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Clare Birchall  
*King's College London*

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secrecy, Secrecy Studies, Georg Simmel

## **Six Answers to the Question "What is Secrecy Studies?"**

**Clare Birchall**

### **1. ...An Apparent Contradiction**

How could one study a secret? Secrecy Studies is always chasing after its object because a secret is inherently unstable and in flux. Frequently, by the time secrets are discovered by those originally not "in the know," they no longer warrant the label. Often, we only get to 'see' or recognize a secret when it has already transformed into something else – rumour, information, fact, knowledge etc. – when the "incorporeal envelope" (Marin, 1992, 195) that the secret is has been deferred elsewhere, to serve as the shroud to some other piece of information, meaning we may never catch up with the secret "itself".

And yet, as the work of photographer Trevor Paglen has shown, secrets and practices of secrecy leave material traces that can be witnessed in half forms. And so he repurposes lenses intended for astro-photography to produce hazy images of covert US military bases across the miles that separate public and militarily acquisitioned land. He collects military patches that commemorate, yet can only refer obliquely to, covert missions. He captures the shop fronts of bland businesses that are covers for CIA operations. He photographs reaper drones flying so high in the sky we might

never think to look. In a series entitled "Torture Taxi," he represents otherwise innocuous looking aeroplanes engaged in the practice of rendition: transporting prisoners to and from places where torture is permitted. Secrets and secrecy leave their mark: they require apparatus and infrastructure.

While *the* secret (form) and even individual secrets (content) might elude us when we turn our gaze to look, secrecy is perhaps a more obedient phenomenon to study. The consideration of secrecy as a set of relational social practices has a long history in academic settings, starting at least with Georg Simmel and his classic 1906 study, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of the Secret Societies." In this text, Simmel explores the ways in which social relations are constituted by shared knowledge, by *who* is allowed access to secrets and *how*. He asserts that the level of secrecy determines human relationships. The secret society, therefore, is merely an extreme, highly ritualized form of a general social experience.

One of Simmel's observations that has proved most useful in my work is his recognition that the secret "itself" is a neutral or universal form, only the content of which can be morally suspect. The secret "itself," therefore, may have accrued negative values along the way (not least because secrets have so often been employed in the arrogation of power), but there is nothing essential to secrets that articulates them to malfeasance as certain (moral, religious, or Enlightenment) discursive formations would lead us to

believe. In my work, this has opened up the politics of the secret in ways that enable us to ask whether we can envisage a secret that works in the service of a radically equal “distribution of the sensible” (what we can see, hear, touch) to use the language of Jacques Rancière (2004). In other words, is it possible to think of a secrecy of the radical Left (Birchall 2011) that interrupts and challenges the securitized, surveillant, neoliberal settlement? Is it possible to wrest the secret from concentrations of power?

## **2. ...An Umbrella Term**

The secret, of course, has two sides: concealment and revelation. As such, any field of study concerned with the secret must consider a range of practices and/or states including opacity, occlusion, obfuscation, confidentiality, privacy, invisibility, withdrawing, classification, conspiracy, lying, propaganda, confession, whistleblowing, transparency, publicity, exposé, and visibility. Such a diverse array of social/relational phenomena can be usefully studied under the umbrella of “Secrecy Studies” not least because it encourages us to attune ourselves to the contingent, ideological quality of this continuum in any historical period (one period’s exposé, for example, is subsequently revealed as propaganda). Rather than an attempt to comprehensively gather and report on every and any instance of such phenomena, then, Secrecy Studies might indicate a commitment to interrogate the

links between these terms and offer a critique of the role each plays in the politics of knowledge.

### **3. ...A burgeoning interdisciplinary and transnational field**

As the editor of this journal, Susan Maret (2011, xvi), stated some five years ago: "secrecy studies ... is a means to explore the enduring "charm of secrecy" as well as negotiate forms and practices of secrecy across disciplinary boundaries." Every new field that uses the term "studies" seems to announce its interdisciplinary credentials. The original impetus behind Cultural Studies, for example, was to intervene into and alter the parameters, canonical traditions, and conservative preconceptions of various established disciplines. As Paul Bowman (2008, 101) writes, "The desired aim of its ethically and politically inflected critiques was the alteration of other disciplines. And although this may appear to be a "merely academic" focus, it was always regarded in cultural studies as (immanently) political because it was based on the post-Gramscian theory that to change what is produced and legitimated as knowledge will be discursively consequential." While Cultural Studies' project to challenge disciplinary boundaries has been surpassed by others (for example, identity politics, post-humanism, the affective turn, ecological concerns, bioethics etc.), the goal of interdisciplinarity remains a given. Divorced from its radical origins, interdisciplinarity is often

