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## **Practising Politics with Alert Senses<sup>1</sup>**

### **Remembering Karl W. Deutsch (1912–1992)**

Anyone who had a chance to meet Karl Deutsch, however fleeting or profound the encounter, must have had the experience that the conversation quickly turned towards two questions: What is the fundamental problem on the person's mind at the time of the conversation? And: What methods may be employed in order to mobilise an appropriate gathering of evidence in order to scientifically study the identified problem by means of a methodically implemented research project? The focus on fundamental problems—herein lay the political Eros of Karl Deutsch: the methodologically disciplined scientific identification of problem areas.

We should add that Karl Deutsch was driven by a pedagogical Eros as well. He took it for granted that the findings mobilised within the unfettered world of academia should be shared with the public. In practice, this meant a diverse range of publics: academics, the political elite, the so-called attentive public, but also the broad masses, and this always requires particular skills of communication. These three impulses combine to form a picture of Karl Deutsch as a scholar shaped by humanism, the Enlightenment, and social engagement, whose works reflect a critical examination of the fundamental problems of the 20th century.

Karl W. Deutsch was born in Prague and grew up amidst Czechoslovakia's nationally, culturally, and politically determined ethnic conflicts, the bitter conflicts between the Catholic and socialist political camps in Austria, and finally the rise of National Socialism and its subsequent tyranny. These immediate, personal early experiences left their mark on his later life's work. In his autobiographical sketch, 'A Voyage of the Mind, 1930–1980' [Deutsch 1980], he writes that his interest in politics was awakened when he was just six years old—not in the library, but at his mother's political rallies in the 1930s; a Social Democrat, she was one of the first female members of the Czechoslovak parliament.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in German as Dieter Senghaas. 2003. 'Politik mit wachen Sinnen betreiben! Eine Erinnerung an Karl W. Deutsch (1912–1992).' Pp. 11–25 in 'Politik mit wachen Sinnen betreiben.' *Zur Erinnerung an Karl W. Deutsch*. WZB-Vorlesungen 4. Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB).

For Karl Deutsch, this experience was important not just from a political viewpoint, but also in terms of his lifelong endeavours to impart upon his respective audiences complex scientific facts in as clear and memorable a manner as possible. He was an exemplary teacher and communicator. After studying at the German University in Prague—which had by then already been infiltrated by the National Socialists—and the University of London (where he studied applied optics), he returned to Prague's Charles University, where instruction was in Czech and from which he received his doctorate of law in 1938. When Hitler occupied the Sudetenland, Deutsch was attending an antifascist congress in the United States as a delegate for the Social Democratic Party's youth wing; he heeded his friends' warnings and chose not to return to Prague. Finding themselves exiled, he and his wife Ruth were able to renew their studies at Harvard University thanks to an emigrant aid fund.

Thus began Karl Deutsch's career in the United States. In 1941, he received his MA from Harvard; from 1942 to 1952, he was an instructor at the neighbouring Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); in 1951, he was awarded his doctorate from Harvard; from 1952 to 1956, he was professor of history and political science at MIT; from 1956 to 1967, he was professor of government at Yale University; and in 1967, he returned (as professor of government) to Harvard, where he eventually held the position of Stanfield Professor of International Peace from 1971 to 1983.

For ten years starting in 1977, Deutsch spent a large portion of the year at the Social Science Research Centre Berlin in his capacity as director of the International Institute for Comparative Social Science. Despite his advanced age, in 1987 he accepted a position in peace studies at Atlanta's Emory University. Considering his overwhelming scientific significance to the social sciences in general and political science in particular, the large number of guest professorships, honorary doctorates, academic memberships, and other honours comes as no surprise. Especially worth mentioning is his presidency of the American Political Science Association (1969–1970) and of the International Association of Political Science (1976–1979).

What general description can we provide of Karl Deutsch's work? His research is distinguished by a set of constantly recurring characteristics. First and foremost, there is his clear interest in analysing long-term trends using the *longue durée* approach of the French Annales School. Trend analyses allow us to identify changing contexts, which intrinsically leads to comparative research and the ordering of the acquired knowledge within typologies. An especially striking feature of Deutsch's work is his thinking in configurations, as seen in his repeated attempts at structural, process, and mentality analyses, as well as the systematic study of feedback loops, all of which provides a far more comprehensive understanding of causality than is usually found in the social sciences.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Deutsch's work was noted primarily for his efforts to operationally analyse fundamental issues and theorems through the wide-ranging development of indicators, with the aim of using extensive and

far-reaching new information to help shed light on (in extreme cases, resolve) old as well as contemporary scientific controversies. Thus the fame of his 1964 *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators*, which went on to become a hallmark of the theoretical and comparative quantitative approach to the study of political science.

