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INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic secrecy and the regulation of knowledge in Europe over the *longue durée:* Obfuscation, omission, performance, and policing

Esther Liberman Cuenca[1]* and Asif A. Siddiqi[2]

[1]University of Houston-Victoria, Victoria, TX, USA and [2]Department of History, Fordham University, The Bronx, NY, USA
*Corresponding author. Email: CuencaE@uhv.edu

In his now-classic mediation on the sociology of secrecy, Georg Simmel cautioned that while 'human interaction is conditioned by the capacity to speak, it is [also] shaped by the capacity to be silent'.[1] As historians, we are trained to see what is present, what is material, and what has effect. Investigating absence, on the other hand, as rewarding as it can be when we are able to reconstruct the seemingly unknowable, can lead us astray with speculative banalities or even counter-factual histories. Yet, as one manifestation of absence in society – in this case, the absence of knowledge – secrecy has had a fundamental place in the constitution, shaping, and functioning of the premodern and modern worlds. It has operated in many registers and appeared in many forms, such as censorship, coded language, classification regimes, and in oaths promising secrecy. All these modes in which we find practices related to secrecy operated within bureaucracies where the regulation of knowledge was either explicitly or implicitly part of their functioning. In looking at manifestations of absences – in particular, practices designed to regulate and then render knowledge absent – bureaucracies represent an emblematic and instructive site to explore questions on the co-constitution of power and knowledge.[2]

If the phrase 'knowledge is power' evokes a cliché lacking deeper insight, can we gain substantive appreciation in understanding the foundations of authority in bureaucratic institutions, not from knowledge, but the deliberate occlusion of knowledge? In other words, what has been the historical relationship between the co-produced practices of secrecy and authority in bureaucracies? This is the central question that animates this special issue's essays, in which we locate all our investigations in the European context, not to exclude the rest of the globe but because our insights gain more strength when tracing the history of bureaucratic secrecy in a relatively circumscribed, albeit heterogenous, geographical space. Furthermore, the scope of this special issue encompasses the medieval and early modern as well as the modern period. Cumulatively, we are interested in techniques to normalise secrecy as part of the daily functioning of administrative institutions. Our case studies advance the possibility to imagine a taxonomy to the practice of

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institutional secrecy, one which becomes a matter of routine, ordinary rather than extraordinary, and woven into the larger fabric of administrative labour.

The popular and scholarly literature on institutional secrecy is vast and presents both opportunities and pitfalls. Perhaps the most ubiquitous and immanent concern has been with spying, intelligence collection, and the practice of statecraft, both on the domestic and international stage, the literature of which informs our scholarship.[3] In his study of the British government's efforts to maintain a regime of secrecy in the twentieth century, Christopher Moran, for example, showed that the state was acutely aware of its inability to retain secrets and thus sponsored programs designed to misinform or distract the public.[4] We also benefit much from the considerable contributions of scholars on state edicts to regulate public access to the past, such as establishing controls over archives under the rationale of what, in contemporary discourse, falls under the category of 'national security'.[5] In this vein, the nuclear industry represented a particularly common site for discourses about secrecy in the twentieth century because of a persistent and popular belief that the knowledge required to produce nuclear weapons could be isolated, as Alex Wellerstein has shown in his work, into some singular or ineffable 'secret'.[6] National security regimes were built on this very assumption, as were international nuclear regulatory efforts in the early Cold War.[7] Scholars have also written about secrecy as it pertains to the archiving of historical records, scientific research, intellectual property, cartography, and the obscuration of health risks.[8] By and large, this canon has focused on the production of scientific knowledge about the natural world. It suggests a deep tension between an emerging commitment to the free and open exchange of scientific knowledge, and the concomitant and growing acknowledgement of its proprietary value to corporate entities or the state.[9]

The literature on the premodern period has also yielded rich insights. Scholarship on the spying and policing regimes of early modern governments, as well as the control and dissemination of printed materials, sheds light on the maintenance of secrecy by bureaucracies as a matter of preserving the coercive power of the state.[10] For this period, the work of Pamela Long and others have expertly highlighted the ways in which notions of authorship and technical skills were embedded in a culture obsessed with keeping secrets through the control of manuscripts, including their circulation and production.[11] For the Middle Ages, scholarship on secrecy has often centred on the expansion of centralised governments and in particular on urban and royal administrations. These burgeoning bureaucracies necessitated new methods of regulating knowledge, given the perception of increasing political disorder, the professionalisation of bureaucratic personnel, and the rise of lay literacy, all of which precipitated administrative practices of secrecy.[12]