cited by research funding bodies and universities as a desirable quality even while they are often ill-equipped to support and engage with truly interdisciplinary work. Saying that Secrecy Studies is necessarily interdisciplinary, then, might ring somewhat hollow: merely a sop to fashion, an apolitical statement. And yet, in a fundamental way, Secrecy Studies belongs to no-one and cannot stay still – it lacks fidelity, is curious, impatient in the face of protocol; it migrates, becomes hybrid, looks to the unexpected to help explain its unusual 'object' of study. Often, the urgency of the questions it is grappling with (not least, what role should secrecy play in statecraft) breaks through any vestiges of disciplinary boundaries.

Equally, secrecy in one geo-political context speaks to that of others. Comparative work is an important part of understanding secrecy in an age governed not only by networked and digital technologies, but also linked by the ubiquity of neoliberal free market policies. Secrecy Studies is transnational because it recognizes that secrecy is important to, and yet transcends, every national context. That is not the same as saying that secrecy is universal. As many anthropological studies have shown, the meaning and uses of secrecy are highly localized. Rather, Secrecy Studies recognizes that secrecy is a dynamic and complex phenomenon influenced by trans-regional and supra-national economic, political and cultural forces.

#### **4. ...A Pedagogic Delight**

At King's College London where I teach, I offer a course to Masters students titled "Cultures of Secrecy." The curriculum of that course offers clues to what would constitute something akin to Secrecy Studies (or at least one Transatlantic version of it). I will, therefore, offer here a sense of what we look at and the shape of the course

We begin by reading Sissela Bok's (1984) seminal engagement with the ethics of secrets; I use it as an aid to encourage the students to think about their own relationship to secrets and uses of secrecy. I ask students to write down a secret in the first instance and, without revealing it, analyse the way it works. It is helpful to encourage students to address the affect that accompanies the revelation, even if only to oneself, of a secret. Early on, Bok nicely differentiates between myths, like that of Pandora's Box, that indicate the chaos let loose by the revelation of secrets; and those, like Oedipus and the Sphinx, which, by contrast, reinforce the idea that knowledge brings an end to tyranny and that keeping secrets is corrosive. This usually begins a heated discussion around the ethics of secret keeping.

We next turn to the social and psychological functions of secrecy, reading Simmel, of course, but also D.W. Winnicott's (1965) "On Communicating and Not Communicating." While Simmel



begins a conversation about the sociology of secrecy, the psychoanalytic tradition is shot through with writings directly or indirectly about the role of secrecy in sexuality, child development, and psychic functionality. I choose Winnicott for his masterful articulation of the contradictions that structure the psyche.

Consider: "it is a joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found" (Winnicott 1965, 186). In this pithy phrase, Winnicott captures the experience of an essential privacy that exists in tension with the need to connect and be known.

From social and psychological development, we widen the scope to think about state secrecy, watching Peter Galison and Robb Moss' excellent film *Secrecy* and reading an article by Joe Masco. The former is an efficient primer on the US government's employment of secrecy in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, explicating key aspects like the Manhattan Project, the state secrets privilege, extraordinary rendition, the politics of leaking, and the escalation of classification. Joe Masco's (2010, 456) article concerns itself with the use and abuse of the classification system in which he argues that government secrecy produces the citizen as an enemy and the public sphere as a risk.

The next move is for students to take the leap from fact to fiction because, as Tim Melley (2012) argues in *The Covert Sphere*, it is through the cultural imaginary provided by forms like fiction and film that the citizen comes to learn about the clandestine

operations of the state. We also watch *Spy Kids* and ponder the link between the secret agent and political agency in neoliberal consumer cultures.

Staying with creative explorations of the secret, the students read Thomas Pynchon's (1965) novella *The Crying of Lot 49*. I use this text to apply the metaphor of codebreaking to the practice of interpretation of both words and world and we discuss the limits of hermeneutic practice. At what point does *discovering* the text's secrets become *inventing* the text's secrets?

