

C H A P T E R I

Between Public and Secret Spheres

THE CASE OF COLBERT

In 1698, the Cambridge-trained naturalist and royal physician Martin Lister wrote an account of his trip to Paris.¹ Lister described birds, hedges, flagstones, housing materials, architectural and antiquarian treasures, and French traditions, clothing, and diet.² He measured the wheels of carriages, “not above two Foot and a half Diameter; which makes them [carriages] easie to get into.”³ He visited museums and the workshop of the great gardener of Versailles, André Le Nôtre.⁴ Most of all, Lister visited libraries. Part book and manuscript collections, part antiquarian and natural history museums, Parisian libraries were famed storehouses of erudition and science, and thus obligatory stops on any grand tour.⁵

Among the libraries he visited was that of Louis XIV’s famed minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–83). A block from the Royal Library, on the rue de Richelieu, it was still the finest private collection in Paris. Here Lister found something unique among the Parisian collections. Colbert had died in 1683, and his son, the marquis of Seignelay, had followed his father to the grave in 1690, but their old family librarian, Étienne Baluze, still stood guard over the collection.⁶ Once the hub of Colbert’s administration, the library was now slowly turning into a private museum. With Baluze as his guide, Lister toured the library:

I saw the Library of the late Monsieur *Colbert*, the great patron of Learning. The Gallery, wherein the printed Books are kept, is a Ground-Room, with Windows on one side only, along a fine Garden. It is the neatest Library in *Paris*, very large, and exceedingly well-furnish'd. At the upper-end is a fair Room, wherein the Papers of State are kept; particularly those of the Administration of Cardinal *Mazarin*, and his own Accounts, when he was in Employment. These make up many hundred Folio's, finely bound in Red Maroquin and Gilt. The Manuscript Library is above-stairs, in three Rooms, and is the choicest of that kind in Paris: It contains 6,610 Volumes. The Catalogue of them Monsieur Baluze shewed me: which he said was designed shortly for the Press.⁷

Entrance to Colbert's library had once been guarded, for his financial registers held extensive accounts and administrative papers of Louis XIV's France, the largest European state of its time.⁸ For almost thirty years (1654–83), Colbert had built his own private library in tandem with the semipublic royal collection, creating one of the biggest library-archives in Europe.⁹ It was an encyclopedia of the state.¹⁰ What Martin Lister saw during his tour was the nerve center of Colbert's immense administrative project. On the first floor, Colbert kept a humanist library with classical works, ancient Bibles, medieval manuscripts, rare editions, prints, scientific texts, and naturalist collections. Upstairs, in finely bound double-book accounts, he kept his internal government reports, administrative correspondence, state statistical reports, and the information of industry and administration, such as reports on the quality of cloth, and sketches of winches and sails.¹¹ Colbert had consciously integrated a traditional humanist library and practical state and industrial administrative archive on a large scale on a single site, with one catalog, and one primary librarian.¹²

Colbert believed that all knowledge had practical value for politics. Though himself a relentless man of affairs, he believed antiquarian and classical learning to be as important as engineering and accounting. He was convinced that a ruler or minister of state could learn essential lessons from the most unlikely of sources, such as the price lists of nails, astronomical mathematical research, or studies on Ciceronian poetry. Fusing the cultures of library and archival management, the world of natural science, finance, merchant learning, and industrial technology, he began asking questions basic to encyclopedists and archival and library managers, as well as to Google information technicians today: how to compile, copy, and store a mass of eclectic documents and render them

searchable for topics.¹³ He managed his multifaceted administration through his library, developing a system to use archives, state research institutes, internal reports, and trained teams of specialists to develop high policymaking in areas of colonial expansion and diplomacy, as well as to micromanage industrial production and matters as mundane as the policing of intellectuals, book printers, prostitutes, and the butcher's guild.

