

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Secrecy games, power, and resistance in global politics

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## Abstract

In contrast to a view of secrecy as a tool of statecraft, where the game of ‘covering/uncovering’ dominates as the central way of interpreting secrecy’s power, we set out ‘secrecy games’ as an approach for understanding secrecy’s power and influence. To do so, we offer a set of three games to illustrate the more varied ways that secrecy operates and draw attention to the ways in which non-state actors use secrecy and shape its effects. In particular, we offer an analysis of: (1) the secrecy games of tunnelling in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the role of mobility as part of secrecy; (2) the secrecy game of camouflage and how stowaways blend in to facilitate access to global shipping routes; and (3) the secrecy game of maze-running and maze-making within urban warfare. Drawing these together, we show how secrecy involves a wider set of actors, practices, and associated knowledge–(un)making strategies than currently understood within International Relations. In turn, this expanded understanding of secrecy helps to make sense of the more complex ways in which secrecy is presented, used, resisted, and transformed – including and especially as a force that limits sovereign power – and, therefore, as central to what shapes global politics.

**Keywords:** politics of knowledge; resistance; secrecy; secrecy games; security

## Introduction

Secrecy, as we contend, makes the world go round. With whom we share information, how we share that information, what steps we take to limit sharing, or to encourage or even demand it, what we recognise as secrecy or not, even what we perceive as useful secrecy and the values, economies, and pleasures associated with secrecy are all recurrent features of our world, shaping our relations and engagements on scales from personal to global, from everyday to exceptional. In other words, secrecy is an essential feature of politics within states, between states, and in the relations between states and other actors. Yet to date, International Relations as a discipline has only marginally engaged with secrecy as a concept and set of practices.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>International Relations disciplinary journals have, for example, published a limited number of articles that speak directly to secrecy as the central focus or concept, most of which have been published recently, and in connection with one research group, SPIN. These include Austin Carson, ‘Facing off and saving face: Covert intervention and escalation management in the Korean War’, *International Organization*, 70:1 (2016), pp. 103–31; Marieke De Goede and Mara Wesseling, ‘Secrecy and security in transatlantic terrorism finance tracking’, *Journal of European Integration*, 39:3 (2017), pp. 253–69; William Walters and Alex Luscombe, ‘Hannah Arendt and the art of secrecy; or, the fog of Cobra Mist’, *International Political Sociology*, 11:1 (2017), pp. 5–20; Allison Carnegie and Austin Carson, ‘The spotlight’s harsh glare: Rethinking publicity and international order’, *International Organization*, 72:3 (2018), pp. 627–57; Berthold Rittberger and Klaus H. Goetz, ‘Secrecy in Europe’, *West European Politics*, 41:4 (2018), pp. 825–45; Elspeth Van Veenen, ‘Secrecy’s subjects: Special operators in the US shadow war’, *European Journal of International Security*, 4:3 (2019), pp. 386–414 [SPIN]; Owen David Thomas, ‘Security in the balance:

Part of this relative lack of engagement may be explained by a wider cultural understanding of secrecy as following a ‘privative’ logic, limited to its effects in terms of a negation or absence.<sup>2</sup> Rather than being the object of inquiry in itself, secrecy at best is treated as a methodological issue, perhaps productive but still belying an intuitive sense that secrecy stands in the way of a search for ‘underlying’ facts and truths.<sup>3</sup>

Where International Relations does take secrecy seriously, engagement often takes the form of a narrow conception of secrecy as a ‘tool’ for concealing the ‘real’ locus of power – secrets.<sup>4</sup> Within this understanding, secrets are thought to be the ontological locus of that power; the information secreted away has an intrinsic value ascribed to it, containing some quality that makes it valuable and self-evidently in need of being secret.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the existing literature that does centre secrecy sees it as part of that which shapes state action through, for example, the constructions of discourses of ‘self’ and ‘other’ or of national security imaginaries.<sup>6</sup> In other words, these literatures consistently (re)centre the state. Whether concerning secrecy in connection with World War II, the Cold War, or the Global War on Terror, for example, the literature, even in work that focuses on secrecy as relational, puts much emphasis on the practices of states and state agents including politicians, intelligence officials, double agents, whistle-blowers, or special operators.<sup>7</sup> Secrecy is thus approached as an act of statecraft, an *arcana imperii*,<sup>8</sup> selected either as part of a ‘rational choice’ made by states consciously and deliberately in negotiating their place in the global order or as part of a broader discourse through which state actors (re)produce this global order.

Yet, as Tom Lundborg has argued, while secrecy is a necessary part of statecraft, there are things that ‘sovereign apparatuses of security and intelligence agencies cannot, in the end, control’.<sup>9</sup> There are limits to sovereign power. And while Lundborg focuses on the ways in which state security actors, such as double agents, are always in the process of being constituted as an example of these limitations, we suggest these limits are also a product of the more direct presence of other actors and their social relations. State and inter-state secrecy practices do not take place in a vacuum. Rather than trying to explain secrecy regimes (or the struggles to maintain secrets) in terms of

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How Britain tried to keep its Iraq War secrets’, *Security Dialogue*, 51:1 (2020), pp. 77–95 [SPIN]; Lisa Stampnitzky, ‘Truth and consequences? Reconceptualizing the politics of exposure’, *Security Dialogue*, 51:6 (2020), pp. 597–613 [SPIN]; Ben Jaffel, Alvina Hoffmann Hager, Oliver Kearns, and Sebastian Larsson, ‘Collective discussion: Toward critical approaches to intelligence as a social phenomenon’, *International Political Sociology*, 14:3 (2020), pp. 323–44 [SPIN]; Tom Lundborg, ‘Secrecy and subjectivity: Double agents and the dark underside of the international system’, *International Political Sociology*, 15:4 (2021), pp. 443–59; Oliver Kearns, ‘Forget what you hear: Careless talk, espionage and ways of listening in on the British secret state’, *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 301–25 [SPIN].

<sup>2</sup>William Walters, *State Secrecy and Security: Refiguring the Covert Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 18; Georg Simmel, ‘The sociology of secrecy and of secret societies’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 11:4 (1906), pp. 441–98; Koen Vermeir, ‘Openness versus secrecy? Historical and historiographical remarks’, *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 45:2 (2012), pp. 165–88.

<sup>3</sup>Instead, as Bosma de Goede and Pallister-Wilkins recognise, as a research strategy, ‘documenting and analysing where secretacies are, how they function and who is involved, can be revealing in itself’: Marieke De Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (eds), *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>For an overview of the ‘secrecy as tool’ literature, see Allison Carnegie, ‘Secrecy in international relations and foreign policy’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 24 (2021), pp. 213–33. For an overview of the limitations of ‘tool’ conceptions within IR, see Marysia Zalewski, ‘All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up’, in Marysia Zalewski, Steve Smith, and Ken Booth (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 340–4.

<sup>5</sup>Mark Fenster, ‘Disclosure’s effects: WikiLeaks and transparency’, *Iowa L. Rev.*, 97 (2011), pp. 753–808 (p. 757).

<sup>6</sup>Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s subjects’; Lundborg, ‘Secrecy and subjectivity’; Walters, *State Secrecy and Security*.

<sup>7</sup>The emerging literature on whistle-blowers and leakers is perhaps an exception to this as these actors are positioned as both within and outside the state. See Kaeten Mistry and Hannah Gurman (eds), *Whistleblowing Nation: The History of National Security Disclosures and the Cult of State Secrecy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

<sup>8</sup>Eva Horn, ‘Logics of political secrecy’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28:7–8 (2011), pp. 103–22.

<sup>9</sup>Lundborg, ‘Secrecy and subjectivity’, p. 457.

overdetermined responses to external factors such as globalisation or crisis,<sup>10</sup> we need analytical frameworks that can detail both *how* the limits of sovereign control ‘play out’, as much as descriptions of *where* this limit of sovereign control plays out, so as to be able to account for change or contingency in secrecy regimes, practices, and identities over time as well as their wider impact.

Therefore, to account for the important place of secrecy in global politics and the under-explored limits of sovereign state power with respect to secrecy, we firstly (re)turn to the more interdisciplinary literature on secrecy, with its focus on social relations and their wider set of secrecy actors. However, we also suggest a turn within both Secrecy Studies and International Relations’ engagement with secrecy to include considerations of resistance as part of secrecy’s relations and effects. As we contend, this can help researchers understand not only how non-state actors ‘play’ with and are shaped by secrecy in relation to state practices, but also how these interactions are a force for altering the world.