One of the most lively sessions on the course goes by the heading "Aesthetics of the Secret". Each student is assigned (in a sealed envelope the previous week, of course) an artist or piece of work to research and present on. Whether it's Zach Blas' strategic but non-representational masks resisting biometric surveillance ("Facial Weaponization Suite"), or Goldin+Senneby's institutional critique of opaque offshore finance in "Headless", art provides a provocative lens through which to address the conceptual aspects of secrecy. Specifically, I encourage students to think about what art might be able to tell us about the secret and secrets that other forms cannot.

Dave Eggers' (2013) *The Circle* provides the class with an opportunity to meditate on the politics of privacy and the perils of transparency. Through a historicisation of privacy, students are encouraged to consider the possibility that it is a concept unfit for

the purpose of protecting the self in an age that is characterized in *The Circle* as the “second Enlightenment.” If that is the case, what can be done in the face of the ubiquitous drive towards transparency depicted in the dystopian novel? How close, we ask in class, are we to this vision given the all-encompassing tendencies of Google (glass, mail, search, maps, books, alerts, shopping, Google+, YouTube, Calendar etc.)?

We stay with transparency for the following week, but less from a personal perspective and more in terms of the state. We look, then, at government implemented forms of transparency, such as open data government portals (e.g. Data.gov) and guerrilla or radical forms of forced transparency, such as that practiced by WikiLeaks. Students are particularly interested in the question of what radical transparency can achieve that other forms of media revelation, traditional journalism, say, cannot. We return again and again to the limits of revelation and ask what needs to accompany a revelation to ensure it will not get lost in the white noise of what Jodi Dean (2005) refers to as “communicative capitalism.”

As this latter half of the course considers revelation rather than concealment, I ask students to look at forms of what we can call ‘popular revelation’ – those informal and un-legitimated modes of circulation such as conspiracy theory, gossip, and scandal. Transparency proper, as a form of information management, is thought to eradicate these other maverick forms, setting up a

morally charged opposition between forms of revelation.

Challenging the reputation of gossip etc. for being corrosive and corrupting, I ask students to think about the positive or politically resistant social functions such popular revelation might facilitate – offering an alternative to the technological solutionism of ubiquitous digital transparency.

In the final session, we take a self-reflexive turn, to ask how cultural and ideological analysis itself resembles the revelation of secrets. I also challenge students to widen the consideration beyond thinking about our own hermeneutic practice, to include the function secrets and secrecy play in the institutional life of the academic (and the life of institutions in general). Sara Ahmed (2010) is helpful here. In her essay, “Secrets and Silence in Academic Research,” she tells a revealing story about her involvement in writing a diversity report which causes her to feel complicit in the institutionalized racism of the university.

When I ask my students, does revealing reproduce structural inequality under the sign of difference? This question resonates within and beyond the university. I hope the students leave with a sense of why studying secrecy is a deeply political and ethical challenge that will not end when they leave the classroom. Hence I would have to describe Secrecy Studies as ...

## **5. ...An invitation to self-reflexivity**

As scholars of secrecy, my students and I are engaged in our own revelations and concealments. Ahmed claims that feminists have to perform the role of the secretary. Aware of the concerns such an unlikely heroine of feminism would raise, she is quick to provide a definition of the secretary as one who keeps the secrets. Feminists (and other politically engaged radical scholars) need to make ethical decisions all the time about when to speak and when to remain silent; when to keep a secret and when to reveal it. As I suggest above, secrets and silence are, in the face of some institutional binds, the only tools to cope with a setting in which one's contribution will become appropriated and one's integrity compromised. The founding of this journal is itself an invitation to self-reflexivity. It provides a moment to pause and think about how and when we should keep or reveal the secrets that form the currency of our academic research.

In provisionally defining the field and gathering the practitioners and participants, we are potentially creating something akin to a secret society. Secrecy Studies will inevitably develop its own rituals and rules; but I hope it refrains from the exclusions that characterize most secret societies. Rather than a secret society, then, Secrecy Studies is better thought, somewhat paradoxically, as...

**6. ... A secret that everyone is invited to share.**

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