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Secrecy and Dictatorship

Some Problems in the Study
of Authoritarian Regimes

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Political scientists have paid insufficient attention to the methodological problems that secrecy creates for the study of authoritarian regimes.¹ The principal problem that dictatorial secrecy presents for the study of authoritarian regimes is that any direct analysis of internal decision-making processes is impeded by the non-public operation of central decision-making bodies and the restricted character of any records that these organs may generate. These information constraints turn the power apparatus in most authoritarian regimes into a “black box,” a complex structure that moves and acts upon the environment but whose inner workings are hidden from view. This condition is complicated by the fact that regimes that systematically veil their actual workings behind curtains of secrecy also tend to present a public face that does not accurately reflect their concealed operation.

¹In the following pages, in disregard of some important conceptual differences, I use the terms “dictatorship,” “authoritarian regime,” and “autocracy” interchangeably to refer to non-democratic regimes. I do this for stylistic reasons and will make distinctions when they are relevant.

This non-public decision making in authoritarian regimes is mainly of consequence for attempts to identify and classify “authoritarian power blocs.” For many other purposes, observable phenomena in authoritarian contexts may be sufficient to allow scholars to analyze aspects of authoritarian regimes. Thus, for example, authoritarian secrecy may not create significant obstacles for analysts seeking to discriminate between democratic and non-democratic regimes, since observable properties of a regime, particularly the absence any electoral linkage with society, may be sufficient to identify a case as a dictatorship.² Similarly, the study of public dimensions of dictatorship, such as patterns of regime mobilization, the response of different social and political actors, or the impact of authoritarian public policies may not be significantly effected by regime secrecy as long as researchers have relatively free access to their subjects and reliable information about social states is allowed to circulate.³ However, when analysts seek to study actors and processes within an authoritarian regime, the methodological problems created by regime secrecy are profound though rarely discussed.

The information constraints that authoritarian rulers intentionally set by engaging in non-public decision making, censorship, and, often, the clandestine execution of “policies” which are subsequently denied fundamentally effect the research process. Without access to the internal architecture of dictatorships, nor even certain knowledge of

²However, elections alone are insufficient to characterize a regime as a democracy since in cases where the same party repeatedly wins elections the fact of elections does not indicate whether such incumbents would cede power were they to lose a contest. On this problem, see Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limongi (2000, 23-27).

³ Secrecy will, however, indirectly effect the study of political actors when these adopt clandestine forms of organization in the face of secret state power. In these cases, many of the problems discussed here will also apply to regime opponents.

the full range of their actions, analysts usually are forced to elaborate accounts of the power structure of authoritarian regimes on the basis of observations of how the “black box” moves and acts. They have no choice but to infer inner regime properties from the public actions of non-public actors, that is, from legislative acts, policies, rumors, and the regime’s own self-presentation in the form of speeches, published interviews in the press, or the ritual of official ceremony.⁴ As long as a specific regime is in power, scholars may be obliged to work this way; nevertheless, the limits of this approach must be stressed: widely accepted or apparently plausible accounts based on the public “data” may in fact distort the internal organization of power within a dictatorship.⁵

This possibility is increasingly relevant for comparative politics now that scholars are attempting to study dynamic properties of authoritarian regimes as a function of sub-types of dictatorship defined in terms of internal power configurations, typically the number of rulers – singular or several – or the character of the governing institutions – personalized, single-party, or military.⁶ Clearly, any hypotheses regarding the effects of the number or types of authoritarian rulers can only be validated if we have accurate

⁴ On these two senses of public --public as opposed to private and public as opposed to secret--, which will be returned to below, see Bobbio (1986:65).

⁵ This possibility has been strikingly suggested by a recent study on the internal organization of military rule in Chile which drew on a range of classified internal government documents generated by the military junta and its advisory bodies (Barros 2002). Although widely accepted characterizations of the dictatorship, constructed upon the the types of indirect evidence – decree-laws, public declarations of military commanders, and specific policy acts—I have mentioned, cast General Augusto Pinochet’s as the central and dominant actor in the political and constitutional process, the internal documents reveal that the commanders of the navy and the air force were key players in a collegial military junta, consistently defended their positions and playing a major role in shaping the constitutional trajectory of the dictatorship.

⁶ A recent example is Geddes 1999. Hypotheses regarding the effects of authoritarian institutional structures in Latin America can also be found in Remmer 1989 and Arceneaux 2001.

counts or characterizations of these actors. The present study suggests that this is not very likely, as non-publicity implies that counting and classification are not easy. Thus, unfortunately, it may well be the case that considerable research on individual cases is required before broad hypotheses concerning dynamics of authoritarian rule can be tested comparatively.

In this paper I seek to draw attention to these problem by examining how secrecy effects our capacity to study authoritarian regimes, as well as the issues associated with the use of primary sources as a means towards more precise characterizations of dictatorships. My central claims are that non-publicity at the apex of authoritarian regimes induces scholars to construct characterizations of dictatorship using evidence that is equivocal, rendering most results speculative at best, and that the only way to develop more “informed” accounts of historical dictatorships is for specialists to work with direct artifacts of the regimes they want to analyze –this is a solution not without difficulties, but it is the only path whereby researchers can reliably study internal dynamics without inferring them from public outputs.

I proceed as follows. Section 1 considers how scholars during the 1970s and 1980s confronted or ignored this problem in studies on the “new authoritarianism” in Latin America and discuss in some detail the types of evidence that analysts used to classify the “Pinochet regime” in Chile as a personalized dictatorship. In Section 2, I discuss the affinity of authoritarian rule towards secrecy and in Section 3 consider how the information constraints produced by secrecy render problematic the types of evidence that political scientists typically use to analyze dictatorships. Section 4 explores whether it is likely that dictatorships produce the types of documentary material that, if preserved

and accessible, would allow scholars access beyond the veil of secrecy that obscures observation of the inner workings of dictatorships.

I begin with the discussion of the Latin American and Chilean cases for the following reasons. First, twentieth century Latin American political history produced a bounty of authoritarian regimes and the attendant scholarship provides many examples of how political scientists and specialists have approached the study of dictatorships. Second, the “Pinochet regime” is a significant example because it is a case in which analysts, proceeding in a manner that is typical in the study of dictatorships, made seemingly valid inferences about the nature of military rule that were widely accepted but have been subsequently questioned by research based on once classified internal records.

1. Evidence and the Study of Dictatorship in Latin America

Most writings on Latin American authoritarianism have not paid sufficient attention to how problems of evidence or data affect their research. Some years ago, Ian Lustick (1996) drew attention to the more general problems that arise when political scientists unreflectively use the work of historians as sources of data for testing theories. He argued that there is a potential for selection bias whenever scholars, faced with multiple, contradictory historical narratives, choose as “accurate” those accounts whose categories and implicit theoretical claims are akin to the hypotheses that the researcher seeks to corroborate. When this occurs observations are selected consistent with the researcher’s theoretical expectations, resulting, however unwittingly, in biased findings. Something similar tends to occur in studies on the power structure of dictatorships.