First, alongside existing International Relations secrecy literature sits the interdisciplinary literature of Secrecy Studies.<sup>11</sup> This work most often explores secrecy in relation to states, especially the US state, but is attentive to a wider set of actors, their practices, and their social relations, including religious and corporate ones, and the ways in which they enrol individuals into their secrecy worlds.<sup>12</sup> This growing literature also invites consideration of how secrecy itself takes multiple forms and is mutable as social and political relations take form and change.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, just as International Relations has been invited to play closer attention to silence,<sup>14</sup> transparency,<sup>15</sup> and ignorance<sup>16</sup> – cognate areas of research to Secrecy Studies – Secrecy Studies literature draws attention to the ways in which secrecy manifests in more complex and powerful ways, which can help International Relations scholarship deepen its understanding of the different ways that secrecy makes a difference, beyond the dominant framing of secrecy as a ‘tool’ or as a feature of self/other constructions.

Secrecy Studies, particularly in its engagement with security, however, continues to reproduce too narrow an understanding of secrecy as the preserve of states and therefore, as we argue, overdetermining their capacity to control events.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in response, by drawing on literatures

<sup>10</sup>Richard J. Aldrich, ‘Beyond the vigilant state: Globalisation and intelligence’, *Review of International Studies*, 35:4 (2009), pp. 889–902; Richard J. Aldrich and Daniela Richterova, ‘Ambient accountability: Intelligence services in Europe and the decline of state secrecy’, *West European Politics*, 41:4 (2018), pp. 1003–24.

<sup>11</sup>Susan Maret, ‘The charm of secrecy: Secrecy and society as secrecy studies’, *Secrecy and Society*, 1:1 (2016), pp. 1–28 (p. 1); Clare Birchall, ‘Six answers to the question “What is Secrecy Studies?”’, *Secrecy and Society*, 1:1 (2016), pp. 29–42.

<sup>12</sup>For example, Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); Jana Costas and Christopher Grey, *Secrecy at Work: The Hidden Architecture of Organizational Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Hugh B. Urban, *Secrecy: Silence, Power, and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

<sup>13</sup>Horn, ‘Logics of political secrecy’; Walters, *State Secrecy and Security*.

<sup>14</sup>Sophia Dingli, ‘We need to talk about silence: Re-examining silence in International Relations theory’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:4 (2015), pp. 721–42.

<sup>15</sup>Daniel R. McCarthy and Matthew Fluck, ‘The concept of transparency in International Relations: Towards a critical approach’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:2 (2017), pp. 416–40.

<sup>16</sup>Claudia Aradau, ‘Assembling (non) knowledge: Security, law, and surveillance in a digital world’, *International Political Sociology*, 11:4 (2017), pp. 327–42.

<sup>17</sup>Secrecy studies literature that focuses on security has emerged, rather than from within International Relations, instead from sociology, anthropology, geography, cultural studies, and organisational studies, including most notably Hugh Gusterson, *Nuclear Rites, a Weapons Laboratory at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Joseph Masco, ‘Lie detectors: On secrets and hypersecurity in Los Alamos’, *Public Culture*, 14:3 (2002), pp. 441–67; Jack Bratich, ‘Public secrecy and immanent security: A strategic analysis’, *Cultural Studies*, 20:4–5 (2006), pp. 493–511; Trevor Paglen, ‘Goatsucker: Toward a spatial theory of state secrecy’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28:5 (2010), pp. 759–771; William Walters, ‘Secrecy, publicity and the milieu of security’, *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 5:3 (2015), pp. 287–90; Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Alex Luscombe, ‘Deception declassified: The social organisation of cover storying in a secret intelligence operation’, *Sociology*, 52:2 (2018), pp. 400–15; Oliver Kearns, ‘Beyond enclosure: Military bases and the spatial dynamics of secrecy’, *Geoforum*, 127 (2021), pp. 12–22; Costas and Grey, *Secrecy at Work*.

associated with everyday resistance and infrapolitics,<sup>18</sup> we introduce a focus on resistance actors as key secrecy actors and the analytical framework of ‘secrecy games’, where the play *between* actors as part of secrecy games better captures the extensive and central power of secrecy as a force in global politics in a more diverse set of ways. Building on William Walters’s exploration of the secrecy politics of state–citizen games associated with Freedom of Information requests,<sup>19</sup> and on Michel de Certeau’s secrecy play,<sup>20</sup> we show how the social relations of ‘games’ facilitate a different understanding of the power of secrecy in global politics.

International Relations as a discipline, however, has also long recognised the importance of other actors, including the role of actors that resist state actions, in the making of global (dis)order.<sup>21</sup> Following this, we, therefore, also suggest that to understand the power of secrecy means paying closer attention to non-state actors and specifically to those who resist state secrecy both in counter-secrecy positions, or, as we focus on here, in the co-production of secrecy. By focusing on the ‘infrapolitics’ of secrecy, the politics of those on the margins, hidden and away from the conventional understandings of the centre of power, we can understand the ways in which power is made and exercised not only through domination but through acts of resistance as well; a dialectical<sup>22</sup> or even a ‘transversal’<sup>23</sup> process with multiple networked actors. As Louiza Odysseos argues, ‘obscuring the agency of “the governed” in struggles against socio-economic [political and violent] disposability’ is to fundamentally underestimate the power at work in these struggles.<sup>24</sup> In other words, secrecy in its composition<sup>25</sup> or choreographies,<sup>26</sup> and therefore states and knowledge that are built from this, is also produced from the acts of resistance by non-state actors.

More specifically, we argue that through secrecy games, we can understand the power of secrecy as functioning through more complex arrangements that rely on the interplay of dominant *and* resistant actors, which necessitates shifting from a focus on one actor and their information control

<sup>18</sup>James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Fat, ‘Through the wire: Relations of power and relations of violence’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 34:1 (2005), pp. 1–24; James C. Scott, ‘The infrapolitics of subordinate groups’, in Louise Amoore (ed.), *The Global Resistance Reader* (Oxford: Psychology Press, 2005), pp. 66–73; Dimitrios Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson, and Vassilis Tsianos, *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2008); Carl Death, ‘Counter-conducts: A Foucauldian analytics of protest’, *Social Movement Studies*, 9:3 (2010), pp. 235–51; Antje Ellermann, ‘Undocumented migrants and resistance in the liberal state’, *Politics and Society*, 38:3 (2010), pp. 408–29; Howard Caygill, *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Louiza Odysseos, ‘Human rights, self-formation and resistance in struggles against disposability: Grounding Foucault’s “theorizing practice” of counter-conduct in Bhopal’, *Global Society*, 30:2 (2016), pp. 179–200; Mona Lilja and Stellan Vinthagen, ‘Dispersed resistance: Unpacking the spectrum and properties of glaring and everyday resistance’, *Journal of Political Power*, 11:2 (2018), pp. 211–29; Saerom Han, ‘Securitization of the unemployed and counter-conductive resistance in Tunisia’, *Security Dialogue*, 52:2 (2021), pp. 156–73; Mona Lilja, ‘The definition of resistance’, *Journal of Political Power*, 15:2 (2022), pp. 202–20; Jef Huysmans and João P. Nogueira, ‘Against “resistance”? Towards a conception of differential politics in international political sociology’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 15:1 (2023), pp. 2–21, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661231185569>.

<sup>19</sup>William Walters, ‘A note on secrecy games’, Roundtable Presentation, European International Studies Association Annual Conference, Athens, 2 September 2022.

<sup>20</sup>Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 97–8.

<sup>21</sup>David Held and Anthony McGrew, ‘The end of the old order? Globalization and the prospects for world order’, *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 219–43; Roger MacGinty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Louiza Odysseos, Carl Death, and Helle Malmvig, ‘Interrogating Michel Foucault’s counter-conduct: Theorising the subjects and practices of resistance in global politics’, *Global Society*, 30:2 (2016), pp. 151–6; Elise Féron and Keith Krause, ‘Power/resistance: External actors, local agency, and the Burundian peacebuilding project’, *European Journal of International Security*, 7:4 (2022), pp. 508–30.

<sup>22</sup>Jack Barbalet, ‘Power and resistance’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 36:4 (1985), pp. 531–48.

<sup>23</sup>Huysmans and Nogueira, ‘Against “resistance”?’.

<sup>24</sup>Odysseos, ‘Human rights’, p. 183.

<sup>25</sup>Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s subjects’.

<sup>26</sup>Horn, ‘Logics of political secrecy’; de Goede and Wesseling, ‘Secrecy and Security’.

to a focus on secrecy as knowledge-*un*making through social relations between actors, and thus requiring a shift away from intentional ‘containment logics’ of secrecy.<sup>27</sup> In other words, secrecy functions not only through static logics that are ‘top-down’, state-driven and determined, but through the interplay of resistant actors whose changing movements and flows, more diverse set of practices, and their own expert knowledges contribute to producing new forms of secrecy and attendant structures. Secrecy is a process that emerges over time through the interaction of the ‘players’, both dominant and resistant. Through the analytic of secrecy games, we can, therefore, expand our understanding of secrecy’s power, its key players, its generative effects, and its influences in the world.

