WORK METHOD

By Mette Birkedal Bruun

Prologue

The Danish National Research Foundation Centre for Privacy Studies (PRIVACY) is dedicated to interdisciplinary and collaborative research into notions of privacy and the private in the early modern period (1500–1800). The PRIVACY research team includes social and cultural historians, church historians as well as historians of architecture, of law and of political ideas. When we gather scholars from so many different disciplines each with its distinct scholarly profile and approaches, joint points of orientation are key. We need a shared analytical approach and a set of common landmarks that guide our scholarly efforts. At PRIVACY, we have three such sets of landmarks that serve as investigatory tools in our joint work with the early modern sources – be they, for instance, texts, groundplans or assemblages of archival documents. The first concerns terminology; the second concerns the areas in which notions of privacy and the private are negotiated; the third concerns the semantic realms related to privacy and the private.¹

Terminology²

Searches for words with the root priv generate insight into historical notions of ‘private’ and ‘privacy’.³ The terminological approach stays close to the sources, and it is well suited to grasp the broad array of

¹ This text includes revised version of sections of Mette Birkedal Bruun, ‘Privacy in Early Modern Christianity and Beyond: Traces and Approaches’, Annali Istituto storico italo-germanico/Jahrbuch des italienisch-deutschen historischen Instituts in Trient, 44 (2018/2), 33–54 (pp. 33, 46–49). It is the product of the daily joint research at Centre for Privacy Studies and owes a lot to the scholarly efforts of the entire PRIVACY research team.

² This approach owes something to the semasiological aspect identified in the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe; cf. Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Einleitung’, in Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, ed. by O. Brunner, W. Conze and R. Koselleck, 8 vols (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972-1997), 1 (1972), pp. XIII–XXV (pp. XX–XXI). At PRIVACY, the first aim is to study how priv* words are deployed in particular idioms, texts, and genres at a given location. This means that our first interest rests with particular appearances of such words in particular sources and their linguistic impetus within that source.

³ Attempts at a research bibliography are futile; suffice it here to mention a few landmarks. Classical legal definitions of what is private, be it status, property or civic rights, lay the foundation, and legal understandings permeate historical and current conceptions, the latter generally rooted in the definition of privacy as ‘the right to be let alone’ presented in S.D. Warren and L.D. Brandeis, ‘The Right to Privacy’, Harvard Law Review, 4 (1890), no. 5, 193–220, with the analysis of surveillance and society in A.F. Westin, Privacy and Freedom (New York: Atheneum, 1968) as another milestone. Sociologists have studied the private as a negation of the public. For example, Richard Sennett’s classic The Fall of Public Man (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) examines the progress of private values in an urban setting over and against what is public and common and Barrington Moore Jr. applies
historical meanings of priv* words, ranging from the corporeal and run-of-the-mill connotations associated with terms such as privy and private parts to loftier matters of state associated with the vocabulary related to the Privy Council or the conseil privé. Strictly speaking, the Geheimrat eludes this focus, which gives us a first hint as to the blind angles of the terminological approach.

A terminological focus may help us sidestep commonplace presumptions and attune our scholarly attention to unexpected variants. We may work on different scales. Perhaps we simply keep an eye on priv* words when we work with early modern sources. Perhaps we do a more systematic search, targeting a particular genre of sources or doing word searches with a more or less refined technological mediation, thus entering into research areas such as corpus linguistics. In other cases, a concern with priv* words may not be sufficient, and we are well advised to broaden the terminological search to include cognate terms such as, for the French material, particulier or intime. The relationship between priv* words and its cognates outlines local networks of meaning that are context sensitive and demand careful interpretation. This approach also leaves us with the question of how to study the non-verbal terms of, for example, visual programmes which draw on layers of aggregated symbolic meaning.

This strong focus on the context of specific kinds of language-use warns against too general conclusions as to the priv* terminology. With its proximity to the sources, the terminological approach risks leading to a form of atomization, bringing to the fore a multitude of occurrences of priv* words, each of which comes with its own context in a particular historical situation. To borrow an expression

from von Moos, this approach risks winding up in ‘reiner Quellensprache’ – that is, parroting the idiom of the sources themselves and leaving us with a host of historical priv* words in an unhandy 1:1 scale. Moreover, the terminological focus does not necessarily capture all the aspects that we associate with privacy, and trawling the sources with a terminological net yields but a section of the broader picture.

