

# Karl Deutsch: Teacher and scholar

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## Abstract

The article provides a reminiscence of Karl Deutsch as a teacher and scholar. I examine his scholarship and focus on its enduring qualities. In particular, I highlight how he was a passionate advocate of innovative approaches to enduring political problems. His comprehensive theoretical vision, with central concepts such as communication and learning, remains as inspiring as his methodological eclecticism. It offers a synthesis of traditional sociology of the Europe he had left behind with the rationalist empiricism that he encountered in America.

## Keywords

communication, international relations, Karl Deutsch, learning, politics, power

In thinking about Karl Deutsch as a teacher and scholar, one fact stands out.<sup>1</sup> His mind soared. What was extraordinary for all around him was to him simply a way of life. This accounts for Karl's easy manner as the absent-minded professor and brilliant scholar who slept late, taught in the afternoon, and wrote all night. His corpus of work was as enormous as it was varied. Most of the core ideas that informed his scholarship were published in the early 1950s in an explosion of novel ideas that he developed subsequently. His prodigious output included numerous co-authorships across multiple disciplines. His intellect ranged from history to simulation, from developing new statistical measures to the enthusiastic use of aggregate data, from computerized and hand-coded content analysis to experimental psychology, from literature to the philosophy of science. Karl's intellectual range dazzled – then as now. Today's more monochromatic international relations (IR) research streamlines scholars to intellectual niches most of which were included in his encompassing vision and practice of research. What sets

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Karl's work apart from many methodological advances in contemporary research was a central, powerful idea that anchored his work substantively in all methodological, theoretical, and epistemological discussions. Karl was a gregarious and interactive scholar who embodied the power of communication, the concept that was at the center of his scholarship.

## Teacher

Karl's soaring happened spontaneously in any setting: while answering questions in a lecture hall filled with 250 undergraduates; while debating research strategies in an advanced graduate seminar; and in discussions, one-on-one. Karl often appeared to be unprepared for class, ready to jump on any possible diversion. The unfocused questions of his students were opportunities for him to teach how to soar. Rather than 'winging it', he was simply taking another exhilarating leap. Working his magic – a blend of analytical abstraction steeped in relevant evidence and presented with telling detail called up from an evidently inexhaustible store of historical knowledge – Karl never shied away from taking intellectual risks in the classroom. Attempts to make an ordinary idea, any idea, soar, or to extract a testable hypothesis, any hypothesis, from a confused insight, entailed the risk of having to abort during take-off or suffering the occasional indignity of a crash landing. Devoid of professorial stuffiness, Karl accepted this as the inevitable by-product of creative thinking and vigorous teaching rather than a cause for embarrassment. Typically, though, he would succeed effortlessly in getting that ordinary idea or confused insight off the ground, and in reformulating and extending it until its origin was almost unrecognizable. And then he would cut the string quickly, look around the room with a faint smile, thus sharing with all the sense of a world full of exciting, unthought thoughts. Karl never paraded his brilliance; rather, he used that brilliance to sharpen ideas and correct misconceptions. He never treasured insights as his own; he always insisted that ideas were a common property.

His attitude toward teaching was almost cavalier in its emphasis on improvisation and spontaneity. I was a teaching assistant for his introductory IR lecture course for Harvard undergraduates in the fall of 1971. Karl had taught that course for many years and his lectures were eventually recorded and put out as a thin, brilliantly accessible volume.<sup>2</sup> Its approach and that of the course was conceptual, a kind of potpourri with little attention paid to underlying sets of arguments that would make things cohere for undergraduates. Teaching was performance, and for Karl a brilliant one at that. The teaching assistants were spell-bound. The students quickly figured out that reading the book was for the most part sufficient for passing the final exam. Attendance dropped sharply. I do not recall Karl making any effort to instill in his teaching assistants any sense of pedagogy. His teaching was for the moment and the bright students who would take from it what they could. The rest would have to fend for themselves.

