



Managing Secrecy

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As many anthropologists and sociologists have long argued, understanding the meaning and place of secrets is central to an adequate representation of society. This article extends previous accounts of secrecy in social, governmental, and organizational settings to configure secrecy as one form of visibility management among others. Doing so helps to remove the secret from a post-Enlightenment value system that deems secrets bad and openness good. Once secrecy itself is seen as a neutral phenomenon, we can focus on the politicality or ethics of any particular distribution of the visible, sayable, and knowable. Alongside understanding the work secrecy performs in contemporary society, this article argues that we can also seek inspiration from the secret as a methodological tool and political tactic. Moving beyond the claim to privacy, a claim that has lost bite in this era of state and consumer dataveillance, a “right to opacity”—the right to not be transparent, legible, seen—might open up an experience of subjectivity and responsibility beyond the circumscribed demands of the current politico-technological management of visibilities.

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“Secrecy secures, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside of the obvious world, and the latter is most strenuously affected by the former.” (Simmel, 1906, p. 462)

Though governments still keep secrets, indeed, are heavily invested in covert operations and classification systems, *Arcana Imperii* have long been outmoded by open government as a *modus operandi* (see Horn, 2011). Likewise, keeping personal secrets is seen today to be some kind of pathology that social media and confessionary culture can alleviate. The implication of such an imperative is that secrets corrupt, signaling political conspiracy or personal repression. This leaves many social actors in something of a bind—caught in a value system concerning secrets and secrecy that discredits a persistent, perhaps even essential part of governmentality and the human psyche. The discourses of security and transparency come to the rescue of the former; the appeal to privacy, the latter. That is to say, states commonly appeal to security as a justification for covert operations and surveillance and offer forms of transparency, or open government, as a form of compensation. For the individual, privacy is a legitimated

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version of secrecy, sanctioned by liberal discourse. In spite of the fact that secrets and secrecy are an enduring aspect of political and social worlds, they have accumulated negative moral values, particularly when placed in opposition to transparency and, in a different way, privacy. In order to think through the management of visibilities in contemporary life, it is important to disarticulate secrecy from these negative values and recognize that transparency and privacy do not always serve the interests of social justice. Only then can we have a sense of how secrets and secrecy can function critically in an age of visibility.

Configuring secrecy as one form of visibility management among others, as we are doing in this special issue, helps us to see the secret anew. Rather than a morally reprehensible social and political form, the secret, drawing on the Latin origin *secretum*, simply separates or sets apart certain phenomena from view. Secrecy manages or distributes visibility in a certain configuration. It is, then, a particular *distribution*, as opposed to the secret itself, that is ethical or unethical—that is *political*. What is and what is not secret at any time can determine the political settlement on offer, the scope of social mobility, organizational culture, and community boundaries. Such a neutral characterization of secrecy, I will argue, makes the secret ripe for appropriation by a radical Leftist politics previously too wary of such a degraded concept and process.

As Georg Simmel (1906) made clear, understanding the meaning, place, and management of secrets; positioning secrets as an object of study; and crucially, understanding the constitutive relationship clandestine spheres have with their open counterparts—are all central to an adequate representation of society. Simmel's task has been revisited in different contexts by sociologists (see Tefft, 1980, pp. 35–76) and anthropologists since (see Jones, 2014). Organizational studies, too, is turning more explicitly to secrecy as an important vector through which to understand organizational dynamics (see Stohl, Stohl, & Leonardi in this Special Section). In this discipline, secrecy is most often configured as that which protects valuable information, but also, more recently, as a social process (Costas & Grey, 2014). But as well as both understanding the work secrecy performs in and on contemporary organizations and society, and recognizing the consequences of how certain secrets are managed by organizations, communities, technologies, and states, I argue that we should also work *with* secrecy—seek inspiration from it as a methodological tool and techno-political tactic. This is a move from seeing secrecy as an external force “out there” in the world with fixed values and symbolic meanings, toward recognition of it as something that may be utilized in counterhegemonic ways. If the premise of this Special Section is that secrecy is a form of managing or disciplining visibility (and, I would add, information, data, social bonds, subjectivities, bodies), I want to push this further to also consider how we can manage, harness, utilize the secret and secrecy.