The problem in the case of dictatorships is not that the researcher must pick and choose among multiple, contradictory accounts, but that the available narratives are built

upon a paucity of data. The hermetism of most authoritarian regimes means that existing accounts of the organization of a dictatorship, especially while the regime is in power, almost invariably rest upon a minimum of direct evidence. Particularly as regards the structure of power at the highest levels of dictatorships, the researcher's inability to have access to her object of study creates fertile terrain upon which the scholar's prior theoretical models, political commitments, or preconceptions regarding the nature of dictatorship or the institutional actors that compose it may –intentionally or unintentionally – do most of the work in explaining a phenomena that scorns being studied.

This construction of accounts of dictatorial power in accordance with a scholar's theoretical or political priorities, however inadvertent, is almost inevitable when decision making is non-public. Confronted with the information constraints that authoritarian rules intentionally emplace (non-public decision-making processes and censorship), scholars are forced to develop characterizations of authoritarian power on the basis of inferences drawn from facts which are “outputs” – policies, acts, public rituals -- of what the researcher seeks to study but are not the object itself. Although careful analysts recognize the resulting limits of their evidentiary base and the necessarily speculative character of their findings, the indiscriminate use of indirect evidence opens the way to characterizations and classifications of authoritarian regimes that are founded primarily in factors extrinsic to the internal regime.

1.1 The “New Authoritarianism”

It might be argued that scholars studying the military regimes that emerged in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s initially took this “external” procedure to an

extreme. During these years, the study of dictatorship was largely shaped by disciplinary, theoretical, and/or political concerns which to make it unnecessary to confront the methodological problems set by secrecy, precisely because the prevailing theoretical approaches reduced politics and institutions to epiphenomena of economic structural processes. Consequently, the problem of data and evidence was obviated by theoretical approaches and questions which pointed away from the empirical study of dictatorships as organizations of power (except in their repressive capacity). From the vantage points of Marxist theory, dependency theory, and the critique of modernization theory, the central concern was dictatorship as a form of domination corresponding to the contradictions specific to a stage of dependent capitalist development. In this intellectual context, specialists debated at length over the economic determinants of military rule, while the analysis of political dimensions was often limited to assessing the value of the category “fascism” for characterizing exclusionary, military regimes or to explaining the institutional-ideological factors that led military institutions to intervene.⁷

The recognition of the inadequacies of a purely economic explanation of military rule eventually led scholars to turn towards political factors in the rise of dictatorships, nevertheless the empirical study of military regimes qua regimes never took hold as scholars rapidly shifted towards speculation regarding the conditions for transition from authoritarianism beginning in the late 1970s. In this regard, however, the initial theoretical works on transitions did acknowledge the problem of incomplete information regarding the “authoritarian power apparatus.” First, models were posed as abstract,

⁷The seminal work, from the perspective of the critique of modernization theory, was O’Donnell 1973, which gave rise to the debate over industrial “deepening” (Collier 1979 and Remmer and Merx 1982). The “question of fascism” was raised in Boron 1977, Trindade 1983, and, under a different guise, Linz 1973.

theoretical explanations of why and how autocrats might acquiesce or be forced to devolve power to civilians. Second, though these models identified actors within the authoritarian state, famously “hard-liners” and “soft-liners,” these actors were identified in terms of the logic of a certain form of transition which was uncertain and unpredictable precisely because the internal game within dictatorships was opaque, volatile and a potential source of surprise and unexpected moves. Although these theorists placed the internal power bloc at the heart of their models of regime change -- particularly as splits within the armed forces were one of the key variables triggering a return to the barracks—careful studies of authoritarian power blocs did not follow.⁸

1.2 The “Pinochet Regime”

It is in the context of transition theory that the Chilean dictatorship assumed theoretical relevance -- whereas internal divisions explained transitions, General Pinochet’s centralization of power explained the absence of divisions in Chile and the subsequent tenacity and cohesion of military rule. Although this characterization of the regime as a case of “personalization of power,” occasionally with slight qualification, has long stood as the established wisdom regarding military rule in Chile and probably has influenced scholars who explain the differential longevity of authoritarian regimes in terms of subtypes of dictatorship, this classification is based on virtually no evidence of actual internal decision-making processes within the Chilean dictatorship.

Scholars built this characterization out of the following types of public artifacts of

⁸This sensitivity to the problems in studying the inner circles of dictatorial power is often absent in empirical accounts of regime change. In some studies this problem is obviated by formulaic references to the “costs of repression” exceeding the expected “costs of tolerance” or to conflicts between “hardliners” and “softliners,” without any empirical validation of these claims.

dictatorial rule: 1) the provisions of key decree-laws, particularly Decree-Law No. 527, which declared Pinochet the “Supreme Head of the Nation” in June 1974, and the decree-laws that modified procedures for military promotions and retirements; 2) selected public speeches, policy announcements, and directives by Pinochet, especially speeches or orders related to the “institutionalization” of the regime, such as the “*Discurso de Chacarillas*” or the “*Orientaciones Básicas para el Estudio de la Nueva Constitución*”;⁹ 3) seemingly crucial events, such as destitution of air force General Gustavo Leigh from the junta in July 1978 or the 1980 Constitution’s prolongation of Pinochet’s rule; and, above all, 4) the mere fact of Pinochet’s extended control of the executive, which from a comparative perspective was exceptional for a Latin American military head of state.

The problem, I am insisting, is that that these public artifacts of military rule are used to infer what is going on within the dictatorship. That is, that a specific policy or speech act reflects specific intentions or objectives, a specific ideology, or the dominance of one actor over another in the policy-making process. These inferences are made notwithstanding the glaring fact that scholars usually have no access to the internal circumstances, contexts, and interactions that might allow us to make these types of judgments.

Turning to the Chilean case, for example, how are we to know that Decree-Law No. 527, the Statute of the Junta, “clearly demonstrated the enduring character that the military government had assigned itself,” as Tomás Moulian contends (1997, 215), unless

⁹In the June 1977 *Discurso de Chacarillas*, Pinochet for the first time announced a timetable and framework for a return to civilian rule. The *Orientaciones* were a set of recommendations sent by Pinochet to the civilian advisory commission working on a draft constitution, which were immediately given publicity in *El Mercurio* (November 12, 1977).

we have evidence concerning whether and how the duration of the military's intervention was being discussed within the armed forces in early- and mid-1974 and, perhaps even more significantly, among which sets of officers any such deliberations might have taken place? Furthermore, aside from Moulian's prior conviction that the regime from the outset was a "revolutionary dictatorship" (1997, 174), on what basis are we to suspect that this decree-law had to do with the temporal extension of the regime?¹⁰

Retrospectively we know that the military retained power for sixteen and a half-years and that Decree-Law No. 527 was a first step in the legal-procedural organization of the military junta, but what do we really know about high-level military thinking and deliberations regarding time-frames in 1974?¹¹

Similar questions can be raised about the manner whereby analysts impute properties to the operations of dictatorial institutions from the decree-laws that regulate them. Staying with the same example, D.L. No. 527 is generally interpreted as codifying Pinochet's ascendancy over the other military commanders in chief not only because the

¹⁰ The secret minutes of the junta's meetings, the *Actas de la Honorable Junta de Gobierno*, indicate that, in fact, just ten days after the coup, on September 21, 1973, at the prompting of the Supreme Court, that the military junta decided to begin working on a statute regulating its powers (Barros 2002, 54).