Graduate student teaching followed the same mold. Karl was not one to 'train' students. Scholarship was not a job or profession but a calling or vocation and smart students were expected to get the skills and data to produce good work. For one of his graduate seminars I learned econometrics well enough for constructing a simple non-recursive model, gathered original statistical data for the communications among

nineteenth-century central European states, learned how to program in FORTRAN, and wrote a research paper. It all was quite amateurish by today's standards of graduate education. But I worked very hard and learned more in that seminar than dancing artfully on the head of a pin. Karl taught by charisma and, at least for me, it worked. It must have worked for him because preparation for graduate and undergraduate teaching was not very time-consuming. Karl was just there in the classroom, being himself, surrounded by ideas which he could play with, reformulate, and enjoy.

Karl's appetite for acquiring new data and insights about virtually any subject was voracious. On matters of evidence, he was an unrelenting egalitarian. Everyone was entitled to their opinion; no one was entitled to their facts. Karl's ability to probe data was legendary. Large correlation matrices and detailed episodes of the most minor historical events were a source of endless fascination for him. He did not like 'stylized facts'. He wanted 'real facts'. Carefully sifted and properly presented facts, Karl insisted, would eventually disprove mistaken theoretical and political claims. On this score his generosity and easy manner gave way to a steely determination. He pushed his students very hard to go back to the library, time and again, to look harder for better data. He did not seem to notice the occasional bouts of discouragement or exhaustion that his students suffered. Yet, he did not threaten or cajole. Instead, he would peer through thick glasses mournfully while cheerfully announcing 'I know you can do better'.

## Scholar

Karl was an immensely prolific scholar whose work is only partly reflected in the contribution of this volume. With the exception of some of his books, much of it has been forgotten and is no longer read or cited. I thus list here the top dozen articles and book chapters that exemplify various facets of his work that have left a lasting impression – at least on me.<sup>3</sup>

Karl's scholarship has endured in the two areas that preoccupied him. The break-up of the Dual Monarchy and the excesses of nationalist militarism shaped profoundly his scholarship on nationalism and supranational integration. These two topics are intimately connected: theoretically through the underlying theory of communication and methodologically through the broad range of qualitative and quantitative methods that Karl deployed to study them.

Sociological in orientation, his work was deeply indebted both to Otto Bauer's study of the nationality problem of the Austro-Hungarian empire (as was true of Benedict's Anderson's notion of print capitalism 30 years later) and to the emerging field of cybernetics which he encountered when he met Norbert Wiener at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the late 1940s. Karl's main books applied key insights of cybernetics to politics (*The Nerves of Government*), to nationalism (his prize-winning dissertation published virtually without change as *Nationalism and Social Communication* and two decades later his brilliantly accessible *Nationalism and Its Alternatives*), and to supranational security communities (*Political Community and the North Atlantic Area and Background to Community*, a massive, unpublished volume of historical case studies that provided the detailed evidence for the telescoped summary of the published book).

The substantive work remains as relevant today as it was 50 years ago. Nationalism, Karl argued, was the central political force of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The reason was plain, at least to him. Rates of social mobilization were outstripping rates of cultural assimilation by a substantial margin. In the great IR debate of the 1960s (with Stanley Hoffmann's inter-governmentalism and Ernst Haas' neo-functionalism), Karl remained a skeptic on the prospects of European integration. The data on mass communications pointed in a different direction. As we now know, all three of the protagonists of this debate held onto important parts of the elephant, and each got important parts of the story right, testimony to the insights we can gain from the complementary insights of different paradigmatic orientations in IR.

