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Jon R. Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 271 pages + index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-0-520-22819-1

Review by Jacob Soll, Rutgers University.

In 1661, Louis XIV read an announcement to his cabinet ministers:

The first thing I desire from you is secrecy; and as I consider it important and necessary for the sound management of my affairs, I am at ease telling you that if I learn that someone has dared tell anyone anything at all that has happened here, I will find out the origin of this leak, and I will expel from my council he who has been capable of this weakness. (...) once I have taken the resolution to give an order, it must be executed and supported with resoluteness, sincerity and secrecy. [1]

Given the importance of secrecy in early modern religious and political culture, it might seem surprising that Louis had to make such a declaration. Most educated *honnête-hommes* and *femmes* in France, and indeed Europe, at least knew the basic rules of dissimulation and its role in politics, conversation and courtly manners. Secrecy was ingrained through the casuist pedagogy of Jesuits and the international culture of neo-Stoicism, which taught the rules of prudence and self-control.

And yet, Louis felt the need to make a formal policy of political, administrative secrecy. A master of prudence himself, Louis was famed for his inscrutability, and his policy of state secrecy worked to an extent: no budgetary information leaked. At the same time, Louis made clear his displeasure with reason of state literature. While Richelieu was supposed to have kept a copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince* on his night table, Louis loathed books which taught or exposed the methods of secrecy and he worked to ban them.

In what was probably an act of thinly veiled criticism, Amelot de La Houssaye dedicated his translation of Balthasar Gracián's 1641 *Oraculo manual y Arte de prudencia* in 1683, *L'Homme de cour*, to Louis. The master of the court most likely never read *L'Homme de cour*. Louis could not have accepted a work which so candidly recommended maxims of prudence, silence, dissimulation, and finally, to "enfin, être saint."

When then, was it ethical to lie, dissimulate, keep secrets or maintain strategic silence, and when were such topics discussed? In *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe*, Jon R. Snyder examines these old philosophical questions. Snyder's erudite *tour d'horizon* begins with antiquity and medieval thought, and works its way to the beginning of the eighteenth century. Following in the path set by Friedrich Meinecke, Gerhard Oestreich, Rosario Villari, René Pintard, Vittorio Dini, José Maravall, William F. Church, Quentin Skinner, Peter Burke, Perez Zagorin, Richard Tuck, Robert Bireley, and Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, Snyder is primarily concerned with a fine point: he claims there was a thin line between dissimulation, which is possibly immoral, and simulation, which, according to the Neapolitan Torquato Accetto's baroque treatise, *Della dissimulazione onesta* (1641), could be an honest form of hiding one's intentions.

Snyder shows that there was a rich philosophical framework to deal with these ethical, behavioral philosophies in the work of ancient thinkers like Aristotle, Pyrrhon, Cicero and Tacitus. Christian fathers and theologians such as Augustine looked to balance *parrhesia*, the need to speak what is on one's mind, with *dissimulatio*, and the need for the Church to maintain secrecy and silence in certain matters. Some early humanists, such as the Neapolitan Giovanni Pontano (1426-1503), struggled with the ethical dilemma of prudential dissimulation and Christianity.

At least philosophically, what was new during the late-Renaissance was Machiavelli's revolutionary chapter XVIII of *The Prince* concerning dissimulation. Machiavelli twists Cicero's bestial analogy of wrongful action from *De officiis* (I. xiii. 14) into an analogy of necessary political prudence, rendering it the key passage of the prudential transformation. Machiavelli rejected Cicero's ethic of taking the skin of the lion to do good, instead recommending the *prudenza* of taking the skin of the fox to dissimulate one's actions. This flew in the face of Aristotelian, Ciceronian and Augustinian ethics and fell more in line with the duality of Tacitean history, which explained the mechanics of both political dissimulation and unmasking. Following Machiavelli, manuals of prudence proliferated, in particular in Italy, Spain, France, the Netherlands and Germany. The renowned Dutch humanist, Justus Lipsius recognized the necessity of Machiavellian political prudence and sought to reconcile political dissimulation with Christian civic virtue. More than the quest for honest simulation, there were attempts to render political lying ethical. In spite of the clarity of Thomist ethics, even orthodox churchmen could recommend prudence and reason of state in the old name of *dissimulatio*, now fashioned as casuistry, or the moral art of justifying expedient action in the name of the greater good of the Church without recourse to simulation.

If simulation was a religious behavioral necessity, Snyder never explains why there were so few well-known books on it. Nor does he examine what anti-Machiavellian thinkers and critics of lying—from scholastic and Jesuit critics such as Roberto Bellarmino, Francisco Suárez and Pedro de Ribadeneyra, to Protestants such as Innocent Gentillet—thought of it. As Snyder points out, dissimulation was not simply behavioral; it was also a stylistic writing practice. It would have been helpful for Snyder to dig further how figures from Giovanni Botero, Trajano Boccalini, Justus Lipsius, Thomas Hobbes, Samuel Johnson, and Hugo Grotius wrote about dissimulation, while also possibly masking their own intentions.