¹¹ We know something about the expectations of civilian groups who backed the coup, such as factions within the Christian Democratic Party who expected elections to be held relatively rapidly, as well as of potential end-point dates, such as November 3, 1976, the date Allende would have left office given the 1925 constitution's provision for a six-year term without immediate reelection. This date may have defined what some Christian Democrats understood as a relatively brief period of emergency rule. Patricio Aylwin, for example, in late-1973 stated that two or three years would be sufficient (*Ercilla*, October 24, 1973).

Similarly, one suspects that the meaning of endurance in power for military officers at the apex of the dictatorship --as well as of the desirability of any such permanence-- varied according to the conjuncture. Is it reasonable to think that high-ranking officers in mid-1974 equated enduring power with sixteen and a half years (almost three presidential terms)?

statute fixed the exercise of executive power in General Pinochet, but also because it consigned the other members of the junta to exercising legislative and constitutive powers in conjunction with Pinochet by unanimity. Here, the unanimity decision rule is portrayed as the mechanism that allows Pinochet to emasculate the legislative junta since this rule gave Pinochet a veto with which to quash any attempts to reduce his powers (Arriagada 1985, 162; Valenzuela 1995, 38). Yet, logically, isn't this to presume what needs to be explained? If indeed unanimity was the effective mechanism – itself a research question—wasn't Pinochet's problem that he could only attain those powers that the other junta members were willing to confer to him?¹²

This conceptual problem, however, is not the issue; the point is that the significance or insignificance of the military junta cannot be resolved by the articles of the decree-laws that regulate its operation, nor by appeal to some other event as an indicator of Pinochet's dominance. To assess the relative importance of the military junta – the role the junta played in defining the distribution of powers, its actual exercise of the powers it nominally held, its relevance at concrete junctures, such as the dissolution of the DINA, Leigh's ouster, or the design and implementation of the 1980 constitution—scholars have to be able to study the junta in operation and not just the normative content of the decree-laws that conform the “institutionality” of the dictatorship and the legislative output of the regime.

¹² Although the documentary record on the design of institutions within the dictatorship is incomplete and spotty, evidence that became available after the military withdrawal from power reveals that the junta operated according to the unanimity decision rule and that on at least two occasions Pinochet sought to shift to a system of majority decision making in which he would possess a tie-breaking vote in the four man junta. Majority rule with such a tie-breaker, not unanimity, was the formula for personal dominance of Pinochet. On this point and the operation of the junta as documented in its own minutes and other primary documents, see Barros 2002.

This type of analysis, however, was impossible while the military was in power. Like other dictatorships, the Chilean armed forces intentionally secluded their decision-making processes from public view and tried to control how and what information was transmitted to the public. From its first session until its last, the Chilean military junta met in secret session --neither journalists nor independent observers were allowed to witness its proceedings and debates, and, although the junta functioned as a legislative body, for sixteen and a half years Chile had no public legislative record.

Faced with this information constraint, political actors, journalists, and scholars had no choice but to construct characterizations of the military regime using the indirect evidence produced by the movements of and around the “black box,” that is the whole array of second-order phenomena that were determined by the configuration internal to the dictatorship but that do not necessarily reveal this configuration: policy announcements, legislation, foreign and domestic policy moves, ebbs and flows in repression, public ceremonies on regime anniversaries or dates of national commemoration, accounts in official or pro-regime media, rumors, or reports from informants close to or within the regime.

As I have been suggesting, this gap between the purported object of study and the types of data that are available to analysts of dictatorships draws observers, however subtly or inadvertently, to read events in terms of their particular theoretical preferences, political commitments, or prior notions about dictatorship. Furthermore, as the resulting narratives account for the observed actions that they are constructed from there is really no challenging these characterizations, particularly as analysts lack access to alternative evidence that might raise doubts about these narratives and contradictory outcomes or

sequences can always be explained away as miscalculations or self-deceptions. Not surprisingly, the identification of a unifying interpretative key, be it personalization of power or capitalist refounding by means of revolutionary dictatorship, tends to shape essentialist reconstructions that often read much like an authoritarian variant of the Whig interpretation of history, with the twist that in these variants each act emerges as a step in the implementation of a coherent project of domination.

All of this may be inevitable given the fact of non-public rule. However, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to authoritarian secrecy and its implications for the types of evidence that are commonly used to “study” authoritarian regimes.

2. Autocracy, Secrecy and Deception

It may be the case that scholars studying authoritarian situations in Latin America do not reflect upon the reality of autocratic non-public rule or, to use Norberto Bobbio’s term (1986), “invisible power” because secrecy is so evidently a part of dictatorship – as second-nature, secrecy is assumed as backdrop and analysts proceed with this constraint as a given.¹³ Such an association of dictatorship and secrecy does not explain why many observers of dictatorship fail to reflect upon how secrecy effects their research nor does it obviate the effects of secrecy, but it does reflect a long political-theoretical tradition of identifying autocracy with non-public procedures of deliberation and decision making.

¹³ A further reason may be that students of Latin American dictatorships generally never faced the types of obstacles to empirical research, such as travel restrictions, that forced Western analysts of the Soviet Union to confront the limits of their sources and speculate upon ways to glean information out of seemingly extraneous artifacts. Alexander Gerschenkron (1950, 1960), the Russian-born, Harvard economic historian, for example, argued for the use of Soviet literature as a source of economic and social information. For further examples, see Schlesinger 1951, and Sheldon and Dutkowski 1952. It would be ingenuous, however, to suggest that Latin American authoritarianisms encouraged social scientific research.

As Norberto Bobbio (1986: 65-66) noted in an essay aimed at drawing attention to the persistence of invisible power within democracies, one of the fundamental criteria for distinguishing constitutional and autocratic states is that government in constitutional states is public in the sense of being non-secret, manifest to view, open to the public, whereas in autocracies, though power is also public in the other sense of imposing binding norms upon a society, autocratic public power tends to be exercised with a maximum of secrecy. Publicity is constitutive of and necessary for the ideal of representative government – no secret assembly can represent citizens and citizens can only effect representation if they have information regarding government acts and deliberations.¹⁴

The principle of autocracy requires no such publicity: unconstrained by any requirement to coordinate with others to make a decision, the autocrat may deliberate and decide unilaterally in absolute privacy, free from public scrutiny. This principle is posed here in terms a singular autocrat, but there is no reason why the autocratic sovereign cannot be a collective body – an oligarchy, committee for public safety, junta, or politburo, for example—that privately and unilaterally decides and subsequently imposes its public norms, as well as particular acts, upon a society.¹⁵ Autocracy is not only thus compatible with secrecy; as a form of exclusive rule, it also conduces to the use of secrecy since under conditions of autocracy politics collapses into reason of state as the

¹⁴This allusion to the literature on accountability is to underscore that problems of access to information in democracies are broader and more “domestic” than the gaps caused by the classification of foreign policy and intelligence records, a point Bobbio was also raising. For a discussion of explanations for secrecy in democracies, see Gibbs 1995.

