

Secrecy and Subjectivity: Double Agents and the Dark Underside of the International System

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Drawing on a wide range of material, from memoirs of former spy masters to the highly acclaimed TV series *Le Bureau des Légendes*, this article shows how documentary as well as fictional accounts of double agents cast light on a “dark underside” of the international system. This dark underside is made up of exceptional spaces of secrecy in which intelligence organizations and spies operate. The article’s main point of entry when analyzing these spaces is the intimate connection between secrecy and subjectivity. While secrecy as a social practice has received increased attention in sociological accounts of secret intelligence, the constitutive role of secrecy in relation to subjectivity is a much less explored theme. This theme, it is argued, becomes especially valuable for thinking about the conflicting lines that constitute the life and becoming of the double agent. In particular, it can be drawn on to show how this subject both is captured by the transparent norms and limits of the international state system and effectively transgresses those limits. In this way, rather than upholding a dichotomy of secrecy and transparency as two separable sides of the international system, the double agent emerges as a disruptive figure calling for its deconstruction.

S'appuyant sur un large éventail de documents allant des mémoires d'anciens maîtres de l'espionnage à une série télévisée encensée, *Le Bureau des Légendes*, cet article montre comment les documentaires ainsi que les récits de fiction d'agents doubles apportent un éclairage sur une « face cachée » du système international. Cette face cachée est constituée d'espaces exceptionnels de secret dans lesquels les services de renseignement et les espions opèrent. Le principal point d'entrée de l'article pour l'analyse de ces espaces est la profonde relation entre secret et subjectivité. Bien que le secret en tant que pratique sociale ait fait l'objet d'une attention accrue dans les comptes rendus sociologiques portant sur les services secrets de renseignement, le rôle constitutif du secret par rapport à la subjectivité est un thème beaucoup moins exploré. Nous soutenons que ce thème devient particulièrement précieux lorsqu'il s'agit de réfléchir aux lignes de conflit qui constituent la vie et le devenir d'un agent double. Il est en particulier possible de s'y pencher pour montrer la mesure dans laquelle ce sujet est à la fois capturé par les normes et les limites transparentes du système étatique international tout en transgressant ces limites dans la réalité. De cette façon, plutôt que de soutenir une dichotomie entre le secret et la transparence comme deux facettes distinctes du système international, l'agent double émerge comme une figure perturbatrice appelant à sa déconstruction.

Con base en una gran variedad de materiales, desde memorias de antiguos maestros espías hasta la aclamada serie de televisión *Le Bureau des Légendes* (Oficina de Infiltrados), este artículo muestra cómo los documentales y las cuentas ficticias de agentes dobles ponen el foco en el “lado oscuro” del sistema internacional. Este lado oscuro está formado por espacios excepcionales de secretismo en los que las organizaciones de inteligencia y los espías se desarrollan. El punto principal de introducción de este artículo al analizar estos espacios es la íntima conexión entre el secretismo y la subjetividad. Aunque el secretismo como práctica social ha recibido más atención en las cuentas sociológicas de inteligencia secreta, el papel constitutivo del secretismo en relación con la subjetividad es un tema mucho menos explorado. Según se argumenta, este tema toma especial valor al pensar en las líneas contradictorias que constituyen la vida y el proceso de convertirse en un agente doble. Particularmente, se puede usar como base para mostrar cómo las normas y los límites transparentes del sistema estatal internacional captan este tema y cómo viola efectivamente estos límites. De esta manera, en vez de mantener una dicotomía entre el secretismo y la transparencia como dos partes separables del sistema internacional, el agente doble surge como una figura disruptiva que pide su deconstrucción.

Secrecy is an enduring theme in the study of security and international relations (IR). It is, for example, what brings together contemporary security practices aimed at preventing terrorist attacks with the Cold War rivalry between Western and Eastern powers. It plays a central role in all forms of intelligence gathering, and it would be hard to imagine “security” to hold any value were it not for its connection to secrecy (Hennessy 2010, xvi).

Secrecy is commonly linked directly to “secrets,” understood as pieces of information that are possessed by subjects who, in intelligence work, can use it as a “currency” to be traded and shared (Van Cleave 2013, 60; Macintyre 2014, 53). Recently, secrecy has also gained increased attention in international political sociology (IPS), not least through studies that look at the everyday work of intelligence agencies and security professionals (Bigo 2019; Ben Jaffel 2020; Ben Jaffel et al. 2020; Walters 2020).

Building on Georg Simmel’s (1906) groundbreaking essay on secrecy as an indispensable part of societal relations, this article adds an important ontological dimension to our understanding of secrecy. While recent sociological work on secret intelligence mainly focuses on secrecy as everyday practice, it has typically ignored the crucial question of how the subjects involved in those practices are constituted. In response, this article aims to explore the connection between secrecy and subjectivity, and how that connection pertains to our understanding of the international. To do so, the article turns to a very specific subject in the world of secret intelligence: the double agent.¹

The double agent, it is argued, offers a unique lens for analyzing the relationship between two different “sides” of the international state system: one open and transparent, and the other secret and opaque. The latter, referred to by Martin Wight (1977) as the “dark underside” of the international system, points to the existence of exceptional spaces of secrecy, hidden from “normal” politics and made up of strict secrecy rules that protect them from public insight. These spaces allow states

¹In this article, the double agent is defined as someone who pretends to spy for one country but who in fact works for another. More precisely, “A double agent is a person who engages in clandestine activity for two intelligence or security services (or more in joint operations), who provides information about one or about each to the other, and who wittingly withholds significant information from one on the instructions of the other or is unwittingly manipulated by one so that significant facts are withheld from the adversary” (Begoum 1995).

to interact not only through open dialogue and diplomacy, but also through work in the shadows.