At no time, however, did Deutsch understand quantification as an undertaking in and of itself. His aim was always to enable the scientific analysis of seemingly unsolvable scientific controversies, dangerous political developments, or of questions that were simply analytically exciting (for instance, 'Is there such a thing as fundamental innovation in the social sciences?'). The act of creating indicators and ascertaining information was a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Deutsch repeatedly found inspiration in the history of political ideas, social philosophy, and works by classical authors from an alarming number of related disciplines in which he wanted to remain informed. In fact, it is because of his focus on systems theory and social cybernetics that we can describe his work as interdisciplinary or (as embodied in his person) transdisciplinary in the best sense of the word. In the second half of the 20th century, Deutsch was without a doubt one of the most important scholars in the fields of social and political science.

In his early youth, Karl Deutsch experienced the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—a process that in his mind represented the disintegration of antiquated imperial structures. He understood these structures as a 'layer cake', with the upper layer characterised by a reasonably intense level of social communication among the members of the ruling elite. One layer down, the processes of exchange and communication were more limited, while the mass of the peasant population at the bottom had not been truly integrated, either through assimilation or through participation within social structures. Their sole function was their duty to pay tribute and thus their exploitability by the respective social elite. For Deutsch, these imperial formations—including the world's 'high cultures'—were only superficially integrated. Thus their susceptibility to external attacks as well as internal processes of decay.

The central concept in relation to this vulnerability to disintegration, so Deutsch, was the process of 'social mobilisation'. This process, which began in Europe during the modern era and has by now reached worldwide proportions, involves the transition from traditional societies into modernising and modern societies. It takes place at different, scientifically measurable speeds, and depends on the specific context; in addition, later experiences are persistently overlain by earlier ones. Nevertheless, we can observe the following common features:

- (1) the shift from a traditional subsistence economy to a state/territorial and (today) worldwide exchange economy;
- (2) the transfer of the rural population into core areas, in particular urban agglomerations, enabling an intensification of communication and the organisation of populations;

- (3) the spread of literacy among the broad mass of the population, with the consequence of its increased self-confidence and a revolution in skills: the spread of capabilities in every respect, in particular in terms of political self-organisation;
- (4) the politicisation of public as well as private affairs throughout all of society, with the long-term consequence of a pluralisation and politicisation of interests, identities, and 'truths'.

Especially important in this context is the rising awareness and politicisation of ethnicity, the mobilisation of national symbols as the unconscious consequence of the above-described processes, frequently however by political design. In each individual case, this secular process of transformation reproduces the fundamental problem of modernity: how, under these conditions and in view of a politicised plurality, to enable political co-existence.

Karl Deutsch understood the 'growth of nations' as a process of emancipation, though one with potential problematic implications. On the one hand, modern nation-states were being increasingly transformed into integrated and consolidated entities within whose limited territory it was possible to mobilise services for the masses that would never have been possible in pre-modern societies. On the other hand, however, these new centres of power also resembled collectively organised prejudices: their tendency towards self-absorption or even nationalist-chauvinist politics was and is impossible to ignore.

Deutsch analysed the emergence of politically coherent territories and the concurrent threat of the chauvinistic-aggressive abuse of the mobilised potential in many exhaustive studies. His detailed questions and observations can already be seen in his early classic, *Nationalism and Social Communication* [(1953) 1966], as well as in *Nationalism and Its Alternatives* [1969] and the collection of essays *Tides Among Nations* [1979]. This last volume also contains numerous important essays on the subject, some of which appeared in an early German translation under the title *Nationenbildung—Nationalstaat—Integration* [1972]. In all his writings, Deutsch argues unmistakably that emerging nations are no primordial creations, but that they undergo a process of 'nation-building' that can be analytically reconstructed in detail and through which they develop, to varying extents, a mental, emotional, and infrastructural collective identity spanning all social classes.

For Deutsch as an analyst of the collapse of imperial structures and the development and growth of nation-states as a consequence of social mobilisation, it only made sense that he would also study the related integration of nations within supranational networks of varying degrees of integration. As a result, Deutsch became a pioneer in the study of integrative processes that, if they were unable to overcome nation-states, at least managed to bring them together into (his own terminology) 'security communities' created in order to ensure the peace. Deutsch differentiated between two types of such communities: amalgamated and pluralistic.

'Amalgamated security communities' are less likely to succeed, because

they are much more demanding in terms of their requirements, as shown by the factors that Deutsch distilled from a wide-ranging comparative analysis (*Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* [Deutsch et al. 1957]). Such communities require: the mutual compatibility of basic values, intensified transactions in the areas of communication and economic exchange, an expectation of economic gains arising from the new integrative network, increased political and administrative capacities as a foundation for improved problem-solving abilities, a broader social base for the political elite, the cross-border mobility of people, the ability to engage in comprehensive and cross-cutting communication (including the constitution of new publics), a new and attractive way of life into which the relevant parts of the populations are socialised, the chance for upward social mobility, and in particular the predictability of the actors' behaviour within the overarching integrative network. Basically speaking, amalgamated security communities involve the emergence of a new political community.

