The Exploration of Political Conflicts and Personal Relationships in Ian McEwan’s The Innocent

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Abstract
Political conflicts have historically affected the relationships of nations. Ian McEwan’s The Innocent is an excellent example of a story set within the web of such a conflict—the Cold War—that was brought about by U.S. and Soviet confrontation over spheres of influence after the Second World War. This article aims to show how Ian McEwan pictures Americanization as a form of cultural politics aimed at spreading American influence throughout the occupied countries such as Germany for political domination. Max Weber’s theory of political power along with semiotics as a tool is the framework of the article. Signs that refer to the Americanization process, including inferences in the dialogues, gestures, choice of food, and even clothing, are scrutinized and interpreted within the socio-political context of the Cold War. The analysis of The Innocent provides an example of the ways in which fiction represents political conflicts permeating personal and intimate relationships, and how such conflicts may result in a sense of mistrust and intrigue among both people and nations.

Keywords
Ian McEwan, The Innocent, conflict, political, personal, semiotics, domination

Introduction
Ian McEwan’s The Innocent was written in 1990, at about the same time the Berlin Wall was coming down, a symbolic representation of the end of the Cold War. This novel, set against the post-war backdrop of Cold-War politics and the uncertainties of a vanquished Germany attempting to rebuild lives after the war, presents the consequences of political, social, and economic turbulence on personal lives and relationships; a time when the way people dealt with the past seemed almost as important as how they were going to deal with the future. As Maria in The Innocent says, “We all have to make our own arrangements with the past” (McEwan, 2005, p. 219).

The specific locale of the story is Berlin in the mid-1950s, which had become a focal point for the Cold War as a major conflict is being waged. “Operation Gold” is a top secret project being conducted by both American and British intelligence in Berlin to tap encrypted Soviet lines. To spy on Russian lines, a tunnel had been dug in 1949 by MI6 and ran from a private house in Schwemcht suburb seventy feet out under a road where it picked up the cables linking the headquarters of the Soviet occupation forces in the Imperial Hotel with the Soviet command in Moscow. (McEwan, 2005, p. 60)

There is a continuous disagreement between the superpowers, United States and U.S.S.R, over the occupied zones. Americanization as a U.S. strategy of acculturation, commercial and ideological influence, overshadows Berliners who find it both fascinating and overwhelming.

Leonard Marnham an English bachelor is employed to cooperate on the project. He is unfamiliar with the new circumstance in Berlin which was as a result of Cold War. Against this backdrop of intrigue, espionage, and counter-espionage, the characters of McEwan’s novel build their relationships.

This article will explore the ways in which The Innocent represents the macrocosm of political turmoil of the era through the microcosm of the characters’ relationships. In analyzing the book, a combination of Weber’s theory of Power and semiotics seem appropriate to show several dimensions of power and its distribution through communities. Thus, the next section explains the theoretical framework, while the subsequent sections are devoted to the analysis of the book.

Theoretical Framework (Weber's Theory of Power and Semiotics)

The theoretical framework for this study is Max Weber’s theory of political power understood through a semiotics analysis and interpretation. Weber’s theory attempts to explain how both economic and political power allow the
strong to dominate and influence the weak. In the case of this study of a story set during the Cold War, the authors intend to show how the United States imposes its affluent economic and political condition upon its allies and how this dominance is shown in the variety of ways. Weber describes political power as a historical force and considers the multidimensional aspects of conflict as a consequence of plurality of forces/values in contemporary society (Jiménez-Anca, 2013, p. 43). McEwan in The Innocent deals with historical and political issues, in a specific time and place. Weber explains that the conflict can arise from two spheres: “as a historical tension between social groups and forces, or as a dilemma which individuals have to face” (Jiménez-Anca, 2013, p. 44). His works have been both praised and criticized by historians. One of the areas that he has been questioned on was his definition of the concept of authority. In his abstract definition of authority, he addresses authority as interpersonal relations, while in empirical situations he deals with political systems or institutions, for instance, feudalism (Blau, 1963, p. 307). O’Neil (1986) in his “The Disciplinary Society: From Weber to Foucault” explains the differences between Weber and Foucault in the following way: Weber has a “formal-analytical approach to the rationalization of social and political control” while Foucault’s approach is through the “discursive strategies and physiology of disciplinary power which were devised in the context of the shift to the factory and its gradual bureaucratization of the work process” (p. 44). Weber’s theory which describes political force as historical power will be preferred to Foucault’s theory discourse and language, with regard to an analysis of distributions of power as represented in the novel. Therefore, the combination of Weber’s theory along with a semiotic reading of the novel will provide a new and alternative interpretation of Weber’s theory which takes into consideration with both historical forces and language.