While the dark underside's primary function is to secure and uphold the transparent norms and limits of the international system, including the distinctions between inside and outside the state, and friends and enemies, it may also generate subjects that transgress those limits. The double agent is particularly interesting in this respect as the becoming of this subject essentially involves *playing* with roles of friendship and enmity, and refusing to submit to an either/or logic of inside/outside the state. For this reason, the double agent is also interesting to study, not only as a point of entry to the dark underside of the international system, but as a tool for analyzing the relationship between the secret and transparent sides of the system. As the article will go on to show, once the subject of the double agent and the complex lines of becoming that constitute this subject are taken seriously, the distinction between the two sides of the system becomes very hard indeed to maintain. Instead of upholding the dichotomy of secrecy and transparency as two sides of the system, the double agent calls for its deconstruction.

To study the subject of the double agent, the article draws on different kinds of material, including autobiographies, TV series, and a Cold War CIA manual. When looking at this material, it is especially interesting to consider what Michael J. Shapiro refers to as "aesthetic subjects," which he contrasts to "psychological subjects." In relation to aesthetic subjects, it is not their inner psychic life that matters most but rather their dispositions and movements, and "what they tell us about the world to which they belong" (Shapiro 2013, 11). Crucially, studying aesthetic subjects differs from looking at how particular discourses impose meaning on events or constitute the identity of subjects. Hence, unlike, for example, Elspeth Van Veeren's (2019) recent study on "secrecy's subjects" in the US "shadow war," the main focus here is not on how subject positions are constructed through a particular discourse that revolves around practices of giving and denying certain subjects access to secrets. Rather, the connection between secrecy and subjectivity is studied in this article by analyzing secrecy as a vital part of the subject's *movements of becoming*, with special emphasis placed on movements that *disrupt* and *overflow* established forms of being, perceiving, and experiencing in the world (Shapiro 2013, 30; Massumi 2015, 186). To this end, studying popular culture can be just as important as examining documentary accounts of real-life cases (Grayson 2013, 380). The relevance of the material is, in this sense, not determined by how well it corresponds to the boundaries of one coherent "discourse" that stems from one particular type of source. It is determined, rather, by how well different kinds of sources, historical as well as fictional, can be mobilized to study becomings that have the potential to disrupt and overflow prevalent forms of being in the international system.

In order to arrive at an analysis of the relationship between the secret becoming of the double agent and the two sides of the international system, a number of important and necessary steps must be taken. The article begins by considering the intimate connection between secrecy and society, both in relation to the modern state and with respect to societal relations. With the help of Simmel's essay on secrecy, it is noted how secrecy plays an important role in the relationship between two subjects who are able to interact only on the condition that self and other do not fully reveal their inner thoughts and feelings to one another. This condition is both what maintains their autonomy as individual subjects and what creates various tensions through efforts to expose and reveal each other's secrets. The second section shifts focus to the role of secrecy as an underlying condition of subjectivity. Here, secrecy is used in order to problematize notions of the autonomous "being" of subjects. By stressing the connection between secrecy and becoming, it is noted how a more nuanced understanding of the ontological dimension of secrecy than in Simmel's analysis can be advanced. The third and fourth sections draw on these two notions of secrecy—linked to societal relations, and subjectivity and becoming—in order to explore concrete examples of double agents and the intricate games of

espionage they are often caught up in. The next section returns to the question of how the double agent can be used as a tool for interrogating the relationship between the dark underside and the transparent limits of the international system.

Secrecy and Society

While secret intelligence can be seen as a crucial area in which international politics and security play out, it has traditionally occupied a rather marginal place in the IR discipline. One reason for this might, of course, be that much of the material it revolves around is classified. Secret intelligence thus becomes hard to study, at least along positivist lines based on collecting empirical evidence in order to prove certain hypotheses (Johnson 1991, 170). Moreover, the central role of secrecy makes intelligence not only difficult to study but also potentially suspect in the eyes of many who study politics in a Western democratic context. Here, secrecy, just like exceptional security politics, is easily looked down upon because it conflicts with transparency as a higher political ideal. In the modern enlightened West, secrecy constitutes at best a necessary evil, which should be actively resisted, in favor of open dialogue and transparent political processes (see Birchall 2011; Öberg 2016).

Yet, as Eva Horn notes in an insightful article on the logic of political secrecy: “Modern power fundamentally hinges on a vast range of secrets and secrecy” (Horn 2011, 104). In the context of modern forms of power, secrecy can even be viewed as *necessary*, in a similar way to Carl Schmitt’s definition of the sovereign exception, which is necessary for there to be laws and norms (Schmitt 2005). Without the sovereign exception, any law would at some point inevitably become obsolete since there will always be unforeseen events that fall outside the scope of the law and therefore require an exception in order to successfully respond. Nothing would, as it were, be allowed to happen were it not for the possibility of making exceptions. A similar point can be made with respect to the sovereign’s ability to operate in secrecy. “Being withdrawn or exempt from public control and debate, political secrecy opens up a discretionary space for actions that do not have to be ... justified—since, ideally, they will never be known or discussed” (Horn 2011, 108). In modern politics, this assumed necessity of operating in a space of secrecy, on one hand, and the public demand for transparency, on the other hand, constitute two incompatible ideals, something that Schmitt himself touches on in his *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1988, 50).

How, then, is it possible to take the role of secrecy seriously in the study of secret intelligence? Understandably, much of the research done in this area focuses on historical cases and draws on material found in declassified archives. One can find in these works crucial insights regarding the significance of secrecy, not only as an aspect of intelligence work but also as an organizing *theme* (see especially Moynihan 1998; Aldrich 2001; Scott 2004). As such, it is secrecy, rather than intelligence understood as “knowledge” that is used to shed light on what it means to do intelligence work, including covert action, clandestine diplomacy, counterintelligence, special operations, and so on. There is not enough space for an in-depth engagement with this literature here, but suffice it to say that it has demonstrated the richness of secret intelligence as an empirical field of study, even if the theoretical tools used for analyzing the significance of this field, not least in relation to secrecy, have been somewhat limited.