Karl was a rationalist to the core and a cautious optimist who was in love with intellectual subversion. His social democratic roots were cosmopolitan. Kepler, he delighted in recounting, was hired as the astrologer of the Danish court only to become the founder of modern astronomy.<sup>4</sup> Little did the king know what he was funding. The openness of the process of intellectual discovery and the limits of political power in the face of human ingenuity were two key insights which Karl used to navigate through the turbulence of the late 1960s at Harvard. He disdained power and had no patience for ignorance. He did not fit well either with conservatives, worried over their authority in the academy, or student radicals chanting received, alternative truths. Although he was one of the foremost scholars of nationalism Karl did not take a strong stand against the Vietnam War. Area specialists like Cornell's George Kahin did and insisted that the Vietnam War was about nationalism not Communism. In a way, this reticence is a surprise, as Karl, the non-specialist, had published in the early 1950s a prescient piece titled 'Cracks in the Monolith'.<sup>5</sup> Based on his theory of nationalism, he conjectured correctly the coming Sino-Soviet split that specialists, years later, still failed to acknowledge.

Striking in Karl's work is the relative inattentiveness to and disinterest in power as conventionally understood. In the early 1960s, the field of American politics and the Yale political science department where Karl then taught was engaged in a great debate pitting pluralists like Robert Dahl against proponents of elite theory, such as C. Wright Mills, or non-decisions, such as Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz. A few years later, spear-headed by college students, the anti-war movement chanted 'power to the people'. Karl dealt with the turbulent challenges of the 1960s in his distinctive way, embedding them, sometimes obliquely, into a more abstract conceptualization of power and politics that did not speak to the political passions of the student movement. Although he had strong social democratic leanings acquired in his youth in Austria and Czechoslovakia, he did not take a public stance on the issues that engulfed the universities and the United States in the late 1960s – civil rights and the Vietnam War.

Compared to the conceptual clarity and richness of indicators of socio-economic and cultural processes that characterized his work on nationalism and supranationalism, Karl's theory of power and politics was less fully developed. It centered on the Skinnerian concepts of economic reward and punishment. Economic rewards, his studies showed, were vital to the success of integration processes; economic punishments furthered disintegration.

Politics and power that are not embedded in and filtered by social processes resisted Karl's preferred style of analysis. This is particularly relevant in the analysis of processes

of integration and disintegration, as the boundary between domestic and foreign blurs and the stakes for gaining or maintaining control become more pressing for elites and counter-elites alike.<sup>6</sup> Karl was a master of the telling anecdotes to make his magisterial command of economic and social history come alive politically. Yet, his magnificent published work of historical structures and processes was largely devoid of institutions, politics, and power.

This is not to argue that Karl did not pay attention to these topics. His main theoretical book, *The Nerves of Government*, offers a sustained treatment.<sup>7</sup> For Karl, the essence of politics is the dependable coordination of human efforts and expectations in the attainment of social goals. Politics is the central mechanism by which social commitments are produced, preserved, and altered. Habitual compliance and the threat of enforcement constitute politics in its variegated forms. Power gives priority to an agent's output over intake, the ability to talk rather than listen, and to act out rather than modify internalized routines and acquired traits. In this cybernetic formulation, power is the inability or unwillingness to learn. Power politics and the lack of learning is the antidote to the politics of growth with and through learning. Politics thus is a mechanism for retarding or accelerating social learning and innovation.

This formulation leads to a set of images of political systems to which Karl returned time and again – politics as a piece of driftwood (lacking any internal program or pre-defined goals), politics as a torpedo (internally preprogrammed without the capacity of goal modification), and politics as steering (arriving at an appropriate balance between internally defined goals and externally required adaptability). Based on a set of analogies from cybernetics and the field of communication studies, Karl's approach to politics and power thus evoked technocracy with the captain on the bridge of the ship of state, navigating the oceans' harsh elements and the dense traffic of the shipping lanes.

Committed to empirically verifiable and replicable data and robust indicators, Karl was a 'splitter' who favored conceptual disaggregation, rather than a 'lumper'. He distinguished between four different dimensions of power.<sup>8</sup> Weight shifts the probability of a class of outcomes through the activities of an actor or group of actors. Scope delineates the activities that are subject to the effects of power. Domain describes the territory or the sets of people subject to the rule of a political agent. Range describes the width of the amplitude between rewards and deprivation. In his scholarship on power Karl never went much beyond this conceptual discussion, historical anecdotes, and readily available statistics such as the relative size of the government's budget in total gross domestic product (GDP).

