FACULTY
OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
Charles University

Karl Wolfgang Deutsch: A Brief Introduction

Richard Ned Lebow

Professor of International Political Theory, King's College London and Chairman of the Advisory Board, Deutsch Security Square

Karl grew up in a secure family in an insecure country. Born in 1912 in Prague, in what was still the Austro-Hungarian Empire, his formative experiences were in the newly independent Czechoslovakia. His family was Jewish, German speaking and professional. His father was an optician who owned a shop on Wenceslas Square and his mother became a Social Democratic politician and member of the Czechoslovak parliament. Initially committed to studying optics, Karl attended the German-speaking University and took a leave to spend two years in England. He and his wife Ruth Slonitz returned to Prague. He entered the Czech-speaking Charles University as the German university had come under the influence of the Nazi student organization. In 1938, he received a JUDr. degree from the law school.

Karl and Ruth left Prague for a visit to the United States and decided not to return after the Munich agreement in November of that year. Harvard offered him a fellowship and he would ultimately receive a Ph.D. from that institution in 1951. His dissertation became the path-breaking *Nationalism and Social Communication,* published in 1953 by the MIT Press. During the war years, he worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and attended the San Francisco conference where the United Nations was created.

Karl began teaching at MIT in 1943 and remained there until 1956. He taught at Yale from 1956 to 1967 and at Harvard from 1967 until his death in 1992. For a decade, from 1977 to 1987, he served as director of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB).

Karl was an amalgam of several intellectual traditions, and struggled all his life to synthesize them. He considered himself as a scientist and felt happiest when grappling with intellectual problems. The puzzle that never ceased to engage his attention was the phenomenon of **nationalism**. In what way was it a response to the modern world? On what basis did nationalities form? And how might national identifications be muted, superseded or somehow finessed to build international cooperation and peace? These concerns are hardly surprising as Karl was born into a multi-ethnic empire on the eve of its collapse and grew up in a successor state where relations between Germans and Czechs and Czechs and Slovaks became increasingly embittered and would be responsible, or at least provide the pretext, for Czechoslovakia's destruction.

Karl's work on nationalism sought to find some form of association that would transcend national commitments and provide a more secure basis for interpersonal and interstate relations. *Nationalism and Social Communication* posed the fundamental question of how a nationality became constituted. Why did people form a communal bond that found expression in the desire for political autonomy?

Karl provided a two-part answer. Modernization cut people loose from their traditional ties, often moving them physically to cities where they were compelled to make new economic and social ties. Nationalism provided a much-needed form of personal identification and vehicle for social integration. It also conferred practical benefits in a world where competition for wealth and status was intense and best achieved through group membership. National communities could be organized on the basis of language, culture, religion and territory, but none of these features were determinative. Communities were constructed on the basis of complementary habits of communication that over time led people to share symbols and a sense of common destiny. Communication had the potential to construct a "we feeling" among people and for this reason became the *Leitmotiv* of Karl's research agenda.

Karl was educated in the Kantian tradition. Like so many Europeans of his era, he looked to metaphysical frameworks to make sense of empirical observations and for categories to organize these observations. Along with so many other refugee social scientists, he was surprised by the narrow empiricism of his American colleagues. He nevertheless collaborated with Michigan's J. David Singer, arguably the narrowest quantitative researcher in the field of international relations. His Correlates of War project consisted of data collection on a massive sale in the hope that important relationships would somehow emerge.[1]

Karl was more at home with "big thinkers" like Crane Brinton and like long-time friend and intellectual guru Norbert Wiener. His *Nerves of Government*, published in 1963, was the most wide-ranging and ambitious of his books, and the one of which he was the proudest.[2] It elaborated a conceptual scheme implicit in *Nationalism and Social Communication*. Karl drew on communications theory, including Wiener's concept of feedback, to develop a three-tiered model of feedback, the last of which could be analogized to consciousness. Like Plato's description of the mind in the *Republic*, Karl intended his model to be equally applicable to individuals and states. It emphasized the importance of learning, defined in terms of modifying behavior, beliefs or concept of self on the basis of feedback from one's behavior.

