

On the Need for an Avant-Garde in Strategic Studies

by Louis René Beres (January 2015)

Theory is a net. Only those who cast will catch.

In an important work of contemporary philosophy and social science, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas S. Kuhn articulates the vital idea of “paradigm.” By this idea, which has obvious parallels in the arts, Kuhn refers to certain examples of scientific practice that provide theoretical models for further inquiry: Ptolemaic or Copernican astronomy; Aristotelian dynamics; Newtonian mechanics, and so on. At any given moment in history, we learn, the prevailing paradigm within a given discipline defines the basic contours of all subsequent investigation.

The transformations of these paradigms, transformations that are occasioned by the essential opposition of new “facts” and empirical findings to the prevailing dominant orthodoxy, are “scientific revolutions.” The transition from one paradigm to another represents the core dynamic in which science is able to progress.

As an intrinsically important (but generally under-recognized) area of political science, *strategic studies* are no exception. In the fashion of all other fields of inquiry, this very old area of scholarship can progress only to the extent that new paradigms routinely arise to “excavate” a consistently transforming consciousness of war and peace. Ironically, however, the emergence of such indispensable new paradigms has been remarkably scant in recent years, creating a genuine ossification of strategic studies. This condition is already precipitating assorted negative intellectual and policy consequences.

What is to be done? I propose to argue here that the benefits of Kuhn’s useful concept of paradigm could be enhanced by pertinent reference to the *world of art*. In this world, creative “advance” is achieved via ongoing and persistent challenges to dominant orthodoxies, what Kuhn would call the dynamic of “paradigm shifts.” Significantly, in the world of art, these entirely revolutionary transformations of prevailing epistemologies [i] are spawned by an always emergent *avant-garde*, by a critical “vanguard” for the *new*.

This is exactly what we need in strategic studies today. Now, we lack altogether the idea and the presence of an *avant-garde*. As a result, the field continues to be dominated by aging and

increasingly irrelevant paradigms; hence, by static models of military thinking that are often incapable of shaping any purposeful military policies. More specifically, the absence of *avant-garde* thinking has had determinable consequences for our problematic strategic policies in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

One of the major “beat” [ii] poets of the 1950s titled a poem, “This Is Not a Poem.” [iii] In so doing, he sought, through irony and paradox, to confront and eventually to alter the prevailing norms of poetry. It is in the constant and continuing tension between orthodoxy and *avant-garde* that art advances.

This is also true of academic disciplines. Yet, in the genre with which we are presently concerned, the sub-field of political science that we call *strategic studies*, we are witnessing nary a new challenge to the now-sanctified mainstream still defined by Clausewitz, Sun-Tzu, Brodie, Schelling, Liddell-Hart, etc.

What is to be done? Let me offer an example from the world of art. To recognize the origins of modern art, a contemporary expression of which was contained in the “beat” movement, we must look at the revolutionary romanticism of Blake and the revolutionary classicism of David. So, too, must we consider the historical idealism of Delacroix (to Cezanne always “*le grand maître*”); the realism of Courbet and Manet; the expressionism of Van Gogh and Munch; the symbolism of Emile Bernard and Gauguin. All of these precede and even predetermine the specifically modern movements of Fauvism, Cubism, Constructivism and Surrealism.

Let us look more closely at Surrealism. In June 1936, the International Surrealist Exhibition broke over London, electrifying the dry intellectual atmosphere, and stirring sluggish minds and sluggish brushes to unaccustomed wonder, enchantment and redefinition. Of course, the Exhibition also stirred derision, but this can assuredly be a most positive and productive emotion as well.

Surrealist art was intended to shock the viewer into a different and new kind of awareness. The paintings of Dali and Magritte, the frottages of Max Ernst, Picabia’s mechanistic pictures, and the abstract sculpture of Jean Arp – all were timely expressions of revolt against a dull and timeworn orthodoxy. All were expressions of a much-needed *avant-garde*.

And there is the related movement known as *Dada*. [iv] More than anything else, Dada represented a revolt against existing art by artists. [v] Even today, Dada stands outrageously for an exaggerated individualism, for universal doubt, and for an appropriately aggressive iconoclasm. Debunking the prevailing canons of reason, taste and hierarchy, of order and of discipline, of an artistic inspiration controlled by rationality, Dada emphasized the

arbitrary, the power of chance, of the unconscious, of the primitive. Always, Dada delighted in the shock effect of its new-paradigm blasphemies among those who were “right thinking” artists. [vi]

This brings us back to strategic studies. Like art, our particular genre cannot progress without an ever-present and ever-emergent avant-garde. Indeed, this requirement was not always neglected by the field. For the transition in paradigm from war histories to war studies, we need only consider the seminal works of Marshal de Saxe, Chevalier de Folard, Guibert, Count Raimondo Montecuccoli, Henry Lloyd and Frederick the Great. We may also consider the reactions to and reformations of those principles contained in Thucydides and, later, in manuals on warfare such as Maurice’s *Strategicon*, Leo VI’s *Tactica* and even Machiavelli’s *The Art of War*. From Vegetius’s *De Re Militari* to Baron De Jomini’s *The Art of War*, from Helmuth von Moltke to Giulio Douhet’s *Command of the Air*, a strategic *avant-garde* is evident in our field that countered the *rigor mortis* of academicism with the sheer vitality of creative intellect and art.