To make the case for the utility of this framework and our argument for moving beyond the existing state-centric understanding of secrecy and its limitations, we provide an overview of secrecy games as a concept and set out three models of the secrecy game which we explain in relation to three illustrative examples. In particular, we focus on the secrecy games of tunnelling in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and how movement and mobility feature as part of the game; the secrecy game of camouflage and the ways in which stowaways blend in to facilitate access to global shipping routes; and the secrecy game of maze-running and maze-making, exploring the secrecy politics of urban warfare and complex landscapes. While the cases are used illustratively here, they are based on more extensive projects, and with attention to the methodological and ethical challenges of researching the infrapolitical.<sup>28</sup>

In so doing, this article, therefore, makes four contributions to an understanding of secrecy in International Relations. First, we make a case for diversifying the actors that we take to be politically salient in our explanations for (the limits of) state secrecy. Moving beyond state-centric accounts of global politics has long been a feature of International Relations, and we seek to apply that insight to explorations of how secrecy matters. Second, in paying attention to resistance actors, we argue that to understand secrecy’s effects, we need to consider a greater range of spatial formations and practices other than covering-over or containment logics that have dominated secrecy-security accounts. Resistance actors, like dominant actors, use flows, complexity, and camouflage to produce and maintain secrecy, and, to date, International Relations has not paid sufficient attention to these spatial forms and practices. Third, we suggest a new analytic framework for studying secrecy and its effects: ‘secrecy games’. The ways in which resistant actors engage in secrecy as an interplay with dominant actors are a significant force in global politics for its generative effects and facilitate a shift away from the more agential or intentional accounts of secrecy in global politics. It not only takes a vast deal more effort and power to keep secrets secret than presently recognised, but the effect of this power is productive, as Joseph Masco and William Walters argue,<sup>29</sup> in important and interesting ways. We argue that paying attention to secrecy games as a locus for ‘political explanation’ for events in the world<sup>30</sup> can help International Relations attune to these forces and account for change in ways that can only enrich our explanations. Finally, by bringing these insights together – secrecy, resistance actors, and secrecy games – we suggest an important way to understand state power and its limitations.

<sup>27</sup> We therefore share an aim with Kearns, ‘Forget what you hear’ to move ‘beyond enclosure’, but rather than focusing on the social (re)production of ‘mystical’ impenetrable spaces that secrecy actors such as states rely on, we focus on moving *beyond* enclosure to look at how other forms of spatiality matter as part of secrecy actor’s repertoire, what Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s subjects’, has called an *arcantum* (or arcanon).

<sup>28</sup> Amaha Senu, ‘The global assemblage of multi-centred stowaway governance’, PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2018; Elspeth Van Veeren, ‘The shoot house: On the spatial power of mazes in security discourses’, in Faye Donnelly and Tilman Schwarze (eds), *Security and Space* (Bristol University Press, 2025). See also, de Goede, Bosma and Pallister-Wilkins, *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research*.

<sup>29</sup> Masco, ‘Lie detectors’; Walters, *State Secrecy and Security*.

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Mitchell, ‘The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics’, *American Political Science Review*, 85:1 (1991), pp. 77–96.

Overall, through three empirical case studies – tunnelling, stowing away, and urban warfare – this paper makes the case for how – rather than just another field of exceptional security politics – secrecy (games) can be understood as one realm where these international forces ‘play out’. By attuning to the productive role of secrecy games, this article, therefore, aims to thicken our understandings of (the limits of) sovereign power within global politics as well as adding to the growing calls for secrecy to be considered a key concept within the discipline.<sup>31</sup>

### From state secrecy to secrecy games

To explore resistance actors and their relationship with state and other dominant actors as shaped by and through secrecy, we turn to the analogy of ‘games’ in the sense employed by Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>32</sup> and secrecy ‘play’ by Michel de Certeau.<sup>33</sup> Like William Walters, we do not do so to trivialise what is taking place, but to point out that even very dangerous situations involve multiple players, patterns, and rules that often govern these social relations.<sup>34</sup> The ‘game’ of ‘Russian roulette’, as Walters points out, is a game, but one that is highly dangerous. In other words, in addition to conceiving of secrecy as a ‘choreography’<sup>35</sup> or ‘composition’<sup>36</sup> that shapes its relations and draws attention to its material-discursive elements, we invite consideration of the emergence and shifting assemblages associated with the rules and patterns of secrecy games. This enables us to expand the focus to include consideration of the resistance to state secrecy that takes place, to note how state and resistance actors *together* ‘play’ these games and, in so doing, generate secrecy in a greater variety of ways.<sup>37</sup>

More specifically, games, as in Wittgensteinian ‘language games’, as explained by Karin Fierke, are ‘a set of practices based on rules within which [agents, actions and objects] are constituted in relation to one another.’<sup>38</sup> They are patterns of social behaviour with shared sets of assumptions, frames of reference, and end goals. For example, within a chess game, the identities and functions of the pieces are only made logical through understanding the rules and purpose of the game: ‘[Any] move made within a game of chess can be understood to be an expression of following or breaking the rules of chess, since these rules prescribe the boundaries of what can reasonably be said about it or done within it’; to violate the rules would be ‘cheating’ and possibly punishable, to apply the rules of another game would be ‘nonsensical.’<sup>39</sup> And these rules that make up the specific game are repeated by different participants who may never know or come into direct contact with each other.<sup>40</sup> For Fierke and others, therefore, games are an existing feature of international politics in that they shape the rituals and conventions around diplomatic relations, the conventions of war,

<sup>31</sup>Allison Carnegie and Austin Carson, ‘The spotlight’s harsh glare: Rethinking publicity and international order’, *International Organization*, 72:3 (2018), pp. 627–57; Austin Carson, *Secret Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Austin Carson, ‘Facing off and saving face: Covert intervention and escalation management in the Korean War’, *International Organization*, 70:1 (2016), pp. 103–31; Walters, *State Secrecy and Security*.

<sup>32</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, revised 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 [1953]).

<sup>33</sup>De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, pp. 97–8.

<sup>34</sup>Walters, ‘A note on secrecy games’.

<sup>35</sup>Horn, ‘Logics of political secrecy’; de Goede and Wesseling (2017).

<sup>36</sup>Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s subjects’.

<sup>37</sup>Like Huysman and Nogueira, ‘Against “resistance”?’, we also acknowledge that these secrecy games often involve more than two ‘players’, so the driving force is not exclusively a dialectical one, but far more complex, for example involving multiple overlapping resistance actors who may draw on or be influenced by ‘transversal’ ones. For the purposes of this paper, however, we have chosen to focus on the dominant/resistant relationship as if it is a binary, though with the possibility of future research looking to develop and further explore these heavily complex relationships.

<sup>38</sup>Karin M. Fierke, ‘Multiple identities, interfacing games: The social construction of Western action in Bosnia’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:4 (1996), pp. 467–97 (p. 469).

<sup>39</sup>Fierke, ‘Multiple identities, interfacing games’.

<sup>40</sup>Karin M. Fierke, ‘Wittgenstein and international relations theory’, in Cerwyn Moore and Chris Farrands (eds), *International Relations Theory and Philosophy: Interpretive Dialogues* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 83–94 (p. 89).

trade negotiations, or nuclear deterrence, for example.<sup>41</sup> Finally, these games are not necessarily fixed but can shift and evolve over time as technologies and norms change, as they are played in different contexts, but also as a result of how players interact, adapt to limited or new resources, and/or subvert rules, or invent new ones.<sup>42</sup>

While the usefulness of ‘games’ as a concept for understanding ‘public’ international politics, such as diplomacy, has been explored, secrecy games, as we argue, are also a significant feature of our world. Moreover, rather than static and state-led practices, these secrecy games, as we contend, centre social relations and patterns that often include non-state actors and which ‘play’ with the ‘web of tactics’, the composition or choreographies involving the binaries of hiding/unhiding, concealing/revealing, visible/invisible, covering/uncovering, sensing/unsensing, and knowing/unknowing. Or, as Michel de Certeau explained:

Secrecy is not only the state of a thing that escapes from or reveals itself to knowledge. It designates a play between actors. It circumscribes a terrain of strategic relations between the one trying to discover the secret and the one keeping it, or between the one who is supposed to know it and the one who is assumed not to know it.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, states are not the only actors with the power to set the ‘rules’ of secrecy games. As William Walters explains, the ‘citizen-secrecy’ game of the state concealing documentary evidence of its activities and of citizens using freedom of information request systems to access this evidence has emerged with seemingly fixed laws, regulations, and identities, but these are constantly iterating in a cat-and-mouse play of procedure and counter-procedure between state and the citizens, journalists, researchers, and others that challenge the state. For example, documents released under Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests in the United States have traditionally been redacted with the emblematic black lines and boxes such that, at times, those seeking to read these documents have succeeded in ‘reading between the lines’ using the redactions as clues in successful legal challenges.<sup>44</sup> The creation and use by the US state of new digital technologies, however, is now producing a ‘whiting out’ of documents, making efforts to detect these redactions even before ‘decoding’ them all the more difficult.<sup>45</sup> That is until new technologies or approaches emerge.

