

Wikileaks Beyond Wikileaks?

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Corporate media most likely tries to buy you off only if you pose a real danger – radical and subversive to ‘power’. While attacking Wikileaks for corporate collusion, therefore, its original radical potential cannot be overlooked.

Wikileaks’ close collaboration with big corporate media (including *The New York Times* and *Guardian*) and the ‘redactions’ raise serious doubts over whether information is actually flowing freely (Michel Chossudovsky, ‘Who is Behind Wikileaks?’ Dec 13, 2010, *Global Research*). And yet the Wikileaks’ intervention cannot be cast away in a cynical manner – the only way to welcome it however is by saving it from Wikileaks itself, in particular from its liberal slide. Let us problematise the kind of politics or the ‘attacks on power’ which Wikileaks represents, even as stories circulate about corporate-funding and CIA-backing. Indeed one gets deeply suspicious when for example *The Guardian* reports that, for the hackers, ‘the first global cyber-war has begun’, ‘the first sustained clash between the established order and the organic, grassroots culture of the net’. On the other hand, for someone like Jemima Khan typical of a whole swathe of liberal supporters, Wikileaks stands for something far less dramatic. In her already apologetic piece, ‘Why did I back Assange?’, she states that it is only about ‘a new type of investigative journalism’, about freedom of information and so on. What is it really?

Let us ask a counter-intuitive question: what if instead of (only) hacking the internet sites of Mastercard, Paypal and Visa, our ‘Anonymous’ hackers had (instead) attempted to connect with the rank and file employees of the company to go on strike or at least voice their concerns, perhaps issue a collective statement deploring the action of their company? And this would not have really asked of our hackactivists to come out in public and expose themselves to possible reprisals and court cases – just releasing a statement making such a call would have worked or at least showed what they are thinking. And yet they did not do anything like that, nor have Wikileaks itself tried to widen their struggle in any way. Instead of calling upon people to come out and protest, the statement of ‘Anonymous’, responsible for the attacks on these companies, displays an unmistakable, strong and un-self-reflexive behalfism, of acting on behalf of the people or citizens. In typical *V for Vendetta* style, Anonymous declares: “we are here for all of you, campaign for all of you”. Thus *while Wikileaks seems committed to fight ‘power’, and not just fight those in power, they also at the same time display a profound disconnect with ‘people’, even as they claim to fight for the people’s right to know.*

Lets stretch things a bit more by asking another counter-intuitive question: why is it that students in London protesting against fee hike but also against every symbol of authority they come across, against ‘power’ even when not directly related to the hike, somehow did

not turn their wrath against the government for arresting Assange even though it was happening in the same city at the same time? Is the problem with the students, with the people that they get charged up about what looks like a trivial issue of 'fee hike' than about the evil workings of US power revealed through nothing less than the '9/11 of diplomatic history'? Not at all. Indeed, if the student protests or similar 'single-issue' protests often are unable to break out of this single-issueness and place the movement in terms of the larger dynamics of the system as a whole or of the logic of capital and state power, then the problem with Wikileaks is its exceedingly abstract notion of power.

Power is identified only at the top, and it is as though it is in place only through hiding the truth, through manipulation, deceiving the public. It is as though power is on the outside, and is parasitic on society – more seriously, it is as though society functions autonomously (of capitalism), as though society is not internally determined and configured by this power. In the world of Wikileaks, society and power do not meet: 'power' is dissociated from the entire mode of organizing production, distribution and consumption in society, and concentrated to some power-mongers and conspirators. Without any such basis, power becomes an excrescence, an absolute deadweight from without, the handiwork of conspirators and CIA agents whose workings can be deciphered only through secret diplomatic cables. From this it of course follows that power can be fought only through dramatic leaks, exposes and revealing truth. From this, it also follows that 'real struggles' like the student protests or workers struggles are merely doing shadow boxing and hence not worthy allies in the fight against power.

