

# H-Diplo ESSAY 350

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## *On Scepticism and Scavenging*

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I was born in 1948 and grew up in the north-east of England at a time when its two major industries – mining and shipbuilding - were in decline. My father had joined the Royal Navy in 1938 as a regular officer. This was quite an achievement for a working-class Jew. He served through the war as a naval aviator, including spending some tough months on the besieged island of Malta. After the war he went into business with his brothers, sometimes successfully and sometimes less so. There were times when we were very short of money. My mother had shone at school but because of the war had not gone to university. These days she would undoubtedly have had a successful professional career as well as bringing up two boys. She never complained about this.

We would now be classed as observant Jews although my father never took religion that seriously. Our community was very small and so regular attendance at synagogue was an act of loyalty as much as piety because without me the requisite ten males would not have been present for the Shabbat services. I went to an overcrowded primary school (50 in a class) but then onto a selective grammar school where I got a decent education although I was only a mediocre student. I struggled, largely because I felt I should follow my elder brother and become a scientist. I could not see how I could earn a living if I stuck with humanities. Unfortunately, other than Maths, I was not very good at science and not that interested. Again following my brother, I got interested in politics. When he joined the Liberal Party so did I and here my enthusiasm was genuine. I was thus a member of minority religion and a minority political party in one of the more deprived parts of the country.

My father was patriotic but also strongly anti-racist - he had been in street fights with fascists before the war. This combination probably influenced me more than I realised. He was the one who encouraged me to study politics at university as it was obviously engaging me more than my school work. One evening, while we watched a pundit talking on TV, Dad queried his qualifications. I replied that he was a Professor of Political Science at LSE. "Why don't you do that?" "Can I?" This was something of a liberation. I was released from the burden of trying to be vocational. The plan did not quite work out. LSE rejected my application, but Manchester was not so choosy. I was accepted for their broad social science degree. Helped by my Maths, I scraped through my school exams with not a lot to spare.

Arriving at Manchester as an undergraduate in 1967 I was exposed to the full range of the social sciences. It had a first-rate faculty. Of the more senior professors, Sammy Finer who taught government was memorable for his theatricality, and the brilliant anthropologist Max Glucksmann, sadly, for essentially reading chapters of his textbook as lectures. Peter Worsley, a charismatic new leftist, was the greatest revelation as he provided my first introduction to sociology. This opened my eyes to the relationship between social structure and life chances, the factors shaping attitudes and behaviour, and the wellsprings of political movements. To be honest, however, it was the practice of politics rather than the study that had the more lasting influence. I became an active Liberal, soon attending national conferences, ending up in 1970 as a rather unsuccessful Chairman of the Union of Liberal Students (a general election took place while I was doing my finals so I was not much use). In those days, the party's youth movement was well to the left of the main party. I also got involved in student politics

at Manchester, joining the student Council, negotiating for representation on university committees, and helping to lead a sit-in which closed down the university for two weeks.

Although I was drawn to the radical left, and supported all the causes – opposing the Vietnam War and campaigning against Apartheid – unlike many of my friends I never quite made the leap to becoming a revolutionary Marxist. It might have been an over-developed sense of irony but I was never a natural zealot. As I started to use my undergraduate opportunities to sort out my muddled political views I came across an incisive book of essays by the Polish dissident Leszek Kolakowski which left me wary of exaggerated doctrinal claims.<sup>1</sup> I was also impressed by the student movement in the U.S., because they really had taken on big challenges such as civil rights, and also because it seemed to produce fresh thinkers like Tom Hayden. He was one of the main authors of the Port Huron Manifesto, which compared favourably with the more turgid prose of local socialists.<sup>2</sup> For a while C. Wright Mills was my bible as I liked his combination of cool analysis with polemical critique (though I now find it self-indulgent) and his readiness to identify new social types away from simple class models.<sup>3</sup> These American influences allowed the few essays I turned in to appear more original than was really the case. Interestingly much of this literature involved critiques of U.S. ‘behaviouralists’ with their quantitative methods – dismissed by Mills as ‘mindless empiricists’ – which left me, probably unfairly, with a residual distrust of such approaches.

I became intrigued by the Cuban Revolution and made this a specialist field of study. Under the forgiving eye of the wonderful Norman Geras, who taught me political theory, I wrote a long paper on Fidel Castro as an example of a charismatic leader, and then wrote something even longer on the revolutionary theories of Che Guevara and his French acolyte Régis Debray (then in prison in Bolivia – I rang the Bolivian embassy to ask when he would be released). I concluded that their theories glorified violence and were indulgent and elitist, based on myths that paid little attention to the actual sources of Castro’s victory. It was not surprising that Che’s Bolivian campaign had ended in failure. (I find I keep on returning to Che - in the book I am currently writing I look at his failed campaign in the Congo). In line with choosing my own curriculum I somehow got permission to write an undergraduate dissertation instead of taking one of my exams. I wrote about the student left in Britain, which turned into a study of sectarianism, personality cults, and futility. Already I was fascinated by strategy – in this case the huge gap between idealistic aspirations and practical achievements. I wanted them to align but every personal research project I undertook made the gap seem unbridgeable. This explains why I spent so much time on the radical theorists and practitioners in my 2013 history of Strategy.<sup>4</sup>

