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Good Manners in the Age of WikiLeaks

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In one of the diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks Putin and Medvedev are compared to Batman and Robin. It's a useful analogy: isn't Julian Assange, WikiLeaks's organiser, a real-life counterpart to the Joker in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*? In the film, the district attorney, Harvey Dent, an obsessive vigilante who is corrupted and himself commits murders, is killed by Batman. Batman and his friend police commissioner Gordon realise that the city's morale would suffer if Dent's murders were made public, so plot to preserve his image by holding Batman responsible for the killings. The film's take-home message is that lying is necessary to sustain public morale: only a lie can redeem us. No wonder the only figure of truth in the film is the Joker, its supreme villain. He makes it clear that his attacks on Gotham City will stop when Batman takes off his mask and reveals his true identity; to prevent this disclosure and protect Batman, Dent tells the press that he is Batman – another lie. In order to entrap the Joker, Gordon fakes his own death – yet another lie.

The Joker wants to disclose the truth beneath the mask, convinced that this will destroy the social order. What shall we call him? A terrorist? *The Dark Knight* is effectively a new version of those classic westerns *Fort Apache* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, which show that, in order to civilise the Wild West, the lie has to be elevated into truth: civilisation, in other words, must be grounded on a lie. The film has been extraordinarily popular. The question is why, at this precise moment, is there this renewed need for a lie to maintain the social system?

Consider too the renewed popularity of Leo Strauss: the aspect of his political thought that is so relevant today is his elitist notion of democracy, the idea of the 'necessary lie'. Elites should rule, aware of the actual state of things (the materialist logic of power), and feed the people fables to keep them happy in their blessed ignorance. For Strauss, Socrates was guilty as charged: philosophy *is* a threat to society. Questioning the gods and the ethos of the city undermines the citizens' loyalty, and thus the basis of normal social life. Yet philosophy is also the highest, the worthiest, of human endeavours. The solution proposed was that philosophers keep their teachings secret, as in fact they did, passing them on by writing 'between the lines'. The true, hidden message contained in the 'great tradition' of philosophy from Plato to Hobbes and Locke is that there are no gods, that morality is merely prejudice, and that society is not grounded in nature.

So far, the WikiLeaks story has been represented as a struggle between WikiLeaks and the US empire: is the publishing of confidential US state documents an act in support of the freedom of information, of the people's right to know, or is it a terrorist act that poses a threat to stable international relations? But what if this isn't the real issue? What if the crucial ideological and political battle is going on within WikiLeaks itself: between the radical act of publishing secret state documents and the way this act has been

reinscribed into the hegemonic ideologico-political field by, among others, WikiLeaks itself?

This reinscription does not primarily concern 'corporate collusion', i.e. the deal WikiLeaks made with five big newspapers, giving them the exclusive right selectively to publish the documents. Much more important is the conspiratorial mode of WikiLeaks: a 'good' secret group attacking a 'bad' one in the form of the US State Department. According to this way of seeing things, the enemy is those US diplomats who conceal the truth, manipulate the public and humiliate their allies in the ruthless pursuit of their own interests. 'Power' is held by the bad guys at the top, and is not conceived as something that permeates the entire social body, determining how we work, think and consume. WikiLeaks itself got the taste of this dispersion of power when Mastercard, Visa, PayPal and Bank of America joined forces with the state to sabotage it. The price one pays for engaging in the conspiratorial mode is to be treated according to its logic. (No wonder theories abound about who is 'really' behind WikiLeaks – the CIA?)

The conspiratorial mode is supplemented by its apparent opposite, the liberal appropriation of WikiLeaks as another chapter in the glorious history of the struggle for the 'free flow of information' and the 'citizens' right to know'. This view reduces WikiLeaks to a radical case of 'investigative journalism'. Here, we are only a small step away from the ideology of such Hollywood blockbusters as *All the President's Men* and *The Pelican Brief*, in which a couple of ordinary guys discover a scandal which reaches up to the president, forcing him to step down. Corruption is shown to reach the very top, yet the ideology of such works resides in their upbeat final message: what a great country ours must be, when a couple of ordinary guys like you and me can bring down the president, the mightiest man on Earth!

The ultimate show of power on the part of the ruling ideology is to allow what appears to be powerful criticism. There is no lack of anti-capitalism today. We are overloaded with critiques of the horrors of capitalism: books, in-depth investigative journalism and TV documentaries expose the companies that are ruthlessly polluting our environment, the corrupt bankers who continue to receive fat bonuses while their banks are rescued by public money, the sweatshops in which children work as slaves etc. However, there is a catch: what isn't questioned in these critiques is the democratic-liberal framing of the fight against these excesses. The (explicit or implied) goal is to democratise capitalism, to extend democratic control to the economy by means of media pressure, parliamentary inquiries, harsher laws, honest police investigations and so on. But the institutional set-up of the (bourgeois) democratic state is never questioned. This remains sacrosanct even to the most radical forms of 'ethical anti-capitalism' (the Porto Allegre forum, the Seattle movement etc).

WikiLeaks cannot be seen in the same way. There has been, from the outset, something about its activities that goes way beyond liberal conceptions of the free flow of information. We shouldn't look for this excess at the level of content. The only surprising thing about the WikiLeaks revelations is that they contain no surprises. Didn't we learn exactly what we expected to learn? The real disturbance was at the level of appearances: we can no longer pretend we don't know what everyone knows we know. This is the paradox of public space: even if everyone knows an unpleasant fact, saying it in public changes everything. One of the first measures taken by the new Bolshevik government in 1918 was to make public the entire corpus of tsarist secret diplomacy, all

the secret agreements, the secret clauses of public agreements etc. There too the target was the entire functioning of the state apparatuses of power.

