Afterword: hidden beauty

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People love a secret, as long as they are in on it. One might even argue that historians are *more* attracted to secrecy than the average scholar, or average individual, in that the tools we have for unearthing documentation from the past regularly trawl up long-dormant secrets. At one time, someone may have died to preserve this secret; for me, it is lying accessible in an archive. The challenge is not reading the secret – it is crafting an argument and a narrative that would make others care for this once tightly-held confidence. This fascination of access to privileged information, to being (whether licitly or not) in the know, and the rich texture that hidden material provides, partly explains the recurrent historiographical attention to secrecy. Historians get to have both secrecy and transparency at once, at least in many cases where the precious documents survive and are not still locked behind the classificatory walls of national-security states or profit-seeking megacorporations.

This special issue of *Continuity and Change* amply demonstrates the insights that come from taking secrecy itself as a focus across a broad temporal swath. Seven centuries and four very distinct polities occupy these pages, yet the puzzles and charms of secrecy resonate on every page in ways that reinforce rather than confute each other. The four articles also invite a new perspective on the historian's evergreen attraction to the secret. To appreciate what they bring to the table, we must first confront an absence.

For all the bookshelves of studies dedicated to the history of secrecy that litter the footnotes in these pages (and that in turn litter the footnotes of the works they cite), there remains an analytic deficit with respect to secrecy, a void. By and large, the intellectual frames historians use to comprehend secrecy, to shape it into the narratives we build from the detritus of the past, are not native to our discipline. Categories born from historical analysis do exist, of course – Whiggism is a prime example[1] – but such frameworks are not the tools that historians in general, and these four historians in particular, bring to the question of secrecy in the past. This is not to fault them; almost no historian has attempted to use such categories when writing about secrecy, and there is no question that we have learned a vast amount about the subject without insisting on such a native framework. We practically always resort to borrowing from other disciplines.

I do not, in these pages, intend to offer an alternative hammer for the secrecy nail that would hail from the historical discipline's own toolbox. I am not a purist about these things, and believe scholarship is enriched as historians plunder from

art history, political science, anthropology, economics, and even beyond the humanities and social sciences.[2] Nonetheless, there is an important point to be made about *which* disciplines we borrow from – and which we do not (at least not yet) – and how those choices shape the resulting narratives. This special issue, 'Bureaucratic Secrecy and the Regulation of Knowledge in Europe over the *Longue Durée*: Obfuscation, omission, performance, and policing', explicitly builds on a particular constellation of disciplines. But it does more than that: it suggests a way forward, a new workshop to visit, that can deepen some of the traditional emphases of the historiography.

When it comes to secrecy, the first discipline that historians usually raid is sociology. Indeed, sociologists pioneered some of the classic studies in this area, and time and again later scholars in other disciplines have returned to their insights.[3] There are good reasons for the appeal of such sociological research. Secrecy, especially in the forms explored in this special issue, is a product of institutions – and not just modern institutions. Although many scholars' attention has been drawn by the practices of secrecy exerted by states, it is important to recall that a great many institutions invested with power enact that power in part by the erection of controls over the flow of information. This is of course true with the secrecy of corporations (and before them, guilds, which were essentially defined by this control) and religious orders.[4] It is certainly arguable that a body cannot be socially powerful without enacting some mechanisms of exclusion, and secrecy is a significant part of how that happens. Admittedly, that is off-the-cuff speculation, but even in such cases the impulse to sociological analysis is evident. Such a focus on institutions immediately lends itself to the formation of hypotheses and testing, and institutions often leave behind precisely the kinds of sources historians are adept at plumbing.

The appeal of sociological framings does not just stem from the rich body of literature or the insights that it provides. One of the important practices of sociological research is taxonomy, making precise the nature of the social phenomena being investigated. The most common term for this, whether in a library or an herbarium, is 'classification'. This is not a pun. When talking about secrecy, the impulse to classify is well-nigh overwhelming: while this special issue focuses on what the authors describe as 'bureaucratic secrecy', the authors also use 'governmental secrecy', 'professional secrecy', 'citizen secrecy', 'police secrecy', 'institutional secrecy', and 'workplace secrecy'. Other literatures point to nuclear secrecy, radiation secrecy, medical secrecy, and more.[5] And, as Asif Siddiqi reminds us, the classifiers themselves love to classify: the Soviets had their 'secret', 'absolutely secret', and 'absolutely secret of special importance'; one might add that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency works with 'confidential', 'secret', and 'top secret'. (James Bond fans will recall 'eyes only', which is indeed used on occasion, but only as an intensifier for 'top secret'.)[6]

Classification requires classifying – this is not an especially revelatory observation. But classifying is also a common byproduct of what C. Wright Mills called 'the sociological imagination'.[7] The impulse to break things down into finer and finer categories has generated a great deal of understanding. The secrecy within a guild is not the same thing as that which controls information about the properties of plutonium – using different terms for each is only appropriate. But there might

be a deeper point here: one of the reasons why sociologists have been so insightful about secrecy is that the designers of bureaucratic secrecy regimes tend to reason like sociologists, generating in-groups and out-groups as information flows along the contours of the organisation. Sociology provides methods to reverse engineer how our historical actors thought, at least within the confines of bureaucratic secrecy.