What such a notion of power forgets is that to the extent that people live, work, consume, enjoy, die and so on in this society, they are invested into it, into capitalism – they are 'subjectivated' by it, to borrow a term from psychoanalysis. However this subjectivation is never complete and there is always a remainder – this is where a radical intervention, a transformative politics is always possible, is always already written, as it were, into the script. But radical resistance is not really triggered off as soon as the truth is exposed to all, as soon as citizens know that those in power are this corrupt – for it is not a problem of awareness, not an 'idealist' problem of knowledge. Perhaps this is why the Wikileaks revelations themselves did not let loose a social campaign or a movement even though those in power were embarrassed and jolted into anger – the protests in support of Assange that have taken place, as I will explain, follow from the other events that followed the revelations and not from the revelations themselves.

And yet the actions of Wikileaks carried a tremendous radical political charge, which even lot of the mass mobilizations and social movements totally lack. And here we must hand it to Wikileaks that their subversiveness came precisely from the fact that even though they tend to espouse liberal ideas of free flow of information or, in semi-anarchist mode, think of power as merely conspiratorial their attack really came from outside the normal channels professing free flow of information and citizens right to know: they challenged power by challenging the normal channels of challenging power and revealing the truth, even though they are perhaps getting suckered now into the hands of corporate houses and other suspicious players.

Radically subversive

This subversiveness comes from the fact that not only was the truth revealed about power but even those trusted bodies meant to ensure 'citizens right to know' were cast aside,

transgressed and rendered pointless by the Wikileaks operation. Thus while Sarah Palin and other right-wingers might have asked for Julian Assange's real head, those whose professed objective is to promote 'citizens's right to know' like Amnesty International were not really welcoming of Wikileaks either. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that 'Wikileaks and Mr. Assange risk being isolated from some of their most natural allies in the wake of the documents' publication'.

Amnesty International, Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict, The Open Society Institute, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and the International Crisis Group have severely criticised Wikileaks for releasing material which might risk the lives of many. However this is not the only ground for their opposition to Wikileaks. In an Open Letter to Assange, Reporters Sans Frontieres faulted Wikileaks for 'imprudence' and 'incredible irresponsibility', saying 'you cannot claim to enjoy the protection of sources while at the same time, when it suits you, denying that you are a news media.' Wikileaks in turn derided the 'human rights groups' as US-led and refused to be identified as 'media', 'human rights group' and so on. John Pilger is quite right when he said that "WikiLeaks has shamed those in the media whom George Bush's press spokesman once called 'complicit enablers'".

It is not media, it is not human rights group, so what is Wikileaks? This tussle over finding a proper place for Wikileaks, a given assigned place within the normal functioning of the system is what brings us to the role of big 'complicit enablers' like *New York Times* and *Guardian*. Writes Michel Chussudovsky, 'in a bitter irony, Wikileaks partner *The New York Times*, which has consistently promoted media disinformation is now being accused of conspiracy. For what? For revealing the truth? Or for manipulating the truth?'

Hard-pressed to justify their decision to publish the leaks, these media houses are presenting Wikileaks' actions as, predictably, mere extension of 'investigative journalism' and the right of the citizens to know what their governments are doing. In 'A Note to Readers: the Decision to Publish Diplomatic Documents', the *Times* tries to make the Leaks seem very normal and not all that dramatic. One way it is done in the piece is by stressing a lot on the negotiations the *Times* had with the Obama administration over 'redactions' and how Wikileaks were informed about the administration's views: looks like all three groups had a common point of understanding. It says, 'After its own redactions, *The Times* sent Obama administration officials the cables it planned to post and invited them to challenge publication of any information that, in the official view, would harm the national interest.'

Add to this Jemima Khan's explanation that 'WikiLeaks offers a new type of investigative journalism". That is, the leaks are already part of what big corporate media houses have always espoused for and there is nothing dramatic, anarchist or dangerously political about it. Well, is it? This is where one must assert that no matter what Wikileaks or Assange might claim subsequently, what they have done do not seem to follow from liberal concerns of the citizen's right to know or the emphasis on transparency, responsible government and an active citizenry. For the liberal idea is also of citizens who are not overly politicized and who merely wants 'negative liberty' - non-interference by the state.

