

Travelling Secrets:

Reflections on the Epidemiology of Secretive Representations

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Abstract:

The essential lack of transparency regarding both the *content* of concealed knowledge and the *causes* for adopting strategies of dissimulation enables intriguing dynamics of cultural creativity and meaning making. There is ample historical evidence (e.g. in conspiracy theories, discourses on “mystery cults”, “spiritual alchemy” etc.), that the use of secretive techniques for quite specific, practical ends can trigger innovative speculations on profound esoteric secrets that were never there, along with novel ideas on the rationale for secrecy.

We can better understand this dynamic by drawing on the epidemiology of representations pioneered by Dan Sperber. The key theoretical problem of an epidemiology of secrecy is to explain why, how, and in what sense secrets, which on the face of it are about *restricting* public communication, can become powerful cultural entities that are transmitted through larger populations. This paper explores secrecy as a form of meta-representation that produces “relevant mysteries”, affording salient but divergent inferences in different social and cultural contexts, which account for the cultural and religious productivity of secretive representations.

Introduction: When secrets travel

In the simplest sense, [SLIDE] secrecy is about the control of strategically relevant information. To conceal is to limit the transmission of knowledge to a select few, or to curb it altogether. Yet, [SLIDE] few things seem to travel faster than the rumor of an astonishing secret. Secrets are desirable commodities.

This paradoxical quality of secrecy has been the object of much theoretical work, also in the study of religion.¹ Today, most such analyses start from [SLIDE] Georg Simmel's (1906) influential essay on "The Sociology of Secrecy and Secret Societies", and especially from his observation that the social *effects* of secrecy are independent of any "real" secretive content – the claim *that* there is a secret is sufficient. We might call this notion the "empty secret".

In religious studies, both Hugh Urban (1998) and Kocku von Stuckrad (2010) have drawn on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of social and symbolic capital in order to extend this insight and make it into a useful analytic tool for discursive analysis. [SLIDE] In Urban's words, "secrecy" then becomes

a discursive strategy that transforms a given piece of knowledge into a scarce and precious resource, a valuable commodity, the possession of which in turn bestows status, prestige, or symbolic capital on its owner. (Urban 1998: 210).

As Von Stuckrad emphasizes, [SLIDE] this symbolic capital is therefore not simply an effect of "secrecy", but rather of the interplay of secrecy and *revelation* – if there were absolute concealment, there would be no knowledge of the fact that anything was being concealed, and hence no social effects, and no prestige on those wielding the secret.

Secrecy and cultural innovation

[SLIDE] In this talk, I want to pick up on the transformative quality of secrecy, but with a couple of twists. Instead of focusing on the social effects of "secretive claims", I want to suggest that "secrecy" has played and continues to play an important role in processes of cultural innovation. To show more precisely what

¹ See, for example, Tefft ed. 1980; Bellman 1984; Bolle ed. 1987; Wolfson ed. 1999; Kippenberg and Stroumsa eds. 1995; De Conick, Shaw, and Turner eds. 2013.

I want to focus on, I want to distinguish [SLIDE] between *practicing* secrecy and *attributing* secrecy. The sociologically oriented literature has largely focused on the practice of secrecy – that is, of keeping secrets or insinuating that one is in possession of secrets. This category may, however, itself be broken down into several subtypes. [SLIDE] For example, we may distinguish secretive practice in the strict sense, where those who practice it are truly trying to conceal something at all costs, from the sort of *performative* secrecy that is less concerned with concealing information than with performing the role of the “initiate”. Of course, these two types can also go hand in hand. For example, spy agencies are certainly in the business of keeping state secrets absolutely unknown, but it has also become clear that they are transforming an enormous amount of trivial data into “classified” material and deploying it discursively in the competition for government funding and other resources.

Instead of the practice of secrecy, however, I want to focus on the processes of *attributing* secrecy elsewhere. Again, this type is distinguishable but not entirely separable from practiced secrecy. We attribute secrets to organizations that perform secrecy, for example, and the very ability to infer that someone is keeping something secret bases itself on our own abilities of strategic communication. Nevertheless, what I want to suggest is that the attribution of secrets is, on its own, a potent source of cultural innovation. The attribution of secrecy [SLIDE] can be seen as an interpretational strategy that allows the person attributing it to invent (or, as they would claim, to *discover*) new “hidden” meanings. This process has been extremely important to innovation in fields such as esotericism or conspiracy theories, but it is also a regular part of public discourses about religion, politics, and social change – from old-school anti-Semitism and anti-masonry, to claims about *taqiya* in contemporary anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Cognitive Science Tools: Epidemiology of Representations

I am going to argue that we can find useful tools for understanding secrecy-induced cultural innovation in the cognitive theorizing of Dan Sperber’s *epidemiology of representations*. In fact, Georg Simmel’s own microsociology of secrecy was thoroughly grounded in an account of the cognitive and

psychological situation of interacting agents, so I see this merely as recovering an aspect that is now given much less attention.