In the 1560s, the word “manage” emerged in English to refer to the *handling* (from the Italian *maneggiare*) of horses. Horses needed to be handled, to be managed, because they had to be tamed and put to work. Horses were needed to work the land, but also, like secrets, to act as carriers of targeted information and to play an integral role in war. Without wishing to push the analogy too far, the handling or management of both horses in the 16th century and secrets in the 21st century is central to the security of the nation state. Equally, developed nation states today have elaborate and expensive systems of classification (the cost of classification for the fiscal year 2013 in the United States came to \$11.63 billion, for example [ISOO, 2013]), legislate against the revelation of state secrets (in the United States, the Espionage Act of 1917 is enlisted for this purpose), and harbor punitive approaches to whistleblowers.

While some people are still engaged in the art of managing horses, and the state's need for secrets is nothing new, the point is that every era subjects particular phenomena to intense disciplinary practices.

Whenever we find areas of intense scrutiny and activity, we can be sure we have stumbled on something that is potentially valuable to the people, as well as the state. But I don't just mean that learning of classified and clandestine programs is of value (though it can help us to understand the operation of power that might otherwise remain an abstraction). The secret could be valuable to the people beyond any informational content. I do not want to underplay the importance of coming to knowledge. But rather than gaining access to state secrets—managing secrets by blasting them open, following the examples of Chelsea Manning or Edward Snowden —I want to move away from a reliance on revelation and visibility as the only corrective to state malfeasance and obfuscation, and toward an appropriation of the secret "itself." That is, I am imagining a move toward the secret as form. Perhaps we should say that it is *the* secret, rather than individual, contextual *secrets*, that are of importance to the people.

This article explores the proposition that openness might not always be the most ethical, democratic, or socially desirable option, because the current configuration of transparency supports a particular articulation of capital and commerce antithetical to community and equality, just as the visible staging of "diversity" might ignore the singularity of raced experience, and the state practice of mass dataveillance employs a wholly asymmetric visibility. (I will explain all of these risks in more detail below.) Rather than calling for more and more transparency in fundamentally inequitable organizations, or relying on the concept of privacy in a post-privacy paradigm, communities interested in a different political formation might want to insist on a "right to opacity," a right to have a vision and experience of subjectivity, responsibility, and even liberty beyond the circumscribed transparency of the neoliberal settlement; the apolitical appeal to privacy; the often empty rehearsal of "diversity" rhetoric; or the datafied, securitized, and surveillant state.

The Politics of Visibility and Revelation

Visibility, openness and revelation were central to an Enlightenment move away from, as Foucault puts it, "arbitrary political acts, monarchical caprice, religious superstitions, tyrannical and priestly plots, epidemics and the illusions of ignorance" (1980, p. 153). Light was to be that which oiled the wheels of reason and secured accountability and equality; "openness" was to ensure access to government, information, and knowledge. Such ideals have been endorsed by a host of thinkers, from Kant—arguing against secret treaties in "Perpetual Peace" (1795/1991)—and Rousseau, whose "search for transparency sought not merely to reveal the truth of the world, but also to make manifest his own internal truth, his own authentic self" (Jay, 1993, p. 90), to Karl Popper and his endorsement of open society as the only one which can allow for a critical evaluation of knowledge and good decision-making (1945). Countless political actors echo these philosophical tenets. To take only the American example, we can look to the founding fathers and their professed commitment to citizen access to, and oversight of government enshrined in the Constitution, right through to Barack Obama's 2009 Open Government Directive, with prominent proponents of transparency such as Woodrow Wilson and his pronouncement that "government ought to be all outside and no inside" (1913/2008, p. 70) along the way.

Zeal for light and a reliance upon coming forth has been mobilized by a liberal humanist progressive agenda embracing a host of ideals and practices. It animates not only modern day incarnations of transparency, open government, freedom of speech, and an understanding of the press as fourth estate, but also identity politics. Distinct from a form of top-down visibility akin to surveillance and control, Andreas Brighenti aligns progressive visibility with "recognition": "a form of social visibility, with crucial consequences on the relation between minority groups and the mainstream" (2007, p. 329). Visibility announces the self and the collective as having to be seen in a way that *recognizes* the humanity of the subject. The emphasis on visibility as a political strategy is wholly understandable, given a history of marginalization and erasure, and nothing I want to say hereafter should be read as a dismissal of that very important attempt to dislodge the complicity between whiteness/heterosexuality/masculinity and public legitimacy. However, finding voice, claiming the right to be heard and seen, to "come out," perhaps, has today achieved such a level of ubiquity that it now extends to everyone—even those historically granted visibility anyway. The visibility, self-tracking, and confession that characterizes the use and experience of social media and popular culture today means that being seen and heard is less a corrective force within a stratified culture, and more a measure of social and entrepreneurial success. Visibility has arguably been hijacked by commercial spectacle, and our experiences of subjectivity and communication are increasingly mediated through technologies of digital consumer surveillance (whether we are talking about social media platforms like Facebook or search engines like Google).