Despite this rich scholarship, there are fissures in the literature on secrecy, particularly in the way certain processes associated with it are reflexively coupled with the modern period (usually framed around technologies to circumscribe the sharing of information) and others linked with the premodern (typically focused on the vicissitudes of elite statecraft or technical skill). In describing the emergence of a specific type of labour suitable for the work of administration, Max Weber famously ascribed the emergence of the large-scale bureaucratic forms to the *modern* period, suggesting that secrecy was a natural outcome of this form of governance. He noted that '[e]very bureaucracy seeks to increase the superiority of the

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professionally informed by keeping their knowledge and intentions secret'.[13] Weber's commentary linked firmly such measures to modern capitalism. But, as we see here, secrecy was also a crucial organising function for premodern institutions, and ones that were relatively less capitalistic in form.

In this collection of essays, our goal is to examine the bureaucratic cultures of secrecy over vast spaces and times in Europe, from medieval English towns to Soviet Russia and from fourteenth-century Valencia to pre-revolutionary France. Unlike much of the extant scholarship, focused as it has been on the practices, manifestations, and uses of secrecy, here we explore the institutional cultures that produced secrecy as part of their normative functioning, where regulating knowledge was not the principal focus but rather a feature of their *everyday* operation.[14] Our principal concern lies at the intersection of technologies of secrecy – techniques, practices, tools – and institutions that relied on these technologies, formalised them, and gave them shape. We speak not of personal secrets but of a *classification* of knowledge deemed important for the workings of institutions and governments, as well as the individuals subject to these bonds of secrecy. We accept control of information as part of the social contract that governs the relationship between rulers and the ruled, conceding that such a social contract has been historically contested, breached, or conditionally accepted at given times. Similar arrangements extend into the twenty-first century with technologies that increasingly blur the boundaries between public and private knowledge, capitalist-driven consumerism and surveillance.

We also emphasise a range of actors invested in keeping secrets. The acquisition and distribution of official knowledge has usually been an exclusive enterprise, often shrouded in practices that evoke secrecy in the broadest sense. For at least several millennia, those trained in the scribal arts, responsible for keeping records or for composing works of literature, had skills that were inaccessible to most of society. Possession of certain forms of knowledge was, in many cases, for privileged sets of ears and eyes only. Such forms of exclusivity remain characteristic of modern institutions, although the precise technologies of regulation have evolved, particularly in the past century.

1. Defining terms, finding continuities

The essays in this special issue describe regimes of secrecy within bureaucracies in premodern and modern Europe, through practices of *omission*, *obfuscation*, *performance*, and *policing*. These techniques, with whatever technologies may have been available, show not only continuities over time in bureaucratic practices that ensured secrecy, but also how such techniques could reflect the will of political actors who demanded secrecy as part of their management.

In considering *omission*, we refer to the withholding of information, which can manifest in, for example, locking away documents, censorship of oneself or others, revealing intelligence to a select group of individuals, and devising classification and clearance systems that limit access to certain forms of knowledge. As Edward A. Shils noted in his classic *The Torment of Secrecy* (1956), such systems of deliberate and selective omission are maintained, at least in theory, by the threat of sanction.[15] Omission is not an act of negation but rather one which rearranges

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the relationship between a body of knowledge and its possession by certain parties. This rearrangement could require a class of bureaucratic actors to allocate a substantial portion of their worktime in classifying knowledge as secrets. If we assume that bureaucracies produced things of value, these 'secrecy-makers' ascribed value to certain forms of knowledge simply by decreeing them secret, even if that information was of no value otherwise. As Simmel noted long ago: '[o]ut of this secrecy… grows the logically fallacious, but typical, error, that everything secret is something essential and significant'.[16]

When examining *obfuscation*, we see practices of deliberate intervention, which can involve tampering with documents and spreading misinformation that obfuscates truth. In some respects, state propaganda campaigns, especially those aimed at the broader public, can be categorised as part of the larger project of secrecy given the power of some of these campaigns to influence public responses towards achieving a political end. Obfuscation (akin to Simmel's notion of the 'promotion of error'), we argue, was often a response to institutional failure in maintaining secrecy and was a strategy to influence the flow of knowledge among the public. Of course, obfuscation is not solely an outcome of the bureaucratic need for secrecy; it can also be an instrument to withhold information about malfeasance or other forms of embarrassing behaviour. Notions of Orwellian doublespeak notwithstanding, we find that obfuscation has been an unexceptional function of bureaucracies through the ages.