[SLIDE] First, let me introduce very briefly the relevant aspects of Sperber's framework. The basic assumption is that minds are populated by ideas, thoughts, images, intentions etc., which may collectively be called "mental representations". When people interact with each other and with the world, they create [SLIDE] "public representations" – such as signs, gestures, facial expressions, sounds and so forth. The interaction [SLIDE] between mental and public representations is the key process underlying "cultural transmission". However, even in the most simple form of communication between two beings, it is not so much a genuine "transmission" that takes place – instead, [SLIDE] we produce public representations that allow the recipient to form mental representations that "interpret" the meaning. In short, it's about triggering mental processes in another being. This also means that transmission will almost never be a case of faithful copying – variations are the norm (Fig. 1). The epidemiology of representations, then, is a framework for charting out the variations of both public and mental representations and see how they are constrained by both "ecological" and psychological factors.

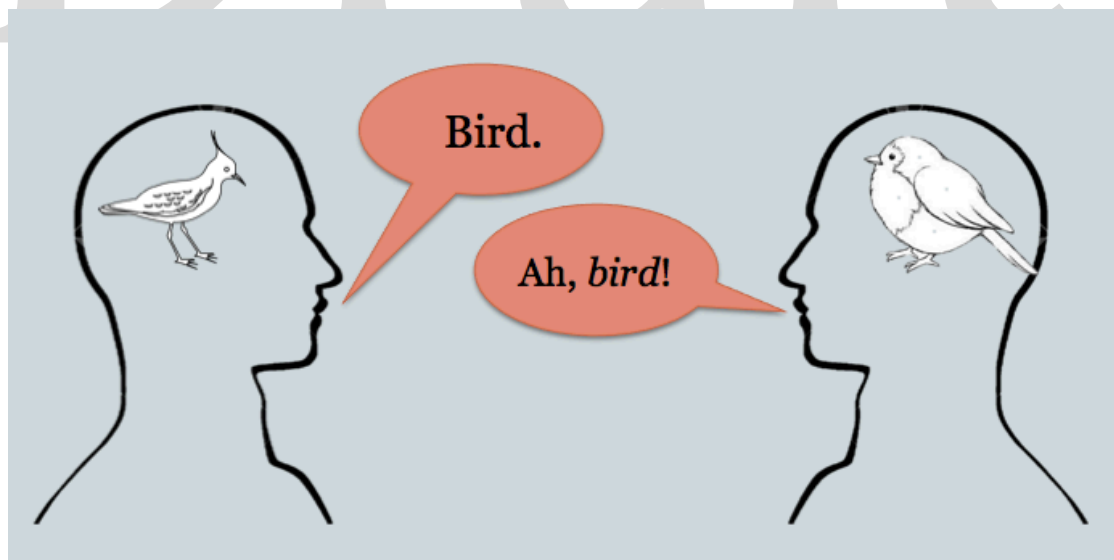


Fig. 1: Transmission is not faithful copying

One important feature of human representational systems, which is also of crucial importance to the story I want to tell here, is our ability to form

representations of *other* representations [SLIDE]. This *metarepresentational ability* is crucial for all human learning. It allows us to “bracket” pieces of information and conceive of various options for it – whether it is true or false, whether it is good or bad, whether it is what person x believes to be the case, whether we wish it were different, and so forth (Fig. 2). The ability to attribute content and intentional states to other minds is one well-known example of metarepresentation, and may even be its evolutionary origin.

