

## BOOK REVIEWS

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“Government Secrecy,” edited by Susan Maret. *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy*, Volume 19 (2011).

reviewed by Peter McDonald

The French dramatist Jean Racine once wrote: “There are no secrets that time does not reveal.” Every historian since Homer has made this truism a cornerstone of their history lesson. For the story of our civilizations is nothing more nor less than the tale of secrets of statesmen and states revealed.

What becomes apparent soon enough in reading the edited work “Government Secrecy” in a new volume of the monographic series *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy* v.19 (*RSPPP*) is the startling fact that it is not always Racine’s historical time, per se, that is the crux of governments penchant for concealment but often ‘just enough time’ at which point a secret may be discarded and labeled ‘old news’ or leaked in bits for propagandistic purposes or conversely openly revealed. That secrets serve many purposes forms the key ingredient behind the success heads of states are able to wield to keep their actions for good or ill concealed. After all, the plans of the Japanese military to bomb Pearl Harbor in 1941 only needed to be kept secret sufficiently long for their planes and payloads to arrive over the coastlines of Hawaii without detection. In this their secret succeeded. Ironically it was a secret intended to reveal something important, exposed literally with a bang, by proclaiming in an act of war the rise of Japan’s imperial might. The rest, as they say, is history.

As is stated in the Introduction, what sets this volume of *RSPPP* apart from more traditional historical exposés of how nation-states shape geopolitics through secrecy, is this work’s stated goal to provide sufficiently broad underpinnings of scholarship, in a single edited volume, to help elevate government secrecy studies to a formal area studies in its own right, a first step if you will “toward actualizing a field of inquiry termed secrecy studies” (Maret xxii). A noble effort one might argue given how modern social media and communication has formed a worldwide network of citizens decrying government secrecy which pervades and jades our worldview. But perhaps it has always been so, it’s just today we have YouTube technologies to cut quicker to a consensual worldview based so often not on reasoned judgment, but visceral reaction.

“Government Secrecy” is edited by secrets expert, Susan Maret, a lecturer in information secrecy and freedom of information at the School of Library & Information Science at San José State University, and a widely published

author on the topic herself. In this current work of compilation, Maret does a masterful job of bringing together nineteen separate essays to examine the history of government manipulation of information while simultaneously delving into topics as diverse as information control, censorship, ethics, concealment, freedom of information and in the end, the universal obligations of governments to abide by efforts toward transparency.

With a stated purpose of focusing ‘on the analysis of the potential failure of public institutions to fulfill their obligations to the broader society’ in this regard, this particular volume of *RSPPP* on government secrecy succeeds in its obligation to discuss secrecy openly. Divided into four well-represented sections covering respectively the historical underpinnings of the evolving scholarship, a global exploration on national security, the current status of government policies related to state secrets, and finally, on the ethical tensions between an increasingly ‘open source’ society and the closed circuit business-as-usual governance we have all come to decry, *Government Secrecy* seeks to provide a global perspective which is both selective and representative. Each of the sections is ably introduced by Maret who serves as the reader’s guide through the individual articles in the volume.

For anyone wanting a cook’s tour of the history of government secrecy studies, both Maret’s Introduction and her separate overviews of the four sections, provide excellent background. In the opening Introduction, putting the essays in the volume in context, she ably describes such seminal figures as Georg Simmel, a German philosopher and social critic, who was one of the first critical thinkers in Europe to delve into the political pathology of the “dysfunctional excesses of secrecy” back in the early 1900s. We are introduced to sociologists like Edward Shils and Carl Friedrich in the U.S., who worked under the shadow of McCarthyism yet wrote poignantly about the fallout of “the compulsory withholding of knowledge.” And to give even the government its due, Maret explores recent efforts by the U.S. government’s to sanction exposure as set out by such efforts as the Senate’s Moynihan Commission in the late 1990s.

In all one comes to realize that government secrecy is a hugely complex but equally interdisciplinary subject whose welter of complex parts remains largely unexplored. Indeed, in Table 1 in the Introduction called “Selected Forms of Secrecy and Enabling Factors” Maret provides two pages of topics each worthy of its own voluminous inquiry. Next to each topic she includes some of the early investigators, providing in total a set of proposed boundaries to this emerging field.

While the articles themselves focus heavily on the United States, *Government Secrecy* does provide excellent investigations on the ‘British view’ (Wilkinson), a Cuban perspective (Maret & Aschenkas), cross-national Africa (Relly), and from Mexico (Fox & Haight). There is also a fine cross-section of topics, from the secretive early responses to the BP spill (Edelstein), to a critique on the censorship of history (de Baets),

to a deconstruction of conspiracy theories (Olmstead), to freedoms of the press in Israel (Nossek & Limor) to a topic dear to this reviewer, Project Censored and media accountability.

In aggregate these essays flesh out a conceptual framework that reveals the differences between privacy and secrecy, between secrecy and censorship, between what gets censored and the duties of a truly investigative press, and how the media, especially social media, feeds conspiracy theories, and why conspiracy theories at heart are a perfectly understandable psychic response which an alarmed citizenry of the world has come to realize are too often confirmed by revelations of nefarious activity by their own governments. No wonder leaders, legislators and corporate tycoons everywhere seek to control access to information, too often their dirty laundry shows just how often they work tirelessly against the interests of we the people. In reading these essays one becomes only too aware that often the greatest weapon governments, and corporations have in their armamentarium of concealments is the counter-intuitive weapon of the controlled leak, or worse misinformation campaigns. This work seeks to tease out these disparate threads and examine more effectively their interconnectedness.

Worldwide, but especially in the United States, we see a growing collapse of the financial stability of the Fourth Estate. We witness the consolidation of media empires under the rogue stewardship of demagogues and bottom-liners. Yet we remain ubiquitously surrounded by a Google driven miasma of variegated information outlets. Sadly, to the average voter the blogosphere may well seem indistinguishable from critical reporting. Social media abounds to info-tain the masses, and YouTube can often seem more 'truthful' in its voyeuristic quality of seeing 'history' as it happens, as opposed to the hard slog of wading through long articles of investigative reporting. The mantra "who has the time to read all that stuff" resounds. Even a news junkie like this reviewer, feels guilty each night as yet another *New Yorker*, *Harpers*, or *New York Times* piles up beside his bed unread. For this very reason, creating a new field of scholarly endeavor called "secrecy studies" that will be rooted in the traditions of academic freedom and intellectual inquiry, funded we can only hope by independent universities, is a welcome emergence if our democratic institutions of governance are to survive this near ubiquitous onslaught of closed door deals and dealings by the rich and powerful. In this regard volume 19 of the monographic series *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy* covering this engaging topic of "Government Secrecy" is a welcome vanguard to an emerging field.