With *performance*, we have observe how the concealment of information manifests in bureaucratic rituals that give political actors and personnel the opportunity to show their investment in maintaining regimes of secrecy. These rituals – gestures that may have been performed to assuage anxieties for superiors but also colleagues – were acts in some contexts that allowed for public expressions of institutional authority. Social science evidence confirms that the performative aspects of secrecy were not uncommon. For example, a study of scientific communities in possession of proprietary information (in this case, skills related to recombinant DNA and polymerase chain reaction) found the common practice of 'strategic withholding'. Scientists had shared that they possessed secrets to 'build prestige and enhanc[e] commercial considerations', while also reaping the 'benefits of *not* sharing, by maintaining enough secrecy that the ultimate ability to perform a technique could be limited'.[17] Historically, as described in some of the essays in this special issue, premodern bureaucracies sometimes developed elaborate rituals to suggest that secrets were being held. And later, during the Cold War, such performative rituals assumed enormous risks because even the admission of knowing secrets might reveal some aspects of the information withheld.[18]

Lastly, *policing* brings together these three aspects of secrecy under the umbrella of surveillance, which not only include 'traditional' forms of policing often associated with spying and denunciation, but also the enforcement of policies that bolstered secretive behaviour through the guise of professional conformity. Bureaucracies have, for example, engineered systems of surveillance to ensure fealty to the information regime. We might also note the wide range of sanctions for violating secrecy edicts as well as entire systems designed to protect secrets through a range of tools: gradations of access by categories and ranks; the marking of documents such as redactions; and physical and material practices to restrict the

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movement of the information. Policing techniques frequently overlapped with practices of obfuscation, especially for institutions whose primary purpose involved activities related to the security of the state. Yet, as with performance, policing can also be understood as a *process* to foster the power and stability of the institution itself. Even though policies that bolstered secretive behaviour aimed to cultivate professional conformity and fealty, in practice they could often be disruptive. Communications scholar Beryl Bellman cautioned that 'those who are the most responsible for the maintenance of security systems need not know anything about the secrets they protect, and often they are able to exercise considerable authority over those who do'.[19] In other words, in encouraging policing as part of their regime of secrecy, bureaucrats created fissures between those who possessed secret knowledge and those whose jobs were to keep that knowledge secure – two populations that often had different investments in the process and thus different levels of authority.

The four methods described here – omission, obfuscation, performance, and policing – are thus the overlapping, interpretive frameworks that underlie the analysis of the essays in this special issue. Though some techniques are highlighted more than others, we show in the following articles that these practices were the interlocking structures of secretive regimes, from the medieval to the modern.

In the first essay, Adam Franklin-Lyons explores late medieval Valencia, an urban node within a vibrant trade network in the Crown of Aragon, and tracks the manifestations of 'performative' secrecy, relying on 'shallow' secrets, showing that it was part of the routine response of Valencia's rulers to various crises in the region during the late fourteenth century. Their omission of certain key pieces of information – for example, the amount of grain available – in response to ongoing trade conflicts with other cities was one way in which officials performed their duties within established modes of secrecy. One important aspect of keeping order in the city was the power officials could exert when monitoring the population, especially in the aftermath of a pogrom against the city's Jews. A select group of notaries kept a list of ransacked items (and presumably those who stole them) to return them to their original owners, an act that sifted information into the 'right' hands, thus illustrating the policing powers of the late medieval town.

Similarly, Esther Liberman Cuenca reveals how civic administrators in late medieval and early modern British towns performed the keeping of secrets through oath-taking ceremonies that bolstered their political authority and legitimacy to rule. She argues that oath-taking represented a type of concession to mounting anxieties about regulating knowledge and concealing government business in premodern towns. The civic oath not only omitted key information about the secrets being held but also represented (self-)policing measures that bound office holders and citizens to their duties. These duties included the expectations of preserving secrecy and, most importantly, the maintenance and reinforcement of informational hierarchies through which certain knowledge was supposed to flow to the top.

Moving more firmly into the early modern period, Nicole Bauer finds a striking relationship between terror and secrecy in Paris before the Revolution, showing how policing in this period aimed at limiting circulation of information in hopes of keeping the identities and treatment of the Bastille prisoners under (quite literal)

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lock-and-key. As agents of the Crown, the guards and governor of the Bastille, for example, obfuscated the nature of the prison's conditions by tampering with correspondences. These acts of obfuscation, and the general perception that the Bastille operated under secretive, and perhaps horrific, conditions, fanned a market of rumours that undermined the authority of the French monarchy. Bauer's case study of policing and secrecy in a Paris on the verge of rebellion highlights how the restriction of information in and out of the Bastille was one of many techniques that characterised the vast surveillance networks of the absolutist French monarchy during the *Ancien Régime*.