I would have been happy to stay at Manchester but after my role in the sit-in I was short of supporters among the Faculty. When I did surprisingly well in my final exams (my brief political life had also taught me how to bulls\*\*t) guilty consciences found me a place at York to do postgraduate work. I am still not sure how this was fixed. The politics department there was very Marxist at the time so maybe it was just assumed that this would be a more suitable home. Here I read György Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxembour, and the dreaded Louis Althusser. Some of this rubbed off, largely in encouraging an interest in power structures and popular ideologies. I began to appreciate how much the important factors in political life might be those matters that are taken for granted and barely discussed, and not necessarily the issues dominating the news cycle.

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<sup>1</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Marxism and Beyond: On Historical Understanding and Individual Responsibility* (London: Pall Mall, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.progressivefox.com/misc\\_documents/PortHuronStatement.pdf](http://www.progressivefox.com/misc_documents/PortHuronStatement.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> His most famous book was C Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961). The one with the more lasting influence, including on me, was *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Over these couple of years I also became involved in national student politics. It was not a happy time. Because I was not a Marxist, and this had not changed despite a growing appreciation of Marxian methods, I was unacceptable to the dominant Trotskyist groups. Also, although I had never been to Israel and had never taken much interest in it, I proposed at a Liberal Party conference what would now be described as a 'two-state' solution. This led to me being denounced as a dedicated Zionist and to my first troubling encounter with leftist anti-Semitism. This added to my disillusion. And so my political career came to a shuddering halt. When I arrived at Oxford to do my doctorate, I'd had enough of it. Oddly, my last serious act of political activism was working for George McGovern at the Miami Democratic Convention in the summer of 1972 during my first visit to the United States. (Bizarrely as a Brit I spent much of my time on security duty. I know how Watergate happened).

My period of political activism lasted about five years. Yet it shaped me in a number of ways. First, I became much more efficient. I spent so much time on politics that I had to squeeze in my academic work where I could. Time had to be used to the full. Second, the counter-culture passed me by. I loved the music but was wary of drugs. I insisted on wearing a sports jacket and tie because to have dressed in an extreme fashion would have in some way conceded that my views were also extreme. Besides, any tendencies to the psychedelic made me look ridiculous. Third, I learned basic political skills that became invaluable in my later career, including in university management. I knew how to run meetings and forge alliances of convenience with unlikely people. I was not afraid of public speaking, although I probably should have been as my north-eastern accent meant that I tended to gabble. I had learned to write to communicate an argument rather than show off my erudition. Last, I had practical experience against which to judge the politics I was being taught. After demonstrating in support of the Paris students in May 1968 I was amused to get an exam essay question on the stability of the Fifth Republic.

But I had also developed a sceptical outlook. I had spent a lot of time with committed people with admirable and sometimes not-so-admirable aims and no obvious way of achieving them. I'd become familiar with 'revolutionary socialism.' In poorly attended meetings there would be ferocious arguments about points of doctrine and about which hopeless strategy should be adopted, far away from the concerns of the 'masses' on whose behalf the activists claimed to speak. A particularly low moment came when I joined a group in Manchester wondering how to respond to working class rallies in support of the racist, anti-immigrant Conservative MP Enoch Powell. My heart sank as an elderly and deeply upset Communist opened with the observation that "the workers have taken an incorrect position." I had learned about unintended consequences, the role of chance, and the difficult choices that were rarely simply between good and bad. I increasingly viewed politics as an arena of moral complexity, with which I could only cope by doing deep research. This might have been a good way to sort out my ideas, but it was clearly no way to succeed as a professional politician.

The only career open therefore appeared to be that of an academic. In my last year at Manchester, Roger Williams ran a unique course on science and technology in government. One topic involved reading those glossy *Scientific American* articles on arms control – written by such authoritative figures as Herb York, Jerome Wiesner, George Rathjens and Hans Bethe. I was struck how they were operating within a framework for analysis that appeared perverse from the outside yet made perfect sense within its own terms.<sup>5</sup> As at the time I was influenced by Noam Chomsky's critique of the thinking that led to Vietnam (I'm being honest here) I started to wonder if this branch of the 'new mandarins' might have set the world on a path to nuclear war.<sup>6</sup> A research project began to take shape while I was at York on the status of 'expertise' in nuclear policy debates. But nobody at York knew anything about these issues and by a stroke of amazing good luck (I just met the deadline) I got a research studentship at Nuffield College Oxford. At Nuffield I came under the wing of Philip Williams, a much loved student of French and American politics, who would take a few pages of my writing and return it with faint but meticulous pencil marks so that once it had been retyped it read 100 times better. Michael Howard was appointed as my

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<sup>5</sup> For example George Rathjens, "The Dynamics of the Arms Race," *Scientific American* (April 1969) and Herbert York, "Military Technology and National Security," in *Scientific American* (August 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969)

university supervisor. I have written elsewhere about how Michael became my mentor and friend.<sup>7</sup> But from our first meeting in October 1972 my life was on a new course. (The fact that I met my future wife the same month was an important part of this).