In contrast, the Wikileaks expose leads us to assume a highly politicized citizenry, who cannot and do not want to restrict themselves to their private lives and allow a handful of people to rule over them, typical of representative democracy. And further the subversive intent of the Leaks amount to a call for people to bring down those up there -not just know the truth and take legal recourse or wait till the next elections to vote the government out of power! And now, with Mastercard and Visa hitting back at Wikileaks and a cyber-war

declared, it does clearly seem that what is at stake is much more than transparency and accountable government. Hacktivists in turn attacking these two companies completes the picture of daggers drawn and the 'two warring sides' well-defined - the liberal idea of consensus and a shared ground in which all classes and both the powerful and the powerless can supposedly converge did disappear for good, even if temporarily!

It must therefore be stated in no uncertain terms that Wikileaks clearly embodies a radical rupture in US imperialism's normal functioning and also from the normal channels of dissent and 'citizen activism' set up by imperialism. As it stands, Wikileaks cannot be contained and even understood as part of an impeccably liberal idea of an active citizenry, transparency, accountability and so on. Wikileaks is not just demanding the right of citizens to know about the decisions and actions of those in power but is challenging the very legitimacy of that power. 'Knowing the truth' through Amnesty or Reporters Sans Frontieres that are established groups engaging with states through established procedures and legal battles is one thing. Knowing, in terms and conditions that are themselves illegitimate from the standpoint of power, is however another thing - it radicalizes the very meaning and significance of the 'right to know'. Wikileaks' action is therefore at one level a purely formal gesture, the audacity of the act, which stands on its own irrespective of how damning the actual contents of the leaks have been for the US and other governments, irrespective of the diplomatic fall-out and embarrassment caused. At least in the way it was received by large majority of people in the world, its action seems to carry an insurrectionary force, highly dissonant and subversive for the 'established order'.

The later collusion with corporate media does not take away the fact that the original Wikileaks espousal of the free flow of information was less a routine, incremental process of democratization than an open attack on power before it could readjust and absorb this free flow in its normal functioning. It was a deadly sting operation which turned around the 'citizen's right to know' from its decorative functions to an open assault on power - right which is not given but taken, an unconditional right.

Elite radicalism

Thus US officials are not entirely off the mark in declaring that what Wikileaks did was 'not journalism but anarchism' - that Wikileaks was challenging the very legitimacy of power, including the manipulations of Empire and the established order. *And yet the fact of the matter is that Wikileaks is quickly becoming part of business as usual* - anarchism is slowly morphing into journalism! In his recent piece in *The Australian*, Assange himself has shifted his positions from raising the question of the illegitimacy of power to giving liberal arguments that he was only defending the right of citizens to know. He comes down to quoting the US Supreme Court decision that 'only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government'. *Worse, he declared Wikileaks as part of the media and that 'the media helps keep governments honest'.*

Assange might continue this liberal slide further but we should not be surprised about this 'compromise'. For one cannot conceive of another outcome given Wikileaks' methods and forms of activism purportedly challenging power and undermining US domination through the hacktivism of a handful of tech-hippies. *The faceless bohemian tech-libertarians, so long as they remain an underground hacker-elite, must increasingly rely on spectacular releases and big ticket actions:* it is through such actions that they will try to short-circuit themselves into prominence. This makes them dramatic as well as vulnerable at the same time.

(Wikileaks dissident Daniel Domscheit-Berg has on occasion expressed his dissatisfaction with the over-emphasis on big exposes.) *V for Vendetta* can inspire Wikileaks, giving us W for Wikileaks, as the Anonymous releases have announced. However even though V too is a rupture, a subjectivity miraculously intervening from the outside and against 'power', it is W which is much more vulnerable than V since W is not in a movie but in the real world! And so it is not entirely surprising that the corporate media has already entered the picture.