Finally, Asif Siddiqi, in looking at a post-World War II Soviet Union, explores manifestations of secrecy in everyday life by focusing on the functioning of two of the most common civic spaces for Soviet citizens: office spaces and libraries. He identifies what he calls a 'parasitic' bureaucracy that emerged in Soviet offices to maintain secrecy at every level, with tools such as forms, questionnaires, applications, reports, and cards to be filled out by regular people. Siddiqi argues that the set of practices associated with this bureaucratic culture of secrecy prioritised knowledge in its material and spatial forms. Thus, the problem of maintaining secrecy in everyday life was enacted largely through policing objects and the spaces they occupied rather than the information contained within documents or books.

In sum, this collection examines how bureaucratic practices of secrecy have long continuities, which cut across different periods and communities, spanning both premodern and modern institutions. When staffed by educated officials that used, at least for their time, sophisticated methods of communication, institutions and the personnel that helped govern populations tended to develop techniques that regulated information. We argue that maintaining secrecy, and the strict division between those who had access to privileged information and those who did not, was not merely a side show of governing complex societies; it was, in fact, the basic principle around which these institutions were organised. Whether written down, in print, or communicated orally, the officials responsible for handling and transmitting information within (as well as without) did so using established methods. The business of politics simply demanded it. Regulating knowledge was a quasi-scientific process that not only compelled them to classify information in a systematic way but also the personnel that were considered crucial to upholding the hierarchies of power.

In bringing together historians who normally would have little cause to cross paths to discuss how these techniques of secrecy appeared in the historical periods and places of their expertise, this special issue urges readers to reflect on the methods, arguments, and common concerns that animates this scholarship. In making administrative actors central to our narratives, we have only begun a conversation about how certain routine practices that regulated knowledge, both large and small, appeared in different contexts. There is more to be done. But as a group, these essays demonstrate how secrecy, as a series of methods rather than a state of occlusion, makes it possible to tease out connecting threads, recurring patterns, and significant continuities in the regulation of knowledge over the *longue durée*.

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Notes

1 Georg Simmel, 'The sociology of secrecy and of the secret societies', *American Journal of Sociology* **11** (1906), 441–98.

2 The classic political science meditation on secrecy in bureaucracies highlights authority as its central goal. See Francis E. Rourke, 'Secrecy in American bureaucracy', *Political Science Quarterly* **72**, 4 (1957), 540–64.

3 David B. Frost, *Classified: a history of secrecy in the United States Government* (Jefferson, NC, 2017); C. A. Bayly, *Empire and information: intelli* (Cambridge, 1996); Deborah Susan Bauer, 'Marianne is Watching: Knowledge, Secrecy, Intelligence and the Origins of the French Surveillance State (1870–1914)', Ph.D. diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2013.

4 Christopher Moran, *Classified: secrecy and the state in modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2013).

5 Richard J. Aldrich, 'Policing the past: official history, secrecy and British intelligence since 1945', *English Historical Review* **119**, 483 (2004), 922–53; Kate Doyle, 'The end of secrecy: U.S. National Security and the imperative for openness', *World Policy Journal* **16**, 1 (1999), 34–51; Wesley K. Wark, 'In never-never land? The British archives on intelligence', *Historical Journal* **35**, 1 (1992), 195–203. See also the special issue of *Diplomatic History* **35**, 4 (2011) dedicated to 'Cultures of Secrecy in Postwar America'.

6 Alex Wellerstein, *Restricted data: the history of nuclear secrecy in the United States* (Chicago, 2021).

7 Michael D. Gordin, *Red cloud at dawn: Truman, Stalin, and the end of the atomic monopoly* (New York, 2009); Alex Wellerstein, 'Patenting the bomb: nuclear weapons, intellectual property, and technological control', *Isis* **99**, 1 (2008), 57–87; Janet Farrell Brodie, 'Radiation secrecy and censorship after Hiroshima and Nagasaki', *Journal of Social History* **48**, 4 (2015), 842–64.

8 Brian Balmer, 'A secret formula, a rogue patent and public knowledge about nerve gas: secrecy as a spatial-epistemic tool', *Social Studies of Science* **36**, 5 (2006), 691–722; J. B. Harley, 'Silences and secrecy: the hidden agenda of cartography in early modern Europe', *Imago Mundi: The International Journal for the History of Cartograph*y **40**, 1 (1988), 57–76; David B. Resnik, 'Openness versus secrecy in scientific research', *Episteme* **2**, 3 (2006), 135–47; Maria Portuondo, *Secret science: Spanish cosmography and the New World* (Chicago, 2009). See also the special issue of the *British Journal for the History of Science* **45**, 2 (2012) on 'States of Secrecy'.