More recently, scholars have turned to sociological perspectives in order to study the more mundane aspects of secret intelligence, in particular “the daily routines of security professionals” (Ben Jaffel 2020, 6). The significance of secrecy relates in this way not only to information withheld from public view but also to how it constitutes an integral part of social relations and practice (see Ben Jaffel et al. 2020). This focus on everyday practices of secret intelligence can be contrasted, moreover, to the emphasis commonly placed on elite actors and decisions made with respect to

geopolitics and national security that tend to characterize traditional intelligence studies (see [Bigo 2019](#)). From a sociological perspective, what matters, as William Walters succinctly puts it, are “the ordinary rather than the extraordinary aspects of secrecy” ([Walters 2020](#), 61).

An important point of reference for the sociological work on secrecy is Georg Simmel’s essay, “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies” ([Simmel 1906](#)). For Simmel, secrecy constitutes an underlying condition of society and social relations. “Every relationship between two individuals or two groups will be characterized by the ratio of secrecy that is involved in it” ([Simmel 1906](#), 462). We interact with and relate to each other on the condition that something may always be hidden from view, and that not everything is constantly and fully revealed in the relationship between self and other. He notes, “all commerce of men with each other rests upon the condition that each knows something more of the other than the latter voluntarily reveals to him” ([Simmel 1906](#), 455). While being an underlying condition of self–other relations, the impact of secrecy on those relations and how they play out are not necessarily perceptible. “Even when one of the parties does not notice the secret factor, yet the attitude of the concealer, and consequently the whole relationship, will be modified by it” ([Simmel 1906](#), 462).

On one hand, Simmel argues, secrecy works by hiding from view the naked truth of someone’s knowledge and inner thoughts, thereby creating a necessary distance between self and other. On the other hand, this very distance invites efforts whereby self and other seek to reveal the secrets that keep them apart. “Secrecy sets barriers between men, but at the same time offers the seductive temptation to break through the barriers by gossip or confession” ([Simmel 1906](#), 466). This interplay between concealment and revelation is crucial for the sociological understanding of secrecy, precisely because it points to how secrecy works in practice. It works, then, through the constant tension between two different modes: “the capacity or the inclination of the initiated to keep the secret to himself,” on one hand, and “his resistance or weakness relative to the temptation to betrayal,” on the other hand ([Simmel 1906](#), 466). The greater differentiation there is in society, Simmel contends, the more space for secrecy, and the more potential for the interplay between the desire to keep secrets at every cost and efforts to expose, reveal, and betray ([Simmel 1906](#), 466–67).

One can immediately see the relevance of Simmel’s sociological account of secrecy for analyzing international security and intelligence. Think, for example, of the extreme efforts made by intelligence services in different countries to both conceal and reveal secrets, and of the tensions created between them as a result of this. Before returning to these issues later in the article, the next section will shift focus to the constitutive dimension of secrecy in relation to subjectivity. While Simmel provides crucial insights into the role of secrecy in societal relations, other conceptual tools are needed in order to grasp the relationship between secrecy and subjectivity.

Secrecy, Subjectivity, and Becoming

To think of secrecy as intrinsic to subjectivity implies moving away from the modern dichotomy of transparency and secrecy mentioned in the previous section. This dichotomy is also relevant for thinking about the modern subject of the Enlightenment that, following Rousseau, has the potential to find a more authentic self in the aspiration of increased transparency, which functions as a higher ideal ([Birchall 2011](#), 9). Secrecy, in this respect, is something that must be suppressed in favor of transparency. In addition to upholding a hierarchical relation whereby secrecy is seen as “bad” and transparency as “good,” this view affirms the image of a fully present subject for whom secrecy and transparency may be achieved to greater or lesser extents. Secrecy is thus assumed to lie within the realms of agency, sovereignty, and control. As such, it also fits with the notion of the sovereign state as the primary

subject of security at the heart of the modern political imagination (Campbell and Dillon 1993; Walker 1997; Edkins, Persram, and Pin-Fat 1999). In addition to the Weberian definition of the state as the human community that successfully claims monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory, it can be argued that this subject rests on the idea of claiming monopoly over the legitimate use of secrecy.

While reaffirming the presence of the state as the primary subject of modern politics, the concept of secrecy can also be drawn on in order to question the very notion of such presence. Key to this questioning is to think of secrecy as something that evades sovereign mastery and control. Moreover, secrecy does not necessarily have to belong to a subject who “possesses” secrets through the conscious concealment of inner thoughts and feelings. According to philosopher Jacques Derrida, secrecy may refer to something much more elusive: an inescapable part of the subject’s continuous coming into being, which does not belong to a fully present “now” but to a past and a future that cannot be incorporated within the “present” (Derrida 2008, 24–31, 92). The lack of a stable present in which past and future can be anchored means that the subject can never be fully self-present or, indeed, self-aware of her complete existence. The subject is constantly *haunted* by all those instantaneous events and encounters that constitute her life, but that do not make up a coherent whole, and can never confirm who she truly is. This underlying condition of subjectivity, which belongs to the past and the future without a stable present, is also what Derrida refers to as “the secret of secrecy” (Derrida 2008, 92).

The secret of secrecy does not belong to an already existing subject who, through self-reflexivity, is able to make sense of the secret as a knowable object. The secret of secrecy lies beyond the subject’s grasp and is therefore never fully controlled by a sovereign self. Derrida thus asks, “what sense is there in saying that it is ‘my’ secret, a secret ‘of mine,’ or in saying more generally that a secret *belongs*, that it is proper to or belongs to some ‘one,’ or to some *other* who remains *someone*?” (Derrida 2008, 92, emphasis in original).