Therefore, when we pay attention to these moves and counter-moves, we can see how secrecy as a set of practices, and even identities,<sup>46</sup> emerges as a product of these games.<sup>47</sup> A secrecy games approach, in other words, ‘reveals’ or draws fresh attention to the diverse and even pluralising actors, the interactions, the changing rules, and the ‘rival knowledges’<sup>48</sup> produced by secrecy. Studying secrecy as a game, therefore, enables a focus on secrecy in flux, as an emergent product of

<sup>41</sup> Fierke, ‘Wittgenstein and international relations theory’, p. 89; Amy Skonieczny, ‘Playing partners: Expectation, entanglement, and language games in US foreign policy’, *International Relations*, 29:1 (2015), pp. 69–95.

<sup>42</sup> Karin M. Fierke and Michael Nicholson, ‘Divided by a common language: Formal and constructivist approaches to games’, *Global Society*, 15:1 (2001), pp. 7–25 (p. 13).

<sup>43</sup> De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, p. 97.

<sup>44</sup> William Brennan, ‘The declassification engine’, *The New Yorker* (16 October 2013), available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-declassification-engine-reading-between-the-black-bars>; Anjali Nath, ‘Beyond the public eye: On FOIA documents and the visual politics of redaction’, *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies*, 14:1 (2014), pp. 21–8; Matthew Connolly, *The Declassification Engine: What History Reveals about America’s Top Secrets* (London: Penguin Random House, 2023).

<sup>45</sup> Kevin Walby and Alex Luscombe, ‘Freedom of information research and cultural studies: A subterranean affinity’, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 21:1 (2021), pp. 70–9.

<sup>46</sup> Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s subjects’; Lundborg, ‘Secrecy and subjectivity’.

<sup>47</sup> Walters, ‘A note on secrecy games’.

<sup>48</sup> Amaha Senu, ‘Stowing away via the cargo ship: Tracing governance, rival knowledges, and violence en route’, in Lorenzo Pezzani, Charles Heller, and William Walters (eds), *Viapolitics: Borders, Migration, and the Power of Locomotion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 84–104.

these secrecy games, subject to the movement and change, accident and contingency, across space and time, and less under the control of state actors than most often is presented within International Relations.

What we set out below is, therefore, a study of secrecy games in action, focusing on games that involve the play of ‘cat and mouse,’ ‘hide and seek’ of non-state actors as states and state-supported actors seek to secure borders and territory and non-state actors refuse and resist these acts. Just as James C. Scott documented the ways in which Karen populations in Burma or Maroon communities in the Caribbean sought to evade state control by evading state lines of sight, leading to distinctive ‘hill communities’ and ‘lowland communities’ and, therefore, playing a role in overall state formation,<sup>49</sup> we seek to document the ways in which three sets of resistance actors push back against state actors. As we demonstrate below, these games involve the negotiation of changing rules and patterns of encounters; they shift and adapt over time, and, owing to the ‘play’ of resistance actors as well as of state actors, involve the (re)production of competing, sometimes complementary, and sometimes collaborative compositions and choreographies of secrecy. They also do so through the involvement of multiple and overlapping forms of secrecy: through containment strategies, but also through dispersal, movement, and complexity. This in turn enables us to argue that secrecy, and therefore security, are far more fluid and non-linear than current work on secrecy in International Relations has emphasised to date. Rather than a view of secrecy as a state-imposed ‘top down’ and fixed strategic tool, using these examples, we highlight the opposite through the ‘games’ of secrecy and the different spatial and temporal ways in which secrecy ‘play’ occurs. As the rest of the paper will now contend, secrecy games are more generative, material-discursive, spatially varied, and temporally contingent than existing state-focused accounts suggest; this, in turn, underscores the contingency of state secrecy discourses.

### Secrecy game: Tunnelling

As our first example of a secrecy game, tunnels and tunnelling demonstrate a set of secrecy practices in which actors, practices, and objects are constituted in relation to one another, including crucially the role of resistance actors in shaping the ‘game’. Along with transport and storage, tunnels have a long history associated with warfare and with the illicit flow of goods and people across and within borders.<sup>50</sup> Assyrians used tunnels as part of their sieges, just as Romans did 2,000 years later. Medieval European siege warfare also featured tunnels as part of both offensive and defensive tactics, while pre-industrial historic smugglers’ tunnels, real and imagined, dot the landscape of the English coastline. Within modern times, tunnels have featured as part of resistance strategies associated with successive wars, including World War II (e.g. resistance fighters fighting Nazi occupation variously used the catacombs of Paris, as well as tunnels in the Netherlands and Odessa, while the Japanese resistance on the Island of Peleliu in 1944 included tunnelling), the Vietnam War (e.g. the Viet Cong’s use of hundreds of kilometres of tunnels between the Cambodian border and Saigon in the later stages of US occupation),<sup>51</sup> the Cold War (e.g. the 30 or so tunnels constructed under the Berlin Wall which were used to smuggle people from the Soviet occupation of East Berlin),<sup>52</sup> or those, more recently, used by ISIS in Iraq during the siege of

<sup>49</sup>Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

<sup>50</sup>Paul Springer, ‘Fighting under the earth: The history of tunnelling in warfare’, Foreign Policy Research Institute (23 April 2015), available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/04/fighting-under-the-earth-the-history-of-tunneling-in-warfare/>; Richard Platt, *Smuggling in the British Isles: A History* (Stroud: The History Press, 2011).

<sup>51</sup>Tom Mangold, and John Penycate, *The Tunnels of Cu Chi: A Remarkable Story of War in Vietnam* (London: Cassell, 2005).

<sup>52</sup>Jessica Camille Aguirre, ‘The story of the most successful tunnel escape in the history of the Berlin Wall’, *The Smithsonian Magazine* (7 November 2014), available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/most-successful-tunnel-escape-history-berlin-wall-180953268/>.

Mosul<sup>53</sup> or the tunnels used by Ukrainian military forces in the Azovstal steelworks in the city of Mariupol to resist Russian forces.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, tunnels continue to be used by smugglers across the United States–Mexico border, for example, or by environmental activists to prevent developments, such as those used by HS2 railway protestors in the UK who opposed the environmental costs associated with the new infrastructure.<sup>55</sup> Tunnels and tunnelling have been a feature of warfare for millennia.

Beyond being tools of state and non-state actors, these tunnels, and more specifically, the back and forth of tunnelling, detecting, obstructing, destroying, reusing, or co-opting tunnels, can be understood as a game. Tunnelling, and tunnel detecting, is a pattern of behaviour that is observable as moving from one set of actors and contexts to another. Tunnelling is a social practice with expectations around what it means to tunnel and what it means to use tunnels. Today, for example, there are professional ‘tunnellers’ in the form of engineers and engineering firms that specialise in tunnelling or detecting tunnels, including in security contexts. The US military, for example, is expanding its expertise in tunnelling and countering tunnels.<sup>56</sup> There are also social rules associated with tunnels. That is, while it is socially acceptable in most places to move through tunnels, to use tunnels for storage, to build tunnels, to work in them, etc., it is less socially acceptable to live in them, such that, for example, those on the margins of society may be consigned to a life living in tunnels.<sup>57</sup> And tunnels have emerged as holding an important place in our social imaginary in the form of the ‘underground’ as something counter-cultural and subversive.<sup>58</sup>

But as a practice, tunnelling is also important within and as a secrecy game, where the game centres movement and flow as a key component of its effectiveness. As Scott argues, mobility is a key strategy used to evade a state and its expansion.<sup>59</sup> Within this game, tunnellers, tunnel users, and tunnel detectors vie for control of these spaces and the objects that move within them. In other words, tunnels are repeatedly a site that reproduces the ‘cat and mouse’ game of hiding and seeking between tunnellers and those who oppose tunnelling. Owing to their materiality, tunnels present excellent hiding opportunities, as to detect tunnels or tunnelling either is labour intensive or requires specialist equipment. Tunnels are inherently difficult to detect as they pass ‘under’ what has come to be the ‘surface’ of daily lives, making them more obvious choices for those who seek to resist the state or conventional ways of living. And though tunnels may at first glance seem to ‘contain’ information as, like bunkers, they seem fixed and static, obscuring by covering over, instead, as we argue, it is the capacity of tunnels and tunnelling to facilitate flows and to flow themselves that lies at the heart of this form of secrecy game. In this regard, we, therefore, build on the work of Otero-Bahamon, Uribe, and Peñaranda-Currie on ‘insurgent infrastructures’ and how they make resistance illegible to the state through impermanence.<sup>60</sup> This also suggests that the tunnelling

<sup>53</sup>Amanda Erikson, ‘The Islamic State has tunnels everywhere. It’s making ISIS much harder to defeat’, *The Washington Post* (14 April 2017), available at: {<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/04/14/the-islamic-state-has-tunnels-everywhere-its-making-them-much-harder-to-defeat/>}.