Snyder's historical view of the ethics of dissimulation also needs clarification, for rather than distinct works, there was a real tradition which linked humanist authors not only to the ancients, and to patristic thought, but also to themselves. To cite Lipsius and Gracián without explaining their connection (Gracián along with many others of his generation were heavily influenced by Lipsius), and the large body of works which grew out of it, risks the danger of cherry-picking sources outside of their historical context.

Of interest in Snyder's book is his analysis of a number of Italian authors relatively unknown to Anglophone and French scholars, such as Giovanni della Casa, Gianfrancesco Lottini, Bernardino Pino da Cagli and Bonifaccio Vannozi. Snyder's original research is compelling: for example his fascinating discovery of the *Saletta del silenzio*, or the "Salon of Silence" in the Palazzo Salmatoris in Cherasco, outside of Turin. It was here, in the frescoed room painted by Sebastiano Taricco (1641-1710) that the Shroud of Turin was hidden during the siege of Turin by French forces in 1706. The frescoes comprise a remarkable iconographic tribute to the virtues of silence and secrecy, but also to revelation and honesty.

In his concluding analysis of the Saletta, Snyder reminds us of a well-known but little studied point. While secrecy remained an elemental part of early modern society, Enlightenment philosophers became increasingly uncomfortable with publicly justifying insincerity and hypocrisy. Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau all agreed that prudence was a "sotte vertu" and that dissimulation was immoral. But a major

question remains: what exactly tipped public sentiment away from the quest to find a moral form of dissimulation while still possibly dissimulating? Was it useful for libertines to pretend to experience Rousseauist honest sentiments? Obviously many, like Danton, who presented themselves as honest citizens, still lied. Ministers from the marquis de Pombal, the vicomte de Vergennes, princes Tallyrand, and Metternich still employed courtly prudence, but professional administrators like Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Samuel Pepys and Turgot had to straddle both prudence and candor in financial administration.

To begin to figure out what changed, at least in the world of political culture during the seventeenth century, it is useful to return to the earlier anecdote about Louis XIV. Where did Louis' sense of secrecy come from? Did his libertine tutor François de La Mothe Le Vayer instill in him neo-Stoicism? Did he formally consider the fine points of dissimulation and simulation? Or, was it the merchant Colbert, who we know wrote this speech for Louis, and his practices of mercantile industrial and financial secrecy help influence the hard-nosed king? If the late-seventeenth century saw the rise of merchants as managers of large-scale administrative states, they brought with them old attitudes about how to do business. Secrecy along with sound financial record-keeping were high among them. Historians of philosophy often ignore economic writings and theories from the genre known in the Middle Ages and Renaissance as the *ars mercatoria*, and in the classical age and Enlightenment known more diffusely as political economy or administrative and accounting manuals. Trade did not necessarily mean fraud, as Charles Fourier would later claim. Instead, secrecy was a managerial and professional necessity to protect business interests against competitors and rapacious tax collectors.

The ideas of administrative, industrial and financial secrecy in turn complicate Norbert Elias's misleadingly simple chronology of the process of civilization, and schema of court society. At the top, the king was secretive; courtiers employed secrecy in their quest to climb closer to the throne. Private citizens followed suit. But in the corridors of government, professional administrators were secretive not only with government information, but also with their managerial trade. Dissimulating one's emotions was important, but equally important in the large centralizing monarchies was the old Italian tradition of protecting one's office and family "lobby" by hiding administrative archives and information and plugging information leaks. The kind of know-how necessary to run an ideally airtight administration could be found in books of ethics, but also in manuals of political economy and accounting from the late Middle Ages onwards. Surely to understand early modern political and ethical culture, it is necessary not only to look to traditional manuals of reason of state, prudence and dissimulation, but also to manuals of practical administration. It might show that princely courts lagged behind family companies in many aspects of the so-called civilizing process which most likely began in the early Italian city states and, of course, the Vatican.

Politics, as the practically-trained Louis XIV knew so well, could run only so far on theory. Behind the court society was the highly sophisticated mechanism of administration. While absolutist courts engaged in their ballets of dissimulation and attempts to move closer to the sun, few aside from the king and a small group of administrators had any idea of the budget of the kingdom. Far more threatening than the self-fashioned pose of a courtier, or even the acidic wit of a critical writer, and certainly as important as the prudence of diplomats, was the dissimulation or simulation of financial information. As John Law and the Mississippi Bubble would dramatically illustrate in 1720, financial sleight of hand could pose great danger to power and to the very stability of the state. Snyder's book makes for an enjoyable read for students of reason of state and courtly ethics, but to answer the big questions about dissimulation and its evolution in early modern Europe, a wider disciplinary net must be cast.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Baptiste Colbert, *Lettres, instructions et mémoires*, ed. by Pierre Clément, 7 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1861-70), “Discours de Louis XIV à l’ouverture du Conseil des Finances (Minute autographe de Colbert), 1661, 2, 1, pp. ccii-cciii at cciii.

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