The difference in relation to Simmel’s sociological account of secrecy becomes stark here. For Simmel, a secret still belongs to *someone*, whereas for Derrida, the secret, or the secret of secrecy, is what makes the being of that someone impossible. The subject, for Derrida, is exposed to an incessant questioning of the self: “‘who am I?’ no longer in the sense of ‘who am I’ but ‘who is this “I” that can say “who?”’” (Derrida 2008, 92). There is much at stake in this questioning, precisely because the identity of the “I” cannot be tied to a stable ground or affirmed through relations between self and other, but is constantly dissolved by the past and the future.

Secrecy, when viewed as an underlying condition of subjectivity, thus pertains to *becoming* rather than to stable or coherent states of being. “Only becomings are secrets,” write Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2004, 317). Becomings are secrets because they lack a clear content as well as a form that can be known and represented *as such*. In this way, they can also be linked to Shapiro’s notion of “aesthetic subjects,” referred to in the introduction and highlighting the importance of movements and dispositions, as opposed to the inner psychic life of subjects. Studying these movements and dispositions, then, is not about uncovering a secret hidden within the subject, like a Freudian unconscious. There is no inner core of the subject that the movements and dispositions may reveal. The significance of the latter relates instead to what they can tell us about the world to which they belong, and especially how they can be mobilized in order to *disrupt* established forms of being in the world. The following sections explore the secret becoming of double agents along these lines.

Becoming a Double Agent

What are the dispositions and movements of the aesthetic subjects found in the world of secret intelligence? One common impression from fictional as well as

documentary accounts is that here, in this secret world, the subjects are not only in control of secrets. As they enter the exceptional spaces of secrecy that espionage has thrown them into, it may also be the case that secrecy takes control over *them*. As cultural critic Mark Fisher notes, with respect to the espionage genre in film and literature, for spies “there are no limits” to the roles they play; “one cannot simply step out of them ... because everything—including inner life itself, all its wounds and private shames—starts to feel like cover, a series of props” (Fisher 2014, 70).

Fisher opens up a series of interesting questions that are relevant to the broader field of secret intelligence as he ponders on the role of the spy. Such questions are also what make the topic of counterintelligence so fascinating. In order for espionage to hold any value for a nation’s intelligence services, it is necessary to be able to trust and verify the information gathered. The purpose of counterintelligence is to provide such verification and detect possible acts of deception by foreign powers. However, it may also involve offensive strategies aimed at actively deceiving enemies by feeding them with false information. The possibilities opened up by both offensive and defensive intelligence strategies make counterintelligence an intellectually challenging task. As noted by Michelle Van Cleave (2013, 57),

the counterintelligence “mindset,” its puzzles and intellectual challenges, stretch the imagination and provide insight into how we think. How do we know what we perceive is correct? How do we measure what an adversary knows about us? How do we determine whether or not we are successful in keeping our secrets and projecting the image we wish to project? How do we know what and whom to trust?

While practitioners working with counterintelligence are naturally interested in being able to give definitive answers to these questions, it is also interesting to consider the difficulty of providing any such answers. This difficulty may also generate a strong sense of uncertainty and confusion, which is perhaps best captured in novels, films, and TV series, most recently in the critically acclaimed French TV series *Le Bureau des Légendes* (*The Bureau*), created by Eric Rochant (2015–). *The Bureau* follows the agents working at a special, ultra-secret section of the French foreign intelligence services (DGSE) that deals with deep cover operations and long-term missions in which the agents take on fictive identities. Many of the characters in the series experience conflicting loyalties: to the self, to the nation they have sworn to protect, to the organization for which they work, and to their colleagues. Instead of resolving them, the series effectively uses conflicting loyalties to illustrate how the agents constantly question themselves, who they are, and what limits they have, as both agents and persons. Commenting on his role as agent Malotru, who soon turns against his own organization, actor Mathieu Kassovitz notes:

Malotru is a guy with an ethic, and sometimes your personal ethic goes against your professional orders. And what you have to do for your country is not exactly what you need to do for yourself. So you get your hand stuck in that machine: If you lie once, then you have to lie all the time. (Quoted in Shattuck 2016)

Due to the confusion all these lies can create, entering the intelligence world with a clear sense of purpose and a well-conceived idea of what your cover is and who you are underneath that cover is often seen as crucial. According to British intelligence officer Kim Philby, arguably the greatest (known) double agent in the history of espionage, and who secretly worked for the Soviets from 1933 until he was exposed in 1963: “The first duty of an underground worker is to perfect not only his cover story but also his cover personality” (Philby 2018, 201). Having gained vital experience as a spy, first in Nazi Germany and then in Fascist Spain, he was well equipped to further develop his skills and fine-tune his cover personality during the early parts of the Cold War.

While the very notion of a cover personality may prompt us to think of Philby’s betrayal in relation to an underlying “real” identity anchored in an ideological cause,

a common impression of Philby is that he lacked any strong ideological convictions and that it was not clear even to his Soviet handler, Yuri Modin, who Philby “really” was. In his autobiography, Modin (1994, 270) writes about Philby:

He never revealed his true self. Neither the British, nor the women he lived with, nor ourselves [the KGB] ever managed to pierce the armour of mystery that clad him. His great achievement in espionage was his life’s work, and it fully occupied him until the day he died. But in the end I suspect that Philby made a mockery of everyone, particularly ourselves.

Philby’s own words on his motivations do not give us many further clues. He merely writes: “I did not hesitate. One does not look twice at an offer of enrolment in an elite force” (Philby 2018). So, who was Philby, *really*? This is a recurring question in the literature on him and the other members of the infamous Cambridge Five spy ring to which he belonged. The only personality trait that recurs in various accounts is that he was a true British gentleman with impeccable manners.