Heuristic zones

Often early modern sources have no priv* words, but are nonetheless relevant for an investigation of notions of privacy. The PRIVACY scholars’ second approach is not dependent on terms. We deploy a heuristic set of zones that represent early modern areas of theorizing, regulation and practice related to privacy and the private. These zones are neither exhaustive nor absolute, but they do offer a common structure that enables us to correlate widely different sources and disciplinary approaches. The zones serve as a catalyst for historical analysis. They point to spatial registers that are relevant not least, but not only, in relation to architecture, and they delineate particular practices and ideal entities as well as their intersections. Each zone thus gives rise to historical debates regarding privacy, and the thresholds between zones potentially involve a negotiation where the contours of an individual or a group of individuals come to the fore.


5 This approach owes something to the onomasiological aspect identified in the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe; cf. Koselleck, Einleitung, p. XXI. It differs by its deployment of heuristic zones as a means to secure a shared focus for the interdisciplinary research team.

boundary between, say, the street and the house demarcated and described; is the retreat into an alcove perceived as an escalation of privacy; how are the difference of activities and characteristics pertaining to respectively the body and the mind classified – and are such classifications related to privacy or the private?

Just as interesting, however, are the overlaps between zones. When we consider such overlaps, our attention is directed to questions such as: to what extent and by which means do rulers and societies access and regulate the minds of the subjects; which societal circumstances provoke a change in this regard; when and how do members of, for example, a civic community gain access to private homes; how do the collective norms of a community or a household determine the bodily practices of an individual? Such questions spring from the zone structure and aid our joint focus on, for example, legislative boundaries between household and community, decrees regarding individual bodies or the theorizing of the household (oeconomia) vis-à-vis the societal order (politia) as well as the regulations of practices that come out of it.

The heuristic zones help us to put such questions to the sources and to establish common ground between disciplines. Since the work with the zones takes as its point of departure conceptions of privacy that are to some extent modern, this approach comes with the risk of anachronism. We pay heed to


7 Von Moos, for one, warns against taking modern conceptions as the point of departure for Begriffsgeschichte; particularly with notions such as private and public the definition of which are blurry; Die Begriffe, p. 163 in a dis-
possible projections of our own more or less conscious assumption that certain phenomena are particularly private, be they artefacts (particular pieces of clothes, mementos, containers for personal belongings), activities (sleep, sex, hygiene, contemplation), spaces (home, bed, bedroom, latrine, confessional), forms of communication (letters, one on one conversations, coded communication, sharing of secrets) and so forth.

Semantic mapping

There is no stable definition of privacy, and it is not the aim of PRIVACY to provide one. We do, however, aspire to outline a semantic taxonomy that helps us to approach systematically the meanings and valences connotated by terms and notions of privacy and the private. In its Latin root and historical development, the adjective privatus is a negation, and notions of privacy or the private, whether they are priv* words or the fruit of a zone analysis, are often characterized by being the opposite of, or at least in tension with, concepts such as the public, official, professional, communal, evident and so forth.\(^8\)

The semantic map is a basic template for a taxonomy of the meanings and connotations of privacy and the private. As an organic tool, it may be adjusted and proliferated as we extend and deepen our analyses. Particular contexts, sources, genres or societal circumstances may lead to a privileging of one of the circles; other circles may evolve as we extend and deepen our research; and finally developments over time may be charted on the map.

Concluding remarks

The three approaches supplement each another. The zones give us a form of birds eye view on each source and direct correlations between sources, while the terminological approach is instrumental for a

---

\(^8\) Lewis and Short inform us that privatus comes from the verb privo, meaning 'to bereave, deprive, rob, strip of anything' or 'to free, release, deliver from anything' and that its primary meanings concern being «apart from the State, peculiar to one’s self, of or belonging to an individual, private (opp. publicus or communis; cf. domesticus)’ and that it further denotes persons who are not in office and things, such as houses, that are isolated from State affairs; C.T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891 [1879]), p. 1447. According to Amy Russell, Plautus (c. 254–184 BC) offers the earliest datable opposition of publicus and privatus; A. Russell, *The Politics of Public Space in Republican Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 30.
fine-tuning of our historical perception; it helps us to see nuances of the private that we might otherwise miss and to weed out anachronisms. The semantic mapping offers a template for overall classifications of meaning and valence. The three approaches do not pretend to exhaust all aspects related to privacy; nor are they to be mistaken for research results. They offer a starting point and a set of analytical tools that serve research on early modern notions of privacy, be it interdisciplinary or monodisciplinary, be it individual or collaborative. It is our hypothesis that adjusted versions of the three approaches might even prove useful for analyses of current notions of privacy and the private.

July 2019 / © Mette Birkedal Bruun
Please do not distribute without author's consent