I am by no means the first to have questioned the hope put into both visibility and revelation as progenitors of political change. Slavov Žižek, drawing on Peter Sloterdijk, wants to understand why people still act as if they do not see through ideological falsehoods when demystification is in abundance: "[O]ne knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it" (1989, p. 29). Revelation *qua* class/race/gender consciousness does not lead to action. He concludes that "cynical reason, with all its ironic detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself" (1989, p. 30). The problem with revelation for Jean Baudrillard is similar. He worries that revelation of a scandal (his well-known example is Watergate) merely serves to regenerate and restore faith in the inherently scandalous system and logic of capitalist democracy. Woodward and Bernstein, in Baudrillard's view, merely regenerated "public morality (by indignation, denunciation, etc.)," and therefore "spontaneously further[ed] the order of capital" (1983 p. 27).

Other, perhaps less pessimistic commentators, emphasize the action that must follow on the heels of revelation to enable a political intervention. Alasdair Roberts argues, "The significance of Abu Ghraib may . . . lie in the extent to which we overestimated the catalytic effect of exposure" (2006, p. 238). For him, democracy has to involve the responsibility of the public to act upon the information to which it apparently has a right. Jodi Dean also airs frustration with revelation and visibility: "All sorts of horrible political processes are perfectly transparent today. The problem is that people . . . are so enthralled to transparency that they have lost the will to fight" (2002, p. 174). She calls for "decisive action" to interrupt the depoliticizing flow of messages.

Rather than constituting a lasting intervention in a "distribution of the sensible" as Jacques Rancière (2004) would have it, referring to a politics of that which is visible, audible, sayable, and knowable at any moment, these writers point toward the way in which revelations often become

subsumed by “communicative capitalism”: “the circulation of content in the dense, intensive networks of global communications” that “relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond” (Dean, 2005, p. 53). According to Dean, actors “hope that sufficient volume (whether in terms of number of contributions or the spectacular nature of a contribution) will give their contributions dominance or stickiness” (2005, p. 53). The proliferation of positions is damaging because it “hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies” (2005, p. 53). Ultimately, revelation within communicative capitalism might lead to structural repetitions under the sign of difference.

Attuned to such risks, Nicholas Mirzeoff develops a politics of revelation along more Rancièrian lines. He uses the term “the authority of visibility” to refer to discursive practices that render and regulate the real (2011, p. 476). Mirzeoff reminds us that the gaze from the position of power not only is surveillant, “that exclusive claim to be able to look,” but also exercises “that authority to tell us to move on,” the right to claim that there is nothing to see (2001, p. 474). In other words, control involves the power to decide what is invisible, or secret, what does not count as being in the field of visibility, and also renders some subjects as thoroughly surveilled. For Mirzeoff, a resistant political act would emphasize less the demand to *be seen*, and more the right to *look*—the right to be an active agent in determining the conditions and management of visibility. He writes,

The right to look is not . . . a right for declarations of human rights or for advocacy. It refuses to allow authority to suture its interpretation of the sensible to domination, first as law and then as the aesthetic. (2001, pp. 476–477)

That is to say, the right to look enables one to resist a certain distribution of the sensible naturalized through legal and aesthetic regimes.

What I find helpful in Mirzeoff’s modification, via Rancière, of the emphasis on “visibility” and “voice” within identity politics is that it configures politicality as that which is evident in the shifting conditions that underpin revelation, looking, and seeing, rather than in the event of any new informational content entering an existing organizational paradigm or field of visibility. From this view, what was most radical about WikiLeaks, for example, was not necessarily the content of the government secrets it revealed, but the way in which it had to employ an alternative, counter-visibility; the way it was able to intervene in—*handle* or *manage*—however briefly, a distribution of the sensible. WikiLeaks was a way of looking (at revelation/visibility/secretcy), a way of articulating anew the very politics of looking, as much as a mode of leaking. But Mirzeoff’s emphasis from being seen to looking also places power in the ability to manage and keep secrets.

