Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s Republic of Letters

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FEW FIGURES BETTER REPRESENT the world of scholarship at the turn of the seventeenth century than Bernard de Montfaucon, the French maurist monk and antiquarian who lived from 1655–1741. Montfaucon was trained in ancient languages and philology, and was an avid collector of manuscripts and antiquities. He founded the Academie des Bernardins, and later became president of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres during the Regency in 1719. Montfaucon wrote what was to become the central work on antiquarianism at the beginning of the Enlightenment: L’antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures (1719–24), which attempted to catalogue and show in engravings all known ancient sculptures and carvings. He also wrote on the collection of ancient manuscripts. For his work, Montfaucon was complimented by Bossuet and made royal confessor. Indeed, he represents a world of ecclesiastical scholarship, in the strain of Dom Jean Mabillon, that mixed antiquarianism, ecclesiastical scholarship and loyal service to royal power.

It was clearly this mix that informed Montfaucon’s ideals of learning and scholarship. It is thus not surprising that in his introduction to L’antiquité expliquée, he eulogizes the state Intendant-turned antiquarian, Joseph Nicolas Foucault:

Monsieur Foucault, Counselor of State, has furnished me with more antique pieces than anyone else. The charge of intendant, which he exercised in several provinces, gave him the means to discover [many pieces] which would have been destroyed had they fallen in other hands. As he has marvelous taste, he has created one of the most beautiful [antiquities] cabinets in the kingdom, and perhaps all of Europe. Always attentive to please learned peo-

1 This article is a series of extracts from my forthcoming book, The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s Secret State Intelligence System (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). I would like to thank the anonymous readers of this article for their useful suggestions.
ple, he keeps those who work on antiquity informed, like another Peiresc, he has offered them with pleasure, all that he has collected for public utility.²

Montfaucon’s comparison of Foucault to Peiresc and his equation of the charge of state Intendant with the circulation of knowledge shows how much had changed since the beginning of the seventeenth century. As we know from the work of Peter Miller and Marc Fumaroli, Peiresc was, on the one hand, one of the most central figures of the international Republic of Letters.³ Along with ethics of learning and friendship, communicating and collecting defined his activities. At the same time, he aided the crown or other powers with his scholarly expertise when asked and when he needed to. Even for the ethically conscious Peiresc, scholarship had an ambiguous relationship with politics, moving between independence and service.

Foucault, on the other hand, was learned, and shared his findings with the world of the Republic of Letters, but this was only in his retirement. He began his career as Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s administrative assistant. In the early days working for Colbert, Foucault did not share information amongst public scholars. In fact, he was known for seizing books, and for the coerced conversions of Protestant nobles.⁴ And as he did this dirty work for the state, he learned and gained a taste for antiquarianism.

The case of Foucault opens the door onto an aspect of the Republic of Letters that has been little discussed: the role of the state and coercive political power in relation to the phenomenon of the Republic of Letters. How do we fit Foucault, and his master, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, figures of both political repression and learning, into narratives of the Republic of Letters informed by traditions of the ethics of learning and the Habermasian paradigm of the rise of a public sphere of civil society?⁵

The examples of Colbert and Foucault show that the state, with its modes of power and repression, was also strongly connected to the Republic of Letters. This article aims to demonstrate that it is impossible to understand the Republic of Letters, and its various anchors—academies, state libraries, and learned networks—without understanding the tight interaction between the secret sphere of state knowledge and its relationship to the Enlightenment project. The world of learning and communication that produced the radical Enlightenment also, in part, produced Enlightened despotism. The Republic of Letters was connected to both these traditions; the stories of Colbert and Foucault help us understand how.

² Bernard de Montfaucon, L’antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures (Paris: F. Delaulne, 1719–24), 1:xix: “M. Foucault, conseiller d’état, m’a plus fourni de pièces antiques que nul autre. La charge d’intendant, qu’il a exercée dans plusieurs provinces, lui a donné moyen d’en découvrir beaucoup qui auraient peut-être péri si elles étoient tombées en d’autres mains. Comme il a un goût merveilleux, il a fait un des plus beaux cabinets du royaume, et peut-être de l’Europe. Toujours attentif à faire plaisir aux gens de lettres, il a prévenu ceux qui travaillaient sur l’antiquité, et, comme un autre Peiresc, il leur a offert avec plaisir ce qu’il n’avoit ramassé que pour l’utilité publique.”


THE CRISIS OF CIVIC LEARNING IN FRANCE

A critical turning point and a key to understanding the dialectic between learning and political power is found in the civil war of the Fronde (1648–1654) in France that caused a profound crisis for the Republic of Letters. The revolt that would pitch old nobles and Parisian parliamentarians against Mazarin and Louis XIV broke the French information entente which had formed the basis of the French Republic of Letters. Aided by scholars such as Peiresc, Pithou, de Thou, Théodore Godefroy and the Dupuy brothers, parliamentary scholars and legislators of the first half of the seventeenth century worked for the crown as historians, diplomats and propagandists, librarians and archivists.6

They sat at the center of a pan-European web of learned and political information and scholarship, and while generally managing to maintain their status as independent and relatively free scholars, they would use their skills and networks to serve power. While members of the Republic of Letters, like Robert Cotton, Hugo Blotius, Antonio de Morales, and Nicolas Heinsius, worked for states, princes and parliaments, they retained a certain ethic of professional independence. At one level, they would work for the state, but they would also lead their primary existence as independent scholars, answering to the ethic of philological science. This entente was a delicate balance, as the career of Jacques Auguste de Thou shows—when high scholars angered royal power, it could damage their careers.7 However, even in the time of Richelieu, there was no serious attempt to muzzle and control the Republic of Letters and its prestigious members.8

However, the entente between political power and scholars fell apart during the Fronde as parliamentarians—the social corps that had provided the principal scholars of the crown—now became its adversaries in what was a constitutional and cultural crisis.9 In the mid-1650s, as Mazarin and Louis, aided by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, emerged victorious over the parlements, they proceeded to cut back their powers and most of all, cut the old class of scholars who had formed the Republic of Letters out of the service of the state.10

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7 See Grafton, Footnote, chap. 5.