¹⁵ I would claim that for secret collective decision making to be effective its procedures must be governed by internal publicity. I will return to this point when I discuss the conditions under which we can expect a documentary record of secret decision making.

ruling bloc can assure its self-preservation and domination only by continuously defending its state.¹⁶ The principle of autocracy, thus, naturally leads to the virtues of invisible government, secrecy, and deception as techniques of power to attain security and advantage before domestic and external actors, who by their situation beyond the authoritarian power group are always potential threats.

Notwithstanding this general affinity between authoritarian regimes and secrecy, unless I belie my insistence on the empirical study of dictatorships, I must ask whether specific dictatorships can be distinguished according to the extent of secrecy in the exercise of power. Although this may be an empirical question, conceptually it is important to frame this problem in terms of the distinction between the two senses of public, i.e. “public” as non-secret deliberation and decision making, on the one hand, and “public” as acts that impact upon the general society, on the other. My hunch is that distinctions in regards to secrecy concern the second meaning, that is variations in the extent that autocracies give publicity to their acts, a continuum that may extend from dictatorial rule by law to the covert effectuation of the bulk of government acts under the cover of night and curfew, with a range of intermediate combinations between these extremes. Though it may only reflect personal ignorance, I suspect that autocratic sovereignty as the moment of supreme deliberation and decision is always exercised amidst secrecy—for if public assemblies or bodies were the actual locus of decision, I think that we would be before a democracy not a dictatorship, or a step away.

The problem, as I have been insisting all along, is that of identifying where power actually resides in an authoritarian regime. In this regard, the observation that

¹⁶ This intuition, despite the anachronism of the category of reason of state which Machiavelli didn't use, is of course the argument of *Il Principe*.

authoritarian power is all-pervasive and is deployed from a surveillant center is of no assistance whatsoever. The facile invocation of Foucault forgets that the panopticon is a structure for seeing without being seen (Foucault 1979, 200-203, 214, 172-174); if this is a model for authoritarian power, then the social scientist must acknowledge that she is in the position of the prisoner, not the warden. The effects of invisible power cannot be eluded by positing that behind a veil of secrecy lies a web of power nor by reconstructing the public acts of this power.

As I will proceed to discuss, the substance of the hidden reality of non-public power is not revealed in the artifacts of authoritarian action, be these laws, policies, speeches, detentions, unacknowledged assassinations and disappearances, closures of radio stations, or public festivals.

3. Secrecy and the Evidentiary Limits of Public Dictatorial Artifacts

The first gross effect of non-public power is the obvious consequence that the real hidden autocratic power is hard to identify. As a result, there always arises the question as to whether an authoritarian regime's formal-legal organization describes or dodges the structure of power within a dictatorship. Does the power apparatus coincide with the bodies described in a regime's institutional acts? Or are executive and legislative powers located in some other body? Or do they shift among formal and informal agents as a function of internal power struggles? Secrecy implies that these questions cannot be answered by external observation alone.¹⁷

However, it is important to note that non-public power also effects the capacity of

¹⁷ Przeworski's (1982) analysis of the situation in Poland prior to the 1981 declaration of martial law in its self-consciously speculative character is an excellent example of a study aware of the difficulties inherent in identifying the locus of authoritarian power under conditions of non-publicity.

internal participants within a dictatorship to directly observe the mechanisms of authoritarian power. Bureaucrats and officials within an authoritarian regime may have no greater access to the centers of autocratic decision than do external observers. Contrary to the illusion that secrecy is a heavy curtain which separates an internally transparent dictatorship from its environment -- separating an authoritarian "us" from "them"-- the very organization of authoritarian regimes structures incomplete information throughout the state apparatus and non-publicity at the apex of these regimes is equally directed within as without the state. The classification of documents and information within dictatorships (as it is in democracies as well) is not a protection aimed at avoiding embarrassments in posterity but a security measure intended to immediately protect official secrets from officers and employees within the state who have no "need-to-know." As I will now develop, this is one the many reasons why public descriptions of dictatorships by functionaries and officers may not be a reliable source on the identity and deliberations of the ruling bloc.

Information is incomplete at subordinate levels of dictatorships, in part, for the same reasons as it is in all modern states: the division of the state into different agencies, ministries, and forces structures only partial vantage points. However, there is an additional complication in dictatorships. In these regimes, since bureaucratic and other information flows up the hierarchy without scrutiny from representative bodies and /or an independent press and since actors at the apex of the regime can attempt to contain, conceal, and represent this information at their discretion, only the members of the inner circle at the summit of power are in positions to attain a comprehensive view of the situation. Furthermore, despite that they possess far more extensive information than

subordinates or external observers and that as protagonists they may witness the exchanges and deliberations that precede decision, even the highest-ranking officials within autocratic decision-making bodies, as individuals, are likely to possess only partial segments of the total picture and hence are likely to engage in struggles with their peers over information and its veracity.

This type of structure-induced incomplete information is endemic to military dictatorships, since in military hierarchies the command authority of superior officers and the discipline of subordinates is grounded in asymmetric information: the authority to command rests upon the superior officer's capacity to claim a comprehensive grasp of the situation because he brings together the multiple and parallel streams of information that flow from subordinate to superior up the chain of command (Feld 1959). Amidst independent branches of the armed forces, this type of hierarchy also produces a compartmentalization of information between branches, particularly as lateral communication by an officer in one branch with officers of equal rank in other branches may be construed as subordination to someone other than the officer's direct superior (Feld 1959, 19).

These multiple points of incomplete information thus imply that "knowledge" in dictatorships is always local. Accounts from within a regime – even when they are accurate—necessarily will privilege a specific vantage point; therefore, a single event ought to be refracted through the prism of multiple explanatory narratives.¹⁸ This type of partiality in perspective is one source of limitation upon the reliability of actor's accounts

¹⁸ This point suggests that the absence of variety in accounts may be an indicator of non-informative communication, in other words that actors are merely repeating a party line or an official discourse.

or public interventions as a basis for reconstructing the nature of invisible power.

Another, obviously, is the strategic use of public argument by actors within the authoritarian power apparatus, which forces us to ask under what conditions revelations by actors will be informative. On this point, I proceed to sketch a couple of observations, moving outwards (or, perhaps more accurately, downwards) from the regime inner core.

First, even the limited group of officials in the highest circle that compose the ruling clique may have incentives to accept and further a public representation of the dictatorship that does not reflect internal practices nor the organization of the specific dictatorship, even when this public account detracts from or minimizes their individual roles. The members as individuals may be indifferent to such public distortions because their power and presence within the ruling bloc is based on resources other than those generated in public and is, therefore, unaffected by the regime's self-presentation.