Instead of searching for a double agent’s real identity, a more interesting approach is to emphasize the agent’s *impersonal* qualities, which renders the very notion of a core identity irrelevant. As Modin writes with respect to espionage work, “sometimes a man gets so accustomed to the mask he is wearing that he becomes in reality exactly what he is pretending to be” (Modin 1994, 269). What matters, in this sense, is what happens in the movements and continuous processes of *becoming*, which are irreducible to any stable states of being. The agent’s becoming lacks “thickness” in this sense and belongs rather to the “actor, dancer, or mime,” to “the present of the pure operation, not incorporation” (Deleuze 1990, 168).

Furthermore, the double agent’s becoming cannot be reduced to bureaucratic practices, simply because it does not follow the rules and habits that define those practices. Modin notes how his own devotion to the job as controller of the Cambridge spies was due to the Communist system in which he lived, which required him to be loyal. For the Cambridge Five, however, “the choice was altogether different. There was nothing bureaucratic or agreed about their commitment” (Modin 1994, 271). Focusing on habits and bureaucratic practices has little to offer in this respect, since the becoming of the double agent, regardless of motives, falls outside such habits and practices. At the same time, in order to maintain the role of a double and continue to work for two sides at the same time, some sort of balance needs to be struck between playing a role and sticking to certain rules. Transgression might have enabled the subject to take on the role of the double, but to remain a double more transgressions cannot be allowed. Due to the pressure put on spies, keeping this balance can, however, be a perilous task. As Modin (1994, 24) observes, the pressure is “sometimes unbearable. Day and night you have to be prepared for the worst; you worry about failure, about losing control of yourself.” If there is a boundary between “normal” behavior and transgression, this boundary is very thin, which also makes it difficult to fully control.²

John le Carré, the most prominent novelist on the topic of espionage and who, for a brief period, worked for the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6), has aptly captured some of the transgressive becomings of spies and double agents, both in his novels and in his interviews. For example, he notes:

If you can imagine what it’s like to spend your entire day listening to the telephone conversations of one family or the microphoned conversations of one group from 6 pm to 5 in the morning if you like, you *have to join*. You *have to be a schizophrenic*. And much of the confusion about loyalty in that world derives from the fact that you study

² According to Derrida (1995, 3–4), “Between the actor and the analyst, whatever the distance or differences may be, the boundary . . . appears uncertain. Always permeable. It *must* even be crossed at some point not only for there to be analysis at all but also for the behaviour to be appropriate and ritualized normally.” (Emphasis in original.)

the enemy so closely and you empathize so deeply with the enemy that you jolly nearly find yourself wandering across the frontier by mistake. (le Carré 1999)

For le Carré, the “good” of secret intelligence is always in danger of becoming “bad.” The deceptive lines of becoming that characterize this work mean that the “good” self and the “bad” other are seldom clearly distinguishable. Their mutual imbrication in the dark art of secret intelligence means that the barriers between the good and the bad, the self and the other are always in danger of being dissolved. The further the subject goes into the world of secrecy, the more in danger he is of deviating from the original norms associated with a prior self, always in danger of transforming *into* the enemy:

Spies are not policemen, neither are they quite the moral realists they like to think they are. If your mission in life is to win over traitors to your cause, you can hardly complain when one of your own, even if you loved him as a brother and cherished colleague, and shared every aspect of your secret work with him, turns out to have been obtained by someone else. (le Carré 2016, 26)

The security services fixed on their candidates “for being on the one hand larcenous”—a favourite word—and on the other hand, however you call it, loyal.” This dichotomy raised “huge, many-faceted questions.” (le Carré quoted in Banville 2019)

If transgressing the lines that regulate “normal” behavior is essential to operating as an agent in the field, this is especially the case for those who have already taken the step of becoming a double agent. It is crucial that their handlers give them a certain leeway to act and take initiatives. According to a Cold War CIA manual for dealing with double agents: “A case officer does not control an agent the way he controls an automobile. ... The intelligence officer who thinks of control in absolutes of black and white does his operation a disservice; the areas of gray predominate” (Begoum 1995 [1962]). These gray areas include questions about the double agent’s “true” motives and who he “really” is. Instead of seeking to determine the double agent’s identity and motives, it is better to remain open to learning anew about his ways. “Keep analyzing the agent as well as the case. Do not be satisfied to fix a label (such as ‘anti-Communist’) to him instead of learning to understand him” (Begoum 1995).

To “control” a double agent implies following the lines of becoming that he has entered and keeps on entering, something Modin appears to have been very good at in his job as controller of the Cambridge Five. Instead of trying to force his agents into a particular type of behavior, he continuously adapted to their own unique ways of interacting and to their different rhythms, their lines of becoming. Central to this sort of “control” is trusting the agent and avoiding any sort of blackmail, which can be detrimental to both running and recruiting double agents (Begoum 1995). For Simmel, “we ‘give’ our faith in another. It cannot be delivered on demand, in the same degree in which it can be realized when spontaneously offered” (Simmel 1906). This “gift” can, however, also be turned against the organization that the double agent has started working for, transforming him into a triple agent.

Once the first transgressive move has been made, and due to the freedom the double agent must be able to exercise, there is always the risk of further transgressions, leading to a potentially confusing culture of secrecy and paranoia. This culture feeds directly back into the double agent’s becoming, providing the necessary life force that overflows and refuses to be contained by any static forms of being. Herein lies the specific threat posed by the double agent. Analyzed as an aesthetic subject who eludes prevalent notions of identity, belonging, and loyalty in the international system, this threat cannot be grasped as a mere “construction.” It is very much *real*, precisely because it springs from movements of becoming that conventional narratives about this system, predicated on sharp lines between friends and

enemies, inside and outside, are unable to capture. As a double, the agent is always *both* rather than either/or.