Of course I was well aware that under Howard's tutelage I was being drawn into the establishment I had previously despised although I still felt a bit of an outsider. Very few Brits were working on security issues in those days – it still seemed a bit of a militarist field of interest and was bound to require contact with merchants of death. Yet I got to meet interesting and thoughtful people in government and the armed forces and my views gradually softened. I envied the life Howard lived – writing heavyweight books, a bit of book reviewing, offering policy advice when asked, speaking to the media, and attending conferences in glamorous venues. What was there not to like? There was little competition among my generation as far as I was aware in the UK. I had a patron in Michael who I knew was trying, with varying degrees of success, to smooth down my rougher edges. So I made a career choice and stuck with it.

When I eventually got to the U.S. to do my research in 1973 with letters of introduction from Howard I was able to meet all the big names in the field. By this time, the focus of my research had shifted from the role of scientific experts to that of the intelligence community, facilitated by great leaks of documents as a result of the debates over anti-ballistic Missiles and ABMs and the Strategic Arms Limitation talks SALT in the early days of the Nixon administration. It allowed me to follow my interest in the underlying assumptions that shaped policy. My thesis had a discussion of the social construction of reality. But I still needed evidence and there were no archives then available. I developed a research technique which is best described as 'scavenging'. My models were investigative journalists like I. F. Stone, who had their own agendas but also a knack for digging up the dirt and confounding efforts at official secrecy. The great exemplar of this of my generation was the brilliant, burly Australian Des Ball, who had paved the way for me in Washington by demonstrating how much unilateral declassification you could achieve if you pushed hard enough.<sup>8</sup>

The only approach to researching contemporary security issues was to look everywhere for bits of information, from newspaper and journal reports (how I scoured *Aviation Week* and *Space Technology*) to filling in the gaps in redacted Congressional documents. I rejoiced at finding a book covering some aspect of my research, rather than worrying that this dented any claims to originality. In ways that would simply have been impossible in the UK, I contacted people from the intelligence agencies and they told me their stories. I came across the recently sacked director of the Office of National Estimates, who did not hold back on his grievances, and Andrew Marshall just after he had begun work at the Office of Net Assessment. I took extensive notes – no laptops in those days – and had great fun as well as the makings of a thesis.<sup>9</sup> When later in the decade I began to do work on British nuclear policy I had to be even more of a scavenger because the government then prided itself on saying as little as possible on such sensitive matters.<sup>10</sup>

In the wild scavengers survive by eating organisms that have died or been discarded. This does not sound very wholesome. It's not a natural opening for a section on research methodology. Scavenging as research does not lend itself to careful case selection or statistical tests. It is the difference between counting calories and grabbing a leftover cake; between avoiding titbits because they are not part of the approved diet and taking what you can because something is better than nothing; between being methodical and being opportunistic. This is not a recommendation. Eventually I was able to experience the

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<sup>7</sup> <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/michael-howard-a-reminiscence/>. I refer in this to the impact of reading Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace*, (London: Temple Smith, 1970) just before my first supervision.

<sup>8</sup> His early research eventually came out as Desmond Ball, *Politics and Force Levels: The Strategic Missile Program of the Kennedy Administration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> The thesis was published as Freedman, *US Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Freedman, *Britain and Nuclear Weapons* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

pleasures of working with archives and at least appreciate how others found satisfaction interrogating data bases. But old habits die hard. I am still scavenging - easily tempted to follow hunches, veering away from my chosen research path to pursue something that looks appetising in the distance, allowing projects to be reshaped by material I have chanced upon rather than sought.

When I first got a taste for research as an undergraduate it was because it was the only way I could deal with issues that perplexed me. I was unnerved by the dogmatism and certainty exhibited by my political friends and wanted to be surer of my ground. That still happens, even when the big claims take the form of academic theories or policy proposals. I still tend to approach them sceptically and when bothered I find the best place to start is with an exploration of the available evidence, which of course can lead to propositions being accepted as well as rejected. Being sceptical does not mean being remorselessly negative. It just means being ready to ask awkward questions. Over time I have become much more interested in the origins of big ideas, including how they appear and are received. Once contextualised such ideas can lose their aura, be better kept in perspective and then evaluated on their own terms. What keeps me at it after half a century, however, is that I find research exhilarating, a way of satisfying my curiosity and discovering through the process of writing it down what I think, What good fortune to have found a career that allowed me opportunities to spend time engaged in activities I enjoy so much.

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