Whereas for the collective as a group, the misrepresentation of the internal situation may be sustainable because it contributes to the maintenance of group power. For example, a ruling collective may accept a public image constructed around an alleged single dictator because it relieves the ruling group of having to justify the exclusion of all other parties from collective decision making. In other words, the appearance of monism may allow a dictatorship to insist that it is above politics and uniquely capable of confronting the situation at hand, something that would be untenable if its internal procedures were transparent and revealed that regime decisions were preceded by debate, conflict, and compromise. Similarly, this type of projection of a singular institution or an indivisible, albeit, collective institution, such as the armed forces, in conjunction with security measures that occlude the fact of politics at the apex, may be important for maintaining

non-deliberation and authority at lower levels of a hierarchy and, therefore, equally for maintaining the cohesion of the ruling organization.

As we move out of this inner circle, functionaries may have no knowledge that a discrepancy exists between real power and public accounts of power because their institutional location within the state apparatus removes them from any contact with information discordant with the official account. Put differently, these individuals are “out of the loop,” a situation that can also affect individuals who have access to classified information given that “need to know” in most cases implies narrowly circumscribed access.¹⁹

Second, the manners whereby decision-making conventions at the apex of a regime may effect information flows and debates within an authoritarian public sphere also effect the value of public statements and opinion as evidence. In most contexts, irresolution is a tactic that supports group cohesion by postponing definition on potentially divisive issues. This practice by leaving open an issue can create a context for

¹⁹ Even functionaries or officers directly involved in logistical aspects of secret operations may be kept in the dark as to the true nature of their own work by means of compartmentalization or the use of double reporting systems that combine a “back” channel for transmission of classified orders and information and an open “cover” for communication of aboveboard information and any avowed mission. For an example, see the discussion of the logistical organization of the secret U.S. bombing of Cambodia in 1969-1970 in Sigal 1975 (80-81).

A related issue here is the phenomena of leaks and other informal means of communicating state secrets as a source of information regarding authoritarian non-public deliberations or covert practices. Leaving aside the questions of deceptions or the distortions that such information may contain, any leaks, informal briefings, or unauthorized conveyance of classified documents are likely to be of limited use for scholars precisely because the public use of official secrets tends to threaten the source of a leak by triggering internal investigations aimed at sealing security gaps. As the literary and historical literature on espionage reveals, organizations with continuous “intelligence” may be incapacitated from acting upon it for fear of compromising “sources” and the fact of infiltration. Sigal 1975 discusses the constraints that limit the use of informally communicated secret information among U.S. Congressmen.

at times noisy debate and/or wildly self-serving analyses of policy alternatives in the restricted arena of authoritarian publicity. However, these public expressions may have very little connection with positions held internally or the range of internal policy debate. Insofar as there is a body in which decisions are made and its authority is acknowledged by its members, actors outside of this body can make all sorts of noise without this clamor provoking any response or disclaimer from members of the body with real authority as, again, nothing –other than prudential considerations-- compels them to respond to actors beyond themselves.

Third, actors close to or within the inner circle at the apex of an autocracy may have incentives to misrepresent themselves and to speak what they think the autocrat or the ruling circle wants to hear, a practice long discussed in the political theory on monarchy (Skinner 1997, 87-93; Kapuściński 1989). Thus, the meaning of public speech acts in authoritarian regimes – statements at press conferences, official declarations by ministers, interviews in the tolerated press and newsweeklies—may not lie in their substantive content but in the concrete strategic game in which the speaker is attempting to advance or hold ground among other contenders for resources, access, authority, status, perks, power, etc. Much of this activity can be part of the noise mentioned in the previous point, with the implication that seemingly explicit postures may reveal no conviction other than ambition within some game of bureaucratic politics. Similarly, this type of subservience and deference to a superior, which may be discovered at all levels of a hierarchy and may be exhibited by individuals and whole agencies, also implies that information transmitted up a hierarchy may often be distorted by lower-level officials and be less than accurate, a point repeatedly noted in regards to the fulfillment of economic

plans in planned economies and, most recently, in the U.S. context, in regards to the subordination of CIA intelligence to executive aims prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Powers 2004).²⁰

Furthermore, while I have been stressing how the organization of autocracies and the use of secrecy influences the descriptive value of accounts from within of the purported inner workings of dictatorship, we should not ignore the obvious point that autocracies often seek to manipulate and at times occlude information regarding social states beyond the inner organization of their power. These manipulations can involve external deceptions regarding a regime's own policies, such as the denial of repressive acts which cannot be acknowledged publicly because they are heinous by international or local standards, or the misrepresentation of the strength and intentions of regime enemies so to justify continued dictatorial rule. Similarly, even seemingly innocuous data collected by a regime on social conditions may be withheld from the public whenever accurate data about employment, population growth, health conditions, or education may establish the failure of regime policies or the falsity of government claims.²¹

The non-public organization of autocratic regimes thus structures a series of strategic contexts within and around dictatorships from which actors may articulate public accounts of dictatorship that are at variance with what would constitute reasonable

²⁰ These types of subservient distortions also then effect the usefulness of local records for accurately studying social phenomena.

²¹ This was the fate of the 1937 Soviet census once the preliminary results provided evidence of the high population losses caused by the 1932-3 famine that followed collectivization. Stalin had the results of the census entirely suppressed and the senior statisticians involved were arrested and executed (Merridale 1996). In addition to describing the organization and realization of the census, which involved over one million enumerators and instructors, Merridale (1996) provides many examples of the problems of information and distortion that I have discussed above.

descriptions of the actual character of “invisible power” and its attendant games if this secret world were visible: rulers whose power is not based upon publicity can be indifferent to public presentations of power; this indifference creates a space for public debates over policy and institutions that may have little to do with internal deliberations; while subordinate officials seeking advantage have incentives to distort information to gratify the ruler or ruling bloc. Each of these by-products of secrecy within authoritarian regimes renders problematic as keys to understanding decision-making processes in authoritarian regimes many of the sources that scholars use—speeches, interviews, announcements, acts of legislation, public explanations by subordinates, etc.

4. Behind the veil of deception: Can we go backstage?

If the types of traditional public evidence used by scholars are of limited value in revealing the key players and practices obscured by secrecy, what types of sources do social scientists need if they are to develop cogent accounts of a hidden, secret history? In the best of all possible worlds, scholars would have eventual access to a “black box” within the “black box” – akin to the popular image of the airplane data and voice recorder – in other words, some faithful register of the players and their deliberations, decision-making processes, orders, and actions. Ideally, scholars would be able to work with the internal documents and records – agendas, protocols, memorandums, reports, minutes, records of meetings, agreements, plans, and instructions – that issue as part of the everyday operation of authoritarian executive and legislative bodies, advisory councils, administrative agencies, and security apparatuses. Though, for various reasons, this documentary record is likely to be incomplete, only by using such sources can scholars move beyond the essentially speculative accounts that result when public actions, speech

acts, and documents are used to impute internal dynamics of authoritarian regimes.