Molehunt

Very brave thing, in spying, to put your faith in someone. (Nicholas Elliot, quoted in [le Carré 2014](#), 303)

The significance of analyzing the double agent as an aesthetic subject relates not only to how the becoming of this subject overflows prevalent forms of being in the international system, but also to the difficulty of responding to the threat posed by this becoming while restoring faith in the clear lines of identity, belonging, and loyalty that this system is based upon. As historical cases have shown, the revelation of double agents can have severe implications, both for the intelligence agencies that have been deceived and for the nations that were betrayed. The realization that someone who was trusted with secret intelligence critical to the nation's security and survival turns out to have been someone entirely other, who in fact was working against it, can be traumatic for that nation. Irrespective of what motivated them, double agents are culpable of the "worst" form of betrayal; the worst, not only because they have betrayed their country, but because they belonged to an organization that, in secret, was supposed to keep the country safe. As East German spymaster Markus Wolf, head of the GDR foreign intelligence service HVA for thirty-four years, notes in his autobiography,

there is one class of treason that appals and enthral[s] in a particularly intense way ... the traitor inside one secret service who delivers himself and his secret knowledge into the hands of another. Some people assume that a willingness to betray colleagues might make those who work in the intelligence world immune to disillusion when betrayal occurs among their own ranks. That is wrong. Betrayal is poison for every intelligence service, against which the vaccines at our disposal have only limited effect. ([Wolf 1997](#), 174)

The damage caused by the poison of treason was felt most vividly on both sides of the Atlantic following the revelation of Philby's role as double agent in 1963, after more than a decade of suspicions directed against him, especially by the Americans. A climate of paranoia ensued, as both US and British intelligence services directed much of their attention on a "molehunt," initiated by James Jesus Angleton, the CIA chief of counterintelligence, in search of more double agents (see [Bower 1995](#), chapter 12). If Philby had been able to reach the top of the SIS, serving for a period as chief British liaison with the American intelligence services and on the verge of taking charge of MI6, what guarantees were there that others like him did not exist? The strong sense of confusion created by this climate of paranoia and suspicion was aptly captured by Angleton himself through the phrase "wilderness of mirrors," taken from a poem by T.S. Eliot called "Gerontion" (see [Bower 1995](#), 313; [Manning 2018](#), 79). Entering the wilderness of mirrors meant that counterintelligence officers started seeing double agents everywhere; suddenly anyone could be traitor.³

Due to the secrecy on which intelligence work hinges, molehunts are no mere accidents but symptoms of intelligence officers being unable to apply rational thinking based on facts. According to [Doder \(2002\)](#), "Outsiders assume that intelligence services are run in more intelligent and more rational ways than the rest of government bureaucracy. But given their preoccupation with secrecy, the opposite is true." Since the harm done by double agents and defectors is substantial, "even the slightest suspicion must be taken seriously" ([Wolf 1997](#), 175). By following up on these

³ For example, according to [Doder \(2002\)](#), "It was rumoured for a long time that Labour leader and Prime Minister Harold Wilson was a KGB plant and that Roger Hollis, the chief of Britain's domestic security agency, MI5, and CIA Director William Colby, were double agents."

suspicions, a nation's intelligence services may indeed help paralyze their own organization, thereby ensuring that the damage done by one double agent outlasts his immediate actions. This is particularly evident in the case of Philby's betrayal and the molehunt initiated by Angleton. As Doder (2002) writes, "Angleton's counterintelligence program ruined many careers and, perversely, helped the Soviet Union."

It is interesting to consider in relation to acts of betrayal how common the theme of "friendship" is. "Secrecy forges intense bonds," writes Ben Macintyre in his biography of Soviet double agent, Oleg Gordievsky (2018, 19). When these bonds are broken, it is not only the nation one has sworn to defend that is betrayed. Perhaps even more seriously, the friends with whom one has lived and worked in the shadows have been deceived. Loyalty to friends is sometimes even said to stand above loyalty to the nation. As Doder writes, with reference to another member of the Cambridge Five spy ring, Anthony Blunt, who, like his fellow Cambridge spy Guy Burgess, was a member of the secret Apostles society at Cambridge University:

When he tried to explain himself in 1979, Blunt invoked E.M. Forster's statement that if he ever had to choose between betraying his friend and his country, he hoped he would have the guts to betray his country. This resonated with the spirit of the Apostles that love, friendship and contemplation of beauty were the only justifiable ends of human acts. Peter Wright recalled that he realized as soon he began debriefing him in the mid-1960s that Blunt, "far from being liberated by the immunity offer, continued to carry a heavy burden. It was not a burden of guilt, for he felt none ... His burden was the weight of obligation placed on him by those friends, accomplices, and lovers whose secrets he knew, and which he felt himself bound to keep."

The nexus of friendship and betrayal runs through the espionage genre and can be found in fictional as well as documentary accounts.⁴ The stronger the friendship, it seems, the weaker the barrier between self and other that secrecy helps maintain.⁵ To become a "true" friend is to share one's innermost thoughts and feelings with someone. The success of the Cambridge Five appears largely to have been precisely due to their ability to break down this barrier and make people reveal things they normally would not reveal. Of Burgess, for example, Modin (1994, 88) writes: "As the years passed, his principal value for the KGB shifted from his ability to recruit first-class agents, to his knack of gathering information without making his source aware that he was being interrogated."

Going back to Simmel, there is always a barrier between self and other that secrecy helps to maintain. Secrecy can disrupt even the most solid of friendships and social bonds that make up a community. Making a pledge to not reveal any secrets, for example, by signing the Official Secrets Act upon entering the British SIS, is merely of symbolic value in this respect and offers no guarantees that the person who signs it does not break it at some point in the future. There is a secrecy that pertains to subjectivity that is out of reach for the organization the agent "belongs" to: a secrecy that is integral to the agent's continuous coming into being, her becoming, and that becoming may always end up on different sides of the friend-enemy distinction. Trying to control the double agent's becoming implies, in this sense, that the intelligence organization not only seeks to mitigate the risk of betrayal, but also responds to a more general sense of uncertainty over becomings and their ability to overflow frames of being in the international system.