Weber in From Max Weber: Essays in sociology defines how “class, status and parties are phenomena of the distribution of power within a community” (Weber, Gerth, & Mills, 1946, p. 181). In explaining these, he sets out his theory of social stratification in relation to economic and political orders. He explains the meaning of power as follows: “In general we understand by ‘power’ the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action” (Weber et al., 1946, p. 180). This stratification within society directly or indirectly affects individuals and their relationships. This inequality in society, where the superior group can dominate the weaker groups, can be represented both culturally and politically. It can occur by dominating a person or a whole community. As such, I propose that McEwan’s novel represents and reconstructs these distributions of power through the dynamics of the Cold War and Americanization. Weber explains that by virtue of these structural differences of domination it is impossible to say anything about the structure of parties working and discussing the structural forms of social domination. Parties which are always structured to struggle for domination are very frequently organized in a very strict authoritarian fashion . . . (Weber et al., 1946, p. 195).

Furthermore, he explains how these parties are characterized by the goals they wish to achieve, which may be a political cause or personal aim. Toward this end, the party could commit to an ideal, involving itself and its members in a cause with sociological or other implications. Alternatively, its goal could be material and personal, the end result being of benefit to the party’s leaders and followers. Although working for a cause and working for personal material gain are divergent in purpose, it is not unusual for parties to be engaged in both at the same time (Weber et al., 1946, p. 194). Weber continues by explaining diverse ways of distributing power in any society. He starts by referring to the use of direct violence, or by using more “subtle means,” by which he means employing money as a social influence; also aspects such as “the force of speech, suggestion, clumsy hoax, and so on.” Distributions of power could range from rough to more “artful tactics” (Weber et al., 1946, pp. 194-195).

With regard to The Innocent, semiotic analysis can assist the reader in identifying the ways in which both political and personal conflicts are represented in the text. Semiotics is a process that forms meaning from our comprehension of the world through signs. It is an exploration of meaning and its development through signs and is concerned with meaning-making and representation in many forms, perhaps most obviously in many forms of “texts” and media (Chandler, 2007, p. 2). Analyzing signs, or a semiotic reading, potentially offers a more complete understanding of the novel under consideration and allows for an exploration of the characters and their actions as implicit signs of conflict.

A semiotic analysis of the novel under consideration will reveal the ways in which McEwan represents and constructs the close relationship between political and personal conflicts. According to Robert Scholes (1977), the involvement of semiotics for interpretation of literature is necessary, particularly with the kind of literature which deals with codes of semiotics (p. 15). Johanssen and Larsen (2002) in their explanation regarding the relation between semiotics and understanding language, literature, and cultural studies write that semiotics can help us to grasp the meaning. We deal with sign interpretation in our everyday life, since it is part of the human culture, therefore we use semiotics constantly to interpret signals (p. 6). What makes semiotics different from other literary criticism is that semiotics conveys the meaning in language and literature while other forms of literary criticism “ask what the texts mean” (Atkins & Morrow, 1989, p. 61).

Literary texts convey meanings beyond our imagination as Umberto Eco (1981) states. There is a possibility to get
new meanings from literary texts, since the process of sign interpretation leads to a limitless series of developing sequels of meanings which act flexibly “not stiff and guarded prescribing a bi-conditional identity” (p. 44). He explains the importance of context and that signs become more meaningful within the “living texture” while in isolation they turn to “spectral and lifeless conventions” (Eco, 1981, p. 37).

This article sheds light on the political and personal conflicts represented in the novel to demonstrate the indirect reflection of world changes on both national and personal behavior. Leonard Marnham is cooperating with Americans on a project called “Operation Gold” in Berlin. He seems to be quite naive and unable to challenge his sophisticated colleague, an American, Bob Glass. Glass, who is more experienced, is quite aware of the combative circumstances in Berlin and repeatedly reminds Leonard of a continuing war. When he says “you are the soldier,” he indicates the veracities of the situation (McEwan, 2005, p. 49). The signification of American cultural domination in The Innocent can be seen through interpreting different signs and symbols of conflict. As Kiernan Ryan (1994) observes in The Innocent, “the focus tightens on the eclipsing of Britain by the USA, both as a political and as a cultural force” (p. 55). To understand the historical context of the novel, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the Cold War and the position of Great Britain during this critical period. This will provide an additional perspective on the interrelationship between the macrocosm (society) and the microcosm (individuals).

