must be quick in understanding a situation and sensing a looming danger, and they must be self-effacing enough to assume a totally artificial, often mousy personality in order not to attract any attention. Klaus Fuchs, a German physicist who worked at the nuclear research site at Los Alamos building the first atom bomb, stole important material from his work and secretly passed it on to the Soviets between 1941 and 1944. He was an expert in these two senses: an accomplished nuclear physicist, but also an accomplished master of disguise, who managed to live inside a scientific community whose very purpose and work he betrayed without ever raising suspicion. In his trial, he later described the relationship between these two dimensions of his existence as a form of ‘controlled schizophrenia’.<sup>7</sup> Psychological skills and scientific expertise are not necessarily conjoined, a problem which may pose serious problems to the ‘handling’ of these kinds of sources.

Sometimes a scientist or military insider will break down under the stress of suspicion and betray himself, as eventually happened to Klaus Fuchs. Sometimes, however, the art of manipulation and make-believe will dominate over the actual specialization. In other words: There are many people in the shady world of secret intelligence who are not experts in anything but lying or pretending. Traitors and turncoats offer what they

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in MARGRET BOVERI, *Der Verrat im XX. Jahrhundert*, vol. IV, *Verrat als Epidemie*. Amerika, Reinbek 1960, p. 223.

usually call ‘unfailing information’ about their home country, their army or the group they pretend to belong to. This is when the vital question arises how to assess the quality of the information gathered from such sources. It is precisely this type of assessment which is so difficult to make, since – if the information is valuable – there will be no second and third expert view to corroborate the information. If a source is truly good, the information the person provides is unique and the person is the only ‘expert’ on the data in question.

What is needed to assess the value of a source? It necessarily involves questions such as, for example: Is the fake journalist hanging around in the hotel bars of Beirut really a liaison to the Hizbollah – or is he just another poser in search of recognition and money? Intelligence officers deal with these questions all the time, often without ever being able to definitively answer them. In 2002, the German foreign intelligence service BND got in contact with the Iraqi engineer Rafid Ahmed Alwan, who was asking for political asylum in Germany and promised to provide detailed information on mobile laboratories for chemical weapons he had helped to build on the orders of Saddam Hussein.

The question was whether he was just a refugee trying to get a residence permit or a reliable informant on Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction. As we now know, the German and U.S. intelligence officers who interviewed Alwan and famously gave him the name ‘Curveball’ took his information as valuable until it was ultimately revealed in 2007 that he was never more than a compulsive impostor.<sup>8</sup> An impostor, however, who provided exactly the type of information the Bush administration was desperate to get in order to justify starting a war against Iraq. However, there are also cases in which potentially highly valuable information is disbelieved for political reasons: When the KGB Officer Yuri Nosenko defected to the U.S.A. in 1964, he claimed, among other things, to be in possession of important information about Lee Harvey Oswald. But was he perhaps a double agent on the mission of spreading disinformation in the American intelligence community? At least James Jesus Angleton, at the time CIA counterintelligence chief with a wildly paranoid mistrust towards everything and everyone, took him for a Soviet plant. He had him locked up in a CIA safe house for four years and interrogated for almost 1,300 days without ever believing a word Nosenko had to say.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> BOB DROGIN, *Curveball. Spies, Lies, and the Con Man Who Caused a War*, New York 2007.

<sup>9</sup> TOM MANGOLD, *Cold Warrior. James Jesus Angleton. The CIA’s Master Spy Hunter*, New York 1991.

How can we assess the expertise of an expert? Only another expert can. But again, in the case of highly secret and illegally obtained knowledge, there is often only *one* single expert on the very information in question: the person who produced it. It is therefore extremely hard to estimate the veracity of information. Let me give an example: If, for instance, a source provided information about a pending bomb attack prepared by a group of young Muslim students affiliated to Al Qaida, what would we do? Immediately send an anti-terrorist squad to their student flat? Probably not – one would try to double-check. Is there any other evidence for such a plan coming from other sources? Who, one would ask, is this source anyway? Is the person really close to the group? What would be his or her motive to betray their plans? Money? Revenge? Fear? Or, worst case, is it possible that the information is divulged in order to focus the attention of the authorities on a fake case and divert it from the real plan? But, double-checking might reveal the source of the information and put the person in danger, or waste precious time.

To deal with these questions that have a tendency of bordering on unsolvable dilemmas, intelligence services have been organized in a complicated and highly compartmentalized form. Information will never (or only in a tightly controlled way) circulate inside the administration, it will mostly be dealt with by one specialized unit. It will also never circulate outside the house. This means that, for example, the FBI, in tracking down a group of terror suspects, would not obtain relevant information that the CIA already has about them – as happened in the case of one of the 9/11 terrorists, Zacarias Moussaoui. While in academic research, research results or arguments will always have to be widely circulated, evaluated and discussed within the scientific community, in the intelligence community there is no such thing as a peer review.

Karl Popper stressed the difficulty of ultimately verifying any claim to truth and instead pointed to the importance of falsification as a methodological principle.<sup>10</sup> In intelligence, there is no such possibility of falsifying a given hypothesis because there are hardly any peers who do similar and parallel research and who might come up with entirely different results or explanations. Moreover, no one will point to the fact that a certain approach might just be asking the wrong questions, calling for what in academia would be called a ‘paradigm shift’.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of lateral circulation of knowledge between equals – a situation that is at least an ideal in academia – intelligence data take strictly hierarchical paths. Let us return to the example of information on a possible

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. KARL POPPER, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London 1959.