For Deutsch, responsiveness to the environment was the key to survival and growth, concepts that he redefined in terms of **cybernetics**. Individuals and organizations that did not change were doomed to failure because even the most effective routines would over time become inappropriate as the environment changed. This framework could help explain the differential rates of "assimilation", one of his two key variables. Assimilation depended on the responsiveness of governments to the needs of people, in this case ethnic groups not part of the dominant culture. It depended on information gathering, responsiveness to demands, and feedback about the effects of policies. As organizational change depends on agency, the cybernetic approach to politics was a rejoinder to critics who objected to what they unfairly considered the macro-level determinism of his theory of nationalism. In a more fundamental sense, *Nerves of Government* sought to alert fellow scholars and policymakers to a conception of government as a potential vehicle of social learning and, accordingly, of intellectual and moral growth. It was no accident that Karl wrote his book at a time when the civil rights movement was developing and the future of his adopted country would turn on the responsiveness of government and public alike to demands for social justice and institutional change.

Karl differed from many grand theorists in his concern for the empirical. His most influential works *Nationalism and Social Communication* and *Political Community in the North Atlantic Area* combine novel frameworks and detailed empirical work.[3] The latter is an outgrowth of *Nationalism and Social Communication*. Published in 1957, it was collaborate project in which

Karl wrote the theoretical chapter and historians the case studies. In contrast to World Federalists who believed that a world government was the only way to secure peace, Karl recognized the naïve nature of this enterprise but also the encouraging development that in limited regions of the world war between peoples and their states had become all but unthinkable. He was hopeful that such a zone of peace was developing in the North Atlantic region.

Karl defined a **security community** as "a group of people" believing "that they have come to agreement on at least this one point: that common social problems must and can be resolved by processes of 'peaceful change'."[4] A few security communities were "amalgamated," in the sense that previously independent states had formed a central government. The American thirteen colonies were the leading historical example. Amalgamation did not always succeed. The U.S. had suffered a civil war but maintained the union, while the union of Sweden and Norway had failed, although their separation was peaceful. Sweden and Norway, and the other Scandinavian states, were part of a "pluralistic security community", where member states remained independent but their peoples and governments closely cooperated and believed that any differences between them had to be resolved peacefully. The other great historical example was Canada and the United States. *Political Community in the North Atlantic Area* analyzed the requirements of pluralistic security communities and how they developed.

Karl's dream of a peaceful North Atlantic region has come to fruition, and its pluralistic security community has been extended east in the aftermath of the Cold War. Such a community may be in its nascent stages of development in the Pacific Rim. Analytically, the concept of security community is embedded in the international relations literature and has been further elaborated and applied by constructivist scholars.[5] The North Atlantic Community also served a psychological function for Karl. It allowed him to supersede his multiple and at times crosscutting identities as Jew, Unitarian, German, Czech and American by creating the supranational identity of the North Atlantic community. He would be honored, but even more importantly, self-fulfilled, by knowledge of how it has progressed in theory and practice.

1   For a sympathetic but still critical review, John Vasquez, "The Steps to War: Toward A Scientific Explanation of Correlates of War Findings," *World Politics,* Vol. 40, no. 1 (1987), pp. 108-45.

2   Karl W. Deutsch, *Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control* (Glencoe, Il.: Free Press, 1963).

3   Karl W. Deutsch, *The Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

4   Ibid., p. 5.

5   Michael Haas, "Comparing Regional Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific," in Jeannette P. Mass and Robert A. C. Stewart, eds., *Toward a World of Peace* (Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific Press, 1986), pp. 149-168; Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Raimo Väyrynen, "Stable Peace Through Security Communities? Steps Towards Theory Building," Occasional Paper 18 (Notre Dame, Ind., Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2000); Alex J. Bellamy, *Security Communities and Their Neighbours: Regional Fortresses or Global Integrators?* **(**New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004).