

THE POSTSECRET SOCIETY

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Clare Birchall, *Radical Secrecy: The Ends of Transparency in Datafied America*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2021, 244pp, £19.99 paperback

Government, Woodrow Wilson famously argued in 1913, ‘ought to be all outside and no inside.’ Everybody knows, he continued, ‘that corruption thrives in secret places’ and that you ‘can’t be crooked in the light. I don’t know whether it has ever been tried or not; but I venture to say, purely from observation, that it can’t be done.’ Over the last few years, Donald Trump and those inspired by his example, have rigorously tested Wilson’s hypothesis and, again, largely from observation, and pending ongoing developments, it might be concluded that it is, indeed, quite possible to be crooked in the light. In fact, it appears to be the case that, these days, publicity is far from being, as Wilson would have it, ‘one of the purifying elements of politics,’ and instead is the very engine of corruption. For Trump, to be sure, there is very little inside and plenty of outside, yet the virtues of this transparency have been hard to find.

The conviction that transparency is an unequivocal good runs deep. Positioning the conditions of visibility in virtuous relation to darkness is, after all, among God’s first acts of binary division in Genesis (Wilson borrowed ‘Let There Be Light’ as the title of his chapter of *The New Freedom* on openness in government). As guarantor of authenticity, truth and freedom, the literally and figuratively enlightened were firmly set, by the eighteenth century, in opposition to the forces of ignorance, inscrutability and superstition, openness taking on a moral value associated with democracy and reason while the hidden and the secret increasingly signified duplicity and ill intent. Nowhere, perhaps, has this association between openness and virtue in politics been more frequently and energetically announced than in the United States, where Enlightenment bona fides are so explicitly bound up with national identity.

Wilson’s call for openness in politics and business became something of a mantra during the twentieth century, as American government expanded and the nation’s geopolitical influence grew. Louis Brandeis, Wilson’s economic advisor, in the mid-1930s, as a member of the Supreme Court, established the Federal Register to keep a public record of the regulations arising from Roosevelt’s New Deal. The growing administrative state during and after World War Two led to a further series of measures ensuring openness in government, notably the passage of the Freedom of Information Act in 1966. While the Cold War encouraged the United States to draw yet more heavily on its self-conception as the beacon of free speech and openness,

persistent evidence of government secrecy, subterfuge and opacity stoked demands for greater transparency, in line with broader sociocultural changes that valued, and increasingly expected, openness in public life. As a moral force, transparency may have underpinned American government's claims to legitimacy, but increasingly, faced with assassinations and inconclusive official investigations, leaks on the scale of the Pentagon Papers, the FBI's campaign against domestic political organisations, and scandals like Watergate and Iran-Contra, the evidence persistently pointed toward American government not as a clean, well-lighted place but as a murky, indeterminate zone of disinformation and corruption.

The commitment to transparency as a self-evident good, as Clare Birchall explains in this fascinating and wide-ranging account, 'veils a more complex relationship between rapidly multiplying and mutating forms of secrecy and transparency in contemporary mainstream politics' (p37). As the moral authority attached to notions of visibility and revelation has lost its force, we need to ask 'if the opposition between secrecy and transparency is sustainable' (p54). As *Radical Secrecy* makes abundantly clear, the answer is that it is not.

Tracking attitudes toward concealment and openness through the last three American administrations (up to the emergence of COVID-19), Birchall explores how a post-9/11 commitment to secrecy in the name of security normalised the surveillance of everyday life in the US and legitimised wide-ranging covert, often illegal, activity against numerous designated enemies at home and overseas. Barack Obama campaigned on the ticket of transparency and promised openness in government in order to restore American trustworthiness after the degradations perpetrated in the name of the War on Terror, yet the Obama administration continued covert security practices even as it closed Bush's black sites and attempted (unsuccessfully) to close the notorious prison at Guantanamo Bay. Obama was the first, Birchall claims, 'to make it clear that advocating transparency did not mean he would be so on security' (p54). This mobilisation of transparency as a kind of authenticity effect is an example of how, for Birchall, openness can function as a modality of secrecy. In other words, the notional opposition between the visible and the invisible, the open and the concealed, is largely illusory, unhelpful and dangerous.

Instead, Birchall argues, it would be better to think of secrecy and transparency as conjoined twins, as versions of one another, moving together, 'though not necessarily facing the same way or with the same intention' (p4). Each might decide to perform as, or be mistaken for, the other, resulting in an indeterminacy reinforced by the fact that it is not possible to look directly at either the secret or the transparent if they are to retain their identity. A secret cannot be seen because it is hidden, while transparency is also, by definition, something that cannot be seen and can only be seen through.

Bush and Obama may have taken different positions on the relative value of the secret and the transparent, but they were each largely operating within

the conventional paradigm whereby only under exceptional circumstances might secrecy be (temporarily) embraced as good. It is with Trump that the complex nature of the conjoined twins becomes fully apparent and the binary paradigm rendered meaningless. Trump's brazen disregard for the law and for common decency, his flouting of the norms of government and daily expressions of contempt for others, reinforced, rather than eroded, his credibility as unmediated and open. While mainstream media continued to labour under the assumption that a fact-checked riposte would torpedo the Presidential lies and that a thorough investigation of alleged wrongdoing would expose the truth of Trump's corrupt enterprises and thus demolish his credibility, his supporters did not care.