Karl's 1970 Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association was dedicated to the discussion of political theory and political action.<sup>9</sup> That speech is particularly instructive and authoritative in bringing together various strands of his thinking. Theory for Karl was not abstract speculation but passionate contemplation. It was urgently needed to reduce the probability of failure of imagination to deal with the two most pressing issues of his time: the eradication of poverty and the avoidance of large-scale war. It was the role of the social sciences to provide myriads of data to assure safe passage on a perilous journey. Understood broadly politics was about the power of society over its own fate.

Karl listed nine aspects of politics that included changes in awareness and insight and what he called the ‘sensitivity training’ of the American people to the issue of civil rights as America’s ‘lie detector’. Enhanced pattern recognition for him required accurate description and critical self-reflection. As long as it contributed to the substantive development of a science of politics, the critical examination of values and of cognitive assumptions, including those embedded in and taken for granted by empirical political theories, remained an indispensable aspect of political theory and practice. Karl dismissed the naysayers, and there were many in the 1960s, of such substantive agenda with the British epigram ‘You use the snaffle and the curb all right, but where’s the bloody horse?’<sup>10</sup> His conception of political steering and political action was inclusive. Atypically for the 1960s he pointed to the need for policy information and advice for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Communication and learning in a context of diversity, pluralism, and tolerance were central to his conceptualization of politics and power.

In the end, politics for Karl was not about power but about learning and empathy. He remained a Central European social democrat at heart, believing in the force of reason and reform, and committed to those at the bottom. ‘Never forget’, he once advised some of us, ‘to send the elevator down again, once you have gotten to the top’.

## Relevance

Karl Deutsch was a passionate advocate of innovative approaches to enduring problems. He was not interested in playing around with small ‘puzzles’ or sparse arguments ‘clinching’ an argument. He was committed to understanding big ‘problems’ and the ‘vouching’ of ambitious answers.<sup>11</sup> Karl was committed to bringing to bear multiple streams of evidence and numerous methodologies to issues of war and peace, integration and disintegration, tradition and modernity, and the problems of change that are affecting all of humankind. He was a fountain of innovative conceptual analysis, a genius at operationalization, a spark-plug for interdisciplinary work, and an inspiration as teacher and advocate. Although his power of abstraction created some distance to the politics of the moment, his capaciousness of mind embedded the present in the large fresco of global history and world politics.

Karl’s intellectual relevance was and remains so general because he embodied a synthesis of traditional sociology of the Europe he had left behind with the rationalist empiricism that he encountered in America. He embraced American pragmatism and optimism and expressed them through a research program that merged economic and sociological styles of inquiry. Karl was deeply critical of one-sided approaches, such as rationalist deterrence theory which neglected to embed large-scale nuclear war in a broader understanding of history and society. He could not fathom a social science that would not pay due respect to both information *and* identity.

As a student of nationalism and of the waxing and waning of security communities he remained deeply skeptical of traditional qualitative approaches that refused to engage actively the advances that the quantitative social sciences were making in the analysis of social processes. As was true of materialism and idealism, quality and quantity was a wrong-headed dichotomy. His comprehensive theoretical vision remains as inspiring as his methodological eclecticism. A partner and interlocutor in recurrent social science

debates, Karl's work remains relevant on all sides of our intellectual disagreements – lining up comfortably on the side of behavioralists against traditionalists in the IR debate of the 1960s, and on the side of constructivists against realists in the IR debate of the 1990s. Yet, Karl had little interest in academic debates. The academy for him was not an end but a means, a cherished platform of trying to understand the pressing problems of world politics in all their complexities and urgencies.

