

*Section: National Security*

**ADAMI CARLO**

*PhD Candidate*

*Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv*

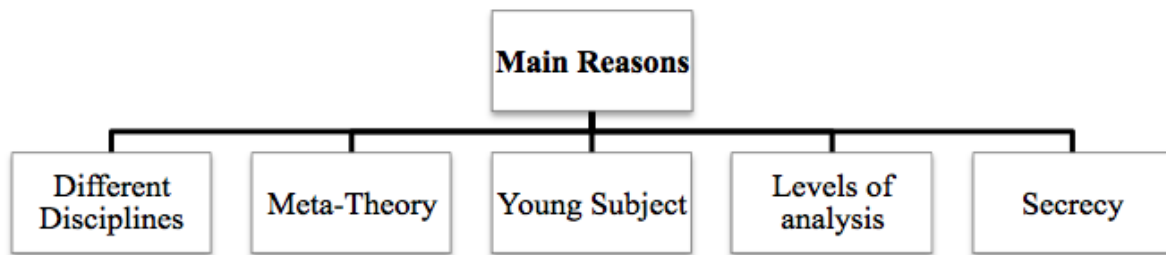
*Kyiv, Ukraine*

## **ECONOMIC INTELLIGENCE: ON THE REASONS FOR THE LACK OF A COMMON THEORY**

The Economic Intelligence (EI) is a relatively new discipline, which consists in a complex system of activities aimed to search and use situations of asymmetric information, in order to obtain a competitive advantage against other actors [1]. It has been proposed by academics and practitioners in order to provide the decision-makers, in enterprises or governments, with the knowledge they need to operate in the new intricate network of international economic relations resulting from the globalization [2]. However, despite the strong relevance of the discipline, there is neither a common view nor a unique definition about the EI [3]. The purpose of this paper is to investigate on the reasons of that absence of a common theory.

In consideration of the fact that the EI could be considered as an algebraic subgroup of the more general concept of intelligence, each theoretical consideration and propriety applicable to the latter remains also valid for the EI. For this reason, in the research of the reasons for the lack of a common theory of the EI, the vast literature about the more general intelligence studies (IS) is taken into consideration.

There are different explanations that justify the absence of a common accepted theory (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1. The Main Reasons of the Absence of a Common Theory about Intelligence.**  
*Source: composed by the author.*

First of all, it is possible to affirm that, during the last years, an important variety of studies about intelligence has emerged, and different disciplines have individually started to develop a theory of intelligence using their own methods and models. Consequently, “researchers located in longer-established disciplines such as politics, history, IR, criminology” [4] have initiated to dedicate attention to this new field of study, previous ignored. The presence of different disciplines with dissimilar methodological approaches, and divergent final purposes has generated a multitude of concepts and descriptions about intelligence. As a result of that use of the development of new sub-areas of study within the traditional disciplines, there is nowadays a vast unsystematic literature, several independent currents of researches, and different methods of analysis, which are “impeding the field from developing as a coherent academic discipline” [5].

Secondly, academics and practitioners have different positions toward the EI and the IS in general. For the latter, the object of the investigation is just its practice, which is the activity of collection and analysis of the information, and generation of knowledge. In fact, the fundamental purpose of the intelligence theory is, in this case, the application of the epistemology, and the hermeneutic, in order to obtain the best knowledge necessary to support the decision-maker. For the academics, instead, the main role of the epistemology, and the scientific method is to define “how intelligence work” [6]. The academic prospective, in other words, is the one of an outsider, and the relative theory could be considered as a meta-theory: consisting in the application of a scientific approach to construct a theory, whose aim is the creation of knowledge by means of a rigorous scientific methodology of search, and

analysis of information. Philip H. J. Davies refers to the two different approaches using the expressions: theory *about* intelligence, to indicate the meta-theory, and theory *of* intelligence, to address to the other [7].

A further reason of the absence of a common theory about intelligence derives from the fact that the intelligence theory can be studied at different social levels. Peter Gill, in particular, individuates five of them: individual; group; organisational; societal and international. Thus, for example, at the individual level the cognitive psychology represents the basis for researches, whereas at the group level the main instrument of study is the social network analysis [8]. Furthermore, there also could be different approaches of intelligence as a consequence of the investigated subject: national intelligence, corporate intelligence, and intelligence of international organizations.

The relative young age of the IS also represent a reason of the lack of a more stable and coherent literature. In fact, despite the ancient origins of the intelligence (the search for the information about the environment or about the enemy has been a relevant issue since the beginning of the history [9]), until the 1955, as Sherman Kent observed, there were no literatures about the topic. For this reason, as previously affirmed, it is generally accepted the idea according to which the intelligence represented the missing dimension of the history and the international relations until the last decades. Non-dissimilar considerations could be advanced for the EI: it started to be studied as a genuine discipline during the cold war, and has become a pivotal instrument to succeed in the complex international relations environment only after the fall of the Berlin wall.

Finally, the last cause of the absence of a common theory in the IS is linked to a particular feature of the discipline: the secrecy. Consequently, it is hard for scholars and researchers to collect documents and materials, which are often covered by state secret privileges, if connected with the country, or jealously guarded by the owners, in case of corporations' information. Furthermore, the

concept of intelligence is often associated with the security services and with espionage activities, and for this reasons disregarded by the academic environment.

In conclusion of the analysis of the causes of the lack of a common intelligence theory, it is possible to identify some solutions to avoid part of the limits of the several approaches toward a theory of intelligence, advanced until now by scholars and practitioners. First of all, it is clear that, due to the its multidisciplinary, the IS are a distinctive field of research. That means, just to give an example, that even though the “structural realism already provides a theoretical explanation for certain key questions in IS” [10], the intelligence shouldn't not be considered as a sub-discipline of the international relations. On the contrary, other useful methodologies, deriving from different disciplines, should be taken into consideration to further develop the field. Secondly, in order to advance a new theory of the EI, the attention should be focused on the meta-theory. In other words, the approach to be preferred is the one that asserts that the scientific method should be the means to construct a theory of intelligence, and not the other that affirms that the theory should be a description of the use of the scientific methodology to create knowledge. Thirdly, notwithstanding the existence of different levels of analysis, a good new theory of the EI would be able to be applied indifferently to all of them (individual, corporate, national and international). Finally, in consideration to the fact that open sources can satisfy up to 80 per cent of the intelligence needs [11], the espionage activities and the covert actions of the security services should occupy a limited space in a new theory of the EI.

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