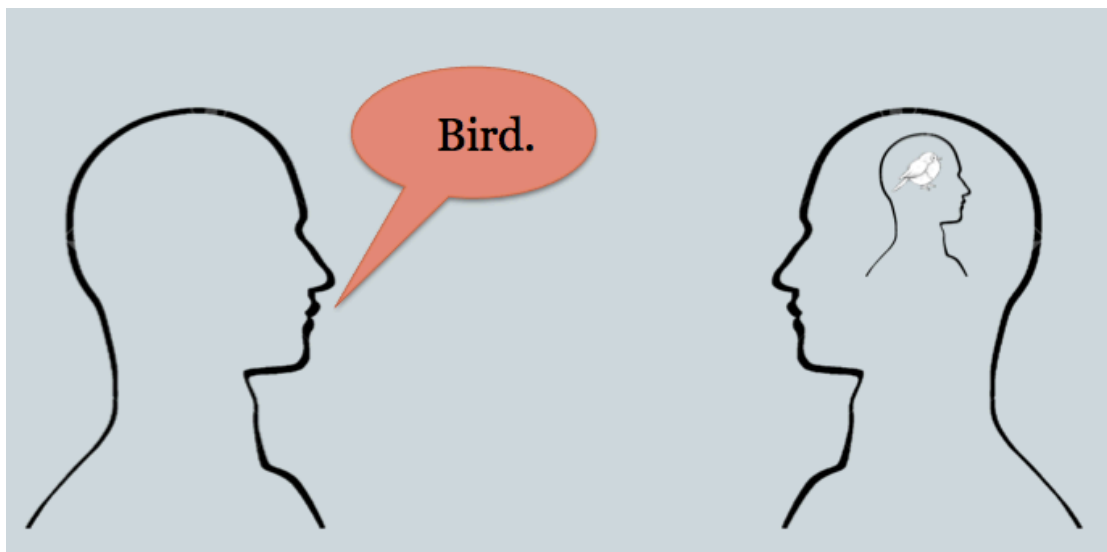


Fig. 2: Metarepresentation allows us to attribute mental states, beliefs, intentions etc.

Another key function is to “allow humans to process information which they *do not fully understand*, information for which they are not able at the time to provide a well-formed representation.” (71). This provides intermediary steps of learning, so that we can store poorly comprehended material, retrieve and puzzle over it later and integrate it with new incoming and clarifying representations down the road. For example, [SLIDE] a student may hear that $E=mc^2$ without having the faintest idea what that means. By recognizing that people with degrees in physics claim that this is true [SLIDE], they are able to store it anyway, as something that physicists believe to be the case (Fig. 3). This allows them to unpack the representation later and learn new justifications.

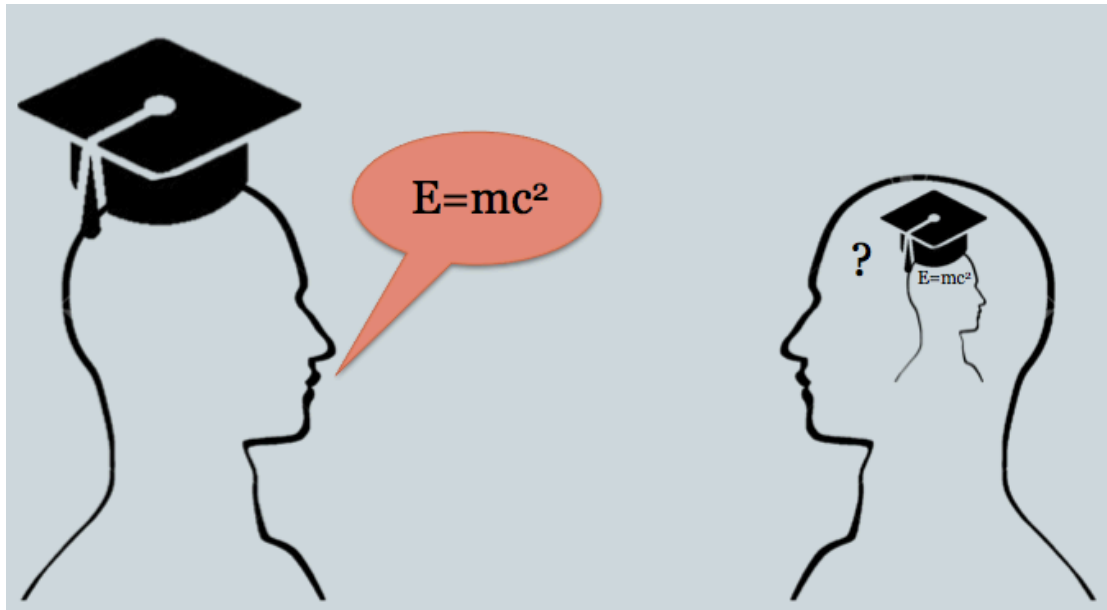


Fig. 3: Metarepresentation allows us to store mysterious representations for later processing.