It was Colbert who recognized this crisis and came up with a plan: he would try and turn the Republic of Letters into a system to aid his administration of the French absolutist, anti-constitutional state under Louis XIV.\(^\text{11}\) He hired French and foreign scholars and hoped that when they worked for the state, they would not express independent views.\(^\text{12}\) Colbert banned non-state-sanctioned academies.\(^\text{13}\) Those scholars who did remain independent, faced harassment and exclusion from state funding and academies. Most of all, and most importantly here, Colbert trained his own internal specialists and even tried to master many aspects of constitutional, ecclesiastical, and legal scholarship himself.\(^\text{14}\)

The fact that Colbert mixed the worlds of state administration and scholarship so closely makes it hard to define exactly what he created. Were his Intendants and agents bureaucrats in a modern sense?\(^\text{15}\) Or were they subservient versions of the humanist secretaries that had filled the ranks of papal and Italian administrations since the late Middle Ages?\(^\text{16}\) What becomes clear is that Colbert was creating a new sort of agent loyal only to the state, but trained in cultures of learning and technology, who might be called state experts or researchers. Colbert was not only interested in hiring scholars to serve his administration. In some cases, he actively trained information managers who could find, copy, catalog and bring him documentation as he needed it for his day-to-day affairs. In others, he sought learned figures to teach him how better to handle the historical materials he used for government. They were masters of that little understood phenomenon of learning: the internal report.\(^\text{17}\) By the late 1660s, Colbert had created a cadre of in-house, state scholars who worked primarily for him.

Colbert preferred above all churchmen for their expertise in medieval charters and perhaps, for their discretion. Where Rudolph II of Bohemia had surrounded himself with scholars and librarians who had independent literary careers, Colbert preferred those with institutional loyalty.\(^\text{18}\) He found the skills of the Benedictines particularly appealing. These churchmen were


expert textual handlers, who saw it as their responsibility to organize ecclesiastical archives. In particular, Colbert sought out the services of the most famous archivist of them all, Don Jean Mabillon (1632–1707), who had developed a methodology of “Diplomatics,” a critical approach to verifying documents and exposing spurious ones. Working with a number of lay scholars in his Société de Saint Germain, Mabillon showed a dedication to conscientious methods of critical philology that worried some in the church, due to his rationalizing approach towards authoritative Church documents. Yet Mabillon’s fame and influence only grew. Mabillon’s skills of ecclesiastical erudition would have a profound effect on Colbert’s approach to learned administration. Mabillon’s masterwork of documentary analysis, De re diplomatica (1681), not only won him Colbert’s admiration, numerous state pensions, and support for the monastery; the following year, Colbert sent Mabillon to Burgundy to search for documents relative to royal rights. In 1683, Colbert sent Mabillon through Switzerland and Germany to look for documents relative to the rights of the Gallican church, which were central to fortifying Louis’s power and claims over ecclesiastical benefices.

Mabillon trained a number of highly accomplished document gatherers and critics, experts in ancient languages, amongst them Baluze and Robert Cotelier. One of the finest bibliophiles and archivists of his time, the former secretary to Archbishop Pierre de Marca, the Jesuit-trained Étienne Baluze (1630–1718) helped manage both the Colbertine and Royal Libraries, as his massive personal collection of manuscripts copied from both libraries illustrates. Baluze ran the day-to-day workings of the library. He managed its finances, acquisitions and staff, down to the purchasing of reams of paper (the greatest expenditure besides books, used for copying, the main process of manuscript acquisition), as well as brooms, maps, locks, coal, rags, rugs, cabinets, armories, maps, globes, curtains and most importantly, repairs on the clock, for Colbert, trained as an accountant, liked all his employees in both his and the king’s library to clock their hours. It is hard to imagine the robed, old royal librarians punching in and out on a work clock in a factory of letters; but Colbert the accountant liked efficiency.

Colbert hired Baluze not only because he was an internationally renowned scholar, but also, as Colbert mentions himself in his correspondence, because of the skills he had honed with the Jesuits and Mabillon. Baluze was a quick copyist with good handwriting, a master cataloguer, and a capable handler of account books. And clearly, he was trustworthy. He did not answer to

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20 On Mabillon’s relationship with Baluze and Colbert, see B. N. MS Baluze 214, fol. 10. On his relations with Baluze, see Émile Fage, Étienne Baluze. Sa vie, ses ouvrages, son exil, sa défense (Tulle: Craffon, 1899), 91.
21 See B. N. MS Baluze 214, fol. 10. Fage, Étienne Baluze, 91.
22 Lucien Auvray and René Poupardin, Catalogue des manuscrits de la collection Baluze (Paris: Éditions Ernest Leroux, 1921), XVII.
23 BNF. MS Baluze 100, fols. 1–57.
the Republican of Letters, but rather to Colbert’s ethic of scholarship and his logic of bureaucracy and state secrecy. Baluze stood midway in the evolutionary chain between erudite scholar and expert bureaucrat. In the end, the library and the administrators who worked for it constituted a quasi-bureaucracy of Letters, and Colbert’s orders were its modus operandi.

Baluze’s main responsibility was to manage historical documentation for Colbert’s daily political uses.25 Like the Fuggers, he insisted his collection be up-to-date. Baluze was to acquire all new publications and archival discoveries, in particular in relation to topics of immediate concern, such as Jansenism.26 The library’s organizational and retrieval system was facilitated by large cataloging projects, organized by Baluze and Nicolas Clément in the Royal Library. Colbert mostly operated through Baluze’s personal familiarity with the collections, and his own collection of textual extracts which Baluze used to handle vast sums of information, often copied from outside Colbert’s collection.27 Baluze authored numerous internal reports: secret histories and reading and archival guides to help Colbert not only master historical and legal policy questions, but also handle his own archives.28 Thus Baluze went beyond scholars such as Mabillon who worked outside the state administration, and refused direct payment for his work for Colbert.29 Baluze was not an independent figure of learning, but rather a state scholar on a salary, and Colbert would employ others like him.

THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS, THE INTERNAL REPORT, AND STATE RESEARCH TEAMS

An early member of the Académie Française and former secretary to Richelieu, the abbé Aimable de Bourzeis (1606–1672) was another Colbertian state scholar trusted to handle secret papers of state relative to Louis XIV’s claims to the inheritance of the Spanish Netherlands. He too produced secret internal histories and legal reports for Colbert, such as his giant file on the inheritance rights of Louis XIV’s Spanish wife, Marie-Thérèse, relative to the Dutch War. The file is filled with secret historical reports, useful documents, and the fruits of a wide scholarly correspondence concerning the crown’s claims over Spanish Netherlands.30 Bourzeis’s secret file for Colbert also contained information that remained secret: reports by ambassadors, legal memos, in *Lettres*, 7:80–81. On Baluze’s function as an erudite administrator, see his correspondence with Colbert in the same volume, 371–78, in particular Baluze’s progress report to Colbert, April 14, 1671, 374–75: “Le travail qu’on fait présentement ne consiste quasy que dans la continuation des copies des registres du Trésor des Chartes, dont on verra bientost la fin (…).” Also see Colbert’s letter to Baluze, August 19, 1675, in *Lettres*, 7:81. On Baluze managing state account books, see *Lettres*, 7:52, “Colbert à Baluze,” March 16, 1671.

26 Colbert to Baluze, October 18, 1673, in *Lettres*, 7:73: “Je prie M. Baluze de verifier si j’ay dans ma bibliothèque tous les livres qui ont esté annoncés par le Journal des Savans, depuis cinq ou six ans, et de m’en envoyer un mémoire bien exacte. Je serais ayse aussi d’avoir une copie du catalogue de tous les livres qui sont dans ma bibliothèque qui ont esté faits pour et contre le Jansénisme, avec un mémoire de tous ceux qui me manquent, en cas qu’il le scache.”
28 For examples of Baluze’s internal histories and reports, see BNF, MS Melanges Colbert 3, in general. For specific examples of Baluze’s internal reports and secret histories, see “Mémoire sur les differens entre la cour de Rome et la Cour de France” (fols. 1–4) and his “Traité de la Régale” (fols. 9–41).
30 BNF. MS Mélanges Colbert 30.
minutes of strategy discussions, such as “Designs that his Majesty has to take parts of these countries, over which he has rights,” as well as collections of legal evidence and arguments backing the French royal case. Bourzeis informed Colbert about legal questions, Spanish responses, and general strategy, while also working on public propaganda and diplomatic efforts. Parts of this file were eventually unified into a work of public propaganda. While delicate internal memos and diplomatic reports remained secret, Bourzeis’s *Traité des droits de la Reyne tres-chrestienne sur divers Estats de la monarchie d’Espagne*, is a discussion of legal documents Colbert saw fit to publish on the Royal Press at the Louvre in 1667, backing the French crown’s claim.

Colbert used methods of the Republic of Letters to find potentially useful documents. He regularly asked Intendants, commissaries, ambassadors and agents to find him materials for his library and archives. To the Intendant Tubeuf he wrote,

I have heard that the Messieurs [the monks] of the chapter of Saint-Gatien were thinking of sending me some of their manuscripts to put in my library. Please tell them for me, when you see them, that I would be much obliged by this present, as I take great pleasure in collecting manuscripts that might serve as the basis for literary projects that I have undertaken of [Louis XIV’s] reign.

I also ask that you let me know what you’ve done to get a copy of the manuscript entitled: *Gesta Aldrici*, which belongs to the chapter of the cathedral of Le Mans; and in the case that you have been able to acquire it, you will please send it to me as quickly as possible.

There were numerous cases of Intendants making contact with religious institutions, and asking for manuscripts, rare works and verifications. Colbert also asked the ambassador to London to scour the London book markets, looking for new editions for his personal collection.

Colbert drafted figures of international humanism for his sometimes public, sometimes secret information hub. Indeed, it could be seen as a parallel republic of letters. The academician Jean Chapelain (1595–1674) became Colbert’s agent, searching for scholars willing to take Colbert’s money in return for royal propaganda. A man who once kept a correspondence with other members of the international republic of letters for his own interests, now used his address book for Colbert. Chapelain wrote Conring, asking him to work for the French crown by assem-

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31 Ibid., fols. 1:311, 326–34, 547.
32 Colbert to Tubeuf, Intendant at Tours, February 3, 1679, in *Lettres*, 7:84: “J’ay appris que Messieurs du chapitre de Saint-Gatien de Tours avoient dessein de m’envoyer quelques-uns de leurs manuscrits pour mettre dans ma bibliothèque. Tesmoignez-leur, s’il vous plaist, en mon nom, lorsque vous les verrez, que je leur seray fort obligé de ce présent, prenant un grand plaisir de ramasser des manuscrits pour servir aux ouvrages de littérature qui sont entrepris pour illustrer ce règne.

Je vous prie aussi de me faire savoir ce que vous avez fait pour tirer copie du manuscrit intitulé: Gesta Aldrici, qui appartient au chapitre de l’église cathédrale du Mans; et en cas que vous l’ayez fait tirer, vous me ferez plaisir de me l’envoyer le plus tost que vous pourrez.”
33 See Colbert’s request to Bouchu, Intendant at Dijon regarding the manuscripts of the abbey of Fontenay, March 9, 1679, in *Lettres*, 7:87.
bling historical documents which could be used as French propaganda. He did the same with Heinsius, whom he flattered by listing other great scholars, such as J. G. Vossius and Huygens, who had accepted royal service. Chapelain flattered Vossius by telling him that Louis XIV himself had taken a personal interest in his works. Chapelain also proposed his own services in developing a form of panegyrical history for the king of a sort that would not reveal political secrets to the king’s enemies. The object here was blatant propaganda. Chapelain explained that he understood that Colbert’s project of keeping documented political history secret:

[...] history should serve only to conserve the splendor of the King’s enterprises and to detail his miracles. At the same time, history is like a fruit that is not good out of season. For if it does not analyze the motives of the things it explains, and if it is not accompanied by prudent commentaries, then it is nothing but a pure, undignified relation [...]. However, this sort of history should not be used during the reign of the Prince who is the subject of the history, for if one were to write this history, it would render public the secrets of the Prince’s Cabinet; it would warn his enemies, nullify his policy, and betray those who work with him in secret and in the shadow of a profound silence. Therefore, I think that we should produce a history in a manner that the work is kept hidden until no inconvenient remarks can be used against his Majesty and his allies.41

Thus Colbert’s agent understood that, unlike earlier historians working for the king, his job was not to write serious, documented history. The royal archives were to remain closed.