In the effort of creating some distance to the drab life of the epigones, each generation of scholars makes their teachers giants. Karl is for me a giant. I remain convinced, however, that a more objective chronicle of IR scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century than I have been able to render here will also acknowledge Karl as a towering figure.

In the end, Karl's gift of letting the mind soar reflected his ability to combine what he had brought from Central Europe, first-hand knowledge of diverse cultures and histories, with what he experienced in the United States, powerful intellectual currents in the social sciences. The combinatorial richness of linking theory with data thus reflected his life's history. Teaching and learning always remained for him a social not an individual act. He inspired scholars the world over. And he encouraged especially the young to give their best while finding their own voice. His gift remains with us.

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## Notes

1. This essay incorporates some previously published material. See Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Karl W. Deutsch: Teacher, Scholar, Mentor, Mensch', *Czech Sociological Review*, 48(6), December 2012, pp. 1149–51.
2. Karl W. Deutsch, *The Analysis of International Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968).
3. Karl W. Deutsch, 'On Nationalism, World Regions and the Nature of the West', in Per Torsvik (ed.) *Mobilization, Center-Periphery Structures and Nation-Building: A Volume in Commemoration of Stein Rokkan* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1981), pp. 51–93; 'On Political Theory and Political Action', *American Political Science Review*, 65(1), March 1971, pp. 11–27; 'Nation and World', in Ithiel de Sola Pool (ed.) *Contemporary Political Science: Toward Empirical Theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), pp. 204–27; 'Power and Communication in International Society', in A.V.S. de Reuck and Julie Knight (eds) *Ciba Foundation Symposium on Conflict in Society* (London: J. & A. Churchill Ltd, 1966), pp. 300–16; 'The Future of World Politics', *The Political Quarterly*, 37(1), January–March 1966, pp. 9–32; 'National Industrialization and the Declining Share of the International Economic Sector, 1890–1959', *World Politics*, 13(2), January 1961, pp. 267–99; 'Social Mobilization and Political Development', *American Political Science Review*, 55(3), September 1961, pp. 493–514; 'Toward an Inventory of Basic Trends and Patterns in Comparative and International Politics', *American Political Science Review*, 54(1), March 1960, pp. 34–57; 'Shifts in the Balance of Communication Flows: A Problem of Measurement in International Relations', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 20(1), Spring 1956, pp. 143–60; 'Symbols of Political Community', in Lyman Bryson, Louis Finkelstein, Hudson Hoagland and R. M. MacIver (eds)

- Symbols and Society: Fourteenth Symposium of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), pp. 23–54; ‘The Growth of Nations: Some Recurrent Patterns of Political and Social Integration’, *World Politics*, 5(2), January 1953, pp. 168–95; ‘Medieval Unity and Economic Conditions for an International Civilization’, *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 10(1), February 1944, pp. 18–35.
4. In light of the authoritative intervention of one of the referees for this article, it should be noted that it was Tycho Brahe not Johannes Kepler who worked for the Danish court. It is possible that in this case Karl got his facts slightly wrong or that I am recalling incorrectly a vignette etched in my memory over more than four long decades. What really matters, however, is that Karl was a master at using telling, small episodes to make large substantive points.
  5. Karl W. Deutsch, ‘Cracks in the Monolith: Possibilities and Patterns of Disintegration in Totalitarian Systems’, in Carl J. Friedrich (ed.) *Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 308–33.
  6. Peter J. Katzenstein, *Disjoined Partners: Germany and Austria since 1815* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976).
  7. Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government: Models of Communication and Control* (New York: The Free Press, 1966).
  8. Deutsch, ‘Power and Communication’, pp. 306–9.
  9. Deutsch, ‘On Political Theory and Political Action’.
  10. Deutsch, ‘On Political Theory and Political Action’, p. 24.
  11. Nancy Cartwright, *Hunting Causes and Using Them: Approaches in Philosophy and Economics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

### Author biography

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