By comparison, 'pluralistic security communities' are more modest in their goals. Three factors form the basis for their success: mutual compatibility of basic values, responsiveness as an expression of being sensitive to the interests of other (especially weaker) members, and the actors' predictable behaviour. Since integrative processes resemble the historical transformation of societies and since amalgamated and pluralistic security communities are always in danger of disintegration, the relevant indicators (always in the inverse) can be used for an analysis of the reverse trend as well: A community's susceptibility to regression is determined using the same factors that characterise the process of integration.

Karl Deutsch was frequently perceived as a 'communication theorist'. This is not wrong, but does not provide a full picture, as vividly documented by his studies of nationalism and integration. His historically and empirically informed theoretical deliberations were always multidimensional; in particular, they always involved material and immaterial, structural and procedural, hard and soft factors. Although, for Deutsch, information and communication flows are generally an important medium for the constitution of society, they cannot be comprehended without their material and institutional foundation: information channels, institutional and mental capacities for information reception and processing, the complex resources of memory as an important depth dimension of communication, the capacity for self-control, and steering capacity.

One of Deutsch's central theoretical concepts—elaborated in his key work *The Nerves of Government* [1963]—is that a social system (no matter on what level) can only survive if it is capable of learning. The learning processes themselves depend on the structure of the information flow, i.e. above all on the transmission capacity of information channels and the efficacy of steering and control mechanisms, i.e. self-steering.

A system's capacity for social learning is a precondition for the solution of acute as well as long-ranging problems. When a system manages to overcome these challenges, Deutsch speaks of 'creative learning'. However, learning can

also be 'pathological'. For this latter case, the following six symptoms are of significance:

- (1) loss of steering capacity as a consequence of a loss of the resources and instruments necessary for a system to overcome the obstacles in its immediate surroundings;
- (2) constriction of the information flow between the system and the outside world, i.e. its increasing blindness;
- (3) failure of internal control mechanisms required by the system in order to be able to continually check and guide its own actions (loss of 'self-consciousness');
- (4) loss of depth of memory;
- (5) loss of capacity for partial inner rearrangement (loss of limited capacity for learning);
- (6) loss of capacity for fundamental restructuring.

Remaining open, capable of learning, and capable of fostering and cultivating one's own learning capacities: these are important tasks for any political system, and require resources, institutions, and strategic orientations ('will'). But they contain a dialectic opposition: the danger of self-referentiality, isolation, and, in extreme cases, autism. Particularly incisive in this context is Deutsch's definition of power as 'the ability to afford not to learn'. In other words, power is held by those who believe that they do not need to learn.

This definition of power is more subtle than most prevailing definitions, because it understands power not only as an indispensable resource, but also as something that can blind us: The potential for losing touch with reality constantly present in positions of power is diagnosed as resulting from a failure to understand the necessity to constantly engage in critical reality tests and self-inspection. In his analyses of the possibility of collective learning, Deutsch falls back on concepts that modern political theory usually does not think about much (anymore): curiosity, humility, awe, love, faith, and grace, as contrasted with pride, idolatry, and indifference—categories and their related attitudes that are of strategic importance for learning processes.

With a view towards the question of social (i.e. collective) learning, Deutsch focuses on four types of systems: self-destructive, unviable, viable, and self-developing or self-enhancing systems. He always analysed the first three systems with the fourth in mind, i.e. with a view towards systems that are distinguished by their capacity for learning, critical self-consciousness, the capacity for the appropriate mobilisation of necessary resources, and the capacity for partial or comprehensive restructuring. Deutsch consequently views politics and political systems as highly ambivalent instruments for slowing or accelerating the social learning process.

Nevertheless, Deutsch's scientific work can be described using the clear-cut, non-ambivalent motto that he himself formulated: All studies of politics, all methods and models that serve as instruments of political analysis, have just one



purpose: 'that men should be more able to act in politics with their eyes open'. This impetus resulted in his contributions to political theory and to comparative politics in particular, as well as—towards the end of his prolific academic life—his contribution to inspiring the formulation of a realistic world model fully reflecting the concepts of political science, through which conceivable international developments can be studied using alternative scenarios. Peace, social equality, and an understanding for cultural diversity formed his guiding principles.