We can distinguish three dimensions in the use of authoritarian primary sources as an evidentiary basis for constructing internal accounts of dictatorships: first, that authoritarian actors produce a corpus of records in the course of exercising power; second, that these records be preserved; and third, that researchers eventually have access to this documentary base. Clearly, at each of these stages authoritarian state practices and the decisions of successor regimes may produce gaps in the scope and integrity of the documentary record produced by a dictatorship. However, although researchers and individuals frequently doubt that authoritarian regimes generate extensive primary records, there are good reasons to believe that the principal source of the limited availability of authoritarian primary sources is not the failure of dictatorships to produce records but later decisions -- to destroy (or seclude) records or eventually to limit access to records after the dictatorship in question has passed.

4.1 Dictatorships and Records: Paperless Tigers?

A popular view of dictatorship associates autocratic power with an absence of primary documents as dictators are construed as shunning any documentary trail. In this conception, the absence of written records is a means to amplify the dictator's immediate power by assuring his irresponsibility for wrongful acts or later failures of policy – by receiving oral counsel and by verbally imparting directives, the dictator can deflect criticism by claiming, as circumstances warrant, that his ministers misinformed him, failed to follow his instructions, or effected acts without his knowledge or authorization.²² In this manner, oral dictatorial practices of counsel and command provide autocratic

²² For an example, see Kapuściński's account (1989) of Haille Selassie's exclusively oral modes of receiving counsel and imparting directives.

rulers with “plausible denial,” while at the same time they deny subordinate officials of any record to hold up against the ruler’s word and use to protect themselves from being scapegoated. If indeed dictatorships act in this manner, scholars would have no primary evidence with which to reconstruct the hidden action in dictatorships.

Although on a limited basis concerns of deniability and irresponsibility (as well as a concern for additional secrecy) may lead authoritarian rulers to deliberately not keep records related to specific particularly sensitive acts, a purely oral regime of deliberation, decision, and execution is impracticable and is thus inconceivable as the standard practice in modern dictatorships. This point may be obvious; nevertheless it is worth developing as it implies that authoritarian regimes are likely to produce a range of materials that scholars could use to study dictatorships if this documentation were preserved and at some point made available to researchers.

First, at any but the most rudimentary levels of administrative and social complexity, officials within an authoritarian regime will produce written materials in the course of formulating and evaluating different policy alternatives, as well as when implementing policies. At the most general level, this production of records is a function of the limits of individual intellectual capacity and memory before the scope, volume, and complexity of the issues demanding policy decision in modern societies -- no autocrat can receive, retain, and evaluate volumes of information without the aid of reports, memoranda, plans, statistics, and budgets, just as lower level officials cannot efficiently gather, retain, and transmit information relevant to superiors without writing. The cautious dictator, thus, may not leave a paper trail documenting his motives and involvement in highly sensitive policy matters, but he is likely to utilize reports and

memos written by advisors and subordinates in arriving even at these decisions.

Similarly, at any degree of administrative development autocratic rulers will want to use written instructions and demand reports as mechanisms to defend their authority over subordinates. While mumblings without any record may grant the dictator the defense of policy irresponsibility, oral transmission of instructions cannot be generalized within an administrative hierarchy without destroying the effective instrumental authority of the ruling bloc.²³ Subordinate officials can be held responsible to their superiors only if they receive relatively precise orders which are not given to excessive interpretation, and superiors will also require reports from subordinates in order to evaluate both policy and personnel.²⁴ Therefore, even though there may be some gaps at the top, we can reasonably expect that authoritarian regimes will generate the whole range of operational files and records characteristic of bureaucratic organizations. Hence, we should not be surprised that primary records were produced in a number of dictatorships, even in the

²³Thus, even Hailie Selassie, who according to Kapuściński's stylized account (1989) imparted all instructions and received all counsel by word of mouth, had a "Minister of the Pen" who took down his orders and instructions for subsequent transmission. Still, the verbal buffer between Selassie and his minister allowed the Ethiopian emperor to lay all necessary blame upon his minister (Kapuściński 1989, 8-9).

²⁴Here again arises the problem of how superiors can prevent deferential reporting and receive accurate information from subordinates, an issue alluded to above in the context of the problems of public information in autocratic regimes. The topic of autocratic deliberation and counsel is an undeveloped area of research, though some references suggest that autocrats use mechanisms similar to those referred to in the principal-agent literature, basically taking advice without revealing expectations or targets. For example, Selassie while receiving verbal reports purportedly never asked questions nor expressed opinions so as not to influence his informants reports (Kapuściński 1989, 11). Similarly, Max Weber (1978, 995) mentions that Frederick William I of Prussia would receive written memoranda but would rarely attend collegiate cabinet meetings.

The degree of precision in instructions to subordinates and how widely these orders will be conferred in the form of written instructions is another topic that cannot be settled a priori. Hitler, for example, apparently preferred the use of ambiguous instructions and eschewed formal decision-making processes (Kershaw 1997 and Mommsen 1997).

course of formulating and executing extremely sensitive and secretive policies.²⁵

Second, although the records and documents just referred to arise from the operation of intermediate and subordinate authoritarian agencies, a range of documents are also likely to be generated at the highest levels of some, if not all, dictatorships. The need for records at this level can be understood as a function of the composition of the authoritarian ruling bloc. In principle, monocratic rulers—one-person dictatorships—do not require a record of the motives, intents, or considerations underlying a decision because the single ruler can deliberate privately. Collective decision, however, necessarily requires and produces written artifacts as part of the decision-making process: minimally, agendas must be established and resolutions recorded, and, beyond this minimum, reports and position papers are to be expected within collective bodies considering complex issues.

In collective decision-making bodies documents and records are tools of power. Whenever power is exercised jointly by the members of a collectivity, individual members, if they are concerned with securing or protecting a share of power in decision making, will demand at minimum a written register of group decisions. This point can be elucidated by contrast with the single-person dictator: whereas a single autocrat can be indifferent to whether his present representation of an earlier decision belies its original content, the same does not hold for the individual members of a group bearing decisional

²⁵Primary records produced in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the German Democratic Republic by secret security and repressive apparatuses and, in some cases, the higher bodies governing them have recently been used by scholars to study a range of issues previously beyond the light of research. For examples, see Browning 1992, Epstein 2004, Finkel 2004, and Ivanova 2000. Police archives registering authoritarian repressive practices have also been discovered in Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina in the most recent post-dictatorial period. On these archives, see Da Silva Catela 2002, González 2002, and Olmo 2002.

authority. If these individuals are to defend their institutional positions, group members can only countenance those discrepancies with earlier decisions that they sanction according to their accepted procedures for group decision. In this context, official registries of decisions provide individual members with a record that can establish the content of an earlier decision and be used to challenge irregular decisions that might be imposed by misconstruing earlier agreements. For the same reason, members may also want a record of their deliberations to have a similar record with which to establish the understandings that underlie joint decisions.²⁶ Regardless of regime type, the logic of collective decision generates a need for written records, a point which has been confirmed by the legislative records found in the archives of collegial dictatorships.²⁷

4.2 Preservation of and Access to Authoritarian Archives

The records generated during the everyday operation of ministries, agencies, and superior legislative bodies in authoritarian regimes can only be of use to scholars if they

²⁶ Thus, one of the first acts at most meetings of collegial bodies is the authentication and approval of the minutes of the previous meeting.

