Michael Warner, *The Rise and Fall of Intelligence*  

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This is no less than a *tour de force*. It is certainly what was necessary to succeed in such an ambitious, self-appointed endeavour: to write, to quote the subtitle of the book, an “International Security History”, virtually encompassing the entire world from the second industrialisation to the digital revolution. With *The Rise and Fall of Intelligence*, US Defense Department historian Michael Warner decided to rise to the challenge, offering experts of the field, as well as the general public, an up-to-date – and perhaps long overdue – global history of contemporary intelligence.

A brief historical evocation of discourses on espionage – from Ancient Sumer, Kautilya’s India and Sun Tzu’s China, to Machiavelli’s ‘coming of modernity’ and Locke’s and Rousseau’s ‘Age of Enlightenment’ – leads the reader to the starting point of the book, which also happens to be the first and major historical turning point in Michael Warner’s narrative, that is, the passage from the ancient practice of espionage to the contemporary discipline of intelligence. This transformation, argues Warner, was essentially brought about by two underlying forces. On the one hand, technological innovations led to dramatic changes in the art of warfare, which in turn generated the necessity for modern nations permanently to monitor each other’s capacities, innovations, and intentions. On the other hand, the emergence of radical, revolutionary ideologies threatening existing governments engendered the bureaucratisation and professionalisation of special police forces. Technological evolutions and ideological forces thus explain the fundamental leap into ‘modernity’ at the turn of the twentieth century. They also happened to be, according to him, the underlying factors commanding the later, major evolutions in terms of intelligence organisation, objectives, and means across the twentieth century, up to the most recent developments driven both by a technological break – the digital revolution – and the threat of a radicalised form of political violence – terrorism.

Relying on these two structural factors, Warner manages to take the reader along a journey that extends from the late XIXth century, the moment of the passage ‘from Ancient to Modern’, that is, from spying to intelligence (Chapter 1), through the First World War I (Chapter 2, ‘A Revolutionary Age’), the unstable interwar period and the Second World War (Chapter 3, ‘As Good as it Gets’), The Cold War (Chapter 4, ‘Technology’, and Chapter 5, ‘Ideology’), the short-lived and illusory ‘Liberal Triumph’ of the 1990s, up to the ‘Shadow War’ of the present (Chapter 7).
While doing so, he also regularly lays out his underlying narrative – a long term evolution of the set of players in the international field of intelligence took place since the mid XIX\textsuperscript{th} century, from virtually any nation to a few industrialised Powers after the First World War, a two-and-a-half game during the Cold War (the American hegemon being seconded by the British ally and, by extension, the Commonwealth framework), and a brief period of definite domination by the sole Superpower in the 1990s, before technological evolutions brought back a great many – and sometimes very dangerous – actors in the game.

The qualities of the book are many and undisputable. First and foremost, the author demonstrates his undeniable knowledge of the topic. In that perspective, and though his chapters on the earlier periods prove his mastery of the body of works that recently extended the understanding of intelligence organisations, policies, and practices in the early to mid twentieth century, his grasp of the later period is to be particularly praised\textsuperscript{1}. Though obviously lacking the comfort of historical perspective, Michael Warner manages to bring some clarity to the intricacies of the clandestine side of the ‘war on terror’, while at the same time engaging and drawing a very clear picture of another, perhaps lesser known aspect of current art of ‘shadow warfare’ – cyber covert operations. Even the most informed readers will benefit from the quasi ‘insider’ status of the author, from his intimate, first-hand knowledge of the American national security structure, both in terms of understanding contemporary concerns of the intelligence community and of identifying current trends – and priorities – of intelligence policies in the foreseeable future.

Michael Warner’s objective is nevertheless to transcend this later period as well as these contemporary issues to adopt a much wider and complete perspective on the history of ‘security’. This wide-ranging angle is arguably the major contribution of the book, making it the most complete and up-to-date intelligence history textbook available to students as well as academics from the field, and beyond. In a single volume, Warner indeed manages to offer a narrative which includes intelligence organisations as well as practices, constantly moving from the field (collecting) to the top (decision-making), taking into account espionage and counterespionage, covert operations and counterterrorism, military and civilian actors, foreign and domestic intelligence, ‘HUMINT’ as well as ‘SINGINT’ (and, for the later period, ‘IMINT’), and all of that both in contexts of peace and war. In doing so, he takes up with a tradition of comprehensive approach that had once been, among others, that of Jeffrey T. Richelson or, with an explicitly narrower, national perspective, of Rodhri Jeffreys-Jones or Christopher Andrew\textsuperscript{2}; and he is able to do so by relying on the many works published since then, perhaps best demonstrating the great leap forward accomplished by the field in the past twenty-five years.