<sup>54</sup>Benay Ozdemir, ‘Inside the Azovstal steelworks exists Mariupol’s last pocket of resistance against Russia’, *ABC News* (23 April 2022), available at: {<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-23/inside-azovstal-steelworks-last-stand-mariupol-ukraine-russia/101006624>}.

<sup>55</sup>BBC News, ‘HS2 protesters in Swynnerton claim tunnelling record’, *BBC News Online* (24 June 2022), available at: {<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-61921903>}.

<sup>56</sup>Walker Mills, ‘The elephant in the tunnel: Preparing to fight and win underground’, *Modern War Institute* (19 March 2019), available at: {<https://mwi.usma.edu/elephant-tunnel-preparing-fight-win-underground/>}; Springer, ‘Fighting under the earth’.

<sup>57</sup>Dan Hernandez, ‘The tunnel dwellers of Las Vegas: Where the city’s vices play out in the shadows’, *The Guardian* (14 September 2016), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/14/las-vegas-homeless-tunnel-dwellers-gambling-addiction>}.

<sup>58</sup>For example, see Lara Langer Cohen, *Going Underground: Race, Space, and the Subterranean in the Nineteenth-century United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

<sup>59</sup>Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 181.

<sup>60</sup>Silvia Otero-Bahamon, Simón Uribe, and Isabel Peñaranda-Currie, ‘Seeing like a guerrilla: The logic of infrastructure in the building of insurgent orders’, *Geoforum*, 133 (2022), pp. 198–207.

game is an example of where the spatialities of secrecy are more complicated than inside/outside relations. As spatial theorists have noted, space can be fluid,<sup>61</sup> complex,<sup>62</sup> three-dimensional,<sup>63</sup> and layered.<sup>64</sup> As Derek Denman argues, even the seemingly inert structures of fortresses and bunkers, ‘classic’ security structures, rely on subtle forms of mobility and more elaborate conceptions of spatiality such as depth than the construction of walls alone would initially suggest.<sup>65</sup> A closer examination of the use of tunnels by resistance actors underscores the power of spatialities beyond containment imaginaries.

Looking more specifically at the conflict over Israeli–Palestinian territory, for example, tunnels built by Hamas, the ‘Gaza Metro’, have emerged as a key feature of the conflict following the destruction of Gaza’s sea and airports and the imposition of tighter border controls by Israel. This includes a central role in connection with the most recent and intense developments in the conflict.<sup>66</sup> As Toufic Haddad suggests, ‘a tunnel incentive was born.’<sup>67</sup> As Hamas political leader Khaled Meshel said in a 2014 interview: ‘In light of the balance of power which shifted towards Israel, we had to be creative in finding innovative ways. The tunnels were one of our innovations.’<sup>68</sup> In other words, as licit flow routes were tightened, even eliminated by Israeli forces, illicit routes, especially through clandestine, subterranean tunnelling emerged in a ‘cat and mouse’ secrecy game where Gazans resisted by developing three different forms of tunnels – tunnels to transport smuggled goods to support the Gazan economy, to transport military forces associated with Hamas’s al-Qassam Brigades and its offensive actions, and to move and protect Hamas’s leadership from attack.<sup>69</sup> All of this required and supported the development of the tunnelling secrecy game. The tighter the restrictions, the more secret tunnels were built.<sup>70</sup>

Central to this secrecy game, and as illustrated by the Gazan tunnels, the game of tunnelling involves flows that facilitate secrecy in four ways. First, the emergence of tunnels and the flexibility in terms of when and where they emerge can be understood as part of their resistant, evasive secrecy flow. Just as in the cases of the East–West Germany tunnels and the tunnels along the United States–Mexico border, the openings of tunnels are hidden in non-descript houses or buildings, and these entrances can appear and disappear overnight.<sup>71</sup> Second, the digging of tunnels

<sup>61</sup>Kirsten Simonsen, ‘Networks, flows, and fluids: Reimagining spatial analysis?’, *Environment and Planning A*, 36:8 (2004), pp. 1333–7.

<sup>62</sup>Tim Ingold, ‘The maze and the labyrinth: Reflections of a fellow-traveller’, in Christopher Watts (ed.), *Relational Archaeologies: Humans, Animals, Things* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 245–9; Robert J. Topinka, ‘Foucault, Borges, heterotopia: Producing knowledge in other spaces’, *Foucault Studies*, 9 (2010), pp. 54–70.

<sup>63</sup>Stuart Elden, ‘Secure the volume: Vertical geopolitics and the depth of power’, *Political Geography*, 34 (2013), pp. 35–51.

<sup>64</sup>Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. H. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]); Doreen Massey, ‘Places and their pasts’, *History Workshop Journal*, 39 (1995), pp. 182–92; Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Expanding the Geographical Imagination* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>65</sup>Derek S. Denman, ‘On fortification: Military architecture, geometric power, and defensive design’, *Security Dialogue*, 51:2–3 (2020), pp. 231–47; Jethro Norman, ‘Porous bunker: Private security contractors and the plasticity of Mogadishu’s international “green zone”’, *Security Dialogue*, 54:3 (2023), pp. 290–309, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106231158890>.

<sup>66</sup>Joshua Berlinger, ‘The “Gaza metro”: The mysterious subterranean tunnel network used by Hamas’, *CNN Online* (15 October 2023), available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/15/middleeast/hamas-tunnels-gaza-intl/index.html>.

<sup>67</sup>Toufic Haddad, ‘Insurgent infrastructure: Tunnels of the Gaza Strip’, *Middle East-Topics & Arguments*, 10 (2018), pp. 71–85 (p. 75).

<sup>68</sup>As quoted in Raphael D. Marcus, ‘Learning “under fire”: Israel’s improvised military adaptation to Hamas tunnel warfare’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42:3–4 (2019), pp. 344–70 (p. 345).

<sup>69</sup>Nicolas Pelham, ‘Gaza’s tunnel phenomenon: The unintended dynamics of Israel’s siege’, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 41:4 (2012), pp. 6–31; Eado Hecht, ‘Hamas Underground Warfare’, *BESA Center Perspective Paper No. 259* (Begin–Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2014).

<sup>70</sup>Haddad, ‘Insurgent infrastructure’, p. 78.

<sup>71</sup>For example, tunnels have appeared in mundane-seeming fast food restaurants: Adam Forrest, ‘Tunnel from Mexico to abandoned KFC restaurant in Arizona discovered by US Homeland Security’, *The Independent* (24 August 2018), available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/mexico-tunnel-kfc-restaurant-arizona-us-border-drug-smuggling-cartel-homeland-security-a8505761.html>.

must also itself be concealed. The waste from tunnel-making and the noise can lead to detection; so, these flows must be managed. Third, what makes tunnels useful is of course the flow of goods and people through them. Even if during their use tunnels may be fixed, that which passes through them is deliberately not. Fourth, and finally, the tunnels themselves may flow as part of the ‘cat and mouse’ game of tunnelling. The tunnels along the Gaza border themselves shifted as part of evasion tactics. Along with the concealment afforded by tunnels through their depth from ‘surface looking’ or situating their entrances within the complexity of the urban environment, the horizontal and vertical manoeuvrability of the tunnels is a feature of this secrecy game. For instance, early tunnels under the ‘Philadelphia Corridor’ (a strip of land or ‘buffer zone’ between Egypt and the Gaza Strip patrolled by Israeli forces in accordance with the 1979 Peace Treaty) were typically 6–10 metres deep. However, after Hamas’s takeover of the territory from 2007, tunnels were dug deeper, up to 30 metres, and reinforced with concrete smuggled in via the commercial tunnels. Tunnels that were destroyed or became old were also replaceable. In turn, Israeli Defence Forces invested in more advanced technologies to overcome the threat of hidden tunnels, including ‘systems that monitor underground movement utilizing seismic and geophysical sensors, complex algorithms, underground microphone systems, land penetrating radar, microgravity radiation.’ This investment, however, did not succeed in ending the game but rather shifted it.<sup>72</sup> The manoeuvrability of tunnels, their secrecy flows, effectively challenged the supposedly superior detection abilities of expensive Israeli state military capabilities.