While metarepresentational abilities provide intermediary steps toward comprehensive understanding, they also create intriguing *susceptibilities* [SLIDE]. They let the mind be invaded by what Sperber calls “conceptual mysteries, which no amount of processing could ever clarify.” (72). Some of these “mysteries” in fact appear to spread particularly well. Sperber calls them [SLIDE] *relevant* mysteries. They are “relevant” in the sense that we can integrate them with a large store of other representational systems, yet they remain “mysterious” in the sense that their interpretation is never fixed once and for all – they remain ambiguous (73). The key examples here are representations that break slightly with intuitive ontologies, but are still useful for making inferences in everyday situations – for example, objects with mental properties, or minds that can know things at a distance. Such “relevant mysteries” are more evocative and therefore more memorable than mysterious representations that lack such situational usefulness.

The Attribution of Secrecy as a Function of Metarepresentational Abilities

Changing gears now, I want to argue that [SLIDE] the attribution of secrecy can be seen as a function of metarepresentational abilities, and that this gives us an

insight into cognitive underpinnings for the cultural productivity that secrecy elicits.

All forms of secrecy depend on representations about other representations [SLIDE]. To *practice* secrecy, for example, we need another representation that guides how the content should be spread.² To help with my visualizations here, [SLIDE] we could render the general metarepresentational structure of being able to think “that there are secrets” as $S(x)$. If we hold some *specific* representation to be secret, we could render that as $S(a)$.

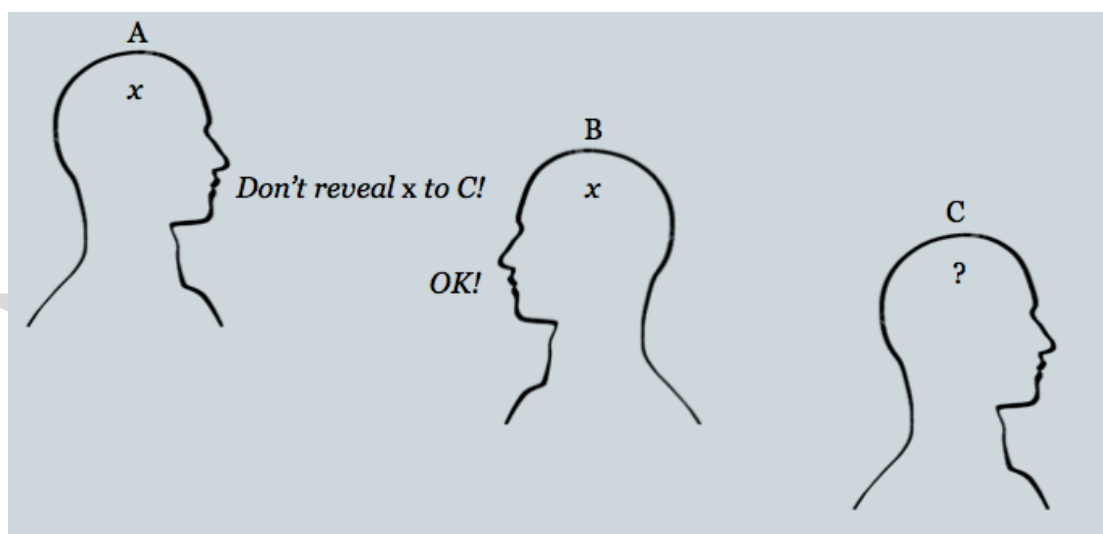


Fig. 4: Secretive practice always involves representations that guide how other representations are spread.

This lets us differentiate four types [SLIDE] of secretive representations (Table 1). On the one hand, we can distinguish “open or “empty secrets” from *determined* or specified secrets. The difference is one between saying that “*there is a secret*”, and saying that “*this is the secret*”. But we can also distinguish between *transferred* and *inferred* secrets. Transferred secrets reach us *as already* “secret” in public representations (Fig. 5) – [SLIDE] for example on the form, “let me tell you a secret”, or “the government is hiding *something*”. *Inferred* secrets are more interesting: [SLIDE] They are what happens when one meets some

² This is, in fact, true of all institutions (Sperber, 75-76), and a secretive institution (which can be as small as a dyad) is only distinguished in the degree to which it controls the spread of specific representations.

puzzling public representation that one cannot make sense of, and *infers* that there must be some hidden aspect that explains it (Fig. 6).