When Denis II Godefroy, Colbert’s agent in the stacks at the Chambre des Comptes at Lille—an archive essential for documents pertaining to Louis’s claims to the Netherlands—asked Colbert if he could write a history with the documents he was collecting under Colbert’s orders, Colbert told him that he paid him to keep his medieval documents for the state, to not publish them. He told the disappointed Godefroy to stick to his secret, archival task. When one of the assistants in the royal library, Antoine Varillas, revealed to Colbert that he was using the documents of the royal collection to write a Secret history of the house of Medici—“I leave off where Machiavelli began,” he imprudently boasted—Colbert was horrified, and fired him and evicted him from his lodgings at the library. When Colbert’s brother protested that

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37 Chapelain to Colbert, November, 1662, in Colbert, Lettres, 5:619.
38 Chapelain to A. M. Heinsius, June 1, 1663, in Chapelain, Lettres, 2:304–6 at 305.
40 Ibid., 272–77 at 275.
41 Chapelain to Colbert, September 18, 1662, ibid., 272–77 at 275: “Je viens à l’histoire qu’avec beaucoup de raison vous avez jugée, Monsieur, un des principaux moyens pour conserver la splendeur des entreprises du Roy et le détail de ses miracles. Mais il est de l’histoire comme de ces fruits qui ne sont bons que gardés et pour arrière-saison. Si elle n’explique pas les motifs des choses qui y sont racontées, si elle n’est pas accompagnée de réflexions prudentes et de documents, ce n’est qu’une relation pure, sans force et sans dignité. De les y employer aussy, durant le règne du Prince qui en est le sujet, cela ne se pourrait sans exposer au public les ressorts du Cabinet, donner lieu aux ennemis de les prévenir ou de les rendre inutiles, et trahir ceux qui auraient des liaisons avec lui, lesquelles ne subsistent que par le secret et à l’ombre d’un profond silence. Ainsi, j’estime que si vous faites travailler à l’histoire de Sa Majesté en la manière qu’elle doit estre que pour tenir l’ouvrage caché jusques à ce que les inconvénients remarqués ne puissent préjudicier à ses affaires et à ses allés.”
43 Colbert to Godefroy, March 6, 1669, in Lettres, 5:274.
44 Varillas to Colbert, October 17, 1663, in Boivin, Mémoire pour l’histoire, fols. 476–80 at 476 & 479. The original documents concerning literary disputes between Colbert and Varillas, as well as his literary correspondence with
Varillas had nowhere to go, Colbert retorted that he had found Varillas “insupportably ugly” (“une mine plus désavantageuse qui se puisse voir”), and that he didn’t care. Long-serving scholars who did not precisely follow orders were given no extra respect for their skills. He showed the same business-like impatience with the old Royal Historiographer, François-Eudes de Mézéray. When he published a passage in his history that was in contradiction with Colbert’s claims of royal tax prerogatives, Colbert fired him as well, ignoring the entreaties of a long-serving old man with a family to support. They had misunderstood their role, which was closer to that of Foucault, the intellectual policeman and bureaucrat in a monarchy of letters. They were to help Colbert deliberately create an archival record that would form the basis of future histories favorable to his agenda.

With the Foundation of the Petite Académie, later the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Colbert organized a historical research team for political propaganda. The team, which included Chapelain, François Charpentier, Claude Perrault, the Président de Périgny, and later, Paul Pellison-Fontanier, had begun by helping formulate Louis’s Instructions for the Dauphin, and had corrected works of propaganda. The team wrote Latin inscriptions for public buildings and medals, and took part in writing collective works of propagandistic history. The most illustrious of this group was Charles Perrault, the great author of fairy tales, who acted as permanent secretary for the Petite Académie. Perrault writes in his Mémoires that he had Charpentier write down the work of the group in a small notebook (cahier), which would be sent to Colbert, who would write his comments on it, much like he did with the reports of his son and the Intendants. Colbert had tested Perrault for the position of secretary by having him write a description of a naval siege. Perrault’s job was then to record Louis XIV’s utterances into a register, so that sententiae and great phrases of the king could later be quoted. Colbert also dictated the story of the fall of Fouquet, omitting the commonly known fact that he himself had mercilessly engineered it. Perrault diligently wrote this official version down in the register.

However, there were problems with Colbert’s historical research team. Perrault notes that the team worked not from primary historical documents, but rather from official gazettes and public sources to write their history. After Charpentier approached Colbert, asking for secret memoranda with which to write his histories, the minister rebuffed him, not wanting to open the royal archives. Charpentier resigned. When Pellison began writing his history of the War of Devolution, he also asked for direct access to Louis XIV and state archives. He had access to the king, but apparently not to state papers. They were two separate things. Louis did not reveal secrets but his papers did. Colbert wanted Pellison for the same reasons he hired Chapelain: to write tasteful panegyric,

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45 Boivin, Mémoire pour l’histoire, fols. 476–78.


47 Ranum, Artisans of Glory, 259–64.

48 Ibid., 260–61.

49 Charles Perrault, Mémoires (Paris: Librarie des Bibliophiles, 1878), 27.

50 Ibid., 26.

51 Ibid., 27.
not to do revealing research. Thus Pellisson was commissioned to write about Louis’s Dutch Wars, and followed Louis on his military campaign, writing observations and a purely descriptive history which could be used as propaganda.