Tunnels and tunnelling have, therefore, been used as part of resistance strategies as a form of secrecy game and, thus, highlight in particular our arguments about the need to move beyond state actors but also to think of secrecy practices as involving flow and movement. The visual and material capacities of tunnelling make tunnels well suited to form part of secrecy compositions. But more than that, tunnelling is an interaction, a dialectical play of dominant and resistant actors, the tunnellers and tunnel users versus the tunnel detectors and tunnel destroyers, which centres secrecy and leads to the formation of this game. More than simply attuning to more complex spatialities beyond the vertical and attuning to volumes as Elden proposes,<sup>73</sup> the result is also productive of a complex formation of tunnels, actors, expertise, technologies, and even economies of tunnelling associated with this game. For example, in the case of the Gaza tunnels, the tightening of restrictions of mobility resulted in an incentivisation towards tunnelling, which in turn increased attempts to detect and destroy tunnels, which in turn created a flow of more and deeper tunnels. Tunnels may, therefore, be understood in one way as exemplifying the fixed and intentional understanding of secrecy – after all, their walls for a time at least seem permanent. However, rather than tunnels being understood as static, the spatial secrecy power of tunnels as a resistance strategy in particular is, in significant part, due to the flows they facilitate alongside their own flows, forming a key element of conflicts more globally.

### Secrecy game: Camouflage

Unlike tunnelling, camouflage as a formal practice has a more recent history. While hunters have long used camouflage, emulating animals in that regard, it was not until 1890 that camouflage emerged as a scientific concept to then be taken up by military forces, specifically in World War I, as part of official state secrecy practices.<sup>74</sup> Camouflage, the ability to blend in with the surroundings, to deceive an onlooker as to the nature of what is seen, is now ‘big business’ and can take many

<sup>72</sup>Marcus, ‘Learning “under fire”’, p. 346.

<sup>73</sup>Elden, ‘Secure the volume.’

<sup>74</sup>Hanna Rose Shell, *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Ann Elias, Ross Harley, and Nicholas Tsoutas (eds), *Camouflage Cultures: Beyond the Art of Disappearance* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2015); Ieva Jusionyte, ‘States of camouflage’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 30:1 (2015), pp. 113–38.

forms, from disguises that emphasise colour matching and/or pattern, to integrating foliage, to using netting and make-up, to altering shapes or even movement in order to deceive.<sup>75</sup>

However, while camouflage, like tunnels, can be conceived of as consistent with containment logics of secrecy, the covering over what is 'true', camouflage also relies on a different spatial logic and an element that is essential to its success, and, conversely, to countering camouflage: that of spatial literacy, of knowing the surrounding space enough to blend in.<sup>76</sup> In other words, it is not just information that counts, but *knowledge* drawn from context. For Laura Levin, the art of camouflage is essentially a spatial performance where 'the human body commingles with or is presented as a direct extension of its setting'.<sup>77</sup> This spatial literacy or performance, as with the original camoufleurs, came from and continues to come from biologists who study the camouflage techniques of the natural world, psychologists, photographers, artists, and technologists. The secrecy game of camouflage is therefore between those who camouflage and those who seek to disrupt camouflage through developing this literacy (and associated literacies, including visual and aural, for example). In other words, the secrecy game involves a dynamic interplay of competitive literacies. An observer may 'see' the camouflaged object but not recognise it: its secrecy is a product that exists at the interstices of the perceptual gap between information and knowledge or understanding. While snipers in their ghillie suits may be seen as the ultimate in camouflage, we can also think of sleeper agents living in communities or intelligence agencies and their use of nondescript buildings as effective at camouflage, hiding in plain sight by learning how to blend into the spaces around them. Similarly, scholars have pointed to how individuals can learn to detect different groups, to see and unsee the same things differently.<sup>78</sup> And while camouflage is most often associated with state military actors, those who resist state or other dominant actors also use camouflage to evade surveillance and detection.<sup>79</sup> In turn, knowledge and technologies for detecting camouflage also emerge, a co-production of target and technique, in what we argue is a second form of secrecy game. State-focused accounts of secrecy based on containment logics, with their emphasis on forms of information control and acquisition, thus, underplay the importance of specific secrecy literacies as part of what makes secrecy powerful.

To illustrate this point further, we therefore turn to the secrecy relations between communities of stowaways, the 'Beachboys', who live and work in Cape Town, and those they seek to evade: the network of ship's crew, owners, insurers, maritime regulators, stowaway detection services, port security, local police, local and state governments, and international organisations such as the International Maritime Organisation – a *stowaway security assemblage*.<sup>80</sup> As Amaha Senu argues, these two groups form distinct epistemic communities with rival knowledge about what it means to hide as stowaways or detect them.<sup>81</sup> These communities are engaged in constant game of 'cat and mouse', as stowaways learn and share new ways to sneak onto ships, hide and evade security measures, and those in the security assemblage seek to learn of these new practices and share these

<sup>75</sup> A corollary of this of course is 'dazzle camouflage', a variant of obfuscation, which is the generation of noise – sharp angles that make judging distance more difficult, for example – rather than masking in order to conceal. Jessica Lingel, 'Dazzle camouflage as queer counter conduct', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24:5 (2021), pp. 1107–24.

<sup>76</sup> Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage and the Art of Blending In* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 67–95; Isla Forsyth, 'Designs on the desert: Camouflage, deception and the militarization of space', *Cultural Geographies*, 21:2 (2014), pp. 247–65.

<sup>77</sup> Levin, *Performing Ground*, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> Thomas G. Kirsch, 'Secrecy and the epistemophilic other', in Thomas Kirsch and Roy Dille (eds), *Regimes of Ignorance: Anthropological Perspectives on the Production and Reproduction of Non-knowledge* (New York: Berghahn, 2015), pp. 188–208; Nadya Ali, 'Seeing and unseeing Prevent's racialized borders', *Security Dialogue*, 51:6 (2020), pp. 579–96.

<sup>79</sup> James Philip Robinson, 'Invisible targets, strengthened morale: Static camouflage as a "weapon of the weak"', *Space and Polity*, 16:3 (2012), pp. 351–68; Torin Monahan, 'The right to hide? Anti-surveillance camouflage and the aestheticization of resistance', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 12:2 (2015), pp. 159–78.

<sup>80</sup> Senu, 'The global assemblage of multi-centred stowaway governance'.

<sup>81</sup> Senu, 'Stowing away via the cargo ship'.

across their communities (globally) to prevent stowing away and police international borders.<sup>82</sup> This is, however, a secrecy game that plays out in other contexts, such as, like tunnelling, the smuggling of migrants across the United States–Mexico border, a practice that has intensified over recent years.<sup>83</sup>

Beachboys, for example, have learned how to read a ship's ballast to see if it is likely to depart soon; how to approach a ship stealthily (and the number allowed to approach a ship at any one time is carefully regulated by the community); how to diagram a ship and find the 'engine room, the lifeboats, the tonnage hatches and even the bulbed area above the rudder – all established Beachboy hiding [spaces]'; and how to stay away from more dangerous spaces, e.g. the anchor-chain locker or in among holds filled with insecticide-laden crops.<sup>84</sup> In other words, stowaways learn to 'see' ships as filled with opportunities and hazards in order to be best placed to 'win' the game of hide and seek, emerging from their hiding spots, revealing their presence to the crews when at sea and it is 'safer' to do so. In turn, ship owners employ stowaway detection teams, who use technologies, including sniffer dogs, and work with crews to remove stowaways in port, working through an internationally recognised 'stowaway search checklist'. If and when stowaways are successful, reports are generated and circulated across the global stowaway security assemblage so that insurers and regulators can pass on where stowaways were found such that these spaces can be searched more thoroughly by other ships' crews in the future.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, when stowaways are detected in the port city before departure, or less frequently are successful, they similarly pass on the knowledge of search routines, hiding spaces, and how to hide successfully to other Beachboys as part of this ongoing secrecy game. In other words, there is an intense secrecy game at work that is generative of these practices and 'rival knowledges', forming new agencies, actors, technologies, practices, and expertise in the process. Within this secrecy game, rather than simply the possession of information, it is the group that can learn and share 'rival knowledges' fastest that shifts the game and the overall secrecy composition.

While we might focus at more length on the 'hide and seek' games on ships that stowaways and ship's crews/detection services play, and where containment logics of this secrecy game looms large – as Beachboys contain themselves within spaces to avoid detection and as the two groups seek to protect their rival knowledges<sup>86</sup> – what we also want to focus on is the game of camouflage that is also a key feature of these relations. Beachboys are very adept at camouflage, living for example in tight-knit communities in and around Cape Town. But for those who have not learned their codes, have not developed the literacy to specifically see them, especially as a community that 'values little more than secrecy and anonymity' and that guards its codes and insider status intensely,<sup>87</sup> to those that are illiterate in this sense, Beachboys disappear into the general background of everyday life, hiding in plain sight until one learns to 'see' them.

