

“The Declassified: Notes for a Research Programme”

William Walters

Abstract

It is true that there would be no declassification were there no classified information - this practice that, as Galison reminds us, only emerges on a massified, bureaucratic scale in the middle of the twentieth century. Yet declassification is not adequately accounted for by the prior existence of classified knowledge, or by the wider phenomenon of state secrecy. Nor is it exhausted by the themes of freedom of information or transparency, even if these are political logics that have sometimes rationalized it. In this presentation I will treat declassification as a complex and sui generis domain in its own right, one that merits sustained theoretical, empirical and methodological attention. I call this domain the declassified. Drawing largely on case material from experiences of declassification in the area of United States national security, the presentation will outline a research programme for the investigation of the declassified. Can we write a history of the different forms of reason and material practices that have invested policies of declassification? Does declassification always leave a remainder, an exemption, a something held back, and what do we learn about secrecy from this remainder? Is there an aesthetics of the declassified, a way in which we come to signify secrecy through images of classification stamps on files and, more recently, redacted texts? What forms of agency, what forms of subjectivity, what kinds of public do different practices of declassification presuppose or enact? Finally, what promises, paradoxes and problems does the declassified present to any agenda of democratizing security?

Supervisory Areas

Political sociology; borders and migration; secrecy and security; genealogies of politics and government.

About

I am a Professor of political sociology, cross-appointed in the Departments of Political Science and Sociology & Anthropology and FPA Research Excellence Chair (2019-22) at Carleton. As an undergraduate I trained in chemistry at Imperial College, London, before doing graduate studies in politics at City University of New York and York University, Toronto. I have published widely in the areas of political sociology, political geography, citizenship studies, security and insecurity, and Foucault studies. My research fields have been unemployment, the supranational governance of Europe, migration, and, most recently, secrecy. What links all of these areas is my interest in denaturalizing experiences and categories, and interrogating their relationship to different forms of politics.

I am currently working on three projects: (1) a SSHRC funded (2017-22) collaborative study of what I call air deportation which focuses on the role of civil aviation in the forced removals of foreigners and illegalized people in and from Europe; (2) with Martina Tazzioli I am co-editing A Handbook on Governmentality (Edward Elgar publishers) (3) a book project tentatively titled Secrecy: A Critical Introduction.