

HOUSE ORGAN

WikiLeaks Forever

The West has fiscalised its basic power relationships through a web of contracts, loans, shareholdings, bank holdings, and so on. In such an environment it is easy for speech to be “free,” because a change in political will rarely leads to any change in these basic instruments. Western speech, as something that rarely has any effect on power, is, like badgers and birds, free. In states like China, there is pervasive censorship, because speech still has power, and power is scared of it. We should always look at censorship as an economic signal that reveals the potential power of speech in that jurisdiction. The attacks against us by the U.S. point to a great hope, speech powerful enough to break the fiscal blockade.

—Julian Assange

This House Organ is being written early in December, 2010, and by the time it appears in print, a great deal, most of it quite unpleasant, will likely have happened to WikiLeaks and its Director, Julian Assange, who has just been arrested on questionable sex charges committed in Sweden and brought by two women, one of whom is alleged to have ties to the CIA. Given the extreme vindictiveness and record of contempt for human rights and liberties shown by the powers out to get him, all bets are off as to his future, if there is one.

Assange’s offense has been to challenge the monopoly of the modern state over the information it needs for its “security” functions: in practical terms, the capacity to make endless war and to lay waste societies in its way. For questioning this, Assange has brought down upon his head a gallery of enemies impressive in the extreme, from right-wingers like Mitch McConnell, Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin, and Joe Lieberman along with the reactionary media that feeds them, to governments like Sweden and Switzerland, and corporations like Amazon.com, Master Card, VISA, and PayPal, who severed their business relationships with WikiLeaks under pressure from the U.S. government. Observe the spectrum: the whole of Western society is on display, from club-wielding Neanderthals to the most advanced states and enlightened, labor-saving enterprises. We understand the presence of politicians representing what H.L. Mencken once called the “booboisie” and their easy success in getting the dumbed-down United States populace to certify 70 percent approval of the need to eliminate Assange; and we can understand the progressive outposts, too, for WikiLeaks is not likely to have been able to operate in, say, Somalia and other “failed states”; nor could Assange have gotten by without the presence of super-sophisticated websites of the kind that now turn on him. It is the extent and juxtaposition that compels attention. For this begins to look like a kind of totality, the coming together of a righteous civilization against the common threat, to quote Republican Senate leader McConnell, of the *electronic terrorist*, a man so vicious that he would impede the honest work of dedicated public servants like Hillary Clinton as they toil to solve the world’s problems.

So long as we concede the legitimacy of terms like “national interest” and “security,” the totality holds together, and Assange’s role can be picked apart. For example, Obama’s efforts to build alliances in contrast to Bush’s unilateralism has been said by “responsible critics” to have been subverted by WikiLeaks. Others have dissected the earlier releases of the lethal attacks in Iraq to find extenuating circumstances, honest mistakes, and the like. In

short, a pragmatic focus on the fine structure of war and diplomacy replaces the sense of fundamentals.

All the more reason to keep an eye on basics, and to not just recall, but retell and underscore the fundamental illegitimacy of U.S. foreign policy, and that of its stooges, such as Britain. One can use any of multiple lines of reasoning (which, however, intersect) for this: the “supreme crime” of aggressive warfare toward Iraq, which brings other crimes in its wake; the absolute inability and/or refusal of Obama to follow through on any of his fine promises to improve Bush’s record; the sordid conspiring with Israel toward Zionist domination of the Middle East; the plain dynamics of global capital and its expansiveness; even the venturing into the strange (and contested) territory of evidence that 9-11 was an inside job: these are anchor points to radicalize vision. And as one becomes radical, the false totality of established reason falls apart. It is as Assange says in the extract above, neither more nor less than power doing what it has done since the beginning of time and with special fervor since the origin of the modern, technologically driven state. George Orwell called it the construction of political speech “designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give the appearance of solidity to pure wind.” The headlong rush of technology reconfigures the field upon which this ancient struggle is waged, while leaving its fundamentals intact.

The Internet is no more special in this respect than the telephone, but it does have the game-changing factor of an insane degree of leakage, hence the name chosen for Assange’s organization. The genie is very much out of the bottle, and WikiLeaks is its gatherer. Meanwhile, *l’affaire Assange* seems to be awakening a sleeping giant, as an army of hackers, long working in relative isolation, appears to be rising to come to his rescue, like the dénouement of a Western movie with the signs reversed, or that of the blockbuster success, *Avatar*, in which the Indians give the Calvary a whipping. The hackers have already gummed up a bank that was trying to freeze his account, attacked VISA and Master Card as well, and created trouble for that model of an advanced society, Sweden. That part of the story begins to look like a William Gibson novel, and should be fun to watch.

Assange calls attention to distinct zones of power according to their sensitivity to open speech, with the West and China said to be on different sides of the divide. The point is well taken, but more complicated than he allows.

I was recently invited, along with Fred Magdoff of *Monthly Review*, to be a keynote speaker for a conference on “Marxism and Ecological Civilization,” held by the Philosophy Department of Fudan University in Shanghai, one of the top academic institutions of the People’s Republic. That this was at all possible was due to the decision taken by the Chinese Communist Party at its Seventeenth Congress to set forth the goal of an “ecological civilization,” which is to say, a society with a rational relation with nature, which is to say, *not* the People’s Republic, whose “economic miracle,” has spawned 20 of the world’s 30 most polluted cities and other horrors—alongside glittering accomplishments such as world-leading developments in high-speed rail systems, solar collectors, and wind turbines.

There’s no denying that China belongs to the history of Marxism. So there was no doubt, either, that Marxism belonged to the Fudan conference, which means that in this unquestionably censorious specimen of state capitalism, one could find in November, 2010,

a prestigious conference held in its economic bellwether which generated numerous calls for the supersession of capitalism, or at least its radical reform. Was this marginalized? No question. But what major university in the free-speaking, uncensored West would go so far as to propose a conference about the doomsday of capital and the necessity of Marxism in light of the ecological crisis? Was the Fudan conference subject to some degree of censorship internal as well as external? No question here, either. I know I weighed every word according to how I read the social environment in which I found myself, and I am sure everyone else did the same. But compare again with the self-censorship that careerism imposes on Western academia. Finally, has there been a kind of damage done to Marxism by all this? Who can dispute it? But how much damage has been done to Marxism over the generations by the social settings in which it has been elaborated in the West or the U.S.S.R., etc.? Is there such a thing as a purified Marxism? Can there be? Should there be?

I most certainly do not claim any expertise on the state of intellectual activity in this vast, vital, and astoundingly complex society. But I think there is a lot more ferment in China than we recognize as China lurches toward the hegemony that seems to be its destiny. We have the obligation to be open to this, and to try to relate to it as best as we can. In any event, my contribution appears after this, both the text delivered at Fudan, and a brief Post-Script of post-conference reflections written upon my return.

—Joel Kovel