	Open - $S(x)$	Determined - $S(a)$
Transmitted	"I have heard that <i>there is</i> a secret."	"I have heard that <i>this is</i> the secret."
Inferred	"I think <i>there is</i> a secret."	"I think <i>this is</i> the secret."

Table 1: Four types of secretive representations.

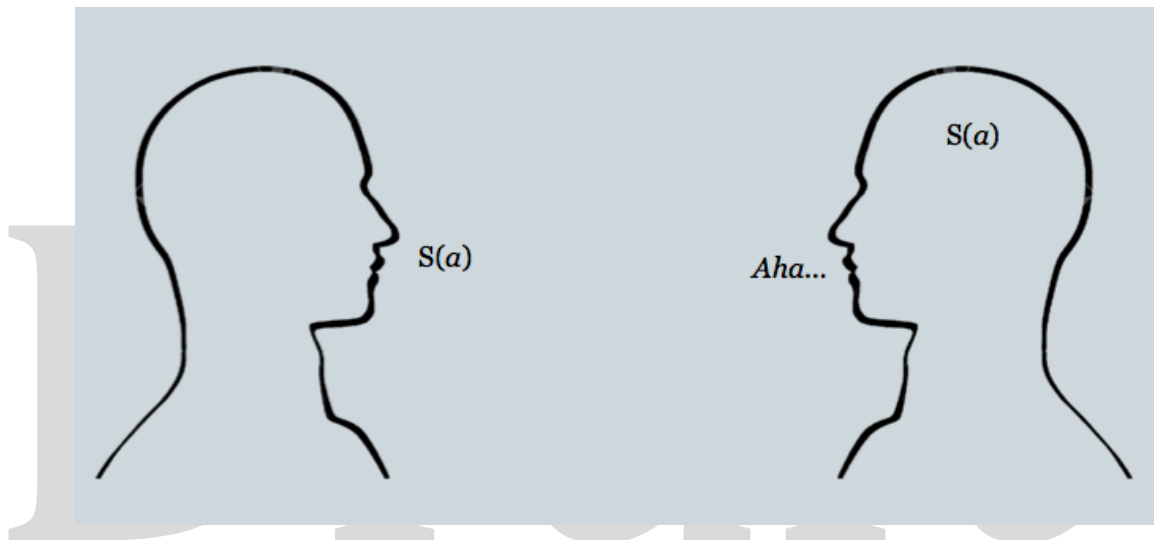


Fig. 5: Hearing a secret. (Determined, transmitted).

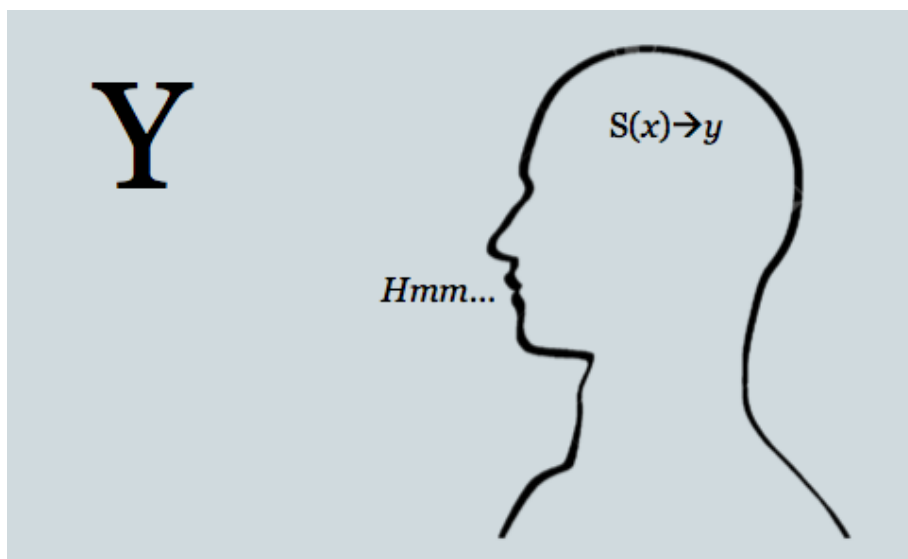


Fig. 6: Inferring a secret.