The object of this book is to bring to light the traditions that Colbert harnessed for government, and how he did it. It seeks to go beyond the debate over Colbert's mercantilist, centralized model of state regulation, and to examine in detail the intellectual tools he used as the patron of the Grand Siècle, the builder of Versailles, and the architect of Louis XIV's administrative state.¹⁴ The rise of the modern administrative state has long been associated with Max Weber's teleology of rationalization, secularization, and the rise of bureaucracy. Louis XIV's government has been seen by historians as a rational form of state administration, inspired by Cartesianism and the Scientific Revolution.¹⁵ Yet the building blocks of Colbert's intelligence system and administration were neither modern nor purely secular. Although Colbert believed in Louis XIV's claims to absolute monarchy, Colbert's approach to learning for government grew neither from theory, nor from pure mercantilist ideology, nor from scientific tradition, but rather from his own brand of curiosity and an astute recognition that myriad traditions of knowledge that had roots in humanist, ecclesiastical, financial, military, and naval culture could be used to build a state.¹⁶

In editing Colbert's papers in the nineteenth century, Pierre Clément described them as not simply an archive, but as a testament to Colbert's obsession with the mastery of information and its connection with government, noting the "excessive care with which Colbert conserved the documents relative to his administration and the attention he applied to correct himself in the margins of all his own letters."¹⁷ Philippe de Champaigne's famous 1655 portrait of Jean-Baptiste Colbert shows him early in his career, as Cardinal Mazarin's personal accountant, dressed in black, holding a folded piece of paper (see fig. 1). Oddly, Colbert is smiling, or at least smirking. What was it that made an obsessive financier—a man apparently never happier than when filling out account ledgers—develop the astonishing view that all knowledge was useful for political affairs? From the accounts we have of Colbert, and from his own humorless and often brutal correspondence, this smile is quite remarkable, for he was not known for joviality. Madame de Sévigné famously called

him “Le Nord,” or the north, for his cold demeanor.¹⁸ It was Colbert’s first biographer, Courtiz de Sandras, who recognized both Colbert’s stern disposition and his interest in using information to govern: “He spoke rarely, and never responded to questions immediately, wanting to be further informed by reports [before doing so].”¹⁹

Ezechiel Spanheim (1629–1710), the German antiquarian and diplomat who had visited Louis XIV’s court, described Colbert’s “rigor” and “austerity,” and was also sensitive to Colbert’s particular reliance on possessing and handling information. He reveals a clue as to Philippe de Champaigne’s portrayal of Colbert smiling with a piece of paper in his hand:²⁰

He never was content, as were those who preceded him in this direction, to learn about high government business, and then to avail himself of the commissioners, intendants, controllers, or other people of finance that were customarily employed; he wanted to take it all on himself, to enter into every detail, as much in regard to income as to expenditure, as well as the expedients to furnish these funds in the future, wanting only to depend on his own skills, precise information that he collected, and in relation to them, to develop methods for handling this information, in exact and particular registers that he kept himself.²¹

Files, correspondence, reports, historical documents, account books, ledgers, and paperwork in general made the otherwise cantankerous Colbert happy, not least because he recognized them as a source of power, but also, as we shall see, because he simply reveled in the various activities involved in handling paperwork, which others often found dull and even odious.

Adam Smith, who warned against mercantilism, recognized Colbert’s aptitude for informing himself: “Mr. Colbert, the famous minister of Lewis XIVth, was a man of probity, of great industry and knowledge of detail; of great experience and acuteness in the examination of publick accounts, in short, every way fitted for introducing method and good order into the collection and expenditure of the publick revenue.”²² Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* (1751–72) mixed political criticism and calls for scientific reason and political liberty with a revolutionary valorization of practical, everyday knowledge.²³ It is, therefore, not surprising that it called Colbert a “great statesman” and “le grand Colbert.” It painted him as an innovator and the able builder of the learned holdings of the Royal Library.²⁴

Diderot and his enlightened collaborators credited Colbert with building the state's financial, industrial, and colonial apparatus and, at the same time, with developing basic research and learning. In their eyes, Louis XIV's minister was a glorious genius, for he established the Enlightened ideal of practical knowledge while also systematizing the old world of scholarship. The *Encyclopédie*'s entries under "Inspector," "Taxation," "Loan," "Subsidy," "Luxury," "Measure," "Iron," "Grains," "Paper Industry," "Cloth Dying," "Engraving," and "Tapestry," as well as "Académie Française," "Académie Royale des Sciences," "Académie de Peinture," "Archival Diplomatica," "Cabinet of Natural History," "Letters," and "Library," all discuss Colbert. Indeed, the *Encyclopédie* contains 143 references to him. This is an impressive showing. Louis XIV has 614 mentions, Richelieu 120, Newton 783, Descartes 506, Voltaire 313, Pierre Bayle 274, Spinoza 200, Francis Bacon 172, and John Locke 116. Colbert is present in all fields of the *Encyclopédie*: artistic, learned, scientific, political, financial, industrial, and legal. Colbert was not an encyclopedist, but the philosophes recognized in him a precursor to their own interest in harnessing and mixing both formal learning and practical knowledge.