<sup>82</sup>Stowaways are an interesting case by virtue of their dual status as security threats who, under international maritime law, should also be afforded protection. This reflects broader patterns in the policing of illegalised migratory flows, where migrants are simultaneously construed as threats and as vulnerable groups. However, in the practice of global shipping, stowaways are predominately constructed as a threat to commercial shipping interests and security more generally: as an economic risk; as potential hijackers, pirates, criminals, and, possibly, terrorists; as a threat to the sanctity of the international border regime; and as a problem for local law enforcement in the port cities where they tend to congregate owing to their 'fringe' existence and the illicit activities that partly sustain them, such as drug dealing.

<sup>83</sup>Miriam Jordan, 'Smuggling migrants at the border now a billion-dollar business', *The New York Times* (25 July 2022), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/25/us/migrant-smuggling-evolution.html>}.

<sup>84</sup>Sean Christie, *Under Nelson Mandela Boulevard: Life Among the Stowaways* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2016), pp. 19–20.

<sup>85</sup>Christie, *Under Nelson Mandela Boulevard*, p. 17; Senu, 'The global assemblage of multi-centred stowaway governance'; Senu, 'Stowing away via the cargo ship'.

<sup>86</sup>Other secrecy games are also part of these relations, such as lying: for example, ship's crew are advised to lie about their next destination ports by writing an 'undesirable' next port of call on the noticeboards that are sometimes erected by the ship's gangway. This is to dissuade would-be stowaways from boarding if the next port of call is just another port in South Africa or a neighbouring country, for instance. Stowaways also learn to lie to ship's crews about their port of origin when they are revealed to be able to claim refugee status and avoid being repatriated to their starting point.

<sup>87</sup>Christie, *Under Nelson Mandela Boulevard*, p. 77.

Second, Beachboys need to sustain themselves economically while waiting for a chance to stow away. This often involves learning how to manage financially through illicit activities in the port cities in which stowaways establish their communities and how to work with and pass under the radar of police forces so as not to be ‘moved along’. For example, the central Grand Parade in Cape Town, where Beachboys often conduct their business, was considered ‘the perfect place to hide in plain sight’.<sup>88</sup> Third, camouflage is a central feature of stowaway attempts to board and hide on ships. Stowaways learn to wear clothing that is less visible at night when they attempt to board, or to disguise themselves as stevedores by wearing vests and boilersuits often used in port settings to better blend in. In other words, stowaways have learned how to mimic their surroundings, to create an appearance that fits into the space around it. To detect Beachboys, therefore, necessitates being able to recognise their presence in the landscape, so that rather than disappearing into their surroundings they can be seen.

Nevertheless, camouflage is also a collaborative feature of this secrecy game *between* ‘rival’ groups. Captains and crews, for example, may conspire to hide the presence of a stowaway, failing to report their boarding to authorities and, therefore, avoiding the paperwork and fines that might be imposed. More specifically, crews may provide stowaways with crew uniforms to smuggle stowaways off ships in new ports, while port officials may accept bribes to smuggle stowaways in, and stowaways may accept bribes to keep their silence.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the secrecy game of camouflage is one that also features productive collaborative play between and across actors.

### Secrecy game: Mazes

A final secrecy game that we outline is that of maze-running/maze-making. Like tunnels and tunnelling, mazes as a practice have a long history as a security design, being used, for example, as a means to slow an invading army and, like fortresses, are an example of ‘defence in depth’. Mazes, however, are also interesting by virtue of their complex spatial design, which consists of a pathway, physical and mental, of branching decision-points where what is around the corner is often, literally and figuratively, unknown and uncertain for those running the maze.<sup>90</sup> A maze simultaneously limits but also overwhelms with choice as each choice depends on the last, and the consequences of these choices are unknown until a ‘false’ choice is made or the maze is run. Mazes, by virtue of this design, can be difficult to escape and can be uncomfortable places, disconcerting and designed to confound, with traps and misdirection, constant multiple choices, or even the illusion of choice, to wrong-foot the uninitiated. A maze is, therefore, inherently an architecture of secrecy. They are a secrecy game in which managing complexity and that which it conceals are the central objectives. Mazes as a game are, therefore, an example of what Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum describe as ‘obfuscation’ practices, ‘the deliberate use of ambiguous, confusing, or misleading information to interfere with surveillance and data collection projects’ as used by resistance actors.<sup>91</sup> And, in contrast to networks which are, alongside containment, more common spatial metaphors used in recent years to understand social relations and political choices, including within international relations, mazes make central the role of unknowability as part of their ontology.<sup>92</sup>

The secrecy game of mazes is also interesting in that it can be played on two levels: between competing maze-runners and between a maze-runner and a maze-maker. Maze-runners, for

<sup>88</sup> Christie, *Under Nelson Mandela Boulevard*, p. 15.

<sup>89</sup> This complicity may also lead to the more sinister practice of casting stowaways adrift at sea on barrels, leaving them to die (Senu, ‘The global assemblage of multi-centred stowaway governance’; Senu, ‘Stowing away via the cargo ship’).

<sup>90</sup> Henry Eliot, *Follow This Thread: A Maze Book to Get Lost In* (London: Penguin, 2018); Charlotte Higgins, *Red Thread: On Mazes and Labyrinths* (New York: Random House, 2018).

<sup>91</sup> Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum, *Obfuscation: A User’s Guide for Privacy and Protest* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

<sup>92</sup> John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2001); Martin Coward, ‘Against network thinking: A critique of pathological sovereignty’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:2 (2018), pp. 440–63.

example, vie to reveal (and sometimes avoid) the secrets of the maze where speed or tempo becomes an important element. Backtracking and retracing steps is, therefore, an important means through which this form of secrecy is navigated. Mazes as a secrecy game, however, are also played between those who make a maze to challenge maze-runners and between those who compete to make and manage a maze.<sup>93</sup> Mazes, unlike containment and networks, however, are a secrecy game that, therefore, also centres around an epistemology of process and journey rather than fixity.<sup>94</sup> Knowledge is ‘forged in movement’, what Tim Ingold calls ‘wayfaring’, which includes, even necessitates, wrong turns.<sup>95</sup> The ‘cat and mouse’ game of secrecy that plays out in tunnels also exists in mazes, but with the added dimension of not only needing to find the tunnels, but also needing to know how to manage the complexity to run the maze. Within this secrecy game, revelation comes not from uncovering but through a non-linear, recursive forms of organising or moving through space, and of the associated time and knowledge-making this privileges. This recursive element becomes especially important as maze games may have the added complexity of changing and reforming at different speeds while they are being run.

To explore the politics of mazes as a form of secrecy game, we now turn to urban warfare and the resistance encountered by US forces in Iraq and by Israeli forces in Palestinian territory as they seek to occupy this terrain. For Anthony King, while in the 20th century, ‘mass armies swamped cities’, now, ‘cities envelop the armed forces’, such that urban warfare ‘has become normal, even the norm’,<sup>96</sup> making maze games important for understanding current conflict dynamics. A central feature of this form of warfare is the maze-like properties of the landscape and the form of resistance this affords.<sup>97</sup> For urban warfare specialists, such as Anthony King and John Spencer, whose work is regularly taught in military academies, for example, cities are understood to present unique disadvantages for expeditionary forces and colonial powers, such as the United States, specifically connected with these maze-like properties and the threats they potentially conceal. For John Spencer, for example:

A weaker enemy can use the physical terrain for concealment and cover both to fight from (e.g., using heavy-clad buildings as de facto military-grade defensive structures) and to manoeuvre (e.g., through buildings or underground in civilian infrastructure and prepared tunnels). ... Urban defenders can hide in any of thousands of locations in the urban jungle. They can pick and choose which buildings, windows, alleyways, or sewer holes to hide in without any worry of being discovered. ... They use guerrilla tactics to attack and then disappear back into the urban terrain. And they can canalize attacking militaries to ambush sites or down roads filled with booby traps and improvised explosive devices.<sup>98</sup>

More specifically, those resisting invasion and control seek to intensify ‘the maze’ as part of this game, shifting it quickly in order to make it harder to learn, despite the intensification of

<sup>93</sup>Denman, ‘On fortification’.

<sup>94</sup>Daniel Andriessen and Marien Van Den Boom, ‘In search of alternative metaphors for knowledge; Inspiration from symbolism’, *Electronic Journal of Knowledge Management*, 7:4 (2009), pp. 397–404.

<sup>95</sup>Tim Ingold, ‘The maze and the labyrinth: Reflections of a fellow-traveller’, in Christopher Watts (ed.), *Relational Archaeologies: Humans, Animals, Things* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 245–49 (p. 41).

<sup>96</sup>Anthony King, *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2021), p. 16.

