

Assange and Political Thinking - “How can we build civic trust in an era of pervasive surveillance?”

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Carried out of the Ecuadorian Embassy last Thursday, Julian Assange cut a sad and desperate figure, clutching a book by Gore Vidal and calling for the UK to ‘resist this attempt by the Trump administration’. He is now being held at HMP Belmarsh. His arrest - inevitable since the political shift in Ecuador and the souring relations at the embassy - raises awkward political problems far beyond the person of Julian Assange.

The US is seeking Assange’s extradition on an indictment that regards routine journalistic practices - using encrypted communications, encouraging sources to speak, taking measures to protect their anonymity - as evidence of criminal conspiracy. These activities not only exposed war crimes, but have been a regular part of Wikileaks’ exposure of the banal, quotidian corruption of the political establishment. Trump’s Department of Justice has sought to crack down on leakers and whistleblowers; Trump himself, according to James Comey’s memos, wondered about the possibility of imprisoning journalists. It would be morally and politically wrong for the UK to collude with the US in punishing whistleblowing journalism, but that doesn’t mean it won’t do it. The scope for both judicial and political action is limited: Assange’s extradition case will turn in part on the question of whether he is in fact being prosecuted for a political offence. Political pressure on the judiciary is likely to be intense. The home secretary - historically an enthusiast for co-operation with US prosecutors - is unlikely to trouble himself much should the court green-light the extradition.

At the same time, Assange’s sojourn in the embassy was a way of avoiding extradition to Sweden to face allegations of sexual assault and rape. He not only protested his innocence but also said he was afraid of further extraction to the US. It is inarguable that the women’s expectation of justice has been frustrated, and Sweden’s eventual dropping of the investigation in 2017 left the matter unresolved. Assange’s arrest last week was related to his skipping bail here, and the extradition request from the US. The Swedish allegations are dormant.

The internet was ablaze seven years ago with questions of whether Assange’s motives were sincere and his fears legitimate. Partisans cited evidence on either side: Sweden’s refusal to extradite a CIA defector in 1992, on the one hand; its enthusiasm for extraordinary rendition on the other. The paranoid misogyny that accompanied the debate last time around - with the women sometimes described as US ‘honeypots’ - seems mercifully less present this time. It is reasonable to argue that Assange’s extradition to the US should be forcefully resisted; that the Swedish charges, if they are brought again, ought to be faced properly; and that the one cannot be thought of as proxy justice for the other.

Wikileaks was initially set up to be a global clearing-house for leakers against oppressive or corrupt regimes. A product of early internet optimism, Assange was a believer in the power of free

information, with an instinctive libertarian streak. In conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2011, he outlined a hazy claim that a 'third pillar of information' previously unavailable to the public - 'how complex human institutions actually behave' - meant that 'all existing political theories are bankrupt'. Freeing this information from the shadowy recesses of power would eventually - the middle stages are unclear - emancipate the public and deliver justice.

Assange's models (he eschews 'heroes') are mathematicians and physicists, paragons of rational detachment; he talks about politics as if it were a mood emptied of propositions (he admires the tone of national liberation movements, but not their ideas). But the realisation that the state has secrets, even shameful secrets, is not a new one. Tacitus could tell you about *arcana imperii*, or that the secret of sustainable autocracy was to have your own man balancing the books. The conviction that unveiling secrets - of man's private heart or the 'mysteries of the cabinet' - will lead to political emancipation is Rousseau in cyberpunk drag.

What is missing from Assange's political folk theory is the middle term: how a population interprets and then acts on information in order to change the world. Information itself does not make us 'more intelligent' or 'more just', to use Assange's terms - these qualities do not simply arise out of information like a fine aroma. Assange's putative theory is additive and iterative: if this flow of information does not work, try that one; if the change you want is not forthcoming, seek more leaks, more flow. But politics isn't reducible to information: conflicts over legitimacy, power and values, the possibility of civic trust or legal redress - all of these frame politics, and cannot be detached from it or transcended by simply adding more information.

'Transparency ... does not entail clairvoyance,' Byung-Chul Han writes in *The Transparency Society*. 'The mass of information produces no truth. The more information is set free, the more difficult it proves to survey the world.' Wikileaks never quite became what Assange had hoped it would be, in part because of his weapons-grade narcissism, and in part because the would-be detached hacker has found himself increasingly drawn into partisan struggles between great powers, affected by the political consequences of leaks himself.

Assange's initial info-optimism looks fragile in an age newly sensitive to encroachments into the private realm by states and digital corporations, and when set next to his own sloppiness of redaction and politicised publication choices. Han's aphorism suggests a deeper truth: the problem has never been just that there is a secret body of knowledge reserved to the state, but that our capacity to interpret and act on it is catastrophically limited. Mere facts do not suggest their own solution. Transparency is not an intrinsic good: the disgorgement of secrets may paralyse as much as catalyse. Only one person was prosecuted because of the video that Wikileaks released under the title *Collateral Murder*: its leaker, Chelsea Manning.

The questions that Wikileaks has thrown up are not those one might have expected at its inception: can evidence of corruption, however extensive, actually produce a crisis of legitimacy in the modern state? How can we build civic trust in an era of pervasive surveillance? Who do we believe? Answers to these questions cannot be found in the transcendence of politics by technological transparency, but only by a return to political thinking.

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P.S.

- London Review of Books, 17 APRIL 2019:

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2019/april/assange-and-political-thinking?utm>