The other major discipline that has animated the historical scholarship on secrecy has done so more subtly, and often without footnotes to the specifically disciplinary literature in question: philosophy. There are two subfields of philosophy that have been especially influential to historians working on this material in recent decades, although most scholars usually stick to one philosophical line or the other. These are, on the one hand, political philosophy (or political theory), interested in how control of information shapes polities and along the way sets the conditions of possibility for ethical governance; and on the other epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge, which has been appropriated by historians to see how the limitations on what we are permitted to know shapes what we in fact can claim to know. As with all categories mentioned in this brief afterword, there is a lot of blurriness, and these categorisations are more ideal types (shades of Weberian sociology once again) and are usually found in some mixture.

Political theory is more prominent in most fields of historical scholarship, if only because political history is more ubiquitous than the history of science has been. The boundary with sociology is a little blurrier in the case of politics, but the questions are distinct.[8] History of secrecy that borrows from political theory tends to be inflected by questions of democracy and ethics: what does the attitude toward secrecy by the state – for here the focus is mostly on state secrecy – tell you about the nature of political power in a given context? Although somewhat less in vogue today, the 'totalitarian' framework that once dominated the history of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany treated secrecy as an intrinsic part of those polities, intimately linked to other practices of violence and exclusion.[9] Although historians have extensively criticised over-reliance on that particular interpretation of mid-twentieth-century dictatorships, there is no question that the guidance Hannah Arendt and her disciplinary colleagues have given to understanding political structure have been and will remain vital for historical scholarship.

Yet within the historiography of secrecy, epistemology seems of late to be eclipsing political theory. Traditionally, epistemology has stressed how to generate *reliable* knowledge: how do we obtain information from the world, verify it, and correlate it among distinct observers? When it comes to secrecy, however, historians have been quite creative in turning the tables. While as scholars they are of course invested in generating reliable knowledge about the past using the various documents and sources that have survived, the question that animates this school of work (much in evidence in the essays in this special issue) is how the deliberate and inadvertent control and blockage of knowledge transfer by the historical actors produces consequences for their societies.[10] In today's political context of conspiracy theories, 'fake news', and 'alternative facts', this approach has escaped the confines of the history of science or academic history altogether and emerged as part of

a public conversation about the production of ignorance through the management of information (re: secrecy), sometimes known as 'agnotology'.[11]

These approaches have been extremely fruitful, but there is no reason why the communion with philosophy should stop here. Indeed, these four essays suggest another philosophical domain to explore: aesthetics. I use the term a little loosely, but hopefully not inappropriately. I do not mean to say that secrets are beautiful (though censors and military planners may sometimes think so), but rather to pose a question about what the practices of rendering things secret do to a particular situation – how they *appear*, and how they render their contexts more theatrical, more structured, and more intentional. Secrecy may be designed to control information, but the act of control itself can be spectacular – both deliberately and unintentionally (as in the black gaps on a redacted document).

These four essays are exemplary in pushing the aesthetics of secrecy. Across the entire gamut of examples, the authors are finely attuned to appearances, to the way secrecy generates fascination, terror, apprehension, and attraction in societies. Interestingly, while in terms of political theory and sociology there are some striking contrasts between premodern and modern contexts, in terms of aesthetics the continuities stand out. (I expect that these would be even more striking when extended to contemporary, postmodern cases.)

In Adam Franklin-Lyons's 'Performative openness and governmental secrecy in fourteenth-century Valencia', we see the urban government of the city consciously exploiting a theater of transparency: a system of couriers to run messages across the region, announcing various matters of state business. This practice granted a number of advantages to the political center in this context, ranging from squashing alternative efforts to spread information to appeasing critics by constantly performing openness. The connection with secrecy lies in what the government chose *not* to say. You might hear that there was an upcoming meeting, but not what it concerned until after the fact. The town criers enforced secrecy through what they did not say, an ironic counterpoint to the loudness of the announcements. There was an attention to beauty, to the perception of the audience, in this arrangement that suggests the benefits of thinking about dramaturgy as well as policing when historicising secrecy.