Toward Secrecy

Sara Ahmed writes self-reflexively about the necessity of knowing when to keep silent, and when to keep certain things out of sight, in organizational settings. When speaking and revealing can be co-opted by a rhetoric rather than ethic of “inclusiveness” and “diversity,” silence and obfuscation are strategies of resistance. To illustrate, she recalls her involvement with producing a race equality action plan for her university at the behest of the Race Relations Amendment Act of 2001. Though she took great care to avoid writing a “happy diversity document” (Ahmed, 2010, p. xviii) and, rather, foregrounded

whiteness as institutional, because the document was deemed “excellent,” the Vice-Chancellor interpreted this as meaning the university was succeeding in terms of racial equality. She reminds us that “documents that aim to reveal can be used to conceal what they reveal” (p. xviii). Consequently, Ahmed invokes the figure of the secretary to symbolize the need for discretion and secretion:

[A] secretary is one who is entrusted with secrets. Sometimes we need to keep the secrets and be worth this trust. Sometimes we need not to keep the secrets with which we are entrusted even if this means we become untrustworthy. What we do with what we are entrusted—whether we speak or keep silent—remains an important question. (2010, p. xx)

We can push Ahmed’s articulation further because, as well as managing and keeping secrets, Mirzeoff’s “right to look” would also include the ability to *be* secret: to look without necessarily being seen. In other words, I want to argue that one way to resist asymmetric lines of visibility or divisive forms of visibility is to do so from a position of opacity, rather than visibility or transparency. I realize that this is somewhat counterintuitive. Such a strategy has as many risks as a politics based on visibility and voice or transparency and openness. To secrete oneself, to make a secret of the self, perhaps risks repeating the violence of state erasure. Yet, it might be a risk worth taking, given revelation’s potential complicity with an ideology able to withstand (and in some cases, even gain strength from) knowledge about its own inequitable contradictions.

It is a risk advocated by the Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant. He uses the phrase “a right to opacity”—playing on the more common “right to privacy.” While the latter suggests a temporary retreat from the public sphere, the former points towards an essential “ethics of singularity” (Spivak, 2013, p. 270). Opacity involves none of the connotations privacy has with property and the self-present, rational subject of liberal humanism and Western metaphysics. Having a right to opacity means evading a gaze that “constructs the Other as an *object* of knowledge” (Britton, 1999, p. 19). It means becoming a subject of secrecy, rather than an object of universalist, dominant, Western, filial-based logic. Even a seemingly progressive attention to what Ahmed refers to as “diversity” (2010) or Glissant refers to as “difference,” can delimit and “contrive to reduce things to the Transparent” (Glissant, 1997, p. 189). In reference to the discursive production of the raced subject, Ahmed writes, “Sometimes we need to know that all cannot be revealed to avoid positioning the others as revelations” (2010, p. xix). Glissant advocates, instead, a model of relationality that does not rest on the false promise of total understanding and absolute truths. “The opaque is not the obscure . . . [i]t is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence” (1997, p. 191). Glissant’s secret is an ethical singularity—capable of derailing the impetus behind an identity politics that seems progressive, but that, in actuality, delimits the conditions of relationality. Opacity positioned in this way could be a useful starting point for rethinking the political potential of secrecy. It helps us to consider secrecy beyond *visibility* management, toward *visuality* management: pointing us toward the very conditions that determine the possibilities and scope of looking.

While Glissant’s theory is concerned with opacity as an ontological condition, we can draw some parallels with calls for a tactical secrecy. Two notable such calls include the aesthetic and political vision of two collectives from the 20th century: *Acéphale* (1936–1939) and Tiqqun (2001). Georges Bataille

imagined using "secrecy as a weapon rather than a retreat" (Lütticken, 2006, p. 32) through a revolutionary secret society he called *Acéphale*, which translates as "headless" and points toward his critique of dominant rationality and reason. As Bataille saw it, this secret society would avoid the corrupting power of politics and instigate a society based on his unorthodox trinity of expenditure, risk, and loss. Tiqqun, a largely anonymous French philosophy collective founded in 1999, much influenced by Bataille, likewise positioned secrecy as a radical tactic. In its "The Cybernetic Hypothesis," Tiqqun posited "interference," "haze," or "fog" as the "prime vector of revolt" (2001). Tiqqun argued that the political project of cybernetics and "the tyranny of transparency which control imposes" can only be resisted through a tactical opacity.