**A Short History of the Cold War**

Uta G. Poiger (2000) explains how Americanization was used as a weapon during the Cold War to the benefit of American domination in both Western and Eastern Europe. Germany grew into a market for American goods of various types, “from nylon stockings to popular music” (p. 2). Poiger continues that, after 1945, American culture, in the form of American movies, jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, dances, and fashion, became highly popularized among West and East Berliners. People’s interest in American culture and its cultural exports like rock ‘n’ roll was considered a “political threat” to East Germany. As a result of American cultural influence during the Cold War, the Germans underwent a significant transformation within 10 years (p. 1). Poiger explains American acculturation by highlighting American music, movies, and models of dress, as well as behavior on young East and West Germans in the 1950s (p. 3).

The nature of the Cold War changed during the 1950s as a consequence of the influence and strategic use of American Youth culture on West German Culture. The interest toward the consumption of American popular culture grew as West German social scientist and politicians were influenced by American thinkers like David Risemen. On the other hand, East Germany, as a communist state, had policies aimed at repressing American popular culture, since it was seen as a Cold War weapon. They wanted to “integrate their own adolescents” into a communist ideology. As an example, American jazz, “became part of the vision of liberalism and pluralism that West German authorities sought to transmit to both their own citizens and their Cold War enemies to the East” (Poiger, 2001, pp. 6, 7).

Prevots (2001) in Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War indicates how seriously the idea of “cultural diplomacy” was pursued by Eisenhower in 1954. He even asked Congress for funds to promote the arts during the Cold War, which was responded to positively. This time he was using “arts rather than bullets” (p. 8). When the Soviet Union failed to accomplish its promised socialist ideals, the control of frustrated people in the East became increasingly more difficult, so to prevent people emigrating from East to West, the Berlin Wall was built. Before the wall, a huge number of people from East Germany emigrated to the West to seek a better life. The Berlin Wall was a physical sign of strategic failure and the obsessive desire for control, influence, and domination. It only kept people in the East by force, against their will. In The Innocent the Berlin Wall is a symbol of separation and its tearing down is a cry for reunion.

**Mistrustful Relationship Between America and Britain**

McEwan’s novel may highlight how American hegemony, and the effects of Americanization in Europe, influenced Soviet policy, but its effect is also to show the decline of British influence and power in the post-war period. William D. Rubinstein (1994) reviews the history of Britain’s decline as the First-world industrialized country which occurred over a number of years. For several reasons, Britain’s power shrank, compared to her rivals, the United States and Germany. To put it in Rubinstein’s words, when the United States and Germany industrialized, the worldwide British Empire “could no longer enjoy the same unchallenged superiority at manufacturing and exporting” (p. 1). The destructive effect of wars on the country was visible through the loss of economic power. As Peter Mathias and M. M. Postan (2008) maintain, in the years between the two great wars, there was a steady diminution “in the powers of shareholders in the larger and therefore economically most significant companies” (p. 211). In this respect, the Second World War was even more lethal for Britain. Rubinstein writes that the great wars hastened Britain’s economic and political downward trend (p. 5). Britain’s downturn continued and in 1950, when the war broke out in Korea, this had effects all over the world, particularly in Britain. In addition, the country experienced political decline when the Labour Government came to an end in 1950 (Mitchell, 1963, pp. 9, 10). Society underwent dramatic changes in the period when Britain was known as a minor power. Inequality and social division as an outcome
were the concern of writers. The outcome of power loss becomes visible in the relationships of nations.

There are examples in the story which could be taken as signs of countries’ power over individuals. The characters are chosen from the United States that is in its peak of power and England which is now down falling. In a first encounter between Leonard and the English Lieutenant Lofting, the fact is explained plainly to him. Twenty-five-year-old bachelor Leonard Marnham is a post office employee from England. Naïve, inexperienced, and still a virgin, he is challenged by the unfamiliar and overwhelming condition of the different culture in Germany. The man he reports to in Berlin, Bob Glass, is a matured and experienced American who is frank, bossy, and even intrudes into Leonard’s privacy by controlling his relationships.