Esther Liberman Cuenca, in 'Oath-taking and the politics of secrecy in medieval and early modern British towns', continues this approach, although here the existence of secrets was directly acknowledged in the publicity of the performance. Her early modern British towns put officials through oath-taking ceremonies in which they had to swear that they would keep confidences. Trust, a central matter in both epistemology and political theory, is certainly being performed here – these men were announcing their trustworthiness – but the oaths are also stylized in a way that itself helped enact the job of enforcing secrecy. The editing of the oaths in the wake of the Reformation highlights how self-consciously leaders fashioned the public effect.

Nicole Bauer's 'Keeping you in the dark: the Bastille archives and police secrecy in eighteenth-century France' brings the topic to the canonical fulcrum of European modernity: the transition from the *ancien régime* to the French Revolution. Fascinating in this case are the paradoxes that attend to the aesthetics of secrecy. The King's jailers made a very big show of how secret everything in the

Bastille was – who was incarcerated, what for, and for how long – to underscore the power of the state. But the practices of concealment were mirrored by an increasing attention in the press and civil society to openness and communication, and the contrast functioned to invert the valuation of concealment. The aesthetic effect generated by the jailers' obfuscation magnified the perceived importance of the institution and the corruption it came to exemplify. Just because you are going for a particular aesthetic effect does not mean you will achieve it.

Almost two centuries later, the same point is underscored in Asif Siddiqi's account of the Soviet Union's omnipresent secrecy theater in both the workplace and the library, 'The materiality of secrets: everyday secrecy in postwar Soviet Union'. Secrecy was so embedded into quotidian Soviet life that it is almost impossible to decide where to start. Siddiqi focuses on the material aspects: the manuals, special stamps, and designated rooms where secret documents were kept, such as the *spetskhran* collections in the many, heavily used public libraries. There are at least two aspects of the aesthetics of secrecy here. First, these stamps and manuals *looked* a certain way – indeed, their properties were typically specified in the manuals themselves. You knew something was secret by its outward mien, which is a way of deterring you from trying to look inside. Second, the existence of secret depositories of books was widely acknowledged, and many obtained special permission to read individual books from them (in a particular reading room). The performance of access was a way in which the state staged itself to its citizens. The Soviet case is extreme, to be sure, but Siddiqi's focus on materiality does make one look around to see analogs in our own everyday.

The point, of course, is not to eschew borrowed analytics in the historiography of secrecy – or in any other historiography, for that matter. There is little to be gained by seeking frameworks native to one's own particular discipline. History as a craft is at its strongest when it is most eclectic, and these four essays are splendid examples of the richness that comes from blending. We still need sociology, political philosophy, and epistemology (and its mirror-image twin, agnotology), but we also benefit from thinking about the aesthetic features of concealment and classification. They let us in on the secret.

Notes

1 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig interpretation of history* (London, 1931). On the history of this historical category, especially as it is deployed by historians of science (who use Whiggism as a cudgel on a daily basis), see Nick Jardine, 'Whigs and stories: Herbert Butterfield and the historiography of science', *History of Science* **41** (2003), 125–40.

2 In my own work most closely engaged with secrecy, in the canonical domain of nuclear history, I too resort to frameworks from other disciplines: Michael D. Gordin, *Red cloud at dawn: Truman, Stalin, and the end of the atomic monopoly* (New York, 2009).

3 For an early example which has been appropriated by many later scholars, not least because of its concentration on the *locus classicus* of American secrecy – the national-security state – see Edward Shills, *The torment of secrecy: the background and consequences of American security policies* (Chicago, 1996 [1956]).

4 Pamela O. Long, *Openness, secrecy, authorship: technical arts and the culture of knowledge from antiquity to the Renaissance* (Baltimore, 2001).

5 Alex Wellerstein, *Restricted data: the history of nuclear secrecy in the United States* (Chicago, 2021); Janet Farrell Brodie, 'Radiation secrecy and censorship after Hiroshima and Nagasaki', *Journal of Social History* **48**, 4 (2015), 842–64; Andrew A. G. Morrice, '"Should the doctor tell?": medical secrecy in early twentieth-

century Britain', in Steve Sturdy ed., *Medicine, health, and the public sphere in Britain, 1600–2000* (New York, 2013), 60–82.

6 Peter Galison, 'Removing knowledge', *Critical Inquiry* **31** (2004), 229–43.

7 C. Wright Mills, *The sociological imagination* (New York, 1959).

8 A classic text in this vein is Sissela Bok, *Secrets: on the ethics of concealment and revelation* (New York, 1989).

9 Of course, the ur-source here is Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (New York, [1951]).

10 In addition to Wellerstein, *Restricted data*; Gordin, *Red cloud at dawn*; and Galison, 'Removing knowledge'; see also Maria M. Portuondo, *Secret science: Spanish cosmography and the new world* (Chicago, 2009).

11 Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger eds., *Agnotology: the making and unmaking of ignorance* (Stanford, CA, 2008); Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of doubt: how a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming* (New York, 2010).