In our context, it is the *open* forms of secretive representations that are of greatest interest, for in different settings they can give rise to a multitude of determined ones (Fig. 7). There is a simple reason for this: [SLIDE] Similar to “relevant mysteries”, secretive representations trigger a search for relevance, but *by definition* they can never have a definitive interpretation. Even when a *determined* interpretation is put forward [SLIDE] – $S(a)$ – a recipient has no guarantee that this interpretation is the correct one. What they will hear, however, is the message *that* there is a secret – $S(x)$. Thus, once an ambiguous representation is cast as constituting a secret and *transferred* as one, it can trigger very different inferences in different contexts, leading to the production of new *public* representations in which the secret is revealed in novel ways. In short, [SLIDE] the epidemiology of secretive representations is like a game of Chinese whispers.

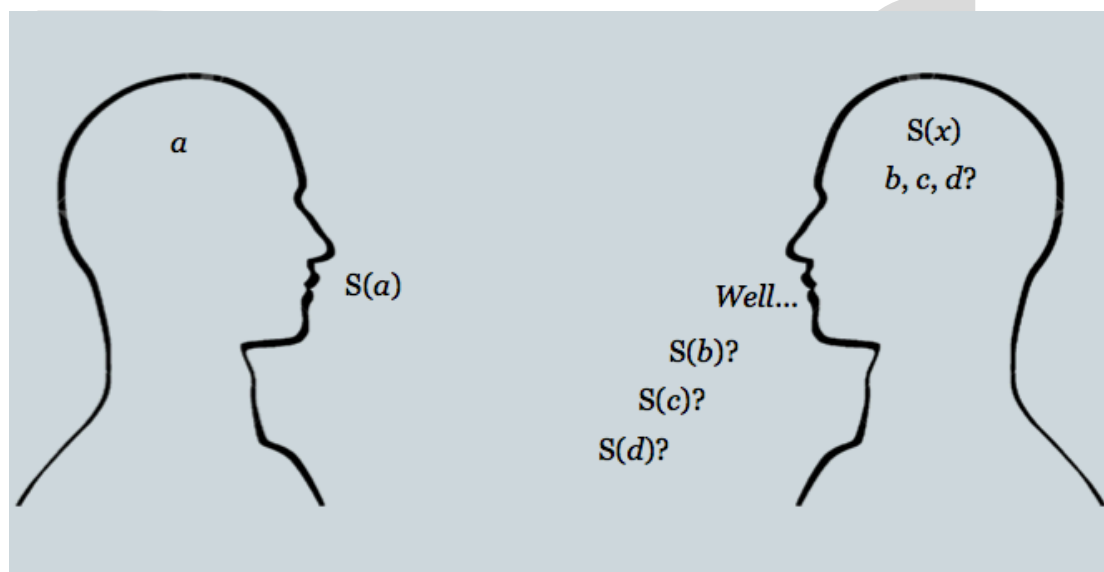


Fig. 7: Interpretation of secretive claims always unstable.

The arcanum and the economy of secrets

So, [SLIDE] how does all of this help us illuminate history? A crucial historical touch point is provided by Daniel Jütte’s masterful book, *The Age of Secrecy* (2015). The medieval and early modern periods were teeming with secrets – not in the sense of malevolent and deceitful conspiracies, not even in the sense of deviant groups keeping secret to avoid prosecution, but rather in the sense that the notion of “the secret” played a positive epistemic role in the knowledge

cultures of premodern Europe. “[T]rue and important knowledge” was considered to be “secret by definition” (Jütte 2015: viii).

The notion of the “arcanum” [SLIDE] is instructive here: The 18th century *Universal-Lexicon* defined it as “a secret, incorporeal, and immortal thing, which cannot be recognized by man, except through experience.” There were arcana of nature (arcana naturae), arcana of God (arcana Dei), arcana of the state (arcana imperii), arcana of the heart (arcana cordis) and so forth. True knowledge in each domain is and ought to be hidden, and only gradually through interpreting the signs and clues can one learn to experience the hidden truth.

This is an episteme that rests entirely on the metarepresentational structure of secrecy – it uses it to bracket current representations as always insufficient and partial, and to hold up the possibility of future learning by approaching the arcanum in initiatory and personal steps. [SLIDE] To paraphrase Urban’s statement on the discursive effects of secrecy, the *cognitive* effect of considering a piece of knowledge to contain an arcanum is to transform it into a form of “relevant mystery” – a representation that elicits the seeking of new connections and interpretations. On the social arena, it also made possible what Jütte calls an “economy of secrets”, in which people come together in networks to trade secrets and ways of unveiling them. In such networks secretive representations were not only transmitted, but interpreted and invented as well.