Immediately after Leonard Marnham’s arrival in Germany, an American Lieutenant, Lofting, informs him of the situation, which shows his inability to control events and his disapproval. He expresses the condition to Leonard: “Look here, Marnham. You’ve only just arrived so there is no reason why you should know the situation. It’s not the Germans or the Russians who are the problem here. It isn’t even the French. It’s the Americans” (McEwan, 2005, p. 1).

When he goes further, the feeling of disapproval turns to a sense of mistrust and betrayal of the British by the Americans. There are more examples in the novel that highlights these feelings and the dynamics of political condition. Soon after meeting Leonard, Lieutenant Lofting informs him that the Americans are deceitful and untrustworthy. He says, “They go behind our backs, they withhold information, [and] they talk down to us like idiots” (McEwan, 2005, p. 1).

The sense of betrayal between allies is never disregarded by the British, as when MacNamee explains to Leonard concerning Nelson’s invention, and reveals how the United States betrayed them by using their invention and not telling them despite the fact that, it was invented by the English.

“Have you heard of a man called Nelson, Carl Nelson? Worked for the CIA’s Office of Communications?” “No”. “It was Nelson’s discovery. And the equipment was his invention . . . So very generously, we let the Americans into our tunnel, gave them facilities, let them make use of our taps. And you know what? They didn’t even tell us about Nelson’s invention. They were taking the stuff back to Washington and reading the clear text while we were knocking our brains trying to break the codes. And these are our allies. Bloody incredible, don’t you think?” “He paused for the confirmation. “Now that we’re sharing this project, they’ve let us in on the secret. But only the outline, mark you, not the details.”’ (McEwan, 2005, pp. 69, 70)

After MacNamee asks Leonard to act as a spy for him, Leonard does not feel comfortable. In fact the relationship between Leonard and Glass mirrors the power-dynamics of the “special Relationship” between America and Britain; it is friendly, but uneven and full of mistrust.

Lately, Leonard had been avoiding him [Glass], but half-hearted. The job for MacNamee had made him, ashamed to spend time with the only American he could claim a friendship with. At the same time, he knew that Glass was likely to be a good source . . . Leonard started to speak, but Glass said, “Listen, Leonard, you haven’t been completely open with me. You think I wouldn’t know when you go behind my back?” (McEwan, 2005, p. 89, italics added)

Leonard has to take directions from the American, Bob Glass. His reaction to this fact is his reluctance to take orders from an American chief. “Now he would have to take directions from a stranger, An American stranger . . . ” (McEwan, 2005, p. 3). This indicates that the relationship between these two allies has undergone a significant power shift since the war. It seems that they are no longer equal allies. England is no longer in the super power position as a result of declining socio-economic power while United States strengthened and expanded its power in different fields. This dynamic of power distribution between America and England is observable through the characters’ relationships like Leonard and Glass.

Characters’ Conflicts: Employer, Employee

The decline of Britain’s power after the war, in both economic and political dimensions, and its dependency on the United States alter the circumstances and places the Americans in a superior position.

There are indications of Leonard’s awareness of his inferior position to the Americans and his attempts to behave like the Americans to cover up his English manners.

Glass as an American is in the higher position and wants Leonard to understand this completely. The way he addresses Leonard is like a boss to his employee. This relation between employer and employee goes even further as “Glass ordered Leonard and let him know, that he can fire him” (McEwan, 2005, p. 42). Glass realizes his country’s superior condition and this enables him to feel that power and act strongly. In this regard, we can refer to Weber’s explanations on power emphasizing man’s realization of their own chances to impose their power in the communal action. Weber’s claim that struggle for domination is the main structure of the parties is observable throughout the examples. Weber’s claim that struggle for domination determines the structure and characteristics of the parties involved is observable throughout the novel.

Operation Gold is run by both Americans and British; however, Glass’s idea tells a different story to Leonard:

This operation is costing the government, the US government, millions of dollars. You guys are making a useful contribution . . . You think we couldn’t lay those taps ourselves? You think we don’t have amplifiers of our own? It’s for politics that we’re letting you in on this. (McEwan, 2005, p. 22, italics added)
Bob Glass explains to Leonard that the Americans did a favor for the English and let them cooperate with them. This passage shows how England’s power has declined when compared to the United States. After the intense conversation between them, Leonard’s irritation shows in this way:

They got in the car. Leonard longed to be alone. The effort of being polite was stifling, and aggression was, for him, out of the question. He said, “It’s very kind of you, Bob. Thank you.” The irony fell dead. (McEwan, 2005, pp. 22-23)

Although he was quite upset, he didn’t want to offend Bob, and instead he thanked him. In fact he was furious and “felt the heat of anger in his face and across his neck” (McEwan, 2005, p. 23). But he could not defend himself and tried to avoid any contact with Bob. This begs the question why “aggression is out of the question for him” and what made him unable to fight back, if he was really in a right position?

