

CHRISTIAN HARBULOT AND THE CREATION OF “ECONOMIC INTELLIGENCE” IN FRANCE

Christian Harbulot was the first French author to address the topic of economic intelligence, presenting ideas that sparked the debate on its importance, given that the gaining of consciousness of the changes on the international scene could no longer be postponed, and recognizing the priority of economic questions over military ones.

The writings of C. Harbulot are authentic essays on the nature of economic confrontation written with the objective of convincing the political elite that an offensive use of information is a key factor in ensuring a Nation's success.

Through comparative cultural analysis, Harbulot explained why certain peoples had mobilized and addressed the conflictual aspects of the market economy while others had not, and advanced his reasoning by which information capital is at the same time a leading factor in production but also an offensive weapon, in addition to being an arm of dissuasion.

Harbulot demonstrated how Japan's economy was further ahead than America's, and naturally France's, precisely because it was capable of exploiting all the potential of intelligence activity in the sector. The United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, France, and Japan developed their own cultural model of market economy. In particular, Harbulot believed that Germany and Japan had gained remarkable economic leverage from their information and intelligence assets and had implemented more offensive and more effective economic policies because they were based on concerted strategies between private or public companies, between administrations and bank networks. Businesses in these two countries optimized their profitability by reducing the gap between information and intelligence, between open practices and closed practices, between what is available to the entire world and what instead must remain secret, moving from information – the mere awareness of information – to action, or rather information that can be useful for intelligence.

Harbulot often accused French political power of not giving the right amount of importance to “economic warfare”, thus remaining vulnerable to the risk of losing the control of its own economic information independence when faced with the massive growth of the Asian economies, all of which are – as opposed to those in the West – founded on unspoken rules of economic warfare.

For France, instead, the complete ignorance of the offensive potential of information engineering would be the cause of the scarce competitiveness of its companies.

Furthermore, the concept of "economic defence" – intended solely in a military perspective – is equally invalid.

This can be summarized by quoting Luttwak:

A nation's cohesion is no longer born from the fear of a military threat but an economic threat instead, in a context in which the importance given to military alliances decreases and geo-economic priorities prevail instead.

In short, the elite in power in France still needed to be convinced of the existence and the importance of "economic warfare".

The term "economic warfare" appeared too strong and radical right from the start, especially when used by authors like Bernard Esambert, who compared a nation's loss of jobs and wealth and the lowering of its standard of living tout court to the disasters of war. Yet for this author, as well as Harbulot, the underlying idea is that a nation's economic success is based on the concept of "culture" considered as a weapon that some nations use better than others: Japan's economic dynamism can be explained by the strength of its cultural power, as might be Germany's economic power as well. The French economy was playing a defensive game, instead.

However, the vocabulary suggested by Harbulot and terms regarding concepts like "combat culture", "economic confrontation" and "economic warfare" were seen as scarcely convincing and overly radical. Thanks to the work conducted together with Philippe Baumard, the terms "confrontation" and "warfare" were replaced with that of "intelligence". The use of the term intelligence derived from a combination of the French definitions of "*surveillance*" and "*veille*" and the Anglo-Saxon and Swedish definitions of the concept of intelligence intended as reasoning, planning, and ability to establish relations between various elements, or more simply, active information gathering activities. However, the term economic intelligence invokes an entirely new category in the field of economic geopolitics that expresses new needs for cooperation between the public and private sector.

P. Baumard proposed a methodology for the creation of a business intelligence system before constructing together with Harbulot a common reading of the stakes at risk linked to the new forms of competition based on offensive approaches to information. The ideas of Harbulot that were given most credence and which best describe the French situation are based on the use of subversive cultural elements in economic warfare.

The analyses of Philippe Baumard are very similar to those of Harbulot, especially concerning changes in terminology: from the concept of “surveillance of the environment”, “intelligence” came to signify the “intelligence of the environment” reflecting the prospect of greater tactical and strategic interaction of information.

Various other authors have considered the ambiguity of the term intelligence. The British give it a wider range of significance than the Americans did, for one thing. To make matters worse, difficulties in translation contribute to the confusion. The French word “*intelligence*”, for example, refers nearly exclusively to a human faculty, the intelligence of an individual, but not the activity of by which a government agency or a private company collects information. The French word *renseignement* is applied to the activities of national security agencies and not those of private companies or a particular social group: it expresses the product, the information that was collected in the environment, and makes tacit reference to the secret services.

Philippe Baumard focused his work on semantic problems and the difficulties of understanding and using the term in France in regard to the terms “*veille*” and “*renseignement*”. Baumard would attempt to renew the image of “vigilance” and “surveillance” in the perception of companies by exploiting the Anglo-Saxon concept of intelligence. However, his meeting with C. Harbulot – whom he even criticized for his use of the French term *renseignement*, declaring his preference for *intelligence*, as well as for the expression “*intelligence économique*” which he preferred to indicate with “economic confrontation” – would lead to the integration of the expression “*intelligence économique*” in the debate on the adaptation of public actions in regard to the problems posed by the management of information in 1992.

In this way, both style and terminology would become more moderate and closer to the vocabulary used by government administrations.

The progressive development of semantics for the topic contributed to a comprehension of the facts that was more appropriate to the changing times. The function of “vigilance” was very useful to the French contributors, and enabled the shift to the successive concept of economic intelligence intended as information assessed, interpreted, and put to use, also in terms of offence, by companies.

P. Baumard underlined the progress made by the United States in the topic in many ways: with an intense proliferation of texts, with an American economic intelligence community structured around the former members of intelligence services working together in the SCIP association, and with the renewed interest being taken by universities on this issue and

journalists who make less confusion between “business intelligence” and spying. In France as well, the reasoning advanced by C. Harbulot proved to be decisive in the implementation of plans for action that would be submitted at the highest levels of government.

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