⁴See, for example, Macintyre (2014), on the close relationship between Philby and Elliot, and Modin's account of the friendship between Blunt and Dick White (Modin 1994, 89).

⁵The intimate relationship between secrecy, friendship, and even love highlights the significance of different types of social relations that are supposed to lay bare who and what you really are. They also help form a strong bond between the members of a group, supposedly safeguarding it from betrayal. Hence, both the CIA and the British secret services have traditionally recruited their employees from networks linked to particular elite universities, while Soviet intelligence has relied on "family dynasties" as "protective mechanisms against betrayal" (Wolf 1997, 175).

In order to guard against the constant risk of betrayal, an intelligence organization must, just like any secret society, be able to structure their work in such a way that some parts are hidden from others. As [Deleuze and Guattari \(2004, 317\)](#) note, “every secret society has a still more secret hindsociety, which either perceives the secret, protects it, or metes out the punishment for its disclosure.” In accordance with that logic, intelligence organizations commonly contain multiple layers of secrecy, with some parts being more secret than others.⁶

Yet, despite efforts to structure their secrecy work in a safe way, intelligence organizations cannot easily defend themselves against acts of betrayal committed by their own personnel. This difficulty becomes especially problematic when the double agent is placed within the agency’s counterintelligence unit, like Philby who, in 1944, was appointed chief of Section IX of the SIS whose mission was to study the Soviet Union’s intelligence activities, as well as those of Communist parties in other parts of the world. As [Modin](#) notes, the SIS “had just named a Russian agent as head of the branch whose specific task was to spearhead the battle against Russian spies. This made Philby the most important operative we had anywhere in the world” ([Modin 1994, 46](#)).

There is, then, an inbuilt risk to the work and structuring of intelligence organizations, the risk that the people they employ end up undermining the purpose they are supposed to serve. All it takes is one single traitor. “You only need one spy to be effective,” as [Gordievsky](#) notes (quoted in [Harding 2013](#)). The urge to discover the “real” identity of intelligence officers following the revelation of traitors is therefore understandable, but does not make it any easier to successfully address it. For example, [Wolf](#) points to the complicated relationship during the Cold War between the Soviet intelligence services and the two German services, the Eastern and the Western. Due to the many defectors going in each direction, Soviet intelligence “had a jaundiced view of both German services. By the end of the Cold War, they came to the conclusion ... that it was impossible to know with certainty for which side any German agent was working” ([Wolf 1997, 192](#)). This uncertainty is an important part of the wilderness of mirrors and illustrates the difficulty of controlling the subjects who enter the world of secret intelligence.

Analyzed as an aesthetic subject, the double agent refuses to settle on a transparent state of being but moves ambiguously between the light and the shadows. While overflowing the forms of being defined by the international system, in terms of friends and enemies, inside and outside, this subject’s becoming is conditioned by the exceptional spaces of secrecy that the agent has gained access to, spaces that allow him to enjoy a unique existence as both inside and outside, friend and enemy. Responding to the threat posed by this double existence is, however, a task that is likely to fail. Irrespective of how far-reaching the molehunt is, the double agent’s becoming overflows and disrupts the forms of being, and the alignment of personal and collective loyalty, that the work of intelligence organizations ultimately hinges on. Crucially, even when a specific double agent has been caught, the uncertainty over identities and loyalties among their personnel lingers, and may even increase.

Between Secrecy and Transparency

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, 462](#))

The mere existence of secret intelligence seems to affirm the modern dichotomy of secrecy and transparency. It demonstrates that there is something more than a purely “transparent” world in which everything is fully and constantly revealed.

⁶ In *The Bureau*, for example, this part is the fictive “bureau of legends,” but it is well known that all major intelligence services (FSB, CIA, MI6, DGSE) have similar departments for dealing with the most secretive aspects of their work, especially deep cover operations.

There is also a secret world or, as Martin Wight puts it, a “dark underside” of the state system. In his *Systems of States* (Wight 1977, 30), he writes: “In the modern West, the world of intelligence, counter-espionage and double agents provides a reverse image of the states-system: the dark underside of mutual interdependence.”

What is this dark underside of mutual interdependence? It is certainly not interdependence as theorized by liberalist approaches to IR, focused on increased cooperation between states that reduces the risks of conflict and war. Rather, it relates to how the main components of the international system, that is, the states, are glued together through a particular type of interaction that allows them to participate in a play of relations not only through open dialogue and diplomacy, but also through deception and work done in the shadows.

For Wight, the two sides of the state system are clearly dependent on each other, in a similar way to how Simmel views the relationship between the world of secrecy and a more obvious world. Without the former, with “full” transparency, relations between subjects, individuals, and states, would be impossible since the necessary distance between self and other could no longer be maintained. Secrecy allows subjects to interact without revealing everything to each other, hence without losing their existence as singular subjects. Irrespective of how close two subjects may seem, or how friendly they are, secrecy guarantees that they continue to exist *as* separate subjects. Acts of betrayal and deception are, therefore, not aberrations but the logical outcome of this double structure of our social, political, and international political existence.

The interplay of secrecy and transparency means that there is no transparent international system “as such,” while its dark underside is ultimately inseparable from attempts to reveal and bring secrets into the light. Instead of trying to isolate the two “sides” from each other, it is therefore more productive to think, with Birchall, of an irresolvable tension or *undecidability* characterizing their relation (Birchall 2011, 12). This means, moreover, that rather than *choosing* between secrecy and transparency, “the more intelligent response” is to “inhabit ... strategically” the undecidability of their relationship (Birchall 2011, 12).

What does it mean to strategically inhabit the undecidability of secrecy and transparency? Most importantly, perhaps, it implies refusing to try to either “master” or “resolve” the tension between them (Birchall 2011, 12). Furthermore, it means acknowledging that whatever rules and norms are said to constitute a fully transparent order in which nothing is hidden from view, there can be no such order that is immune to the secret becoming of its subjects.