The most detailed entry in the *Encyclopédie* on Colbert is that on libraries, and describes how he made the Royal Library and the Académie Royale des Sciences a world center of learning and erudition.²⁵ Colbert may not have been a Latin scholar, but he built the Latin holdings of the library. Vision and even pretension count for something if they inspire curiosity and innovation. Colbert was no scholar, but rather a political administrator who did not hesitate to trample France's ancient constitution. Yet he was, in his own way, a major figure in the history of learning. Echoing the *Encyclopédie*, the *Cambridge Modern History* notes: "We stand amazed at the different subjects which came under the survey of Colbert and at the minute attention which he was able to bestow on them."²⁶

A century earlier than Diderot, Colbert grew up in a merchant household and trained on the shop-room floor. Though neither encyclopedist nor scholar, he saw before Diderot many of the elements that would characterize the new practical learning of the eighteenth century. Studying with the Jesuits and as an accountant, and then working as a financial manager and military contractor, he saw the connection between these cultures and their usefulness for state administration. Humanist encyclopedic scholars, churchmen, state administrators, and accountants had much in common: they categorized subjects and devel-

oped methods of data collection and assessment.²⁷ Colbert recognized and bridged these cultures and integrated them into his governmental system. Ernest Lavisse remarked that Colbert's education was as "mediocre as his birth," and yet Colbert was able to see new applications for disciplines outside the respective fields.

Rather than a paragon of rationality or Cartesianism, Colbert often sounded more like a medieval Italian banker, or an enlightened, hard-driving Scottish merchant manager.²⁸ "My natural inclination to work is such," stated Colbert, "that every day . . . it is impossible for my spirit to support leisure and moderate work."²⁹ Colbert was a Jesuit-trained accountant and state administrator, whose education had its roots in medieval financial culture and Counter-Reformation pedagogy, and as such he was skilled in methods of data gathering and practical learning.³⁰ His state information system shows that curious learning and encyclopedism are not necessarily critical and corrosive to autocratic political authority. Indeed, political absolutism and methods from critical scholarship could, under particular circumstances, mutually serve each other. Louis XIV and Colbert may not have succeeded in instituting complete absolute government, yet the early decades of Louis's reign show the extent to which an able minister such as Colbert could use administrative and financial tools not only to dominate France's politics, society, and culture, but also to build his centralized state information system, a feat impossible in the days of more balanced constitutional power-sharing.³¹

Louis XIV claimed the innovation of the "métier du roy": governing his large kingdom himself. Yet he relied on the administrative techniques and methods of learning and information handling designed by Colbert. Louis gave the orders, but he depended on Colbert to build an administrative machine and show Louis how to use it. Colbert's biographer Pierre Clément insists on this point: Louis le Grand was trained by the Grand Colbert.³² The abbé de Choisy points out Colbert's role as Louis XIV's personal informant and teacher:

He presented to the King, every first day of the year, an agenda in which his revenues were marked down in detail; and each time the King signed laws, Colbert made him remember to write them in his agenda, so that he could see when it pleased him how many funds he had left (as opposed to past times when he [Louis XIV] could never know how much he had).³³

Without Colbert, Louis XIV, the most powerful king in Europe, had not the slightest knowledge of how his finances worked. Louis XIV

credited his minister with the feat of directing the royal finances, noting that he trusted him with the “register” of state funds.³⁴ He needed not only a minister who could inform him about his kingdom, but also a technical instructor to help him build and use his innovative, absolutist state apparatus. Colbert showed Louis how he could dominate and use the world of learning not only as a source of public propaganda, but also as a tool of secret government. As much as mercantilism, this was Colbert’s contribution to state governmental culture.