One scholar who pleased Colbert was Benjamin Priolo, a former spy and adventurer who had worked for Mazarin, and who, in 1661, proposed to write a history of the ministry of Mazarin “in the style of Tacitus or Livy” in exchange for payment. He even asked Colbert for documents for his history, and Pierre Bayle claimed that Colbert had given him access to information concerning rival ministers. Whether or not Colbert actually gave Priolo sensitive documents to bolster his claims, Priolo’s history clumsily attacked Colbert’s rivals and praised Mazarin. Describing Mazarin’s last will and testament, Priolo noted, “At this time especially he recommended by particular Character Jean Baptiste Colbert, in whom as he possessed many qualities, so especially his faithfulness and his industry, and with his most piercing Judgement, sincerity unknown to the most of men.” Priolo noted that Colbert could never be deceived, nor deceive anyone. Colbert did not like base flattery that looked bad. Indeed, Priolo lamented that his book was both ridiculed and disdained. But Colbert did like political loyalty, and Priolo received payments and kept his pension.

THE FOUCAULT FILES: POWER, INFORMATION AND ARCHEOLOGY

The emblematic figure of Colbert’s information system was neither a churchman, nor a librarian, although he had essential training in ecclesiastical scholarship. Nicolas-Joseph Foucault (1643–1721) was an erudite “maître des requêtes” and official whose career spanned and outlasted Louis XIV’s reign. Like Richelieu, Colbert attempted to turn these legal officers into pure royal bureaucrats. Foucault began his career as Colbert’s secretary, compiling a legal and administrative manual for Colbert’s son: a glossary of state paperwork and of the archives which allowed him to learn the mechanics of the medieval state administration. He helped in the trial against Fouquet and led the acquisition campaign for both libraries, finally rising to the powerful post of Intendant of Montauban, where he implemented the repressive measures against Protestants. As Baluze evolved from scholar to bureaucrat, Foucault grew from lowly tax collector, to

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52 Ranum, Artisans of Glory, 262–64.
53 Priolo to Colbert, June 4, 1661, in Benjamin Priolo, Lettres inédites, ed. Tamizey de Larroque (Tours: Bouserez, 1877), 3.
54 Ibid., 6, Priolo to Colbert, June 6, 1661.
56 On Foucault, see the excellent biography by F. Baudry, in Foucault, Mémoires, i-clxxvi.
58 There are two different editions of the “Mémoire sur les Ordonnances en general de Mr. Colbert.” The first, BNF MS Fr. 7213, contains only two volumes. The second, MS Fr. 7497–7500, not mentioned by Pierre Clément, contains four volumes.
59 On the rather unique career of Foucault, see Antoine Schnapper, Le géant, la licorne et la tulipe: Collections et collectionneurs dans la France du XVIIe siècle (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), 297–301. On the transformation of
grand state Intendant, writer of enquêtes, and noted erudite and antiquarian, founder of the Académie des Belles Lettres de Caen. By the end of his life during the Regency of the Duke d’Orléans, Foucault was a celebrated antiquarian and archeologist. Foucault straddled both the strong-arm politics of Louis’s regime and the world of erudition.

Foucault’s father, Joseph Foucault (1612–?), was a secretary of the Chambre des Comptes, and a protégé of Colbert. He went on to be a secretary in the Parlement of Paris and wrote the official report of the proceedings of Fouquet’s arrest. Nicolas-Joseph was educated by the Jesuits. He was first in his class (“empereur”) several times and won the first prize in prose at the Collège de Clermont, where Colbert’s sons would later attend school. Foucault later studied philosophy and obtained the degree of maître des arts. In 1662, he studied theology for a year, was confirmed, received the tonsure and was going to receive a position in the clergy. However, his father and Colbert decided that he should study law, and in 1664, he received a degree in canon and civil law at Orléans. Colbert named him secretary in 1665. He now had the prerequisite skills to become one of the leading figures in Colbert’s administration. He was trained in classical studies, ecclesiastical history, canon and civil law.

Colbert had plans for his skilled protégé. Foucault entered royal administration with a commission as a Procurer General of genealogical research. His first job was thus to work as a support to Colbert’s project of pressuring the nobility to prove their financial rights. In 1674, he became a maître des requêtes, the road to being an Intendant. In 1678, Colbert found a new use for his talents. He made Foucault part of Baluze and Doat’s manuscript gathering operation in the Affair of the Régale in the early 1680s. Working with Baluze, Foucault went to the abbey of Moissac and noted that Doat had missed many documents relevant to asserting royal, secular power over the Church. With the help of the abbé de Fouillac, Foucault went through the manuscripts and had Fouillac make a catalogue for Baluze. They found precious religious manuscripts, such as the “Traité de Lactance,” and “De mortibus persecutorum.” Concerning these discoveries, Foucault wrote to Baluze that he had found a learned priest without an income who will essentially raid the archives and write a catalogue so that Baluze and Colbert could assess which documents needed to be copied, since no member of the besieged abbey of Moissac was willing to do so. Foucault also pointed out that the archbishop of Cahors was having legal

Intendants from tax collectors to state observers, see Esmonin, Études sur la France des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles, 25; and Louis Trénard, “Les enquêtes statistiques au XVIIe siècle,” 12.

