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Wikileaks and the limits of protocol

Facilitated by protocol, the internet is the most highly controlled mass media hitherto known (Galloway 2004: 243).

Introduction

In this chapter, I reflect on Wikileaks and its use of technology to achieve freedom in capitalist society. Wikileaks represents an avant-garde form of media (i.e. networked, cryptographic), with traditional democratic values: opposing power and seeking the truth. At times, <http://wikileaks.org> appears broken and half abandoned and at other times, it is clearly operating beyond the level of government efficiency and military intelligence. It has received both high acclaim and severe criticism from human rights organisations, the mainstream media and governments. It is a really existing threat to traditional forms of power and control yet, I suggest, it is fundamentally restrained by liberal ideology of freedom and democracy and the protocological limits of cybernetic capitalism.

Social form: The administration of order

The purpose of the capitalist state is to maintain a class of poverty through the fabrication of social order (Neocleous 2004). This is achieved, first and foremost, through the separation of needs and capacities; that is, through the justification of private property and the imposition of waged labour. This separation is enforced through a variety of state institutions: domestically, through the legal system and the administrative role of the police, and internationally through diplomatic protocol, trade agreements and, at last resort, military force.

Since the emergence of liberalism, the administration of civil society has been undertaken through the fundamental necessity of wage labour and supported by a number of state institutions, collectively understood as “social welfare” or the “welfare state”. The purpose of the welfare state is that of perpetuating the subordination of a person’s labour to the overwhelming deprivation of property (i.e. maintaining order) through an administrative system of institutional control and social regulation (for example: education, health care, prison).

This system of “social security” with the police at its centre, is the cornerstone of liberal thinking, the “supreme concept of bourgeois society” (ibid: xii). Through the fabrication of security lies the liberal illusion of freedom and liberty (i.e. individuality and self-interest). In fact, security at the level of society, is an impossibility since it ignores the antagonism of the separation of needs and capacities (i.e. poverty) as the source of wealth. In capitalist society, the basis for security is that the working class must work (i.e. exploitation) and therefore the fabrication of security rests on the commodification of labour (i.e. discipline) and the capitalists’ imperative to accumulate private property (i.e. insecurity).

“Terror” is the threat of the breakdown of civil society, the interruption of capital (i.e. value in motion). In response to the general and persistent threat of terror in capitalist society, the primary role of the police project is not the prevention of crime but rather the imposition and political administration of the class system. The real “war on terror” is “the permanent low-intensity warfare against the working class.” (ibid: 82). To win this war on terror would entail the abolition of private property and, therefore, abolishing the state and its police apparatus. Therefore, the state and the police cannot be understood apart from each other. A society based on the separation of needs from capacities is the outcome of a state formulated on the protection of private property and the regulation of wage labour through the all pervasive political administration of its police project.

The logic of the internet is that of administration by protocol. As the social form of mass media *par excellence*, we have been tricked by the internet into confusing the abstract with the virtual. The “real-time” internet is not really real-time but a densification of space-time unlike any other technology. It is a factory of things where the space-time-unit is compressed to such a degree of

abstraction that we refer to it as “virtual”, unable to comprehend the violence of its abstract reality.

Velocity: The internet and the densification of space-time

Protocol is a type of controlling logic that operates outside institutional, governmental, and corporate power; although it has important ties to all three (Galloway op cit: 122).

Speed upholds institutions. Slowness cuts off flow (Tiqqun 2001: 74).

The internet is a concrete product of human labour and as such, a social form of abstract labour that compresses space-time (socially necessary labour time). It is a congealed form of value-creating-human-energy (labour) from which emerges a more dense space-time-unit, resulting in a flow of time and space encapsulated in the commodity form. The real-time internet is not simply synchronous, but compresses social labour time in space, constantly changing the magnitude of value with the velocity made possible by protocol. Standards, such as TCP/IP, HTTP, HTML, XML, etc. all increase the potential velocity of this networked social activity (“socially necessary labour time”). Speed is therefore relative, measured absolutely at the point-in-time of commodity exchange.

For Einstein, the one constant was the speed of light and that was the measure against which all other movement is measured. In the social world Marx also provides us with a social measure: socially necessary labour time: the speed of life (Neary and Rikowski 2000).

The internet can, therefore, be understood as a number of standardised technologies that work to control and increase the velocity of socially necessary labour time, compressing the space-time-unit so that the normative standard of time becomes denser and the valorisation of value, and the expansion of abstraction, becomes the overwhelming logic which subsumes space, time, energy and speed.

These attributes of velocity, intensity and control are clearly revealed by Wikileaks. In the recent leak of diplomatic cables, the pace and discretion of diplomatic protocol has been met with the velocity and intensity made possible by the internet’s protocological densification of space-time. The rhythm of diplomatic protocol has been interrupted by the rhythm of networked leaks.