<sup>11</sup> THOMAS S. KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1996.

terror threat from a student group. The information comes from, say, the sister of one of the students who is concerned about her brother's strange behaviour. She conveys it, possibly unaware that she is giving away harmful information, to a covert police liaison agent, a Muslim woman working in a café and picking up the gossip in some ethnic hotspot neighbourhood at the outskirts of London, Paris or Madrid. The liaison agent now shares her knowledge with the field officer in charge of her. The field officer puts it on file, writes a report and passes it on to his chief of section. The chief of section now will first of all try to ascertain the quality of the sources and ask additional questions: Who is the liaison? Why would someone tell her this? Who is the source? What do we know about her? Does anything in the story sound familiar or match data we already have? Do we have anything on the brother? The chief of section will also forward the information to her superiors, who might eventually start connecting the information with other cases from other sections of the administration.

This almost exclusively upward circulation of information, which has been called the 'stovepipes of knowledge' by former intelligence officer Melissa Boyle Mahle, is certainly an important tool to keep information from spreading between the departments.<sup>12</sup> This structure was essential in the times of the Cold War, when every colleague was a potential mole from the other side. The stovepipe system maintains the exclusivity of information, a security measure that was indispensable in an age when enemy secret services spent a great deal of time infiltrating each other's systems. With the stovepipe system, a mole in another intelligence department would never get his or her eyes on information he or she was not directly dealing with. But this system is less than appropriate for the situation today. Being built on hierarchical compartmentalization, it prevents or obstructs *lateral* double-checking – and, what is worse, makes it much harder to connect the dots of a situation on which one only has fragmented and partial information.

The stovepipe system, however, also serves as an anti-hysteria device, or rather, anti-impostor technique. The main concern of the chief of section when she receives the report from her field agent will be to question the source. She will urge her field agent – and perhaps even other field agents not in contact with the source and the liaison – to check on the sister. Do we have anything about her on the record? Does she have a reason to tell lies about her brother? Could we approach her directly? Should she be put under scrutiny? And how about the liaison? Is she in it for the money? Might she just be in need of new, interesting material in order to stay on

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<sup>12</sup> MELISSA BOYLE MAHLE, *Denial and Deception. An Insider's View of the CIA from Iran-Contra to 9/11*, New York 2004.



our payroll? Or does she have private motives? What looks like an extremely distrustful and cumbersome reaction in fact has some quite good reasons. In the absence of the possibility to falsify information through peer experts, extensive double-checking is practically the only way of assessing its value. Where information cannot be verified openly and at face value, the only way to evaluate it is the evaluation of the person who produces it: *expert or impostor*? As the source and bearer of the specific kind of knowledge that secret intelligence is interested in, the expert is, at the same time, the only criterion to assess the quality of his or her expertise. The entire administration of secret intelligence thus is conceived to create experts who are able to evaluate other experts. Superiors are poised to distrust the material coming in from the field. While the agents who are busy 'out in the field' tend to trust their contacts (otherwise they would not be able to work with them) and to have similar perceptions of a given situation as their sources (since they belong to the same milieu), the secret intelligence administration receiving, processing and interpreting this information tends to have a more distanced and sceptical approach. What clashes here are not only two different sides in the process of intelligence production – the gathering vs. the interpretation of data – but also two different kinds of expertise. While the field agents are pragmatic, often military-trained experts in the art of clandestine activities, psychological manipulation and the discreet gathering of information, the hierarchically superior administration personnel are university graduates with more academic specializations such as the interpretation of military imagery, immigrant Muslim communities in Western Europe or illegal money transfer systems. What we have here is a chasm between two different, incommensurable and yet equally necessary forms of expertise: the psychological skills, the practical experience, the instinct and the personal bonds an agent forges with his or her sources versus the academic training, the theory, the rational approach, the so-called 'bigger picture' – two forms of expertise that certainly complement one another, but very often also collide.

Let me return to my initial remarks on the exclusivity of expertise. The exclusivity that defines expertise derives from specific social, educational and legal limitations of who may claim to be an expert and who will be recognized as such. Without a certain training, without certain tests and other forms of quality control, there would not be any recognizable expertise. However, the more exclusive a form of knowledge becomes, the more it is limited to a very small number of people able to double-check a set of data or an information, the harder it gets to evaluate the quality of someone's expertise. Secret intelligence represents an extreme of exclusivity through the ways in which it keeps its information secret, compartmentalizes its knowledge and treats its own product with a mix of mistrust, cau-



tiousness and hysteria. But the problem might not just be limited to the shady world of spies and anti-terror units. The more limited the access to a certain kind of knowledge, the more the circulation and critical assessment of knowledge and expertise is stymied, the more this paradoxically creates all sorts of epistemological pathologies: not just utter errors, but the possibility of make-believe, of impostors posing as experts and ultimately – and this might be the worst – a blindness that consists in asking the wrong questions or searching for answers in the wrong places. To provide a closing historical example: In spite of all the cleverness the Western intelligence community invested into guarding their administrations against enemy infiltration, one thing they were never able to conceive of was the fact that this enemy was in a dramatic decline. Nobody foresaw the end of the Cold War because all the experts were looking in the wrong direction. There was no one to falsify or to point out a different perspective. Perhaps the real danger lies not so much in impostors posing as experts but rather in experts blinded by their own expertise and its dazzling exclusivity, experts who are unable to realize that they have become impostors.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a more comprehensive view on the history and epistemology of secret intelligence in the twentieth century, see EVA HORN, *Der geheime Krieg. Verrat, Spionage und moderne Fiktion*, Frankfurt am Main 2007.