As an endless fount of theoretical creativity, Karl Deutsch has inspired an incalculable number of detailed studies (in Germany, these include Klaus-Jürgen Gantzel and Torsten Schwinghammer's study of the causes of war [1995]). Also in the tradition of Deutsch's thinking are the comprehensively structured analyses of international relations and the peace- and development-related research of, among others, Peter Katzenstein [1977, 1985, 1996], Bruce Russett [Russett and Oneal 2001], and Dieter Senghaas [1982]. In addition, the concept of 'security community' has experienced a recent renaissance [see Adler and Barnett 1998]. With their concept of 'denationalisation' and the related indicators, including a reference data manual [Beisheim, Dreher and Walter 1999], Michael Zürn [1998] and his team have contributed paradigmatically and in the spirit of Karl Deutsch to the process of addressing the controversies sparked by contemporary debates on globalisation.

Although with his death his ideas have lost their erstwhile aura, it is not immediately clear why the increased attention to ethnic-national conflicts since the end of the East-West conflict should be thought capable of getting by without relying on the work of Karl Deutsch. Even less comprehensible is the fact that the so-called constructivist revolution in the social sciences is being promoted as a novelty, without even remotely approaching the level of complexity found in Deutsch's deliberations. Karl Deutsch attached immense importance to the world of symbols and the meaning and context of social processes, but he never viewed them outside of political power relations and social movements, and never disassociated them from their material and institutional contexts.

When, in the foreseeable future, this two-dimensional and uncontextualised constructivism is discarded as an antiquated temporary fashion, then the currently ignored but weighty factors of social reality will be 'rediscovered' within a contextual and comprehensive heuristic method and analysis à la Deutsch. When this happens, the renewed reception of the work of Karl Deutsch, who neither followed nor founded any fashions, will be initiated. The key points of this reception will be a comprehensive theory of the disintegration and integration of collective entities with a focus on society-wide analysis, as well as an operationally categorised heuristic method for the analysis of pathological as well as innovative social learning processes. Another desirable development would be for the current conceptually narrow definition of power found in nearly all social sciences to be replaced by Karl Deutsch's expanded definition.

This would bring the concept of the reality test—which is equally important for science as for political practice—to the centre of analytical attention. The ques-

tion thus arises: Do the centres of political control have a realistic picture of their surroundings? Or do old habits, ingrained practices, and organisational inertia prevent them from innovatively mediating between old preferences and new requirements? Are they capable, in view of the diverse and often-contradictory demands placed on politics, of coordinating themselves, reallocating available resources and mobilising new ones in order to be up to the new tasks? In other words, is politics capable of creative learning?

Karl Deutsch's main message might be summarised as follows: Politics can become atrophied and lose touch with social reality. When this happens, it frequently does little more than circle around itself in self-aggrandisement and focus on the assertion or acquisition of power, and the citizenry adopts an antagonistic, even cynical attitude towards all politics. To this, we add a dialectic situation that can be bluntly formulated as follows: Politics that dumbs down the people dumbs down itself. But politics can also be an important medium of social learning capable of motivating many people. In such a case, it promotes critical reality tests within the sense of the realistic definition of problems and their innovative solution. This is the first and foremost goal of any social science, political science in particular, that considers itself critical.

Karl Deutsch viewed criticism as a natural precondition for innovation—a premise that he once explained as follows: 'The mass media and pundits [*we might add: academia – D.S.*] hold an unprecedented position—no matter whether they plan to participate in the spiritual *Gleichschaltung* of mankind, or whether they endeavour, wherever possible, to defend the diversity of information flows, the abrasiveness of dissociations, and the possibility of new creative combinations. And here we must add one more thing: memory cannot use that which has not been experienced—thus the need for openness. One cannot recombine that which has not been dissociated. Thus the need for deconstructive criticism as a precondition for constructive creativity: Deconstruction and construction are two stages of the same cycle of production of something new, of creation. It is absurd to wish for the creator but deny the destroyer. It would be equally absurd for me to wish for the cathedral but detest the stone quarry. There are no cathedrals without quarries. We cannot build cathedrals without first breaking the stone blocks out of the rock in which they naturally occur.'

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## Empirical Data for Theory Development

Karl Wolfgang Deutsch had little patience with fanciful intellectual schemes not carefully supported by accurately gathered and ordered facts. He frequently referred to such machinations as grand theories 'planted firmly in mid-air'. For him, speculating without returning regularly to hard data was, well, speculating: speculating in the sense of conjecture, guesswork, predicting without evidence. Surely one of his most important contributions to political science was the insistence upon the vital relationship between theoretical understanding and empirical research.

This was no rejection of theory. Indeed, he was a grand theoretician; his work in a number of areas confirms this. It is nowhere better demonstrated than in his cybernetic conception of behaviour in *The Nerves of Government*.<sup>1</sup> There he compared the role of government to a cybernetic regulator, conceiving the governing process as one of command and control. In cybernetic theory, the regulator is that part of the system designed to detect an intolerable conflict between what is preferred and what is empirically true, and then to effect an appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control* [1963]. A second edition was published in 1966.