Glass, as an American, is quite aware of the political situation in Germany. On the contrary, Leonard is quite ignorant of how Operation Gold is a sensitive program, and they must be careful of everything they do and whoever they have a relationship with. Leonard meets a German girl, named Maria. When Leonard and Bob are in a restaurant, Maria, a German divorcee seated at a neighboring table, sends Leonard a note: “I would like it if you come and ask me to dance. But if you can’t do this, I would be so happy if you would turn and smile in my direction” (McEwan, 2005, p. 36). It signals the beginning of a love affair.

Leonard needs to report to Glass even of his romantic relationship with Maria. Glass is suspicious that Maria is a spy for Russia, since after the row between Leonard and her, she ran to her parent’s home which was in the Russian sector. Glass starts questioning Leonard if he told Maria her, she ran to her parent’s home which was in the Russian sector. What are we going to move in with her. The day before we lay the taps, she disappeared into the Russian sector. What are we going to do? For the duration of a single pulse of sheer hatred, Leonard saw himself seizing Glass’s beard with two hands and ripping it off, bringing face flesh with it too, throwing the mess of red and black to the floor and stamping on it. Instead, he turned and walked away without thought for his direction. (McEwan, 2005, p. 91)

The conflict between Glass and Leonard is an embodiment of employer/employee relationship which could be a sign of vain struggle of powerless to resist the power possessor’s domination. Weber indicates that how realization of power by a group of men would lead to power of controlling and subordinating others. The relationship between Glass and Leonard could be an example of this realization of power by Glass to subordinate Leonard. Glass is more aware of the socio-political dynamics of their relationship—it is a realization of power which leads to a subordination of Leonard. Here, the realities of socio-political dynamics of power are represented at both an official and personal level. Leonard is a personification of British impotency in the Post-War period. His actions are determined by Glass (America) in ways that allude to the Suez Crisis of the 1950s where Britain had to back down under pressure from America.

**Americanization (Dominance of American Culture)**

Europe was experiencing a disastrous condition after World War II. Many people were unemployed, and many were homeless. Starvation and desperation threatened European’s lives, and this encourages communist parties to expand their presence in European countries. The United States realized the potential danger of “the external threat to the core values” (Hogan & Paterson, 2004, p. 130) in Western countries and this inspires the U.S. government to assert their power in unusual ways. Two examples of American influence in Europe were the Marshall Plan and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). European Recovery Program known as Marshall Plan was a strategy practiced by the United States for both economic and political aims. American policy makers recognized that “European markets, sources of supply, man-power resources, and industrial capacity as strategic powers” and they should be under their authority or sphere of influence to exert power and control (Hogan, 1989, p. 26). Billions of dollars are allocated to improve and protect European economies by the U.S. government (Hogan & Paterson, 2004, p. 130).

According to Max Weber (1968), force is an essential part of political structures, although it is conducted in
dissimilar ways to other political institutions (p. 910). In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Weber explains that there is a basic difference among the sociological structure of parties regarding the type of communal action they attempt to influence. “Above all they vary according to the structure of domination within community, for their leaders normally deal with the conquest of community” (Weber et al., 1946, p. 195). *The Innocent* is an appropriate example of such political community. Leonard Marnham is an Englishman who encounters a different society with the rapid spread of American culture and its very different kind of food, music, fashion and even way of speaking. The real challenge for him is to cope with this new way of life and to avoid being singled out from the community.

On one occasion when he is dinning with Glass in a restaurant, Leonard asks for tea. People’s reaction to his usual order is something that Leonard does not expect. “People consternated as he ordered *tea*.” He emphasizes the idea of difference by explaining that

A search was about to mount for tea bags the cook was certain were *in the stores*. Leonard pleaded a change of mind. He had the same as Glass, freezing lemonade which he drank out of the bottle like his host. (McEwan, 2005, p. 22, italics added)

Symbolically, tea represents a typical British drink, which can only be found in the stores, whereas American drinks are available on the table. Here, tea is used as a metaphor for English culture, which is outdated or unfashionable. On the other hand, the American drinks are available now, that is, a symbol of American culture. This shows the popularity of American culture that has marginalized other cultures.

