

Introduction

*"Most movements that are self-described as radical are highly urbanistic, or nationalistic, or oriented to obsolete class structures, or to central bureaucratic planning. The changes that we can see on the horizon are much more drastic than that.... People who think about social change in traditional political terms cannot begin to imagine the changes that lie ahead. Conventional reformers cast their programs in terms of national policies, or in terms of laws and central planning. But in the end, what will shape the future is a creative potential that inheres in the new technologies."*¹

—Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983)

Ithiel de Sola Pool was one of the most original thinkers in the development of the social sciences and a distinguished scholar of the political process. For thirty years he directed the Research Program on Communications at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *Politics in Wired Nations* presents a selection of his pioneering work that explores different communication systems in society and politics and especially the impact of new communications technologies.

Among the classic studies included in this volume are:

- The first study of trends to a global information society.
- The first study of social networks and the "small world" phenomenon that creates new relationships and routes of informal influence and political power, domestic and international.
- The politics of foreign trade and the influence of businessmen on foreign policy.
- A historical study of forecasting, testing whether the methods used to predict the impact of earlier technology are successful.
- Four "unnatural institutions" of the modern world (e.g., bureaucracies, mega-cities, nation-states) that will change because of the new capacities, lower costs, and the user control of new technologies.
- Policy choices for freedom, the battlegrounds ahead, and the risks of government and United Nations involvement in the regulation of new telecommunication technologies, even for good purposes.

Inevitably, a diminishing portion of the readers who consult this volume will know the major events of the twentieth century at first hand. Ithiel de Sola Pool's research responded to these events. I believe that it will assist the reader to place his work in the context of Pool's life and this history. Next, I will place them in the context of his commitment to freedom and the framework that his research was developing to assess the exponential changes in telecommunications technologies that are underway.

A Brief Biography

Ithiel de Sola Pool was born in New York City in 1917, the son of two distinguished parents: Rabbi David deSola Pool (Heidelberg, Ph.D.), an Englishman and the spiritual leader of the Sephardic Congregation in New York City; and Tamar Hirshenson (Hunter College, the Sorbonne), the daughter of a rabbi. He attended the University of Chicago of the 1930s (B.A., 1938; M.A., 1939; Ph.D., 1952) amid the tumult and political passions of the Depression and was a passionate Trotskyite and student leader. The University of Chicago, in this era of President Robert Hutchins, the political scientist Charles Merriam, and others, was the birthplace of social science and Ithiel was one of the first recruits.

During World War II, Ithiel Pool joined two of his young teachers, Harold Lasswell and Nathan Leites, in Washington, D.C. to apply the new quantitative methods of social science to research Nazi and communist propaganda. Next, he moved to Stanford University (to study the effects of symbols, revolution, and revolutionary elites) and, in the early 1950s, to MIT, where he spent the next thirty years.

Ithiel Pool initially moved to MIT's new Center for International Studies to direct a research program on communication technology and its effects on global politics. He continued his earlier role of leadership, helping to create and build the new Political Science Department at MIT into one of the best in the world. He organized international teams of scientists and collaborated widely to develop the understanding of global political change, especially in the years after World War II.

Ithiel Pool's early work applied quantitative methods to traditional academic sources (e.g., speeches, editorials, newspaper stories). However, at MIT the growth of the Political Science Department was part of the post-World War II increase of Cambridge-based academic involvement in international and domestic policy.² And as part of this

new role of social science, Ithiel Pool and his colleagues were frequent advisers to governments and there were remarkable opportunities to travel and conduct well-funded field research in other countries: in Ithiel's case this included India and Japan (especially) but also Vietnam, Turkey, and Egypt. In these decades, new communication technologies (e.g., print, radio) were penetrating the world's traditional societies (including former colonies that were achieving independence) and bringing new ideas, passionate efforts at nation-building, and revolutionary (especially communist-linked) ferment around the world. The study of political development—reflected in these selections—was one of the specialties of the MIT Political Science Department.

Two team-written books from this period remain classic empirical studies in political science: Bauer, Pool, and Dexter's *American Business and Public Policy: The Politics of Foreign Trade* (1963) explored the new internationalism of American business and trade policy and created a refined image of Congress and the process of political influence that has been of continuing value. Pool's basic sympathies lay with the Democrats and, when the opportunity presented itself to apply the new capacities of mainframe computers and attitude surveys to advise President Kennedy's 1960 election campaign, he and several colleagues (Abelson, Pool, and Popkin 1964) built the first computer simulation model of the American electorate to draw upon such data, predicting the outcome of the election, state-by-state, as the interplay of issues with 480 types of voters.³

From his youthful engagement as a political radical in the 1930s, and his research, Ithiel Pool came to believe, as did others of his generation, that many self-described revolutionary leaders used idealistic language and images but established restrictive regimes. He was a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and advised the U.S. government during the Cold War in several capacities, for example, through a long-standing association with RAND Corp.; research to understand communication systems in totalitarian societies and improve the work of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in fostering political change in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; as a public defender of the Vietnam War and an organizer of major research projects in Vietnam that sought to change how it was fought.