What WikiLeaks threatens is the formal functioning of power. The true targets here weren't the dirty details and the individuals responsible for them; not those in power, in other words, so much as power itself, its structure. We shouldn't forget that power comprises not only institutions and their rules, but also legitimate ('normal') ways of challenging it (an independent press, NGOs etc) – as the Indian academic Saroj Giri put it, WikiLeaks 'challenged power by challenging the normal channels of challenging power and revealing the truth'.[*] The aim of the WikiLeaks revelations was not just to embarrass those in power but to lead us to mobilise ourselves to bring about a different functioning of power that might reach beyond the limits of representative democracy.

However, it is a mistake to assume that revealing the entirety of what has been secret will liberate us. The premise is wrong. Truth liberates, yes, but not *this* truth. Of course one cannot trust the façade, the official documents, but neither do we find truth in the gossip shared behind that façade. Appearance, the public face, is never a simple hypocrisy. E.L. Doctorow once remarked that appearances are all we have, so we should treat them with great care. We are often told that privacy is disappearing, that the most intimate secrets are open to public probing. But the reality is the opposite: what is effectively disappearing is public space, with its attendant dignity. Cases abound in our daily lives in which not telling all is the proper thing to do. In *Baisers volés*, Delphine Seyrig explains to her young lover the difference between politeness and tact: 'Imagine you inadvertently enter a bathroom where a woman is standing naked under the shower. Politeness requires that you quickly close the door and say, "Pardon, Madame!'", whereas tact would be to quickly close the door and say: "Pardon, Monsieur!" It is only in the second case, by pretending not to have seen enough even to make out the sex of the person under the shower, that one displays true tact.

A supreme case of tact in politics is the secret meeting between Alvaro Cunhal, the leader of the Portuguese Communist Party, and Ernesto Melo Antunes, a pro-democracy member of the army grouping responsible for the coup that overthrew the Salazar regime in 1974. The situation was extremely tense: on one side, the Communist Party was ready to start the real socialist revolution, taking over factories and land (arms had already been distributed to the people); on the other, conservatives and liberals were ready to stop the revolution by any means, including the intervention of the army. Antunes and Cunhal made a deal without stating it: there was no agreement between them – on the face of things, they did nothing but disagree – but they left the meeting with an understanding that the Communists would not start a revolution, thereby allowing a 'normal' democratic state to come about, and that the anti-socialist military would not outlaw the Communist Party, but accept it as a key element in the democratic process. One could claim that this discreet meeting saved Portugal from civil war. And the participants maintained their discretion even in retrospect. When asked about the meeting (by a journalist friend of mine), Cunhal said that he would confirm it took place only if Antunes didn't deny it – if Antunes did deny it, then it never took place. Antunes for his part listened silently as my friend told him what Cunhal had said. Thus, by not denying it, he met Cunhal's condition and implicitly confirmed it. This is how gentlemen of the left act in politics.

So far as one can reconstruct the events today, it appears that the happy outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis, too, was managed through tact, the polite rituals of pretended

ignorance. Kennedy's stroke of genius was to pretend that a letter had not arrived, a stratagem that worked only because the sender (Khrushchev) went along with it. On 26 October 1962, Khrushchev sent a letter to Kennedy confirming an offer previously made through intermediaries: the Soviet Union would remove its missiles from Cuba if the US issued a pledge not to invade the island. The next day, however, before the US had answered, another, harsher letter arrived from Khrushchev, adding more conditions. At 8.05 p.m. that day, Kennedy's response to Khrushchev was delivered. He accepted Khrushchev's 26 October proposal, acting as if the 27 October letter didn't exist. On 28 October, Kennedy received a third letter from Khrushchev agreeing to the deal. In such moments, when everything is at stake, appearances, politeness, the awareness that one is 'playing a game', matter more than ever.

However, this is only one – misleading – side of the story. There are moments – moments of crisis for the hegemonic discourse – when one should take the risk of provoking the disintegration of appearances. Such a moment was described by the young Marx in 1843. In 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', he diagnosed the decay of the German ancien regime in the 1830s and 1840s as a farcical repetition of the tragic fall of the French ancien regime. The French regime was tragic 'as long as it believed and had to believe in its own justification'. The German regime 'only imagines that it believes in itself and demands that the world imagine the same thing. If it believed in its own *essence*, would it ... seek refuge in hypocrisy and sophism? The modern ancien regime is rather only the *comedian* of a world order whose *true heroes* are dead.' In such a situation, shame is a weapon: 'The actual pressure must be made more pressing by adding to it consciousness of pressure, the shame must be made more shameful by publicising it.'

This is precisely our situation today: we face the shameless cynicism of a global order whose agents only imagine that they believe in their ideas of democracy, human rights and so on. Through actions like the WikiLeaks disclosures, the shame – our shame for tolerating such power over us – is made more shameful by being publicised. When the US intervenes in Iraq to bring secular democracy, and the result is the strengthening of religious fundamentalism and a much stronger Iran, this is not the tragic mistake of a sincere agent, but the case of a cynical trickster being beaten at his own game.

[*] 'WikiLeaks beyond WikiLeaks?', www.metamute.org/en/articles/WikiLeaks_beyond_WikiLeaks.