The double agent is one example of a becoming whose emergence the state is unable to prevent. It is a particularly interesting becoming in the sense that it both disrupts and reaffirms the limits of an international system based on the notion of a perfect alignment of personal and collective loyalties to one and the same state. As we saw in the previous sections, accounts of double agents, documentary as well as fictional, often highlight a discrepancy between personal and collective loyalty. The double agent is no longer at home in a world where this alignment informs him of who he is and where he naturally belongs. His becoming has *transgressed* the limits of that world.

Already upon entering the intelligence community there is transgression. It commonly entails not being allowed to reveal to anyone who employs them and, if they were to die in the line of duty, their work must sometimes remain a secret, as illustrated by the anonymous stars carved into the CIA’s marble wall at Langley, one star for every employee who died in service. The double agent highlights a more extreme form of transgression, which involves the drawing of more experimental lines. The challenge for this subject is not merely to keep a secret but to maintain these lines of becoming. If Philby is the greatest double agent in the history of espionage, it is because his lines kept being drawn so consistently, for such a lengthy

period of time, without reaching stasis and without losing touch with the norms of the “transparent” side of the state system.

Since from its inception the becoming of double agents involves breaking with norms and doing the unexpected, the purity of this becoming is difficult to sustain. As the lines are drawn, there is easily a loss of both agency and control. What remains is an ever more complex array of lines that have multiplied and taken off in different and often incommensurable directions, *throwing* the subject between worlds. Just like Malotru in *The Bureau*, first indispensable to the ultra-secret division of the DGSE for his skills in the art of deception, then banned from and hunted by the same organization for working as a double agent *against* them, and then again embraced as a double agent working *for* them. Any norms that might have guided him at the beginning of his career must surely have become irrelevant now. His multiple transgressions have made it increasingly hard to find a way back to the origin of an identity, a core hidden beneath his cover. This does not mean that he has failed. On the contrary, he is portrayed as the perfect spy, imperceptible, and freed from the illusions of identity and origin. But his success also means that he has lost “himself” along the way.

Transgression, as theorized by Georges Bataille, “opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed, but it maintains these limits just the same” (Bataille 1986, 68). While disrupting the notion of a “transparent” state system, the transgressive becoming of the double agent can also be said to reaffirm this idea of the system. Thus, rather than fully transcending the ideal of transparency and reaching a place beyond, the double agent’s becoming can be said to inhabit the undecidability of secrecy and transparency that Birchall points to.

To inhabit this undecidability, then, does not mean that the double agent has settled on an identity or arrived at a more complete state of being. In fictional as well as documentary accounts of double agents, there is often a strong sense of personal failure at the end of the line: a failure to fulfil the promise of personal transformation, even if the operations they were involved in have been largely successful.⁷ When the game is over and they are forced to abandon their double life, they return from the realm of exceptional becomings to the mundaneness of everyday life. They return, at the same time, to a political existence determined by the inside/outside dichotomy of the state, forced yet again into being either inside or outside, rather than both.

Conclusion

The becoming of the double agent might be exceptional, yet it is arguably the exceptionalism of secret intelligence that makes this area so interesting. This is also the reason why it is important to complement the recent turn to sociology and the increased focus on the mundane practices of intelligence officers. By emphasizing so heavily the significance of the everyday, exceptional becomings risk getting lost. Yet, these becomings must be taken seriously since they powerfully demonstrate the ways in which the transparent norms of the international system, not least concerning the alignment of personal and collective loyalty, must be negotiated with something that clearly does not fit with the limits of that system.

The exceptional becoming of double agents ultimately involves *playing*, not only with roles of friendship and enmity, but also with the very system that is predicated on clear lines between friends and enemies, inside and outside. To play with this system involves a different sort of disruption than the one that is otherwise highlighted by sociological approaches. For example, instead of pointing to the ways

⁷This sense of failure is especially apparent in le Carré’s depiction of Bill Haydon toward the end of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. It can also be found in portrayals of the members of the Cambridge Five spy ring after their betrayals had been revealed; see, for example, Modin’s (1994) account.

in which inside and outside are increasingly entangled through bureaucratic processes and everyday practices,⁸ here disruption occurs through exceptional forms of transgression and becoming. This disruption complicates our understanding of the transparent ideals of the state system, including the alignment of personal and collective loyalty. The double agent demonstrates that there is something more to the continuous play of interstate relations that is not centered on this alignment, or indeed on the construction of identities, and the inside/outside dichotomy.

The double agent does not play by the same rules that the transparent side of the international system is based on. While this system is supposed to inform subjects to which side of interstate relations they belong, and whom to pledge allegiance to, the double agent does not settle on an either/or logic. Taking on the role of the double, the agent is *both* inside *and* outside. Leading a double life is, however, far from straightforward, and may involve entering lines of becoming that take off in different, often unforeseen directions, which are difficult to control. For this reason, the becoming of the double agent should not necessarily be analyzed as a form of “resistance” to the limits of a transparent international system. As noted in the last section of the article, even if double agents transgress the ideals of the system, this transgression does not mean that those ideals have been transcended. There are always two sides of the system that remain inseparable: one dark and secret, and the other more obvious. A final conclusion to be drawn from this notion of a double structure of the international system is that the space of secrecy in which sovereign power operates is essentially the same that the double agent takes advantage of. The becoming of double agents springs directly from spaces of secrecy that sovereign states depend on and could not possibly do without. Acts of transgression, therefore, do not make the transparent side of the system obsolete. They show that in addition to the continuous efforts to reinforce that side of the state system, there are becomings that sovereign apparatuses of security and intelligence agencies cannot, in the end, control.

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⁸This sort of entanglement is often theorized in IPS by drawing on the metaphor of the Möbius ribbon (see Bigo and Walker 2007; Bigo 2019).

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