With the resources of a nation-state at his disposal, Colbert the bibliophile administrator, accountant, and founder of academies amassed enormous libraries and state, diplomatic, industrial, colonial, and naval archives; hired researchers and archival teams; founded scientific academies and journals; ran a publishing house; and managed an international network of scholars.³⁵ By Colbert’s death in 1683, the Royal Library, which became in part a state archive, contained around 36,000 printed books and 10,500 manuscripts, and Colbert’s own collection numbered some 23,000 printed books and 5,100 manuscripts.³⁶ It was one of the largest collections in the world.

Aside from scholarly curiosity and the advancement of the cultural prestige of the French monarchy, the focus of this new collection was to defend national interests in the conflicts over the Dutch annexations, the *régale*, and Spanish rights; to compete with Dutch and English trade; and to assert royal prerogative over the parlements.³⁷ Colbert thus set out to create a national, legal, and financial database. He sent his agents to the various document depots of France—charterhouses, parliamentary registries, monasteries, and episcopal archives—to copy and often seize literally tons of documents for both the royal and his own policy archives.³⁸

Colbert sought to become a scholar of state learning: not simply a bureaucrat but an expert. With the help of his librarian Étienne Baluze (1630–1718), he created reference systems, as well as series of extracts and glossaries designed to connect catalog headings to collections of excerpts and summaries of documents. In some cases, excerpts of referenced documents were strung together in thematic narratives, and cross-referenced with call numbers, but also with search codes, which cross-referenced related documents. In hindsight, these book catalogs paired with glossaries and textual extracts look like primitive, though effective, computing techniques or Google search engines.³⁹ Church scholars had long used glossaries and reference systems, but Colbert used them for daily, practical political use. Thus Colbert’s practices constituted a scholarly, systematized approach to administering the state. In his

history of Louis XIV, Ernst Lavisse describes how Colbert used his collection to govern:

For each subject, he composed “a portfolio,” a dossier as we say today. Here he classed his data by “species.” In relation to an ocean ship accident, he listed all preceding accidents, and, he said: “I then immediately wrote them down.” In the same fashion, he listed all the abuses, all the faults that he observed, examining causes, determining remedies. Then, for all order of questions, he looked for historical antecedents, to understand their *raison d'être* and the force of resistance to one thing or another, that offended or bothered him. Thus informed, he set himself to “think with reflection,” to “continually think,” to “think well and meditate,” with “application,” and “penetration.” These words are his, and he repeated them often. As soon as he saw matters clearly, he took to his pen and paper.⁴⁰ Colbert’s personal archive and the collections he acquired for the Royal Library continue to comprise the very heart of the manuscript collection of the modern Bibliothèque Nationale, as well as numerous other state archives.⁴¹

Colbert was not “the man who knew everything.”⁴² But he could find someone to give him answers and provide reports on a wide range of topics, drawing on his massive state library and on archives, as well as on networks of scholars and agents. As the founder of the learned, scientific, artistic, and technical academies, as well as of Cassini’s Royal Observatory in Paris, Colbert the government minister asked many of the same questions about research posed by scientists and scholars such as Galileo, Robert Cotton, Francis Bacon, Paolo Sarpi, Jacques-Auguste de Thou, and Athanasius Kircher. With the help of Christian Huygens, the Dutch mathematician and clockmaker, he sponsored research projects that led to the creation of the pendulum clock, and the team of Cassini, Picard, and La Hire created a machine to establish longitude.⁴³ Colbert conceived of these state research projects. He followed and directed their progress, organized research groups, found funding for them, and pushed them to fruition. Whether such projects would have happened in France without Colbert’s patronage is impossible to surmise. In certain cases, such as that of the colonies, Colbert’s and perhaps Louis’s lack of curiosity held them back. Whatever limitations Colbert’s system had, his ministerial heirs would not share his global vision of knowledge and his personal involvement in these manifold administrative, bibliophilic, literary, and scientific endeavors.⁴⁴