<sup>97</sup>John Spencer, ‘The eight rules of urban warfare and why we must work to change them’, Modern Warfare Institute (12 January 2021), available at: <https://mwi.usma.edu/the-eight-rules-of-urban-warfare-and-why-we-must-work-to-change-them>; John Spencer and Rich Hinman, ‘Enter and clear a room: The history of battle drill 6, and why the army needs more tactical training like it – not less’, Modern Warfare Institute (21 July 2021), available at: <https://mwi.usma.edu/enter-and-clear-a-room-the-history-of-battle-drill-6-and-why-the-army-needs-more-tactical-training-like-it-not-less>; King, *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>98</sup>Spencer, ‘The eight rules of urban warfare’.

surveillance practices facilitated by technologies such as surveillance drones.<sup>99</sup> US patrols, for example, are redirected by blockades into unfamiliar areas, opposing forces fill streets with rubble or emplace barriers to redesign the maze. They dig tunnels,<sup>100</sup> including ‘mouse-holes’ (holes blasted through adjoining rooms in different houses to create tunnels and avoid streets),<sup>101</sup> cover streets with tarpaulins to limit sight,<sup>102</sup> and plant ‘invisible’ Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to make ‘mazerunners’ more cautious and slow them down. Resistance as part of urban warfare, therefore, centres secrecy produced through maze-making, and one where part of the aim is to control the speed, or tempo, of the conflict through controlling the movement.<sup>103</sup>

To take control of this secrecy game, US and Israeli armies have responded to this resistance by developing new forms of expertise in maze-running and by taking control of the maze and maze-making. The US military (and militaries more globally) has since developed extensive training infrastructure and protocols, for example, that prepare soldiers specifically for navigating through these secret-laden spaces. These include the increasing number and sophistication of ‘shoot houses’ where soldiers, not only special operators, learn how to approach hallways and doors and clear rooms, each with a specific role and choreography to work together to sweep a room as they enter, to search for blind spots, carefully placing eyes, feet, and weapons, branching in different directions, retracing steps to reveal hidden dangers, marking off areas already cleared, eliminating and, therefore, mastering a space turn by turn.<sup>104</sup>

Israeli forces have also developed techniques for ‘walking through walls,’<sup>105</sup> also called ‘mouse-holing’. As Eyal Weizman argues, urban warfare in the Palestinian territories includes a competition over the architecture of the city; soldiers become ‘operational architects,’ competing as maze-makers ‘to control the means of circulation.’<sup>106</sup> Forces compete, or play this game, in a three-dimensional way to reinterpret, short-circuit, and recompose ‘architectural and urban syntax,’ attempting to ‘smoothen out space’ for their own forces while rendering it more complex for others.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, whether within buildings or across a city, the secrecy game is the same – to run or, better yet, control the maze overall, producing the secrecy of urban warfare. And this game is likewise a result of the resistance of the non-state actors involved.

Mazes, therefore, offer an example of a third form of secrecy game that is present and shapes the international. Rather than operating through a containment logic, though urban environments are full of walls that limit sight, for example, mazes as a secrecy game operate through complexity, pitting maze-runners and maze-makers against one another. To win this secrecy

<sup>99</sup>Peter Adey, ‘Vertical security in the megacity: Legibility, mobility and aerial politics,’ *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27:6 (2010), pp. 51–67.

<sup>100</sup>Todd South, ‘The subterranean battlefield: Warfare is going underground, into dark, tight spaces,’ *Military Times* (26 February 2019), available at: <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/02/26/the-subterranean-battlefield-warfare-is-going-underground-into-dark-tight-spaces>}.  
<sup>101</sup>US Department of the Army (2011), Field Manual No. 3-06.11 Combined Arms Operations in Urban Terrain, available at: <https://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/amd-us-archive/fm3-06.11%2802%29.pdf>.

<sup>102</sup>Nick Paton Walsh, Dominique van Heerden, and Salma Abdelaziz, ‘Satellite captures rare snapshot of life in Raqqa,’ CNN.com (25 April 2017), available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/25/middleeast/raqqa-satellite-images/index.html>}.  
<sup>103</sup>In this regard we agree with (on circulations) and depart from (emphasising secrecy games) Peter Adey in that ‘securing the megacity is a battle of dimensions. Extensiveness of form gives it a size and scope that is difficult to master and hard to decode. Its density is at times impenetrable, while its population lies hidden and forgotten. Yet it is not necessarily the urban structure that forms the focus of security, but circulation.’ Adey, ‘Vertical security in the megacity’.

<sup>104</sup>Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Spencer, ‘The eight rules of urban warfare’.

<sup>105</sup>Eyal Weizman, ‘Walking through walls: Soldiers as architects in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict,’ *Radical Philosophy*, 136 (2006), pp. 8–22, available at: <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/walking-through-walls>}, p. 9.

<sup>106</sup>Weizman, ‘Walking through walls.’ This redesign is reminiscent of Napoleon and Georges Eugène Haussmann’s redesign of the centre of Paris in the late 1800s, in part to limit insurrection. With thanks to William Walters for pointing out this parallel.

<sup>107</sup>Weizman, ‘Walking through walls’, pp. 9, 11.

game, to 'reveal' secrets, is not through uncovering in the sense that containment logics offer but, instead, through learning the maze: through recursive movements across space and through the control of time, slowing or speeding up to successfully run a maze or control an opponent's movements.

## Conclusion

Through discussions of three illustrative examples of secrecy games in the form of tunnelling, camouflage, and maze-making/maze-running, this paper has sought to argue that secrecy's relevance to global politics extends beyond the actions and constructions of state actors. In fact, we argue that to understand secrecy, its effects, and its influence necessitates an understanding of the ways in which secrecy actors in the form of state *and* non-state actors, dominant *and* resistant actors, interact and evolve, using the framing of *secrecy games* to do so. Rather than trying to choose between the extremes of purely voluntarist and intentional explanations of secrecy on the one hand where states use secrecy as a 'tool', or structurally overdetermining factors such as technologies, globalisation, or the 'nature' of the international system to account for secrecy's presence, this paper develops the analytical framework of 'secrecy games' as a way to understand and contextualise the limits of sovereign power. As such, we make four interrelated contributions. First, we encourage a focus on a more diverse set of secrecy actors in our examinations of how secrecy works, focusing in particular on resistant actors and the infrapolitics of secrecy as a contribution to scholarship. With attention to the challenges, including ethical challenges, of studying infrapolitical subjects, these cases have drawn on existing research and open-source material in order to offer accounts of secrecy from these perspectives. Like state actors, resistant actors also use secrecy to exert influence on and in the world and often closely value their secrecy.

Second, this paper argues that secrecy is present in more varieties, guises, and forms than previously accounted for. While our three case studies have highlighted the spatial aspects of secrecy, this has served to emphasise secrecy's greater complexity and reflects the turn to a wider range of actors who use and produce secrecy in inventive ways when resources may be scarce. Flows, camouflage, and complexity, alongside tunnels, blending in, and mazes, produce and maintain secrecy in ways that work beyond containment logics and are worthy of greater attention within International Relations' engagement with secrecy. More work should, therefore, be undertaken to explore this greater range of secretcies, particularly in relation to the more diverse set of actors in global politics and how this may reflect ongoing inequalities in the global order.

Third, we offer a closer study of 'secrecy games' as a heuristic for approaching the complexity of the social relations, practices, knowledges, and evolving nature of secretcies. In other words, secrecy games in our analysis better capture the complex and iterative *emergence* of secrecy logics over time and the ways in which secrecy develops beyond the limits of state actors alone. Secrecy games do not provide a 'better' definition of secrecy but, instead, suggest a different range of questions that can be asked to understand the productive power that secrecy has (beyond the power to negate or erase). The paper and its conception of 'secrecy games' can refigure scholars' understanding of where power and agency lie in these relations, to include a focus on the 'infrapolitics of secrecy' and, thus, bring more awareness to the analysis of the different actors who have power in these relations alongside the state, and the more varied set of practices and knowledges used.

Finally, by bringing together the insights from Secrecy Studies, with its emphases on secrecy's productive relations, insights from International Relations on resistance actors, and a focus on a more varied and evolving set of actors and practices, we suggest secrecy games offer an important way to understand state power and its limitations. As we contend, International Relations cannot base theorisations of secrecy through approaching secrecy as a 'tool' alone, especially one that reproduces inside/outside logics; we must also attend to how secrecy works in other ways as influenced by the relations beyond state actors. In other words, in line with a long pedigree of critical approaches in International Relations, secrecy games serve as a heuristic that can underscore

moments where the actions of seemingly powerful actors do not always produce the expected or intended outcomes. Consequently, thinking dialectically (and beyond)<sup>108</sup> through secrecy games, including other games yet to be explored, offers a useful way of reflecting more deeply on power relations in global politics.

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<sup>108</sup>Huysmans and Nogueira, ‘Against “resistance”?’.