The suggestion to become fog-like is one that is certainly heeded by politically engaged techno-radicals and crypto-anarchists, not least because, increasingly, the politics of secrecy is played out in the digital sphere. That is to say, if we are to think about secrecy as a form of visibility and visibility management, today that means considering the technological affordances that not only assert forms of visibility control, but also offer ways to find what Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker describe as "exploits" (2007) in any protocological control. Assisting techno-radicals and crypto-anarchists is an increasing range of infrastructure and applications that resist the Internet's surveillant protocols. Encrypted e-mail and instant messaging is now widely available. By distributing transactions over several places on the Internet, TOR makes it difficult to identify their source or destination. Peer-to-peer encrypted channels of communications potentially circumvent any third-party business that makes connections and stores metadata. Tracking blockers like Ghostery intervene in consumer surveillance by alerting users to, and in some cases disabling, cookies, tags, and beacons. Search engines like Duckduckgo and Startpage allow for online searching without being tracked or profiled. Browser extensions like TrackMeNot flood search engines with random search terms to render algorithms ineffective. And we now have access to decentralized servers and clouds, such as the personal server from FreedomBox or the co-operative storage cloud offered by Symform.

Such technological opportunities for obfuscation, for exploits perhaps, reach beyond the concerns of raced and othered subjects to anyone wanting to disengage from and interrupt the demands of the dominant transparency paradigm. Technologies like these have been advocated previously on privacy grounds, but thinking about them in terms of obfuscation and opacity enables us to think about them as intervening critically and collectively.

Elsewhere in this special issue, the articles by Mikkel Flyvverbom and by Cynthia Stohl, Michael Stohl, and Paul Leonardi engage with and problematize organizational transparency, but it is worth outlining the major components of the contemporary transparency assemblage here in order to emphasize why secrecy, played out in the digital realm, has become a potent political position to occupy today.

Transparency in a variety of institutions, but perhaps most notably government, is seen as a positive, democratizing force. Yet, in many current formations, the values attached to transparency can be questioned because of six main concerns:

- First and foremost, transparency might simply make inherently inequitable systems more efficient. Think of the trade agreements and financial aid packages that are

dependent upon the publication of fiscal reporting with the intention of making the world hospitable to open market, rather than redistributive, economics.

- Second, transparency measures are often implemented for less than transparent reasons. Inventories legitimized through the project of transparency might rationalize labor in ways that marginalize those factors that are harder to quantify.
- Third, there is a concern that transparency is implemented in lieu of, rather than as evidence of, accountability and responsibility. In this way, putting information in the public sphere can take the place of an ethical engagement with decision-making. Because of the extraordinary scale of open data on the Internet, transparency can be experienced as secrecy.
- As an extension of the third point, a fourth concern is that open government data simply outsources auditing to unqualified and unpaid onlookers. That is to say, in asking citizens to consume and monitor the transactions of the state, open government data initiatives "responsibilize" citizens, handing over the burden of regulation, without necessarily empowering them to do it successfully.
- Fifth, transparency initiatives that take the form of open data are a priority for governments less because they offer citizens access, and more for their economic value. For example, with respect to the EU27 economy alone, the direct impact of open data was estimated in 2010 at €32 billion (see Vickery, 2010; and Tinolt, 2013). This is why 2014 saw the EU commit €14.4 million to open data initiatives modelled on the UK's Open Data Institute. In terms of the U.S. market, McKinsey estimates that "Open data can help unlock \$3–5 trillion in economic value annually across seven sectors" (McKinsey Global Institute, 2013), including education, health, transportation, and consumer products. In short, promoting the use of open data in the development of "apps" might mean that the provision of government data becomes influenced by profitability, rather than democratic accountability.
- Lastly, we should note the concern, only intensified by the Snowden revelations, about the asymmetry between state and citizen transparency. When citizens have little oversight of state-run intelligence agencies while those agencies have untrammelled access to the communications and data of citizens, transparency is better understood as surveillance.