9 Asif Siddiqi, 'Soviet secrecy: toward a social map of knowledge', *American Historical Review* **126**, 3 (2021), 1046–71; Asif Siddiqi, 'Cosmic contradictions: popular enthusiasm and secrecy in the soviet space program', in James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi eds., *Into the Cosmos: space exploration and soviet culture* (Pittsburgh, 2011), 47–76.

10 Jon R. Snyder, *Dissimulation and the culture of secrecy in early modern Europe* (Berkeley, 2009); Robin J. Ives, 'Political publicity and political economy in Eighteenth-Century France', *French History* **17**, 1 (2003), 1–17; Ellen R. Welch, 'State truths, private letters, and images of public opinion in the *Ancien Régime*: Sévigné on Trials', *French Studies* **67**, 2 (2013), 170–83; Marco Fioravanti, 'Toward a Legal Lexicon of Transparency. Publicity and secrecy in France between the *Ancien Regime* and the revolution', *Giornale di Storia Costituzionale* **31** (2016), 27–46; Antonio Calvo Maturana, '"Is it useful to deceive the people?" The debate on public information in Spain at the end of the *Ancien Régime* (1780–1808)', *Journal of Modern History* **86**, 1 (2014), 1–46; David Coast, *News and rumour in Jacobean England: information, court politics, and diplomacy, 1618–1625* (Manchester, 2014). See also the essays in Brendan Dooley and Sabrina A. Baron eds., *The politics of information in early modern Europe* (London, 2001).

11 Pamela O. Long, *Openness, secrecy, authorship: technical arts and the culture of knowledge from antiquity to the Renaissance* (Baltimore, 2001). See also Karel Davids, 'Craft secrecy in Europe in the early modern period: a comparative view', *Early Science and Medicine* **10**, 3 (2005), 341–8, and Carlo Marco Belfanti, 'Guilds, patents, and the circulation of technical knowledge: Northern Italy during the early modern age', *Technology and Culture* **45**, 3 (2004), 569–89.

12 Steven A. Epstein, 'Secrecy and Genoese commercial practices', *Journal of Medieval History* **20**, 4 (1994), 313–25; Paul Griffiths, 'Secrecy and authority in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London', *Historical Journal* **40**, 4 (1997), 925–51; Michael Jucker, 'Urban literacy and urban secrecy? Some new approaches to an old problem', in Georges Declercq *et al.* eds., *New approaches to medieval urban literacy* (Wetteren, 2008), 15–22; Christoph Friedrich Weber, 'Trust, secrecy, and control in the medieval Italian communes', in Marco Mostert and Anna Adamska eds., *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns: Medieval Urban Literacy I* (Turnhout, 2014), 243–65; Jonathan

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M. Elukin, 'Keeping secrets in medieval and early modern English government', in Gisela Engel, Brita Rang, Klaus Reichert, and Heide Wunder eds., *Das Geheimnis am Beginn der europaschen Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002), 111–29. One of the most important works on the rise of bureaucratic cultures and literacy in the Middle Ages is M.T. Clanchy's *From memory to written record: England, 1066–1307*, 3rd edn (Malden, 2013).

13 Max Weber, H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills ed., *From Max Weber: essays in sociology* (New York, 1958).

14 We concede, of course, that secrecy can be manifested in many non-institutional settings including the social, personal, and intimate domains of everyday lives of people. This distinction is expertly highlighted in Lisa Blank, 'Two schools for secrecy: defining secrecy from the works of Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Edward Shils and Sissela Bok (2008)', in Susan L. Maret and Jan Goldman eds., *Government secrecy: classic and contemporary readings* (Westport, 2009), 59–68.

15 Shils notes that '[s]ecrecy is the compulsory withholding of knowledge, reinforced by the prospect of sanctions for disclosure'. See Shils, *The torment of secrecy* (Glencoe, 1956), 26.

16 Simmel, 'The sociology of secrecy and of the secret societies', 464.

17 Andrew J. Nelson, 'How to share "A really good secret": Managing sharing/secrecy tensions around scientific knowledge discourse', *Organization Science* **27**, 2 (2016), 265–85. Emphasis in the original.

18 Such cases are masterfully illuminated in Gordin, *Red cloud at dawn*.

19 Beryl L. Bellman, 'The paradox of secrecy', *Human Studies* **4** (1981), 1–24.

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