60 Foucault, Mémoires, xii.
61 Ibid., xv.
62 Ibid., xv-xvi.
64 Reproduced in Foucault, Mémoires, cix-cx.
65 Foucault to Baluze, February 9, 1678, in Mémoires, cxviii: “Je n’ai point voulu, Monsieur, faire réponse à la dernière lettre que vous avez pris la peine de m’écrire, que je n’aie été en état de vous envoyer le catalogue des manuscrits qui sont dans l’abbaye de Moissac. Je me suis servi pour les examiner de M. Fouillac, chanoine de Cahors, qui a demeuré sept jours à en parcourir seulement une partie, les archives de ce monastère étant dans une très-grande confusion et la plupart des actes pourris ou mangés des rats. M. le président Doat y a passé assez légèremment, et il y a beaucoup de livres et de cartulaires qu’il n’a point vus. Il est aisé de connaître parfaitement ce qui est renfermé dans cette abbaye, par le moyen dudit sieur Fouillac, qui est très-habile en ces matières et aux yeux duquel rien n’échappera de tout ce qui mérite d’être relevé. Mais, comme il perdit le revenu de canonicat pendant le temps qu’il travaillerait à cette recherche et qu’il offrir d’y travailler gratuitement, il seroit, Monsieur, nécessaire d’avoir une commission du roi qui enjoignit au chapitre de Cahors le tenir présent pendant qu’il seroit occupé dans sa perquisition. Ce seroit un moyen d’avoir une connaissance entière de tout ce qu’il y a de curieux dans les églises de cette province, et vous serez,
problems, and if Baluze had Colbert help him, he might be able to use this pressure to obtain a rare manuscript.

Nicolas-Joseph Foucault is not considered an erudite author. His works, mostly manuscript internal reports and histories, constitute a genre little studied by intellectual historians. And yet, not only were Foucault’s works diverse, they had great influence within the French state. Foucault wrote major parts of the *Ordonnances* (ca. 1670), or legal and administrative lessons for Colbert’s son Seignelay. With the expectation of inheriting his father’s positions, Seignelay would have to defend the rights of the monarchy and guarantee the smooth functioning of governmental offices. For this, he would need to learn the minutiae of arcane state institutions, and learn the specific paperwork needed for each governmental function. Volume 2 contains a chapter by Nicolas-Joseph Foucault, called, "Il y a différence entre Loix, Ordonnances, et Edits." Foucault’s text is a glossary of every type of government paperwork. It resembles Savary’s compilation for businessmen; however, this manuscript was for Seignelay’s eyes only. Foucault’s treatise explains how to write and properly sign documents. It lists types of documents, official seals, and the documentary practices and responsibilities of each officer. Next to the section on seals, in the margin, Foucault writes an exercise for the young marquis:

Assignment for Monseigneur. Write a succinct memoir of all the different forms of chancery letters, their forms and the essential clauses of their distinctions from which all the different names and letters which are sent under each form. For example. Patent letters. . . . Declaration, commissions, [ … ] arrests. 66

Foucault was also Colbert and Lamoignon’s scribe during the legal reforms, writing the *Le Procès Verbal de l’Ordonnance de 1667*, the internal minutes of Colbert’s legal reforms. He wrote the official description of the arrest of Fouquet. 67 He wrote a secret, internal history of the functions of the royal secretaries, also for Seignelay, to once again describe the workings of state administration. 68 He prepared drafts of his own Intendant’s enquête on Caen for the *Mémoires sur les Généralités* collected to instruct Louis XIV’s grandson and erstwhile heir, the duke of Bourgogne, in 1698. 69 He wrote numerous enquêtes, letters to Colbert, as well as a set of *Mémoires*, not published until the nineteenth century. He also worked as a scholar, writing numerous speeches for both the Académie des Belles-Lettres de Caen, and the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, which made him an honorary member in 1701. 70 During this same period, Foucault and the famed

Monsieur, d’abord éclairci de tout ce que vous voudrez savoir. M. l’évèque de Cahors est à Paris à la poursuite d’un procès qu’il a contre l’Université, et je suis persuadé qu’il ne vous refusera pas le manuscrit de Radulphe, archevêque de Bruges, dont vous marquez avoir besoin.”


68 See Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, MS 5298.


70 See *Lettres patentes avec les statuts pour l’Académie des belles-lettres établie en la ville de Caen. (Janvier 1705) - Discours de M. Foucault à l’ouverture de la première séance, le 2 mars 1705. - Réponse de M. le président de Croisiles… , au discours de M. Foucault* (Caen: A. Caveller, 1705). Also see Claude Gros de Boze, *Histoire de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-
antiquarian and Orientalist translator of One Thousand and One Nights, Antoine Galland, sent a “relation” of their findings from their archeological dig of the ancient cities of Alauna and Viducasiens to the Académie des Inscriptions, for which Montfaucon eulogized him.\footnote{Gros de Boze, Histoire de l’Académie, 240.}

Colbert asked Foucault to mix his duties as Intendant with his scholarly service. He was thus a learned, but also hands-on governor and administrator. In 1680, Foucault sent Colbert substantial administrative reports concerning politics, legal reform, church affairs and tax collection in Montauban, as well as making a map of the area.\footnote{Foucault to Colbert, July 25, 1680, in Foucault, Mémoires, 453.} In all cases, he used his scholarly expertise to assert absolutist royal authority. In the same letter as he asks Foucault to “Inform yourself always on all that concerns commerce, manufacturing, and the feeding of livestock,” he also asks him to continue his state scholarly activity:

In the different visits that you have made all over your districts, you would give me pleasure if you would look in the churches, cathedrals, and in the principal abbeys to see if there are considerable \(\ldots\) collections of manuscripts, and, in this case, to look for the means to have them without using the heavy hand of authority, but rather with sweetness and by purchasing them.\footnote{Colbert to Foucault, December 12, 1680, ibid., 459: “Dans les différentes visites que vous faites dans l’étendue de votre généralité, vous me ferez plaisir de rechercher dans les églises, cathédrales et dans les principales abbayes s’il y auront quelques manuscrits considérables, et, en ce cas, chercher les moyens de les avoir sans y employer aucune autorité, mais seulement par douceur et par achat.”}

