

H-Diplo ESSAY 244

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars

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The Formative Years

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A group of senior scholars has been asked to write a brief essay on the critical influences on their early scholarly choices. The task has a whiff of “fin de siècle” about it, an almost wistful sense of looking in the rear view mirror at a road well travelled to find the roads not taken. That choice of whether to turn left or right at the fork, indeed of whether to take the road at all, starts much earlier than the why of what we chose to study in graduate school.

For me, it started at home. The earliest influence was my mother, who trained as a lawyer even though she knew she could not practice because at the time, in the province of Quebec where I was born, women were not admitted to the bar. I asked her why she had gone to university and then to law school when she knew in advance that she would be unable to work in her field. “For the sheer fun of it,” she said. “I loved the reading, the arguments, the search for evidence, the excitement of discovery, and the companionship.” Her unadulterated love for scholarship was infectious.

She shaped my scholarship in another important way. Throughout elementary and high school, I did not much like school. I found it repetitive, overly structured and, quite frankly, often boring. More than once, I went to my mother and told her that I wanted to quit. Without blinking an eyelash, she told me to stay home and read for as long as I liked. Without saying a word, she taught me that learning occurs in many places and that the best of it often takes place outside the formal structures in the most unexpected ways. I can still taste the sheer pleasure of a week of uninterrupted reading of *War and Peace* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It was those weeks that kindled my preteen love of the drama and mysteries of history.

I began elementary school in the years immediately following the end of World War II. Many of my teachers had numbers tattooed on their arms. When we asked how they got these tattoos, most would not answer. A few said briefly that it had happened during the war in Europe and would say no more. The war became very real to all of us even though we ourselves had no memory of it. It was a presence in our lives, unspoken and enigmatic, a historical memory for our teachers and a historical mystery to us. As a very young child, I sensed that my teachers had had terrible experiences during the war, so terrible that no words could be spoken, no story could be told. And yet history was so present, so heavy in its weight. That was my earliest introduction to the mysteries of history and the dawning understanding that history was written in the silences as well as in the words. I knew from a very early age that the official records, deposited in the official archives, could only tell a part of the story.

These early experiences profoundly shaped what I chose to study in university and graduate school. My first and earliest love was history which I joined with the study of political science. I chose to study the two together because I was so puzzled by war. I asked my parents and my teachers again and again why people fought wars. Why would people kill each other in such an organized and ritualized way that was then cheered on by the public? Nobody could provide a satisfactory answer to the question. And so began a lifelong preoccupation with mystery, with enigma, with silence, and with the inexplicable.

I married my interest in mystery with the wisdom of a wonderful teacher of history in high school. Look beyond the usual places, he said, listen to what is not said, and be careful of any explanation that is too complete, that fits too neatly within the strictures of logic. Embrace the messiness and the diversity of the human experience.

It goes without saying that a sense of the messiness of human experience did not fit neatly with the burgeoning emphasis on positivist science that was sweeping the study of politics as I searched for a graduate school. Convinced that history and political science each enriched the other, I looked for a graduate program that would let me do both. Yale offered a multidisciplinary degree in international relations that promised more degrees of freedom than a graduate program in either discipline. Off I went.

Graduate school was an interesting experience, both intellectually and personally as I was one of a tiny number of women students in the program. It's impossible to say whether my experience as a woman was worse at Yale than it might have been elsewhere – I have no comparative data – but it certainly was demoralizing and debilitating.

Academically, the program was rich and stimulating. Three faculty members stand out. Harold Lasswell joined together psychology and politics in his analysis of political processes and outcomes.¹ It was a revelation to me that psychology could be used to help explain political outcomes. So began a lifelong interest in the joining of these two disciplines with history that defined the boundaries of my scholarly interests and continues to do so today. When I am forced to define what it is exactly that I do, I self-describe as a political psychologist who loves history.

Karl Deutsch, also a pioneer in his field, was a refugee from Germany who fled fascism and devoted his scholarly life to understanding in the deepest way the forces that gave rise to nationalism. Joining together the systematic study of nationalism with patterns of communication, he painted history and politics with big, sweeping brushstrokes to ask big important questions.² Deutsch influenced generations of scholars who pursued the study of war in all its dimensions.

Harry Benda, a superb historian of Southeast Asia, stood out for his capacity to infuse the historical canvas with his deep and sophisticated understanding of religion.³ Born in Czechoslovakia, he too was a refugee from Nazi Germany who fled to Indonesia and was then interned for two years by the Japanese. He brought his profound respect for Indonesian history and religion into the classroom along with a deep commitment to humanitarian values that developed in the crucible of the horrors that he saw and lived. He expanded the scope of history beyond the western canon and made world history come alive in his class.