We are at a very different stage today. While benefiting from the crucial paradigm-challenges offered by Andre Beaufre and Alfred Thayer Mahan, by Col. Trevor Dupuy and Thomas Schelling, we are now operating (and operationalizing) in a deep intellectual “rut.” Generally mimicking the prevailing paradigm, rather than challenging it in any imaginative or systematic way, those who toil in the vineyards of strategic studies are often less and less able to make productive policy recommendations. In consequence, our strategic policies are too often less than optimal.

Many of the principal assumptions associated with current strategic studies need to be challenged by a new intellectual vanguard, by an eager *avant-garde*. One such assumption is the core idea of *rationality* in strategic calculations. Insofar as the functioning of nuclear deterrence is entirely contingent upon this assumption, the field tends to look away from circumstances in which rationality might not operate. As a result, strategic studies do little if anything to prepare national policy-makers for confrontations with enemy states or state proxies whose leaders do not conform to the pertinent rules of rational decision-making. [vii]

Another problematic assumption of strategic studies concerns the generally alleged immutability of human nature. Regarding behavioral factors as fixed and non-variable in strategic calculations, the discipline of strategic studies focuses entirely, and therefore narrowly, on manipulations of force structures, power balances, governments and other institutions in world affairs. Here it would be sobering to reconsider the observation of the late-eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant: “Out of timber so crooked as that

from which man is made, nothing entirely straight can be built." [viii] Newly aware those structural manipulations in strategic studies are always epiphenomenal; ignoring the root causes of war in favor of their symptomatic expressions, scholars and policy-makers could craft from this paradigm-challenge a far more adaptive, and hence more promising, field.

Still another needed paradigm-shift in strategic studies concerns the requirement of what I shall call a "strategic dialectic." [ix] Presently, our field of study is thoroughly static, rather than dynamic. Instead of reasoning toward conclusions by asking and answering questions, it generally offers little more than reportorial summaries of relative force structures and inventories of weapons systems. Not surprisingly, this absence of dialectical reasoning [x] has prevented the development of a highly-predictive system of theory, the very kind of system that should always be the primary element of strategic studies.

We require an *avant garde* to advance a distinctly dialectical series of strategic thoughts, where each thought presents a complication that moves inquiry onward to the very next thought. Contained in this strategic dialectic is an obligation to *continue thinking*, an obligation that can never be fulfilled altogether (because of what is traditionally called the "infinite regress problem"), but that must still be attempted, always, as fully, and as competently, as possible. Without such an attempt, strategic studies will continue to focus narrowly upon discrete moments in time, on "still photos" rather than on "moving pictures," or, to switch metaphors, on what pathologists would call "frozen sections," rather than on actual pathogenesis.

But first there will need to be *courage*, the very sort of courage that allows any individual to accept serious professional risks. "Whenever the new Muses present themselves," says Ortega y Gasset, "the masses bristle." [xi] Those who would now challenge mainstream strategic studies as an essential *avant-garde* will, like their counterparts in the world of art, need to endure some palpable measures of ridicule and opprobrium. Will they be ready?

In leveling their intellectual challenges against a stultifying orthodoxy, the challengers will have to confront the "experts," and they will have to take care not to become "experts" themselves. The problem, in strategic studies as well as in a great many other fields, is that the expert has now replaced the thinker (largely because society always pays for the expert and not for the thinker), and the expert is usually incapable of serious strategic analysis. Oriented to the "wisdom" of television sound-bites, and not to the exhausting discipline of long and lonely intellectual work, the expert largely remains what Ortega identified in 1932, "a learned ignoramus, which is a very serious matter, as it implies that he is a person who is ignorant, not in the fashion of the ignorant man, but with all the

petulance of one who is learned in his own special line." Indeed, continues Ortega, the expert symbolizes, and to a great extent even constitutes, "...the actual domination of the masses. Furthermore, he affords the clearest, most striking example of how the civilization of the last century, *abandoned to its own devices*, has brought about the rebirth of primitivism and barbarism." [xii]

There are, of course, many other areas of strategic studies wherein *avant-garde* challenges must be mounted. One of these areas concerns the need for intellectual *creativity*, especially in regard to the formation of concepts and to the fashioning of promising hypotheses. Another, concerns the long-forgotten rules of *science*, the obligation to begin every inquiry with a sound hypothesis, and to examine this hypothesis according to apt forms of deductive elaboration, and also by correct sensitivity to apt modes of inference. Still another area concerns the idea of *system*