Clearly Colbert had learned lessons from the problems encountered by his aggressive document hunters, although he never hesitated to apply state pressure to acquire his desired papers. If he supported propaganda and suppressed critical histories, Colbert also stifled and controlled the publication of genuine historical documents if they did not serve the strict role of propaganda. In 1666, the parliamentarian Guillaume Ribier complained of the rising tide of state secrecy and government control over state documents, in which more and more historical documents were deemed “secret intelligence.”\footnote{Ribier, Lettres et Mémoires d’Estat, des Roys, Princes, & Ambassadeurs (Paris: François Clouzier & la Veuve Aubouyn, 1666), preface at 5.} It was dangerous for historians, Ribier noted, to publish historical documents with political significance,\footnote{Ibid.}

where one discovers the secrets of the Court of a Prince, the mysteries of the Cabinet, the power and authority of the Favorites, the jealousies and competitions of the \(\textbf{Grands}\) etc. [...] Even now it is considered an attack against the well-being of the state, & the Honor of Princes and their Ministers, to give the means to Strangers and Enemies of the State to use our documents (\textit{adresses}) & to know our most secret intelligence.\footnote{Ibid.}

Secrecy and censorship had always existed in government affairs. It was now clearer than ever that this secrecy was extending in new ways into the world of learning. This did not just mean...
keeping secret archives and manipulating the public world of learning; it also meant creating a vast censorship campaign. It was precisely the sort of policy that missing during the Fronde. Colbert would use his state agents to identify and repress information deemed threatening to Louis’s royal power monopoly. This was the endgame of Colbert’s network of erudite agents.

POLICING THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

For a minister who made his career during the days of the Fronde, libels, clandestine street literature and printing were of primary concern to Colbert. He now sought to police the world of letters. Thus Colbert sought to influence the Republic of Letters at all levels: from its elite spheres, down to the radical world of Grub Street. Throughout his ministry, Colbert wrote to his Lieutenant General of Police, the Intendant Gabriel-Nicolas de La Reynie (1625–1699), of the king’s and his own concern with libels. Colbert wanted not only punish printers of libelous tracts and banned books with terms in the Bastille or in the galleys; he also sought to create a system to tightly control printing throughout France. In 1661, at beginning of Louis’s reign, Colbert sought to strengthen the state’s control over the printing of books in France. There had long been a system of royal “permissions” that printers needed to publish a given work, that followed the “approbation” of the royal censor, called the “approbation du roy.” Colbert wanted to expand this by bringing print-shops themselves under state control.

In 1666 Colbert created the Council of Police and asked them to come up with a system for controlling the book trade. Working under La Reynie, with the assistance of the erudite police commissary Nicolas Delamare, the Council designed a mercantilist plan to reduce the number of printers to only a sanctioned few. Colbert helped the Council design a familiar system of controlled visits, much like those of Intendants. Indeed, La Reynie and Delamare were not simple policemen, but rather prestigious, former maîtres de requêtes and La Reynie was technically an Intendant. The position of Lieutenant General of Police in Paris was a newly created post, a high office that was tantamount to a ministry of the interior, though focused on Paris, and to occupy it took a high level of sophistication, erudition and administrative grit. It brought La Reynie into daily contact with Colbert and often Louis XIV.

The job of the police would be to visit print shops and verify that they were following regulations and only publishing sanctioned books. La Reynie would list all material in each print shop to make sure the state could account for each printing press. He wanted lists of workers in the printing industry, and lists of those who made and distributed moveable type. In 1667, Colbert closed thirteen of the seventy-nine existing print shops in Paris for not complying with state regulation. The decision was taken to limit the number of royally sanctioned printers to thirty. They would receive mercantilist monopolies and advantageous contracts to publish royal mate-

77 For a model letter, see Colbert to La Reynie, April 25, 1670: “J’ay rendu compte au Roy du contenu de la lettre que vous m’avez écrite sur le sujet des gazettes à la main. Sa Majesté désire que vous continuiez de faire une recherche exacte de ces sortes de gens et que vous fassiez punir sévèrement ceux que vous avez fait arrester, estant tres-important pour le bien de l’Estat d’empescher à l’avenir la continuation de pareils libelles.” Colbert would continue writing this same sort of letter to La Reynie and the Intendants until his death. For a later example from 1682, see Lettres, 6:li.

78 Martin, Livre, pouvoirs et société, 2:691.


80 Martin, Livre, pouvoirs et société, 695.

81 Ibid., 678–82.
rials, from books to legal codes, and official announcements that were posted on walls. It was a lucrative business. In order to maintain their privilege, printers would have to pass each book through La Reynie’s censorship office to receive an official stamp of approval. Failure to do so would incur corporal punishment. While Colbert favored state-sanctioned printers that prospered—Frédéric Léonard became a millionaire with his royal and church printing monopolies—small independent printers and bookbinders slowly went out of business. Colbert’s state regulation succeeded in strangling the once great Parisian book industry. Yet, censorship is always a tricky game. Printing in nearby Holland flourished even more, outside of Colbert’s control, and royal printers, such as Frédéric Léonard, often printed subversive works on foreign presses, smuggling them back to Paris for profit.

Gabriel-Nicolas de La Reynie was not a Parisian by birth. Born in Limoges in 1625, from an important parliamentary family, his grandfather was president of the Parlement of Burgundy and a member of the Royal Council. He received a Jesuit education and went on to study philosophy, theology, canon and civil law. At the age of twenty-one, he became President of the Court of Bordeaux. During the Fronde, he became Intendant to the duke d’Épernon, and, although wealthy himself, went on to manage the d’Épernon family fortune and household in Paris. In 1661, having had the support of Mazarin, La Reynie was able to purchase the important position of maître des requêtes at the Parlement of Paris for the considerable sum of 320,000 pounds. With good political connections, he was on the path to an Intendancy.

From a distinguished legal family, La Reynie was cultivated. His marriage contract, reveals the valuable contents of his library of 1,537 volumes in the early 1660s. His library was filled with works of literature and eloquence, theology, history, canon and civil law, philosophy and the natural sciences, as well as a considerable collection of 81 volumes of prints. Here was the perfect information bureaucrat for Colbert: cultivated, professional, with legal and ecclesiastical expertise, and loyal to the crown. La Reynie was not only a well-educated and rich lawyer; he also chose the right side in the Fronde. Best of all, he aimed to serve.