As my first year of graduate education progressed, it became clearer that the political scientists were generally interested in the similarities across time and place while the historians focused on the differences and the granularity. How could I combine the two? And how could I address the puzzle that continued to preoccupy me—why states went to war.

¹ Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936) was one of the founders of modern political psychology, a field of inquiry that brought together politics and psychology.

² Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Boston: MIT Press, 1953). Deutsch grappled with the question of why nationalist ideas met with wide and strong response at certain times and places, and with almost no response at other times.

³ Harry J. Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun, Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945* (The Hague and Bandung: W. van Hoeve Ltd., 1958).

Two books that I read as a graduate student, both by Thomas Schelling, an economist, changed how I thought about my work.⁴ Known for his work on game theory, he had extraordinary influence on strategic doctrine as the Cold War entered the 1960s. At that time, the overwhelming public policy preoccupation of faculty and students was the prevention of nuclear war. Avoidance of war was far from assured as the Berlin crisis simmered and the Cuban Missile Crisis exploded.

The dominant reading of Schelling's work was its extraordinary, almost irresponsible, appetite for risk-taking in order to signal resolve. There were good reasons to interpret his design of logical games that way, since archival evidence has shown that he urged the president to stand firm and warned of the consequences of concessions even as tensions deepened and the risk of an accidental or miscalculated nuclear war grew.

What that reading misses, however, is the deeply psychological rather than logical analysis that informed his policy recommendations. He built into his analysis the psychological short cuts that decision makers use to make difficult choices. His use of "pure" or mathematical theory grew out of his deep and abiding interest in how problems could be solved; he was interested in theory only if it generated counter-intuitive ideas on how hard problems could be tackled. He was a pioneer in the ways he infused psychological concepts into the formal analysis of how people made decisions. Today we would likely call him a behavioral economist, a field that is flourishing as economists finally look at how people actually make trade-offs and choose options.

These were exactly the processes that I wanted to understand. I wanted to know how leaders trying to decide whether or not to use force thought about their adversary's intentions, made difficult trade-offs, and chose whether or not to go to war. The boundaries among the disciplines of psychology, history, and political science were not relevant. All three were important to the answer to the question and all contributed in different ways. I would spend the next three decades rummaging in archives, interviewing living decision makers, understanding the psychology of choice and writing the stories of how leaders made decisions.

It is never easy working at the intersection of disciplines. Those who do so are orphans everywhere and at home nowhere. I quickly ran up against the rational choice theorists in political science who had no time for psychological explanations and not much interest in historical evidence. The theory drove the analysis and as long as the outcome was consistent with the prediction, there was little need for any further investigation. Psychologists were dubious about the application of concepts developed in controlled laboratory experiments to individual leaders. And historians worried about the bias in the interviews of living leaders and the inability to dig into archives that were often still closed or inaccessible.

These were legitimate concerns, but the puzzles couldn't wait. Or I couldn't wait the thirty years until the archives were opened to solve the puzzles. And so I did the best with the evidence that I had at the time, knowing that any historical interpretation is always tentative, likely to be overtaken by better evidence or a flashlight shining in a different direction that uncovers something that was hiding in plain sight, waiting for someone to look.

Over the years, archives have been opened and new kinds of material have become available. I always approach the reading of the new material with a frisson of excitement. What new discoveries will come to light? What puzzles will be solved? What conventional wisdom will be overturned? New discoveries often confound the neat explanations that we impose and show the messiness of decision making that is far greater than even I, a skeptic, imagined. And evidence is not only new, it is often inconsistent and at times frustratingly incomplete. Memoirs, interviews, and archival material can be contradictory and, more and more, archives are slimmer as leaders know they are actors in history and that their papers will be the subject of serious scrutiny down the road.

⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963 [1960]), and *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

New evidence is the fun of ongoing scholarship. It is the lifeblood of historical interpretation and the stimulus to new arguments and new interpretations. But the relationship does not run only one way. New ways of thinking drive the search for different kinds of evidence in different kinds of places. We see what we might have missed when we last looked, largely because we weren't looking in that direction before. As historians have long acknowledged and political scientists are beginning to admit, the present shapes the way we read the past and anticipate the future.

Within these shifting shapes, the parameters of psychology, political science, and history continue to frame my work. The three disciplines quarrel amongst themselves and the friction is creative. It leads to new questions, new problems, and always a search for better evidence. What I have learned over time is that the evidence is almost never good enough and that we are always left with mysteries and the silence that lingers behind the evidence. The most challenging part of scholarship is to listen to the silence and try to understand why it matters.

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