American cultural and political domination creates a comfortable condition for the Americans but not for others. However, Leonard wants to look ordinary and not out of place in the society that is transforming according to the American lifestyle. There are several indications that show how Leonard struggles to cope with the new American lifestyle, which includes clothing, food, and even manners. His taste for clothes alters from what it was before when he is looking for clothes in his wardrobe:

The young man who stood in his Y-fronts and the extra thick vest his mother had packed, staring into the wardrobe at three suits and a tweed jacket, had an intimation of the power of American style. He had an idea there was something risible about his stiffness of manner. (McEwan, 2005, p. 7)

The contrast between American and British dress is represented in this way: “As they pulled away, Leonard fingered his tie knot in the darkness. He decided against removing the tie in case the two Americans had already noticed him wearing it” (McEwan, 2005, p. 28). This reveals the complexity of distribution of power. According to Weber’s theory of power, political parties are not always employing violence, but there are many other subtle and tactical ways for social influences. Americanization could be one of those artful tactics.

[to] which he was now addicted . . . He had specialized tastes now. He wanted *Chuck Berry* and *Fats Domino*. He wanted to hear little Richard singing “Tutti Frutti” or Carl Perkins’s “Blue Suede Shoes.” The music played in his head whenever he was alone, tormenting him with everything he was away from. He took the back off the wireless and found a way of boosting the receptor circuits. Through a wail and warble of interference he found *Voice of America* and thought he heard Russell’s voice. He could not explain his excitement to his mother . . . (McEwan, 2005, p. 115, italics added)

Contemplating the iconic figures of American music in the 1950s, Little Richard and Carl Perkins among others show us to what extent Leonard is absorbed in the dominant culture in Berlin. He feels unable to explain his cheers for the familiar sounds he hears. There is another example of the American cultural influence:

While the bath was filling, he [Leonard] padded about the place. . . . He whistled and sang snatches of songs. At first he could not find the untamed number to carry his feelings. The crooning love songs he knew were all too courteously restrained. In fact, what suited him now was the raucous *American nonsense* he thought he despised. He recalled scraps, but they were elusives; “and make a something with the pots and pans. Shake, rattle and roll! Shake, rattle and roll!” In the bathroom’s flattering acoustic he boomed this incantation over and again. *Bellowed in an English voice it sounded foolish*, but it was the right sort of thing. Joyous and sexy, and more or less meaningless. (McEwan, 2005, p. 75, italics added)

“Shake, rattle and roll” is rock and roll music, which was written in 1954 by Jesse Stone an American rhythm and blues musician and song writer. The original incarnation of the song was highly sexual. Leonard, as a non-American, rejects his own country’s songs and prefers American popular music, which he feels is more lively and erotic. Leonard can be taken as a European who is fascinated by American culture. In the period between 1945 and 1971, America was at the pinnacle of economic and political influence, and Americanization described “a moment of high hegemony.” The economic and military security of the United States gave it a position of leadership and the prominence of American society became an idealistic idea for many non-Americans (Grainge, 2004, p. 214). This shows the success and influence of U.S. cultural politics on Germany and this policy continues even after the Berlin Wall is built, through radio broadcasts and other cultural forms. This was how the impact of America’s popular culture was felt in both East and West parts of Germany (Poiger, 2000, p. 2).
In this section we observed how American lifestyle including food, dance, music, and so on is used as cultural politics in Berlin during the Cold War. The United States employs this new strategy to gain an advantage over its opponents particularly, but not exclusively, the U.S.S.R. Though the political force behind the strategy is not visible, it strongly aims to achieve a political goal which is to dominate occupied countries. It shows multidimensional aspects of war, as according to Weber the battle for influence can be direct or indirect. It can be subtle and tactical, but one thing is always constant and that is employing force or pressure. The extracts from the texts are convincing evidences to show how Leonard as a part of community was influenced by such a new culture and even preferred to its own in some cases. To put it in Weber’s words “all political structures use force, but they differ in the manner in which and the extent to which they use or threaten to use it against other political organizations.” Fate and form of each political community is determined by how they are influenced by these political forces (Weber et al., 1946, p. 159). Leonard’s fate as an individual within this community is influenced by the American political forces.

Symbolic presentation of personal conflict (war) as political conflict.