Faced with this scrambling of truth and lies, it is no use, writes Birchall, lobbying for the return to the 'adaptive arc of transparency's goodness.' It would be better, she argues, to see Trump's disruption of the narrative of transparency as an opportunity to 'rethink what kind of transparency best creates accountable and ethical government.' In order to do this, Birchall reverses the conventional values and promises of secrecy and transparency in order to mobilise, she claims, 'radical incarnations of both secrecy and transparency in a way that makes their separation nonsensical' (p3). This pursuit of a radical transparency and a radical secrecy aims to end the unhelpful cycle of exposure and concealment founded on the misconstrued opposition between the virtues of openness and the wickedness of secrecy.

Addressing transparency first, Birchall examines Obama's release of government information on a range of economic, health, and environmental matters through the website Data.gov, an initiative copied by governments worldwide, including the UK. Here, free public access to data is promoted not merely as a sign of government openness but as an entrepreneurial opportunity available to all. This kind of transparency creates an impression of trust but it also, as Birchall explains, offloads the job of interpreting complex data sets to the individual or to expert companies ready to monetise the information. Dumping data into the public sphere with the instruction to do something innovative with it fits well with forms of neoliberal governance that favour individualism, entrepreneurship, and the free market. Furthermore, it gives the impression that the data is raw material waiting to be shaped into value, rather than acknowledging that data is never neutral and always already formed by the ideology that produced it.

What is not mentioned in the promotion of open access is that the push toward ever-greater transparency exposes the citizen to more surveillance and less anonymity. The more we are invited to share data the more visible and trackable we become, further enmeshing ourselves within the paradoxically compulsory voluntarism of what Birchall calls 'shareveillance,' whereby 'subjects are asked to consume shared data and produce data to be shared' (p102) in an economy of circulation that has conflated communicative action and market transaction. The economic

and ideological investment in this mode of data-driven transparency 'has meant that no real alternatives have been entertained,' yet Birchall insists that if we want 'accountable, trustworthy government, then there might be other forms of transparency to achieve that' (p86).

A 'radical transparency' would, for Birchall, involve 'an openness to openness,' by which she means the capacity to imagine forms of transparency beyond the narrow demands of the neoliberal subject and the marketplace. This would be an openness capable of ascribing alternative cultural values to data, redefining what kinds of information might be made visible and willing to change the 'conditions of visibility in general' (p90). If the Left is to think differently about the virtues of transparency, the same goes for the secret, which need not be in the service of deception. 'For too long,' writes Birchall, 'secrecy and its productive possibilities have been obscured by the fear that it is always a gateway to microfascism and by a moral attachment to disclosure' (p150). Secret societies, masking, anonymity, tactical secrecy, scrambled coordinates, secret keeping, encoding, encryption, and passing are some of the means that have, and continue to be, deployed as strategies of evasion, resistance and refusal. Here, Birchall develops Édouard Glissant's notion of the right to opacity as, in the context of contemporary digital regimes, 'the demand not to be legible as, reducible to, and responsible for the demands of data, and to resist the terms of engagement set by the two faces of shareveillance' (p95).

The right to opacity is one move that acts, like the other strategies proposed here, such as hacking, obfuscation, decentralisation and encryption, as a cut that breaks, severs and disrupts the seamless flow of data harvesting and surveillance. Birchall distinguishes, importantly, at this point the right to opacity from the more commonly claimed right to privacy. The latter, she explains, continues to rely on a conception of the fully self-present sovereign citizen. Not only do we need to think about political agency beyond individualism (privacy, notes Birchall, is a 'poor foundation on which to build collective action'), but we must grasp the fact that it is not ourselves as individual citizens that is of interest to data miners but the citizen as data point within 'a larger background pattern on which an algorithm can work to recognize minority anomalies' (p109). Forget the individual, then, and embrace the possibilities of a 'data multitude' capable of 'putting forth the demand that data accumulation serves horizontal, community-forming, and above all radical transparent rather than its hierarchical manifestation' (p143).

Birchall's proposed strategies of inversion, of embracing the secret and refusing transparency, are intended to lead toward a condition of what she calls 'postsecrecy.' Drawing on the work of artists such as Trevor Paglen and Jill Magid, radical collectives like Georges Bataille's secret society, *Acéphale*, and the anonymous group *Tiqqun*, and key insights from, among others, Foucault, Derrida, and Rancière, *Radical Secrecy* gathers a compelling range of resources aimed at cutting through the normalising binary code of open/closed models

of information and power. To be postsecret is to be free of expectations that transparency will solve democracy's problems and able to move away from the 'endless oscillation between concealment and revelation' (p182). A postsecret outlook works with opacity, embraces unknowability and the value of secrets, knows when to keep silent and when to keep hidden, decides when and where to share, when to be open and when to claim the right to opacity. Birchall, marvelously, makes our currently scrambled epistemological coordinates and ethical vacuum seem like an opportunity.

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