In this light, it is striking that there is no intellectual biography of Colbert. Indeed, aside from studies of the English statesman and inventor of experimental method, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), there are few intellectual biographies or histories of government and administrative figures.⁴⁵ Yet politicians and state administrators were, and still are, the very ones who could, and can, hinder or drive learned endeavor. In the case of government ministers, the task of intellectual biography is daunting. Whereas scholars create defined bodies of work, a minister like Colbert, working with teams of secretaries, scribes, scholars and agents, produced entire archives' worth of material. Unlike official scholarly works, much of this state writing—ferreted away in personal ministerial collections—was not meant to be studied or at least to be seen in the context of scholarship. It does not constitute a clear corpus. Indeed, Colbert wrote few formal works defining his actions as minister and as an information handler.

In his groundbreaking study of Philip II of Spain's state paperwork, Geoffrey Parker was one of the first scholars of politics to study the relationship of high state policy to archival information-handling practices.⁴⁶ Parker had his eye on politics and Philip's "grand strategy"; he stopped short of situating Philip within a larger context of learned culture. In spite of Parker's work, there has been very little attention paid to the convergence between traditional learning and financial and administrative state culture, or what is called in German *Staatenkunde*.⁴⁷

The great nineteenth-century French archivist Arthur de Boislisle (1835–1908), looking for a word to characterize learning at the service of state administration, called it *érudition d'État*, or state erudition. English does not have a term for state erudition or learning. Michel Foucault called this genre of knowledge "le savoir de l'État," or state knowledge. Trying to connect formal learning with the state, some historians of science have compared the "little tools of knowledge" used by scholars, scientists, and administrators alike.⁴⁸ And yet aside from works by James E. King, Kevin Sharpe, R. J. W. Evans, and Blandine Barret-Kriegel, historians of scholarship and knowledge have not generally examined the nature of early modern state knowledge culture.⁴⁹ Thus a biography of Colbert opens the door to a new history of knowledge and politics.⁵⁰

Knowledge, Secrecy, and Government

There are reasons that intellectual and cultural historians have not studied the intellectual history of the state. Following the work of the Ger-

man sociologists Reinhard Koselleck and Jürgen Habermas, historians of information have predominantly studied the concept of the “public sphere” of information and opinion.⁵¹ Studies of the public sphere focus on journalism, clandestine literature, and printing; as well as sites of sociability, such as academies and the Republic of Letters, public and private communication networks, art markets, salons, learned societies, Masonic lodges, societies, coffeehouses, and lending libraries. These social and cultural phenomena are often used as illustrations of a civic, bourgeois opposition and counterbalance to arbitrary, secretive absolute monarchy and its modes of censorship during the eighteenth century.⁵² An enormous corpus of scholarship on the public sphere has emerged. Stéphane Van Damme has identified as least 12,112 articles concerning the public sphere in the eighteenth century alone.⁵³ In spite of the plethora of works on the public sphere, few scholars have examined the relationship between the public sphere and the state.⁵⁴ Indeed, in the schema focused on the public sphere, the state has been reduced to an almost impotent actor, trying and failing to turn the inexorable, teleological tide of public information, opinion, and political liberty.⁵⁵

And yet the history of information is more complex than a tension between the public sphere, bourgeois private secrecy, and absolutist states. Civil society not only had secret elements, but it was also highly influenced by the state, which often sought to enlighten and politically repress at the same time.⁵⁶ Institutions such as salons and the Republic of Letters are now seen as less influential motors of civil society than previously thought. Salons often worked as motors of aristocratic class domination over more humble social groups like the scholars of the Republic of Letters.⁵⁷ The state also played a more important role in influencing the public sphere than historians have recognized. Enlightened despots such as Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo of Tuscany (1761–90) abolished capital punishment and torture, sponsored the world of learning and salons, and gave lessons in science to the general populace of Florence, while also strictly policing learning and public life.⁵⁸ Public life and learning could foster, but did not necessarily mean political freedom.

Furthermore, the Republic of Letters itself was neither a truly public entity, nor was it always polite and run by clear rules.⁵⁹ It was a world of esoteric knowledge, with its own codes of conduct, learned languages, and elite networks, and of course, strong ties to various states and noble patronage networks.⁶⁰ Thus to understand the Republic of Letters and the emergence of a civil society in France, and indeed, in Austria, En-

gland, the German and Italian states, Portugal, Sweden, Spain, and others, the role of the state must now be taken into account. In the case of France, the world of learning set the foundations for civil society yet, paradoxically, provided the cultural building blocks for the French absolutist monarchy. And the absolutist monarchy in turn built and controlled many institutions of civil society.