Luisa M. Flora (2011) says that “while war is perhaps the most public of activities it is also intimately personal, affecting the deepest layers of the human condition” (p. 194). As previously mentioned, during the Cold War, the final winners of the war, the United States and the U.S.S.R., started to demonstrate their power in both cultural and ideological terms to achieve their political goals. On the other hand, Britain’s decline in power and influence created a sense of mistrust between the Americans and the British, not only in work cooperation but also in personal matters. This section focuses on the presentation of metaphoric relationships between characters. As it is explained before, Maria gets divorced from a German man named Otto, an alcoholic who harasses Maria from time to time in a troubled relationship. He physically torments Maria and claims her apartment to be his. As Otto is known as a war hero, he feels immune from the police, who make no attempt to arrest him. He intrudes on Leonard and Maria’s relationship and gets into a fight with them. At one moment in the story, Otto enters Maria’s apartment and hides in her wardrobe. After they find out that Otto has broken in to the apartment, Maria sits by the shoes. “She sat down suddenly over Otto’s shoulder, standing by the pile of shoes” (McEwan, 2005, pp. 144, 145, italics added). After the deadly fight between Leonard and Otto, Leonard desperately is looking for cigarettes but “the cigarettes were nowhere. He looked at the shoes” (McEwan, 2005, p. 150). The repetition of the shoes is not coincidental; certainly there is a meaning behind that. In a difficult time of fighting, a pile of shoes could be an iconic sign to foreshadow the upcoming disaster and murder. It is a symbolic reference to victim’s shoes which were piled up in death camps such as Auschwitz, during Second World War.

During the fight, Otto is addressed as “The German” and Leonard as English. Now, Otto is not only an ex-husband who wants to disturb Leonard and Maria’s relationship, but a German who fights an Englishman. Here are repetitions of the words “The German” and “The Englishman.” Otto addresses Maria and tells her that because you have a man now, you have a place to go therefore you can leave with him, and give the apartment to me. “The Englishman has a place, and you have a ring” . . . The German was becoming stronger . . . The German hardly noticed the contact. (McEwan, 2005, p. 143, italics added)

The shift in addressing Leonard and Otto as “The German” and the “Englishman” represents a broader conflict in the world which relates to the political conflict between Germany and England, not mere personal hostility. “All his hatred and anger were on the Englishman now . . . He drew back his right foot and kicked the Englishman’s shin” (McEwan, 2005, p. 144, italics added). Leonard wins the fight with the help of Maria. They kill Otto, and decide to get rid of the body by dismembering it. Dismembering of Otto with a saw and knife which is performed by Leonard is described in this way:

It was a good saw, sharp, not too heavy, just supple enough. Where the blade met the handle was an inch or two not yet obscured by blood. The maker’s crest was there, and the word “Solingen.” He repeated it as he worked. They were
not killing anyone here. Otto was dead. Solingen. They were dismantling him. Solingen. Nobody was missing. Solingen, Solingen. Otto is disarmed. Solingen. Solingen... This was what they had to do, this was what they were doing. Solingen. He was through the bone in seconds, through the cord, neatly guiding the flat of the saw against the base of the skull, snagging only briefly on the sinews of the neck, the gristle of the windpipe, and through and through with no need for the linoleum knife. Solingen, Solingen. (McEwan, 2005, p. 165, italics added)

The repetition of the word “Solingen” during the course of Otto’s dismemberment has double fold meanings. Solingen is a city in Germany, which is known as a “city of Blades” because of the high quality manufacturing of swords, knives, scissors, and razors. Solingen was destroyed completely during World War II by the allies air raids. The apartment which Otto fights to take possession of is on German land, and Maria represents German women who are taken by the allies. It could be read as a symbolic act of allies fighting over Germany for the spoils of war.

Maria for instance could be seen as one of those spoils of war. Otto’s failure as a previous German soldier and his final defeat by Leonard symbolizes Germany’s defeat and its brutal invasion and bombardment by the allied forces. The metaphoric fight between Otto and Leonard represents the fight between Germany and England during World War II. Otto is dismembered brutally and finally placed in two big cases. Otto’s dismemberment is a symbolic act of dismembering of Germany. “It goes like this now. Lower body, arm, top and bottom leg, and head in this one. And in this one, upper body, arm and top and bottom leg” (McEwan, 2005, p. 170). The two big cases which contain Otto’s corpse could be a symbolic representation of Germany’s division into two parts by the allies. Political conflicts are fought out symbolically on the personal level.

On another front, the feelings of betrayal find their way from political and public issues into personal relationships. Although Leonard and Glass are apparently friends, Leonard is always suspicious of Glass’s betrayal to win Maria. After the private meeting of Glass and Maria, “Leonard was still preoccupied with Glass’s time with Maria” (McEwan, 2005, p. 111).