The Reinterpretations of Alchemy

[SLIDE] How have attributions of secrecy elicited innovation? The transmutations of meanings attached to “alchemy” could serve as an interesting case. [SLIDE] Alchemists adopted a *practice* of secrecy and dissimulation already in antiquity (see e.g. Principe 2012: 17-18), primarily designed to protect trade secrets. Writing about Zosimos of Panopolis’ (third to fourth century) use of *Decknamen* [SLIDE] to code the substances he was working with, Lawrence Principe comments that

Decknamen serve a dual purpose: they maintain secrecy, but they also allow for discreet communication among those having the knowledge or intelligence to

decipher the system. They simultaneously conceal *and* reveal. Consequently, *Decknamen* have to be *logical*, not arbitrary, so that they can be deciphered. If *Decknamen* could not be deciphered by readers, then total secrecy would be the result; and if the intent were to conceal information entirely, it would be far simpler for alchemists to have written nothing at all. (Principe 2012: 18).

Historians of science have made startling progress in deciphering these secrets over the past couple of decades, to the extent of being able to reproduce some of the recipes and reconstruct alchemical experiments.³ But what if one lacks the code, and only knows *that* there is a secret, an arcanum, hidden behind the veiled language? [SLIDE] In addition to simple codes, alchemists would also employ rich allegorical language, couched in mythology, that affords vast possibilities for interpretation. With the advent of printing, public representations in the shape of engravings of alchemical tableaux with mythological content reached a public much broader than the trade networks of the economy of secrets. Here, the search for relevance should lead to new meanings.

Thus, [SLIDE] it may be argued that what started as a technique for encoding experimental practice in allegories came to inspire a whole genre of allegorical writing where “the mysteries” were unpacked as spiritual truths. This appears to be a key dynamic of innovation in the context of Western esotericism. The Rosicrucian current, including the *Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer* and the mythology springing up around both fictitious and real societies calling themselves “Rosicrucian”, has been particularly influential in promoting this innovation (see e.g. Harmsen 2013; cf. McIntosh 2012; McIntosh 2014; Willard 2014), along with the unpacking of alchemical imagery in the context of Christian theosophy. The sheer diversity of readings afforded by evocative allegorical imagery made this step rather easy.

The process continued in modern times, when occultists continued to use the metarepresentational structure of secrecy to justify a search for hidden

³ Lawrence Principe has been at the forefront of this breakthrough, especially together with William Newman. Principe possesses a PhD's in chemistry in addition to the history of science, which has made it possible to add a laboratory component to the deciphering of alchemical texts. See e.g. Newman and Principe 2002.

meanings, but now could draw on a range of novel representational systems to which the bracketed secret could be linked. Thus, Mary Anne Atwood (1918 [original 1850]) rebranded alchemical secrets in terms of animal magnetism and powers of the mind, while in the twentieth century, Carl Gustav Jung produced an appealingly psychologized “spiritual alchemy”, expressed through the perennial language of “psychological archetypes” [SLIDE] stored in the collective unconscious. We have by now moved very far away from the encoded experimental procedures, but the same secretive representations remain at the core of the innovations.

CONCLUSION:

[SLIDE] All of this is, in a sense, merely a point about “reinterpretation”. But I would stress that the cognitive angle does add a component that carries new implications: It locates metarepresentations about “hidden content” as a particularly likely context for cultural innovation of a certain kind, and it opens up a broad comparative space. While I have only discussed some examples from esotericism and early modern intellectual history, this framework formalizes a link to other contexts in which secrets are important, from conspiracy theories to the contemporary intelligence community to the many hermeneutics of suspicion and their related rhetoric that are employed in political movements to the left, right, and “third position”. By suggesting a way to link individual secretive representations with context-dependent meaning-making processes, we may perhaps also have a promising framework for starting to explore and explain some of the links between these domains. Jütte’s conclusion that the economy of secrets in the early modern period created unique and unlikely trading zones where otherwise segregated groups could meet may still be valid today, across the many contemporary subcultures that thirst for what they consider “hidden” and “forbidden” knowledge.

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