Colbert is a key to untangling this paradoxical process of civilization. What his case reveals is the extent to which the public sphere not only competed with the secret state sphere of learning and information circulation; it was sometimes the product of it, as learned state agents used classified document troves to create public propaganda. Secrecy existed in private, among citizens, but it also existed within the state and its large, influential bureaucracy.⁶¹ The state kept semipublic libraries, closed collections, massive archives, and information networks while also trying to control the public world of knowledge and opinion. Therefore, to understand the history of information, the public, and the state, it is necessary to study the history of state secrecy.

In an article entitled, “Removing Knowledge,” Peter Galison has argued that the modern “classified universe” of information is “much larger than the unclassified one.”⁶² Galison claims that open societies paradoxically create vast realms of classified state documents, and this secret sphere of information is bigger in sheer volume than the public world of information. Thus open societies do not have completely open archives, nor are their governments completely open. In nineteenth-century republican France, manipulated state paperwork played a central role in false accusations of treason against the Jewish army officer Alfred Dreyfus. The Dreyfus Affair spectacularly illustrated that state secrecy would be a key problem for democratic government. In 1955, Edward Shils called the tension between democratic society and state security apparatuses “the torment of secrecy.”⁶³ Today, high-level lawsuits brought by Congress against the office of the president and vice president of the United States, and numerous arguments within the branches of American government, in the press, and in academe about the extent of executive state secrecy, attest to the continuing centrality of the secret state sphere even in an age of mass public information and the Internet.⁶⁴ Prominent historians, such as Robert Dallek, have recently testified before Congress, and the American Historical Association has brought a lawsuit against the executive branch, both claiming that contrary to the Freedom of Information Act (1966), the Presidential Records Act (1978) has become “the Presidential Secrecy Act,” expressing the concern that

concealing state records skews historical understanding and public debate, a point denied by the executive branch.⁶⁵ Whether good or bad, the fact is that only 10 percent of the records from Ronald Reagan's presidency have been released, and Bill Clinton's presidential archives remain in great part inaccessible.⁶⁶ Open state information is not a given of democratic government. Indeed, to be effective, government must rely on a certain degree of secrecy. The question remains, how much?

England only voted a Freedom of Information Act in 2000, and in France, presidential documents were not collected systematically by the national archives until 1974 and are sealed for sixty years.⁶⁷ Even in the age of the Internet, the rise of a complex public sphere driven by multiple forms of media and communication has not resolved the challenges posed by state secrecy. Major American policies stumble as internal secret bureaus such as the CIA and FBI fail to communicate internally and externally, or collect bad intelligence.⁶⁸ If anything, the relationship between public and private has become more complex, and the stakes of the state's intelligence management and information handling ever greater.

Colbert's story is thus one of an unprecedented entrepreneur and innovator of state intelligence and information handling, who harnessed many of the techniques of scholars, churchmen, and merchants and systematically applied them to government. Colbert was an accountant, a merchant and industrial manager, a policeman, and a master librarian. He trained with Jesuits, lawyers, merchant financiers, accountants, military outfitters, religious scholars, and state administrators. He closely examined the bureaucratic and legal workings of the church, conversed with architects, mathematicians, and humanist and ecclesiastical scholars. At the same time, he was *un homme de confiance*: in practice, Louis XIV's personal valet, guarding royal family secrets and even raising Louis's bastard children in his own home.

The case of Colbert's information system shows the extent to which a public sphere and Republic of Letters coexisted in a symbiotic and competitive relationship with the growing sphere of state information and knowledge. It also shows the growing role of experts and how the state played a central and innovative, as well as repressive, role in the growth of modern information culture.⁶⁹ A well-informed state could wield great power, but with this power came dangers and limitations. Most of all, it shows that open modern societies, with their governments integrated with state and financial intelligence and research systems, have lessons to learn from Colbert's absolutist project.