²⁷ Thus, we know of the extensive production of records in the course of decision making in the Soviet Politburo and the Chilean military junta. The Chilean records presently in the public domain (at the *Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile*) appear to be considerably broader than the Politburo records, as the former include the voluminous legislative archive of the junta's Secretary of Legislation, which contains legislative histories for most of the decree-laws enacted by the military regime, as well as verbatim minutes of the junta's meetings transcribed from tape-recordings. The legislative histories gather together the range of documents (bills, legal analyses, position papers, proposed modifications, and protocols of junta meetings) generated through the legislative process and complement the junta minutes. On these documents, see Barros 2002 (6-7). The available records of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), at least during the mid-1990s, were limited to the protocols (*protokoly*) of Politburo meetings. These consisted of lists of participants, agendas, and decisions, as well as additional materials attached as addendum, but do not include records of the debate (David-Fox and Hoffman 1996). This difference in the range of Soviet and Chilean materials in regards to central decisional bodies may merely reflect incomplete access to the Politburo archive. For more on the protocols and other CPSU operational records, see Howlett, Khlevniuk, Kosheleva, and Rogovaiet 1996.

are preserved and open to public research communities. Whether records produced by dictatorships are preserved and open is a function of a number of contingent factors that are likely to vary across states – specific national administrative and archival traditions, the manner of demise of the authoritarian regime in question, the degree of public pressure for the protection and opening of archives, and, in some cases, pure contingency. Although there may be no unique pattern to the conservation and declassification of records produced by authoritarian regimes, some general aspects can be identified.

First, the critical moments in the fate of authoritarian regime records may be the period immediately prior to the termination of a dictatorship and any points at which powerholders fear their imminent demise, as it is at these moments that authoritarian incumbents may seek to destroy or sequester documents that they fear will be damaging if in the wrong hands.²⁸ Prior to these critical junctures, official records are likely to be preserved by the agencies and offices that generate them: insofar as documents constitute the working records of specific offices or bodies, each administrative agency, deliberative body, cabinet, law court, or intelligence agency will organize and maintain its archive, often in accordance with some statutory or regulatory stipulation.²⁹ Thus, while

²⁸ The voluntary decision not to destroy highly-sensitive documents probably depends on whether officials feel that they can control access to such records after they lose power, a factor which may be influenced by bureaucratic or civil-military traditions, expectations of institutional and personell continuity across a regime change, and existing power relations. Paradoxically, a sense of impunity may preserve an archive for future discovery, as González Vera (2002, 91) suggests was the case in Paraguay, where over two tons of police records were found in late 1992, about four years after the fall of Alfredo Stroessner. This concern with impunity --which to be effective must be backed by continued institutional power – however, may at a later date lead to the destruction of records and evidence once judicial investigations hone in on hitherto guarded evidence.

²⁹ Thus, although scholars doubted the existence of these records, in Chile the Secretary of Legislation was encharged by law with maintaining the archive of legislative histories, and, at least after 1981, the Secretary of the Junta was encharged with transcribing the

dictatorships are in power the major problem for scholars is access to documents that tend to be classified, rather than their non-existence.³⁰ Subsequently, whether documents are destroyed to protect state secrets, then, will largely depend on whether regime officials perceive that specific archives are incriminatory or of strategic-political or intelligence value in the hands of perceived enemies, that there is no other way to prevent unwanted access, and that officials actually have the opportunity to destroy records.³¹ Records

minutes of junta sessions, storing the original, and circulating a copy to each commander in chief following authentication of the record. While scholarly access to these records was difficult (the legislative archive) when not impossible (the minutes), the fact of their existence was in the public record in the norms regulating legislative procedures and the military junta. See, Article 30, *Decreto-Ley 991, Diario Oficial*, January 3, 1976; and Article 3, *Acuerdo de la Junta, Diario Oficial*, August 20, 1981. The published ruling's of the *Tribunal Constitucional* after 1981 also made reference to the junta minutes, listing the minutes of specific junta sessions among the antecedents that the court received for its review of the constitutionality of the regime's organic constitutional laws. These extracts were made available to this author at the tribunal during 1992.

³⁰It should be noted that in at least two instances civilians had access to important regime records while the dictatorship in question remained in power. In Brazil, as part of the implementation of president João Figueiredo's 1979 amnesty, lawyers for political prisoners were given access to *Supremo Tribunal Militar* archive to allow them to include the appropriate documentation from military court proceedings on behalf of their clients. Once these lawyers realized that they stood before a wealth of secret information on the organization of repression, a small group of human right's lawyers, in cooperation with the church, organized and effected the clandestine duplication of the entire archive (da Silva Catela 2002, 25-38). This operation, completed in 1983, provided the basis for the 1985 publication on torture, *Brasil, Nunca Mais*. In Chile, on the other hand, the military government made public the minutes of the civilian advisory committee, the *Comisión Ortuzar*, that produced the first draft of the constitution and provided constitutional counsel to the junta from 1973-1977. These minutes have been available in Chilean law school libraries since the mid-1980s.

³¹ Opportunity may be just as significant as the decision to destroy records. There are many historical examples, particularly from WWII, of contingent events, such as the imminent collapse of a military position or even the reluctance of archivists to destroy their own records, saving specific Soviet and Nazi archives from unexecuted orders of destruction. Thus, the Smolensk Communist Party archive was saved from destruction by retreating Soviet officials in July 1941 when the German Army captured the town before officials could destroy these local records (Grimsted 1995, 19). Similarly, the U.S. Army seized the German Foreign Ministry archive in April 1945 after reluctant archivists had failed to carry out orders to destroy it (Lambert 1959, 190-191). Both archives later

produced by authoritarian regimes will be preserved either intentionally, if autocratic powerholders decide that later access to specific records is not damaging or that they can protect sensitive records from publicity, or unintentionally, if other actors intervene and prevent the destruction of records. Moments of regime change, therefore may involve the destruction of records, but they may equally involve their preservation.

Obviously, any documents that are preserved can only inform scholarly analyses of dictatorship if they become available to the public. This issue of access involves a number of factors, which undoubtedly vary across cases and transitions. These include: whether documents of authoritarian regimes are secluded from or held within official records systems, statutory norms delaying the opening of official and classified records, and the political, rather than scholarly, motives that often drive declassification.