Wikileaks, is the exemplar social form of protocol becoming concretely manifest in capitalist society, revealing to us the logic of the expansion of abstraction, the violence of virtuality and the “terror of immateriality” (ibid).

The violence of virtuality

The first serious infowar is now engaged. The field of battle is Wikileaks. You are the troops!! #anonops #operationpayback #Wikileaks (anon_operation, Twitter, 8 December 2010).

It takes networks to fight networks (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001: 15).

The “first serious infowar” is, in fact, an arms race of protocol to control the cybernetic “abstract machine” (Tiqun 2001: 4). Extending the police project, this technique of governance is epitomised by “management” (derived from the Greek *kybernētēs* which means to “pilot”), that is, unlimited attempts at rationalisation that seek to support and defend the state through an unlimited flow and capture of information and its feedbacks.

Cybernetics is the theoretical and technological outcome and continuation of a state of war (i.e. World War Two), in which stability and control are the objectives. Developing with the emergence of post-war information and communication theory and corresponding innovation in computer software and hardware, intelligence is abstracted from the human population as generalised representations that are retained and communicated back to individuals in a commodified form. (i.e. mass media) This feedback loop was originally conceived as a “system” and later as a naturalised “network” (i.e. “rhizome”) which, drawing on the 19th century thermodynamic law of entropy, is at continual risk of disequilibrium and degradation and must therefore be reinforced by the development of cybernetics itself. (ibid).

Since the 1980s, the dismantling of social protection systems has led to an attempt to make everyone bear the “risks” borne by capitalism. There has been a shift from the collective responsibility of the welfare state to the responsibilities of the individual toward society. In contrast to the mechanisms of control in the 19th century, which dissolved social bonds, cybernetic capitalism develops social bonds (a “nebulous citizen-community”) through “the

imperative of self-piloting and of piloting others in the service of social unity: it is the device-future of mankind as citizens of Empire” (ibid: 34).

The cybernetic logic of decentralisation through protocol extends and prolongs the centralised institutions of control (i.e. the police project) and in so far as this logic is intended to ward off events and organise feedback, it has a predictive purpose that “aims to eliminate all uncertainty connected to all possible futures” (ibid: 31). In this way, the velocity of protocol congeals past, present and *future* and with it, all spatial territory, too.

For cybernetics, total transparency is a means towards protocological and, therefore, social control in the face of risk. Because the removal of risk is never absolutely possible, citizens are understood as both presenting a risk to the system and a means to regulate that risk through *self-control*. Order in society is socialised through the control of public services that harvest information allowing for the fabrication of trends across time and space. In a sense, the control sector, now thoroughly socialised, is autonomous but in the hierarchy of control, the police, law and judicial system remain controllers of last resort. An awareness of risk (i.e. terror) brings with it an awareness of the vulnerability of a system that is dependent on an accelerated circulation/flow of information. Time and duration is an inherent weakness and their disruption is a disruption of value in motion.

Wikileaks: A ZOO

We do not want more transparency or more democracy. There’s already enough. On the contrary – we want more opacity and more intensity (ibid: 40).

Wikileaks needs to be completely opaque in order to force others to be totally transparent (Wikileaks 2010).

Operating under the strict rules of cybernetic protocol, Wikileaks submits the increasingly impotent protocols of government diplomacy to the “tyranny of transparency” required by the new cybernetic order. Transparency and openness are the inevitable outcomes of cybernetic capitalism in which the machines are in control and we are their mere appendages. Wikileaks naively assumes that with transparency, follows democracy. It believes that when citizens are

better informed and therefore more empowered, politicians act on the assumption that their actions are more visible and therefore accountable.

Thus the release of diplomatic cables is understood as a method of regulating the regulators. This view pre-supposes a liberal view of democracy but represents a clash in politics. As a capitalist political project, cybernetics is in the process of supplanting liberalism as both a paradigm and technique of government that aims to dissolve human subjectivity into a rationalised and stable (i.e. inoffensive) totality through the automated capture of increasingly transparent flows of information and communication (Tiqqun op cit). Wikileaks has revealed not only the invisible hand of diplomatic protocol but also the invisible hand of cybernetic protocol as it reproduces society. If state secrets can be exposed through the abstract machine of protocol, any aspect of public or private life in the liberal sense can be exposed by protocol, too. Thus, as Zizek, writing about Wikileaks, puts it:

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 (Zizek 2011).