For anyone interested in alternative visions of the political settlement, experimenting with secrecy rather than jumping on the bandwagon of transparency might offer more productive possibilities. On the one hand, this might mean obscuring one's digital shadow to avoid state and consumer surveillance, and dis-aligning oneself from the form of subjectivity configured by a relationship with open data that is circumscribed by neoliberal formations. On the other, it might involve a move away from the individualizing concept of privacy and toward a term like opacity, which might better enable collective action and pose a challenge to delimiting discourses that render subjects legible and knowable. Managing

secrecy becomes part of a political project that attempts to challenge the conditions of visibility, as well as recalibrate the cultural values attached to openness and opacity. The latter is essential, given not only the “negative, antisocial and primitive connotations” accrued by secrecy as a social mode (Jones, 2014, p. 54), but also given its dominant articulation to the state and its surveillance and intelligence capacities.

Working with Secrecy

Most hermeneutic disciplines have self-reflexively considered their own role in unveiling, secreting, and revealing. Some have been more preoccupied with this than others. Anthropology is one such discipline. The tension between revelation and concealment in the relationship of the ethnographer to his or her subjects is perhaps only brought more sharply into focus when the practices under scrutiny are ritualized secrecy (see for example, Taussig, 1999; Urban, 1998; and for an overview, Jones, 2014). Psychoanalysis, too, has developed a considerable literature on considering the role of withholding, confidentiality, and silence for both the practicing analyst and the analysand in the (counter-)transference relation (for references, see Birchall, 2011a, pp. 67–69). As a practice deeply attuned to secrets and silences in research cultures that have obscured certain gender relations, feminist theory has raised self-reflexive questions in this respect (see Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). In security studies, Brian Rappert has produced a highly meditative mode for examining absences, ignorance, and secrets. He is “interested in examining the problems associated with undertaking research in conditions of secrecy in order to ask how the missing could figure as a creative resource in accounts of the social world.”¹ Inspired by these inquiries, I myself have attempted to place such introspection in a central position for cultural studies in two special journal issues on secrecy (Birchall, 2007, 2011b), and for American studies at annual conferences and in my teaching practice, asking how secrets and secrecy inform the politically engaged work of those two fields.

The insights of these inter- and multidisciplinary encounters can aid understanding of both secrets and secrecy in organizational settings and the study of those organizations. Not only is it crucial for organization studies to configure secrecy as a dynamic communicational process *and* as a form of visibility and visibility management that supports a particular distribution within an organization; it should also pay attention to the secrets and silences of itself as a discipline.

I began this article by calling for us to work with secrecy as a methodological and political tool. To this point, I have addressed these as somewhat separate: the former practiced by different academic disciplines to think through secrecy; the latter as something formulated by political philosophy and enacted by radical collectives or crypto-anarchists. But the best work cited above already draws together the methodological and political, so that self-reflexivity is never just a turning in, but also a reaching out. For example, in Rappert’s *Experimental Secrets* (2009), he employs different writing forms as a technique to perform the gaps in understanding and knowledge when it comes to the complex issue of how research into biological and chemical weapons will be used by third parties. Responding to the possibility that research could be used for nefarious ends, the book charts a five-year attempt to articulate a code of conduct for researchers. In enacting and experimenting with different forms of concealment and

¹ See “Secrecy and Absences” at <http://people.exeter.ac.uk/br201/Research/Secrecy%20and%20Absences/index.htm>. This stance is developed in several publications (Rappert, 2009, 2010, 2012).

revelation, Rappert both acknowledges the informal spaces in which discussions of the code took place, and attempts to locate an ethics of openness and opacity. In cases like this, and others, an active, rather than passive, “working with” secrecy necessarily challenges the gap between theory and praxis. The questions secrecy raises about our own research and revelations enter the space of the ethico-political.

Elsewhere, I have called for a secrecy of the Left to rival that wedded to, and supportive of, forms of state violence and control (2011a). As researchers, we can interrupt this asymmetry best by experimenting with and exploring the productive possibilities of secrecy, fog, obfuscation. It means not placing too much faith in revelation, visibility, or exposé alone; not relying on privacy to protect a political self; contextualizing and problematizing invocations of transparency; intervening in, rather than accepting, dominant conditions of visibility; pushing beyond ideology critique, or “paranoid reading” (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003), while still being attuned to the opaque operations and erasures of discursive power. It means, above all, believing in a right to opacity—the right to refrain from being understood according to a code (of visibility, politics, knowledge) we had no part in creating, or that we wish to have no part in furthering. In this re-attunement of hermeneutic social sciences, and the echoes it can have in wider circles, the secret is no longer monopolized by the state. In a conjuncture that places a premium on the knowability and surveillability of subjects, in which everyone must come forth and be understood as data and metadata, the “managing” of secrecy and the secret becomes a deeply political act.

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