On the first factor, not only may official papers be held in private hands by high-level former officials, but state institutions, particularly the military and intelligence agencies, may be able to retain records – by legal mandate or *de facto* -- and prevent their transfer to any official records office. In many instances, these acts of retention are also secret, as generally such institutions do not publish a register of the record groups that

became available to scholars. Parts of the Smolensk archive were taken by the U.S. Army in 1945, secretly retained from the USSR, and analyzed by Merle Fainsod during the early 1950s. Fainsod used the fragments of the archive to produce one of the only Cold War studies of Communist Party operation based on primary – albeit fragmentary-- Soviet records (Fainsod 1958). On the odyssey of the Slomensk archives and their use for anti-Communist purposes, first by the Nazi's and then by the United States, see Grimsted 1995. Lambert 1959 discusses the Nazi records, their microfilming by the occupying powers, and their release for public research. For a sense of the strategic importance that belligerent states place upon enemy archives, the extent of archive plunder during WWII, and the on-going international problems created by the non-restitution of seized official state papers, see Grimsted (1997, 1998b). Another example of a contingent event possibly saving a set of records from destruction was the occupation of the Berlin offices of the German Democratic Republic state security police (Stasi) by demonstrators during the winter of 1989-1990.

they have retained or secluded.³² When records are thus withheld, the public may naturally doubt that archives exist and records may be forthcoming, if at all, only once political conditions allow their contents to be effectively demanded in struggles to resolve ongoing legacies of dictatorship, such as the fate of the victims of repression.³³

Privatization of public papers, on the other hand, may be a double-edged sword: although the retention of papers by former officials produces gaps in the public record, under some circumstances scholars may have easier access to privately held papers and this access may subsequently contribute to the same documents later becoming publicly available.³⁴

In this regard, declassification and access to authoritarian records may have more

³² As one analyst of British intelligence archives (Wark 1992, 196) notes, such procedures allow “departments to be secretive about their secret material.” In Chile, for example, shortly after the 1988 plebiscite, the military junta enacted legislation that exempted military and military government records from standing procedures for archival of state records and authorized the armed forces to retain or dispose of these documents according to Ministry of Defense and institutional regulations (*Ley 18771, Diario Oficial*, 17 January 1989). Observers regularly cite this law as proof that the military destroyed all records pertaining to the military dictatorship. However, in fact we do not know how this authority was used, particularly as the holdings in the *Biblioteca del Congreso* disconfirm allegations of blanket destruction. To what extent records remain secluded within military installations is unknown.

³³ The opening of military archives on repression in October 2004 became a major, ongoing political issue in Brazil, and to-date has involved the resignation of a Minister of Defense and legal conflicts pitting the executive and the judiciary. In Chile access to information held by the military regarding the fate of the disappeared has been a recurrent demand, which to-date has stopped at voluntary provision by the armed forces, most recently of mis-information by the Army. In South America, the opening of archives from the authoritarian period has been synonymous with the recovery of archives pertaining to the organization of repression.

³⁴ This sequence access via privately-held papers followed by pressure for public access occurred with the *Actas de la Honorable Junta de Gobierno*, the secret minutes of the Chilean military junta. In late 1992, after librarians at the *Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional* repeatedly denied holding these materials, this author was given access to these minutes by a retired, high-ranking military officer who held a set— by law, at least five copies of these documents were produced. Subsequently, the minutes became available at the library after scholars who had read my research pressured the Chilean Congress for access. As I discovered towards the end of my field research, the minutes had been held all along by the library (Barros 2002, 6-7).

to do with political factors following the termination of a dictatorship than with legal norms that regulate the number of years that secret documents are closed to the public. The most favorable circumstances, at least in the short run, for opening of authoritarian archives appear to be: first, that the institutions that provided the basis for authoritarian power be either destroyed or disorganized in the process of regime change; and, second, that the successor regime be strongly antagonistic to former authoritarian powerholders and see political or symbolic gain in exposing the “crimes” of the vanquished regime.

This scenario, which might be termed “victor’s access,” appears to explain the considerable differences in post-authoritarian availability of archives separating the post-Soviet explosion of declassification and the extremely limited opening of archives after dictatorship in Latin America: Boris Yeltsin essentially nationalized the CPSU archive after outlawing the party in 1991 and selectively combed the archive to build his legal case against the CPSU, whereas no post-transition Latin American president has shown any comparable political interest—let alone the nerve—in similarly confiscating archives held by armed forces which, even when greatly weakened by military failure, as in Argentina, continued to stand as institutions with significant coercive capabilities.

From a scholarly perspective, such politically-motivated declassification, though a bounty of riches in the short term, may not be ideal over the long run.³⁵ Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the early-1990’s wave of declassification in Russia has allowed

³⁵Not only may “victor’s access” disorganize archives, but once the immediate political interest wanes commitment to declassification and financial support for archives may also subside. These vicissitudes can halt the opening of files and force archives to resort to fees and publishing agreements to stay afloat, both subordinate equal access and non-selective declassification to the imperatives of money. These issues are often raised in discussions of Russian declassification during the 1990s. See, for example, Grimsted 1998a and M. 1993. On the archives of other Eastern European communist parties, see van Rossun 1997.

scholars to study facets of Soviet politics and society that were unthinkable a decade before the dissolution of the Soviet Union.³⁶ In those cases where the institutions that controlled the authoritarian state survived the return to civilian rule, as in the Latin American military dictatorships, even two decades after the return to civilian rule no comparable opening of dictatorial state archives has occurred.

Conclusion

Must we conclude, then, that the study of dictatorships, particularly the operation and constitution of their inner ruling circles, is blocked because the documentation necessary to penetrate beyond the veil of secrecy and appearances remains unavailable, especially for the Latin American cases? Must scholars renounce eventual access to the range of documentation that the Latin American militaries undoubtedly produced during their years in power?

Although, the dramatic differences in the scope of declassification after regime change in Eastern Europe and the limited access to records in Latin America might suggest that an additional cost of negotiated transitions is the restriction of the historical record, such conclusions may be too hasty. First, contrary to commonsensical views that specific dictatorships did not produce records, this study has shown this notion to be untenable: rule, authoritarian or democratic, in modern societies produces records. Second, although it is also widely believed that Latin American military's destroyed their archives, recent conflicts in Brazil and Chile over access to military records regarding the victims of repression, as well as the availability in Chile of a significant part of the military junta's legislative archive and of archives relating to repression in Argentina,

³⁶ For discussions of the impact of archival materials on recent Soviet studies, see Fitzpatrick 2004 and Kotkin 2002.

Brazil, and Paraguay, suggest that the key problem may not be the destruction of records but the capacity of the military to seclude archives from official national archive systems.

In this regard, again, secrecy shrouds our knowledge of what is missing – the extent to which documents were destroyed prior to transitions rather than hidden away by the military is a question we still cannot answer with any degree of certainty. Whether authoritarian records, particularly records pertaining to the fate of the disappeared, ever become a part of the public realm probably will turn on two factors: demands for the publicity of records and time. First, only as long as the recovery of military archives is a political issue is there any chance of their retrieval – so far only human right's organizations have raised this demand. Second, the passage of time ought to facilitate military acquiescence to transferring their archives to national archive systems. As successive retirements and promotions clean the ranks of officers and soldiers implicated in human rights abuses, officers in active service will increasingly have nothing to fear from publicity. If this is the case, time will have rendered the secret unnecessary for the armed forces as institutions.

This effect of time also points to a paradox in the study of dictatorships. Dictatorships are most likely to be studied while they are in power, that is, when scholars have the least access to the documentation needed to make sense of internal power configurations. Perversely, once time may have eased the constraints blocking declassification and access, scholarly interest in dictatorship is likely to also have waned. Thus, authoritarian regime secrecy and disciplinary trends in political science contrive to make dictatorships poorly studied. The revival of interest in the comparative study of authoritarian regimes stands to benefit from confronting the many problems that stand

before the study of regimes that don't want to be studied.

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