On the internet, viruses, spamming and piracy are seen as methods to destabilise the operation of the communications network. Wikileaks is not in the same category. It serves mainstream media and hacks cybernetic protocol. It is the machinic protocol realising its full potential by harnessing hackers and cypherpunks who work at the avant-garde of cybernetics. In this view, Wikileaks is a rogue foot soldier of cybernetics, leaping over slow, diplomatic protocol to ensure the transparency and speed of the political machine. It is an audacious act (Giri 2010), an event only possible on this scale due to the guarantees put in place by protocological design.

Wikileaks operates through widely available cryptographic internet applications developed for military purposes (e.g. TOR, TLS/SSL, PGP, SSH). Due to this fundamental requirement of cryptographic tools, Wikileaks is arguably an example of Tiqqun's "zone of offensive opacity", a "black bloc of the cybernetic matrix from which an offensive will take place".

The zones are at once small nuclei from where experimentation begins without being perceptible, a panic propagating cloud within the imperial system and spontaneous subversion at all levels. The proliferation of these zones of offensive opacity (ZOO),

and the intensification of their interrelations, will give rise to an irreversible disequilibrium (Tiqqun op cit: 81).

According to Tiqqun, for a ZOO to be effective in provoking a change in the system, there must be a critical mass that fluctuates from a pivotal, local centre, and amplifies to contaminate the whole system. This “unassailable base” should be sheltered from attack and from fear of attack and must have independent supply lines. As the cybernetic system seeks to absorb/deaden the fluctuating autonomous zone, the base must grow larger as monitoring increases.

We saw this happen with Wikileaks. Contrary to Galloway’s thesis, the horizontalism of the Internet Protocol (IP) could not be disciplined by the hierarchy of the Domain Name System (DNS). When Wikileaks’ DNS service was taken down in December 2010, Google remained true to their mission to “organise the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful” and continued to provide shelter to Wikileaks’ “unassailable base”. This was a curious example of corporate interests (i.e. “information must be universally accessible”) providing a “patch” for what appeared to be an error of protocol.

Here, the hierarchical structure of control of DNS seems to have shifted to the hierarchical control of Google, yet the loss of the wikileaks.org domain name led to the spontaneous creation of over 1000 mirror sites by Wikileaks’ supporters across the internet, acting as distributed hosts to Wikileaks’ publicity campaign. In these audacious acts, we caught a glimpse of a counter-world that uses the network to fight the network, a revolutionary “re-appropriation of the most modern technological tools, a re-appropriation that should permit contestation of the police on their own turf, by creating a counter-world with the same means that it uses. Speed here is understood as one of the important qualities of the revolutionary political arts” (Tiqqun op cit: 72).

Real abstraction

The formal complexity of society is the sign of its potential simplification - an index of the forces pressing against it (Kay and Mott 1982: 23).

Tiqqun sabotages speed with slowness. Wikileaks intensifies the feedbacks loops of information through transparency and opaqueness. Both are caught in the closed circuit of abstraction,

mistaking the liberal face of capital for its ruthless body. Wikileaks uses the network to fight the network but remains a liberal attempt to restore order to representative democracy through the freedom of information and the tyranny of transparency. However, order in capitalist society is a fabrication that maintains a class of poverty, property-less and forced to work. People, no more free from the terror of the state and the necessities imposed on human life than before. Information, secret or free does not undermine the ecocidal logic of capitalist accumulation and the irrationality of property and labour that dominates us.

The actual social forms of capitalist society in all its complexity derive from abstractions based on private property and labour and the process and conditions of abstraction must be continually renewed, becoming increasingly novel and then naturalised as “common-sense”. A condition of abundance is a threat to the motion of capital and increasing complexity through abstraction serves to frustrate such possibility. (Kay and Mott op cit: 23) Assumptions, fundamental to liberal thinking, such as individuality and freedom, diversity and the reciprocity of rights, are abstractions that have achieved their own natural “logic” and impose an irrational order in society that is replicated through complexity.

Conclusion

Wikileaks should be understood in the context of the real possibility of abundance and the violent imposition of order and security in the face of such “terrifying” potential. The architectural logic of the protocols of the internet are at once rational in that they reveal the possibility of the abundance of things (i.e. the meeting of needs with capacity), and yet disciplined by abstraction, in that they cannot escape the logic of capitalist work. The protocols upon which Wikileaks is built are thus a “management style” (Galloway op cit: 242) that privileges the freedom of things over the freedom of people, more so than any other prior technology.

This is the disappointing outcome of over 40 years of intense effort to specify protological control (i.e. the internet). Protocol may be synonymous with the possibility of abundance, but this points to its limits. Wikileaks may be synonymous with freedom, but likewise this also points to its limits, too. Both protocol and its manifestation in Wikileaks are, like all aspects of

social life, *really subsumed* by the logic of property and capitalist work and each of us remains “a living appendage of the machine” (Marx 1996).

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