As a test of his skills, Colbert had him write several reports on trade and tax farms, and also asked him to manage a system of informers and to report their findings.

La Reynie passed the tests and soon after, Colbert gave him a place on the Council of Justice, where he wrote a report supporting royal authority over ecclesiastical courts. In 1667, Colbert appointed La Reynie the first Lieutenant General of Police in Paris, in a move to take
policing away from the Paris Parlement, transferring this power to the crown, and to Colbert’s ministry.

La Reynie’s responsibilities were multiple. He was to police Paris and guarantee security in the city. He was to manage the city itself—from lighting and firefighting to signs, water distribution and flood management. He was to handle vagabonds, hospitals, prisons, abandoned children, and prostitutes, as well as oversee health and the management of the medical profession, hygiene, and epidemics in the capital. He also managed commerce in the city and regulated the guilds, from butchers to wig-makers. Finally, he was to police “mœurs”: roughly put, morals, which also meant ideas, learning, and printing. He was essentially the mayor of Paris and manager of all that went on in this capital of the Republic of Letters.

Colbert had asked La Reynie if it would be possible to completely ban the importation of foreign books and pamphlets. The astute and ever realistic La Reynie pointed out the difficulties in controlling clandestine and foreign literature. In 1664 he wrote Colbert that

high and low officers of customs make everything confused, by the license they take to give to booksellers, before they have been visited first by the Collège Royal, by the syndics of the printing trade, the books they receive in boxes in their offices [from outside France] […]. It is useless to constrain the king’s subjects to obedience, if foreigners are free to fill the kingdom with scandalous doctrines. It is in this way that kings and governments have been slandered in the past.

La Reynie tried various methods of searching in-coming packages from Holland, and even though he was slowing down traffic, he knew that banned books were still making it through. The bookseller Ribou was caught with a reading room with a stock of banned, seditious religious works on Protestantism and Jansenism, and was sent to the galleys. On his return, he was caught selling more banned books and this time Delamare wrote La Reynie that he would threaten Ribou with a life sentence in the galleys if he were caught again.

Censorship had once been the purview of the University, but during the reign of François I, the crown took over censorship from the Church, as well as the Parlement, which delivered the approbations to publish legal texts. Colbert and La Reynie now tried to use their control over the book trade to stifle the wave of anti-government pamphlets, placards, and factums, printed descriptions of trials and legal proceedings, as well as seditious songs. After nearly twenty years in power, La Reynie complained to his old friend, Étienne Baluze:

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88 Ibid., 26–27.
89 La Reynie to Colbert, May 21, 1664, in Lettres, 6:28–9, n.5: “Les officiers et commis de la douane mettoient toutes choses en confusion, par la licence qu’ils prenoient de rendre aux libraires, avant qu’ils eussent esté préalablement visités au Collège Royal, par les syndics de l’imprimerie, les livres qui arrivoient emballés a leurs bureaux. […] Il est inutile de contenir les sujets du roy dans l’obéissance, si les estrangers ont la liberté de remplir le royaume de doctrines scadaleuses. C’est par ce moyen que les rois et les gouvernemens de l’Estat ont esté calomniés par le passé.”
90 Saint-Germain, La Reynie et la police au grand siècle, 161–62.
91 Cited in ibid., 166–67.
92 La Reynie and his assistant Delamare’s folio files of seditious materials are found in massive folios at the Bibliothèque Nationale. See BNF. MS Fr. 21626 and 21742. On La Reynie’s role in providing material for and helping write the Traité de la Police, see Saint-Germain, La Reynie et la police au grand siècle, 38–39. In his Traité de la Police (bk. 1, title 12, chap. 6), which La Reynie helped him write, Nicolas Delamare wrote of the police commissaries of the book trade who worked on the rue St. Jacques: “Ils font recherche de tous les livres ou libelles imprimez contre la Religion, ou ceux même sur cette matière qui ne sont que suspects, pour avoir été imprimez sans approbation des Docteurs, et sans privilège ou permission. Ils les font saisir; et après que sur leur rapport le Magistrat en a ordonné la
I do not understand how it is possible that there are still people insolent and stubborn enough to compose and sing in public such extravagant things. We have imprisoned many of these miserable people, seized all their papers, and have also threatened all these small printers.\(^93\)

La Reynie had the authority to censor and repress, but it was not enough to control sedition completely.

**CONCLUSION**

What is clear from Colbert’s administration is that the world of letters, learning and philosophy was intertwined with the state. He was not fully in control of it, but he managed the world of letters far more effectively than any minister before or after him. And he profoundly influenced what works were written, published and banned. Some scholars, such as Chapelain, took his pay and played along. A scholar such as Varillas did his initial research as a bureaucrat in the Royal Library, but later went on to use this research against the state. In the case of Baluze, a chunk of the Republic of Letters either worked for or took orders from the state, and in doing so, produced significant works. At the same time, the crackdown only fueled radical Enlightenment in Holland. The Republic of Letters was not a distinct institution, cut off from the absolutist state, but rather a complex network that had links across political and confessional lines. The state libraries and learned institutions that Colbert created could be used to further state power, but also as sites where philosophy and history could be written with the goal of undermining the monarchy. Learning, writing and publishing were potent, ever-changing, and potentially dangerous. Colbert’s deep involvement with and ambitious plans for the Republic of Letters allowed him to control and harness it for a time. He knew how threatening it could be to absolutism without such precautions. The events of the eighteenth century would show how prudent, though at some levels, ultimately futile Colbert’s policy had been. \(^{\text{A}}\)

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\(^{93}\) La Reynie to Baluze, January 17, 1684, BNF. MS Baluze 180, fol. 141r-v: "Je ne comprends pas comment il se peut encore trouver des gens assez insolents et hardis pour oser entreprendre de faire et de chanter en public de pareilles extravagances. On a emprisonné plusieurs de ces misérables, on a saisi toutes leurs feuilles et on a aussi menacé tous ces petits imprimeurs."