But the span of the undertaking is to be saluted in itself. The extent of the chronological and geographical scope covered allows Michael Warner regularly to divorce from the mostly political, leadership-centred, top-down approach that had long dominated historical writings on intelligence. His constant efforts to provide


contextual elements offer the reader many opportunities to connect the realm of intelligence with the larger world, that is, to sets of events, international as well as domestic, and more particularly, in the words of the author, with the “diplomatic, technological, and ideological” issues (p. ix). In doing so, he clearly succeeds in giving a sense of the intricate relationships the different sides of ‘security’ always entertained with broader and deeper historical trends, even though the exact relationships between the different levels of analysis are not always explicitly and firmly established. In Warner’s narrative, intelligence and security have to do with more than military strategy and tactics, diplomatic issues and choices, political calculations and decisions. More often than not, they have to do politics, economics, sometimes culture and, first and foremost, with technology and ideology.

An “international security history”, that is a lot. Perhaps there is an iron rule that such ambitious endeavours are, whatever their qualities, bound partially to fail. Michael Warner’s work is, to a certain extent, no exception. To be fair, many of the faults one would find in his narrative are less his, than they are perhaps collectively that of the field of intelligence studies. The most self-evident limit of the book, acknowledged by the author himself from the start, is that this “international security history” suffers from clear national biases, being mostly American, secondarily British and Russian, here and there German, with dabs of French, Japanese or Israeli stories. In other words, it mostly reflects the balance of an academic production which had long been – and which is still to a certain extent – primarily American and British, among other things because of the anteriority of English-speaking scholarship on the subject and of the comparatively easier access to US and UK intelligence and national security archives. One may nonetheless regret the attempt to justify such an unbalanced treatment by self-assumed statements about the “intelligence developments” unquestionably following “events and innovations in Britain, Russia, and the United States” (p. 7). One may also point out that at least part of the unbalance of treatment is due to the author’s ignorance of non English-speaking literatures. The French scholarship on the history of French secret services and intelligence is, for example, all but ignored, although important works could contribute to the perspective on ‘intelligence developments’, especially during the late XIXth, early XXth century.3

Besides, this tendency closely to follow the existing literature has a deeper influence on the way the book is constructed. The time and space dedicated to the different facets of ‘security’ seem to be primarily determined by the volume of works published on each topic, to the point that the narrative sometimes almost exactly mirrors the relative weight of secondary sources. The result is that some issues are barely addressed, while others receive lengthy treatment, such as cryptography in the Second World War, for example (pp. 103–109). Of course there is no problem per se in relying heavily on secondary sources when writing a synthesis. On the other hand, it certainly illustrates the inherent limits of such works, all the more when the amount of scholarship does not yet reach a certain critical point. More importantly, it arguably explains another limit of the book: though well-written, it turns out to be difficult to read because the point, whatever it is, often gets lost by the constant

switch from one topic – or one story – to another. In fact, the chapters often seem to be constructed as juxtapositions of ‘vignettes’, of elements put side by side, and only rhetorically connected with one another. In the end, one cannot help but get the feeling that the book addresses too many topics under the all too encompassing umbrella of ‘security’.

Perhaps a deeper explanation is to be found in the third and possibly the most important limit of this book. One could argue that this proliferation of topics and stories fundamentally stems from a certain degree of conceptual confusion, as well as from a lack of a real argument. There would certainly be things to say about Michael Warner’s use of philosophical concepts such as “modernity”, and even more of political ones such as “progressivism” and “liberalism” (p. 228). But in our view, the main problem resides in the central, and yet extremely vague concept of ‘security’, whose quality and default are the same: importunately to permit – and unfortunately provoke – the multiplication of the topics and issues to be included in the narrative. At the same time, one fails to perceive the problem raised or the argument made by the author, or his final purpose for that matter. He, himself, seems to hesitate, as the introduction and conclusion make abundantly clear, most notably between an historical argument and a contribution to expert thinking.

Instead of a clear argument, Michael Warner offers a narrative of the history of ‘security’ across a long twentieth century as driven by two underlying factors whose role must therefore be constantly – and sometimes artificially – reasserted, technology and ideology. The former may work, and the readers may be convinced that technology was one of the driving forces behind the major evolutions in the field of ‘security’ since the last quarter of the XIXth century. But the case for ideology proves much more problematic. Not only does it rely on a form of essentialisation of the notion, authorising audacious rapprochements under equivocal banners (such as Maoism, pp. 185–200; or Terrorism, pp. 281–284), but it also leads to an ideological description of the world and of history – that is, ideology virtually shadowing other factors explaining behaviours and actions – that has more to do with the way security actors may perceive and present their adversaries, much less with an historical, comprehensive and symmetrical understanding of these confrontations.

All in all, one could conclude that The Rise and Fall of Intelligence does reflect the ‘state of the art’ in historical scholarship on intelligence and security issues, in the sense that it is illustrating its constant progress in quality and rigour, as well as some of its recurrent intellectual difficulties, most importantly with distancing itself from the exigencies of expert knowledge, and from the practitioners’ views and preoccupations. In that sense also, there is no doubt The Rise and Fall of Intelligence is somehow a tour de force.