Some have even argued that in being an elitist cyber-vanguard Wikileaks start becoming a mirror image of the CIA or Pentagon-run spy networks supposed to be as shady. This is an untenable argument even though one can see that it derives plausibility from the fact that the development of the internet was itself part of the military-industrial complex, and the hacking and military computing industry closely competed with each other in their development. That challenging power by constituting oneself as another power, will lead not to the elimination of power as such but only to its replication, is an old argument. Such arguments are however facile, precisely since, as Wikileaks declares, "WikiLeaks needs to be completely opaque in order to force others to be totally transparent". Perhaps not 'completely opaque' but they definitely cannot last a day if they were to come out openly in the name of being transparent and democratic, given the highly organised secretive forces that will hunt them down - or coopt them into defending liberal values.

Wikileaks' spectacular, high voltage attack was in a way a sign of their weakness, proving that at the end of the day, this is not the way you can accomplish change. In declaring that US foreign policy is not decided on the basis of diplomatic cables, Hillary Clinton was perhaps hinting that these leaks will not affect business as usual. Anyways, the masses are not coming out on the streets to overthrow their rulers whose corruption and despotism have been exposed. No point embarrassing the system and the rulers so much, if at the end of the day you have to live with them - that seems to be the attitude of ordinary people who cannot all withdraw into underground hacker sub-cultures even as they realize that this system is built on a lie and mere accountability of the government is not going to really help. We have heard of fears that the revolution will be killed if you expect it to be televised. But with Wikileaks' crusade against 'power', it is clear that the revolution will not be televised - worse, it will be digitized, cyberised!

We can safely conclude that Wikileaks have by now become yet another fact of life, yet another spectacle - in fact journalism and not anarchism! And yet the rupture that is Wikileaks must be upheld in these times of the exhaustion of utopian and radical energies.

Wikileaks beyond Wikileaks

The pure subversive power of Wikileaks' actions catalysed two developments which, paradoxically, took things beyond Wikileaks, perhaps even in spite of them. One, that 'power' is not just a conspiratorial exercise at the top became clear as companies like Amazon, Mastercard, Visa and Paypal turned hostile towards Wikileaks. Here we see that it is not really coded diplomatic cables that are oozing out power in secrecy, but 'popular' companies (oops, Visa cards present in every pocket and wallet) revealing where they stand. This brought 'power' closer home, as it were, so that the battle got a continuity beyond the initial cable leaks and involved a wider spectrum of forces and people. 'Anonymous' cyber-attacks against these companies are of course still shrouded in the style of elite and reclusive hackers and yet the targets now are clearer than just attacking 'power'. Further the arrest of Assange made the fight concrete with people getting involved in gatherings, campaigns and other mobilizations in London. While this still largely

comprises mostly well-known left-wingers (John Pilger, Jemima Khan) and not for example the mass of protesting students in London, Australia has already seen enthusiastic protestors in the streets of Melbourne and Sydney.

It looks like the radical empty subversive action can precipitate a 'content', viz., wider more concrete struggles beyond the confines of the elite hacker sub-cultures. Wikileaks' empty radical gesture can potentially get a life of its own and mobilize people in communities and streets, offices, factories and universities. And that, rather than any major 'diplomatic fall-out', is what the powers really fear. For it is by now clear that so far as the diplomatic world is concerned Cablegate was yet another '-gate' - it gets absorbed as one knows from the past. Rather than the revelations or the actual content of Cablegate, what is interesting is the train of events after that, the widening of the fight and the struggle carrying in newer ways.

Once power is no longer understood as flowing out of a secret den of conspirators and manipulators, hiding truth from the people, but is seen as working in and through real people and their aspirations, the mode of struggle too will no longer be 'Anonymous', secretive and self-contained but will involve the power of 'ordinary people'. But bringing in 'ordinary people' is not a plea to make the fight loose, dispersed and hence 'popular' and ineffective, easily anticipated and neutralised - this is where the radicalism and insurrectionary moment of Wikileaks must be upheld. And yet: Wikileaks beyond Wikileaks.

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