Last night Maria had told him [Leonard] all about the security check which had rather impressed her. Now Glass was back behind his desk, and still Leonard could not dispel his doubts. Could he really trust this man? It was undeniable, one way or another Glass had climbed into bed with them... Glass put his hand on the Englishman’s shoulder and walked with him along the corridor. (McEwan, 2005, p. 107, italics added)

Leonard’s suspicion of Glass having an affair with his lover grows stronger throughout the story. When he enters Maria’s home and comes across Glass he starts to interrogate Maria by asking her “was this the first time he’s been here? He was in a hurry to leave” (McEwan, 2005, p. 205, italics added). Leonard does not trust Glass and this confuses him, “As long as he was sitting here next to an ashtray full of Glass’s stubs he would not be able to think” (McEwan, 2005, p. 205, italics added). Despite Maria’s reassurance that there is nothing between Glass and her, Leonard remains suspicious. All of these signs indicate Leonard’s suspicious mind-set and even though he is unable to prove the existence of any liaison between Glass and Maria, he continues to doubt.

The convincing evidence that Leonard needs to prove the secret relationship between Maria and Glass comes in the end. In the last encounter at the airport, Leonard notices a man near Maria while she is happily waving to him. Leonard is thinking to himself: “He [Glass] had his hand on Maria’s shoulder. Or was it his arm round her shoulder? They both waved, like parents to a departing child” (McEwan, 2005, p. 211, italics added). Leonard’s suspicion reaches its height when he is not even certain of what he has seen at the airport; nevertheless, he is too keen to believe he has been betrayed by Glass and Maria, and that they are having an affair. Presenting Leonard as a child and Glass as a father can symbolize the changing political scene and the change in distribution of power. Since during the Cold war the United States became the superior power and Britain’s power declined, the father and child figure can symbolize the political fluctuations among countries. Glass, as a representative of the United States, has a father role, superior and overruling, while Leonard, as a representative of Britain, is like a child—naive and powerless. Leonard who is aware of Britain’s political oppression reflects on his sensitive thoughts and believes that Bob Glass and Maria have made a fool of him. “He felt such shame” (McEwan, 2005, p. 211). This endless and unbroken suspicion makes him end their romantic relationship despite his affection for her. Maria is quite happy to take advantage of American and British culture and this situation reveals another dynamic of Americanization; there is “imperialistic” Americanization, where American culture is imposed on a receiving country, and there is “assimilated” Americanization, where the receiving country happily adopts American culture and gives it a local flavor. This dynamic reveals the subtle complexities of distributions of power, especially with regard to American acculturation.

The analysis highlights the symbolic representation of political power and national conflicts through personal politics and conflicts. The characters in the novel come to embody the larger political and historical moment. The Innocent represents and constructs multidimensional aspects of the Cold War through the character’s attitudes and actions toward each other.

Conclusion

Weber’s theory of power along with semiotics as an interpretative approach for this study demonstrates the unusual aspects of influence and domination that are
maintained symbolically. Such an approach enriches our knowledge of how novels can embody and represent the social and political climate of the era in which they are written. But they can also give voice to hidden or forgotten histories. The study foregrounds McEwan’s ability to demonstrate the relation between macrocosm (society) and microcosm (personal). He portrays a very vivid and thorough picture of supposedly personal conflicts in human relations that are proven to be socio-culturally and politically rooted. At the first glance, the conflicts that McEwan’s characters experience in their relationships seem to be entirely personal and private, but as demonstrated in this study, they are also symbolic of the cultural and political turbulence of their time. There is a continuous war among the Allies concerning competing spheres of influence over a defeated Germany. Americanization is employed by the United States as a cultural means to achieve political goals. Due to the World Wars and economic recession, Britain’s power is diminished while U.S. power is growing culturally and politically. At the very beginning, Leonard is made clear of his position as an Englishman in Berlin. The mistrustful relationship between the Americans and the English engenders an uneven power struggle and produces circumstances where Leonard’s ability to influence events is shown to be powerless. When Leonard does act, he makes the mistakes of killing Otto. Leonard and Maria’s life is influenced by the cultural and political turbulence of their time and the socio-economic distributions of power that Weber alludes to. In fact, most of the scenes and fights are metaphors of the broader conflict in the world. It is a demonstration of how a nation’s life is affected by the political struggles between countries, in one way or another.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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