As a scientist, Ithiel Pool continued to grow and pioneer new areas. In the early 1970s he organized and edited a distinguished *Handbook of Communication* (1973) which defined the field and summarized its early scientific accomplishments. Next, it was clear that a new era was

beginning, with the growth of communication satellites, computer technology, cable television, packet switched networking, fiber optic cable, and other inventions. He began to develop a framework to assess the effects of these new telecommunication technologies, integrating his early work on mass communications (e.g., Nazi propaganda) and the modernization of peasant societies, to forecast the road ahead and identify key policy choices. Many of the selections in this volume are drawn from this work, which continued until his death in 1984.

During this period he developed a steady, cumulative research program to assemble the components needed for the task: Among other projects, he studied earlier forecasting methods, began the measurement of trends (e.g., the original studies of movement toward a global information society), reviewed the earlier debates and court decisions that justified control of communication innovations (e.g., licensing of television and radio), and analyzed (in *Technologies of Freedom* [1983]) whether the earlier justifications remained valid in the emerging era of new telecommunication technologies. There is a growing excitement in this work as he begins to see its implications—a subject that I discuss in the next section.

Freedom and the Road Ahead

These selections are united by Ithiel Pool's belief that first-rate social science can strengthen citizen decision making and advance freedom. There are two ways in which this is so: First, a perception, widely shared by pioneering social scientists, of the inherent value of an independent scientific framework; second, a more powerful logic to Ithiel Pool's own cumulative research program.

Concerning the traditional belief of social scientists: recently, it has become fashionable for deconstructionists and other practitioners of literary criticism in communication studies to emphasize that social and political reality is created, and to portray themselves as liberators (e.g., from being entrapped in a reality that is socially constructed by communicators). The implied contrast is to early social scientists, measuring an allegedly "objective" reality with mathematical models and fixed coefficients, who are naively entrapped, not as primarily committed to freedom, or misdirecting their energies to technocratic enthusiasms.

The appropriate response is brief: as these selections illustrate, Ithiel Pool and other founders of social science *knew* that social and political

reality was created. And that men were manipulated, entrapped, and limited in their images of themselves and of the possibilities open to them; and by the flows of communications that maintained traditional societies or that were programmed by governments. These claims were not presented with verbal flourishes and rebellious poses because to a generation that saw a world in flames (millions of troops marching at the behest of Nazi propaganda, the passions of nationalist and communist revolutionary movements) they were axiomatic. And they believed that social science could be liberating by providing an independent, steadier, truer, and more realistic alternative to the frameworks and choices that the political world provided.

Concerning the more powerful claim about social science and freedom, quoted at the beginning of this introduction, that pertains to the road ahead: Pool's argument is that social science can provide a unique and powerful guidance to augment freedom (given the exponential changes in telecommunications technology and computers that can be forecast) *and that "people who think about social change in traditional political [even radical] terms cannot begin to imagine the changes that lie ahead."* That is, specifically, when applied to the study of communication systems, social science *does* pay off and *does* provide an independent, steadier, truer, and more realistic alternative to the frameworks and choices that the political world provides.

Pool's claim, if true, is important. There are (limited) implications for government and (many) implications for other institutions (e.g., foundations, professional and scientific societies, universities, religious and cultural institutions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), corporations) and individuals (e.g., inventors, students, activists, citizens) in all countries: if you wish a world that works better, and must choose between: (a) traditional political activities and a focus on government policy, and (b) the thoughtful development and application of these new technologies, shift toward b.

Pool's full case is made by implication, as he did not live to pull together all of the pieces. The selections allow the reader to see where he was coming from, and how the cumulative force of research leads to his conclusion. I will discuss the argument more fully in the introduction to the third section of readings.

Notes

1. The quotation is from "Four Unnatural Institutions..." reprinted in this volume and drawn from the essay in Aida, 1983 cited in the bibliography.

6 Politics in Wired Nations

- 2. The Center for International Studies was created at MIT to strengthen American research capacity when James Killian from MIT was science adviser to President Eisenhower.**
- 3. Pool and Kessler (1965) was the first computer simulation of crisis decision making. An assessment of early contributions to the development of social science credited Ithiel Pool with a pioneering role in three areas: the quantitative analysis of communications content, the study (during his Stanford period) of ruling elites, and these computer simulation projects: Karl W. Deutsch, J. Platt, and D. Senghaas, "Conditions favoring major advances in social science." *Science* 171 (1971): 450–59.**