

WIKILEAKS, OR, WHEN IT IS OUR DUTY TO DISTURB APPEARANCES

Slavoj Zizek



SLAVOJ ŽIZEK is a Slovenian continental philosopher and critical theorist from Ljubljana. He is currently the International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at Birkbeck, University of London, and President of the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis, Ljubljana. He has authored many works, including *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan... But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (1993), *Tarrying With the Negative* (1993), *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (1992), *Repeating Lenin* (2001), *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (2004), *The Parallax View* (2006), *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008).

How are we to judge the struggle between Wikileaks and the US Empire — **is the Wikileaks publishing of secret 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 posing a threat to stable international relations?** What if this is not in fact the true struggle, 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 was re-inscribed into the hegemonic ideologico-political field by, among others, Wikileaks itself?

The ultimate triumph of the ruling ideology is that it can afford what appears as its ruthless self-critique. There is no lack of anti-capitalism today, we are even witnessing an overload of the critique of the horrors of capitalism: books, newspaper in-depth-investigations and TV reports abound on companies ruthlessly polluting our environment, on corrupted bankers who continue to get fat bonuses while their banks have to be saved by public money, of sweat shops where children work over-time, etc.

There is, however, a catch to all this overflow of critique: **what is as a rule not questioned in this critique, ruthless as it may appear, is the democratic-liberal frame of fighting against these excesses.** The (explicit or implied) goal is to democratize capitalism, to extend the democratic control onto the economy, through the pressure of the public media, parliamentary inquiries, harsher laws, honest police investigations, etc. — but to never question the democratic institutional frame of the (bourgeois) state of law. This remains the sacred cow that even the most radical forms of this 'ethical anti-capitalism' (the Porto Allegre forum, the Seattle movement) dare not touch. The question is thus: can Wikileaks be reduced to this?

The answer is a clear no: **there was, from the very outset, something in the Wikileaks activity that went well beyond the liberal topic of the free flow of information.** We

should not look for this excess at the level of content. The only truly surprising thing about the Wikileaks revelations is that there is no surprise in them: didn't we learn *exactly* what we expected to learn? The only thing disturbed was 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 publicly changes everything. If we are looking for predecessors of Wikileaks, we should recall that one of the first measures of the new Bolshevik government in 1918 was to render public the entire corpus of the tsarist secret diplomacy, all the secret agreements, the secret clauses of public agreements, etc. Here also, the target was not only content, but the entire functioning of the state apparatuses of power.

What Wikileaks threatens is the formal mode of functioning of power: the innermost logic of diplomatic activity was in a way de-legitimized. The true target were not just dirty details and individuals responsible for them (to be eventually replaced by others, more honest), or, more succinctly, not those in power, but power itself, its structure. We should not forget that power comprises not only its institutions and rules, but also legitimate ('normal') ways of challenging it (independent press, NGOs, etc.) — and, as Saroj Giri put it succinctly, Wikileaks activists 'challenged power by challenging the normal channels of challenging power and revealing the truth.'¹

1. Giri S. Wikileaks Beyond Wikileaks — http://www.metamute.org/en/articles/wikileaks_beyond_wikileaks

Wikileaks exposures do not address us, citizens, merely as dissatisfied individuals hungry for dirty secrets of what happens behind the closed doors in the corridors of power; their aim was not just to embarrass those in power. **Wikileaks exposures bring with themselves a call to mobilize ourselves in a long struggle to bring about a different functioning of power which reaches beyond the limits of representative democracy.** Walter Lippmann, the icon of American journalism in the 20th century, played a key role in the self-understanding of the US democracy. He coined the term Manufacturing Consent, later rendered famous by Chomsky — but Lippmann intended it in a positive way. He saw the public as Plato did, as either great beast or a bewildered herd — floundering in the ‘chaos of local opinions.’ So the herd of citizens must be governed by ‘a specialized class’ whose interests reach beyond the locality.

There is no mystery in what Lippmann was saying, it is an obvious fact; the mystery is that, knowing it, we play the game. We act *as if* we are free and freely deciding, silently not only accepting but even *demanding* that an invisible injunction (inscribed into the very form of our free speech) tell us what to do and think.

Wikileaks exposures bring with themselves a call to mobilize ourselves in a long struggle to bring about a different functioning of power which reaches beyond the limits of representative democracy

In this sense, in a democracy, **every ordinary citizen effectively is a king — but a king in a constitutional democracy, a king who only formally decides, whose function is to sign measures proposed by executive administration.** This is why the problem of democratic rituals is homologous to the big problem of constitutional democ-

racy: how to protect the dignity of the king? How to maintain the appearance that the king effectively decides, when we all know this is not true?

What we call ‘crisis of democracy’ does therefore not occur when people stop believing in their own power, but, on the contrary, when they stop trusting the elites, those who are supposed to know for them and provide the guidelines, when they experience the anxiety signaling that ‘the (true) throne is empty,’ that the decision is now *really* theirs. There is thus in ‘free elections’ always a minimal aspect of politeness: those in power politely pretend that they do not really hold power, and ask us to freely decide if we want to give them power — in a way which mirrors the logic of a gesture meant to be refused.

Alain Badiou proposed a distinction between two types (or, rather, levels) of corruption in democracy: the de facto empirical corruption, and the corruption that pertains to the very form of democracy with its reduction of politics to the negotiation of private interests. This gap becomes visible in the (rare, true) cases of an honest ‘democratic’ politician who, while fighting empirical corruption, nonetheless sustains the formal space of corruption. (There is, of course, also the

‘constituent’ corruption of the very democratic form of government.

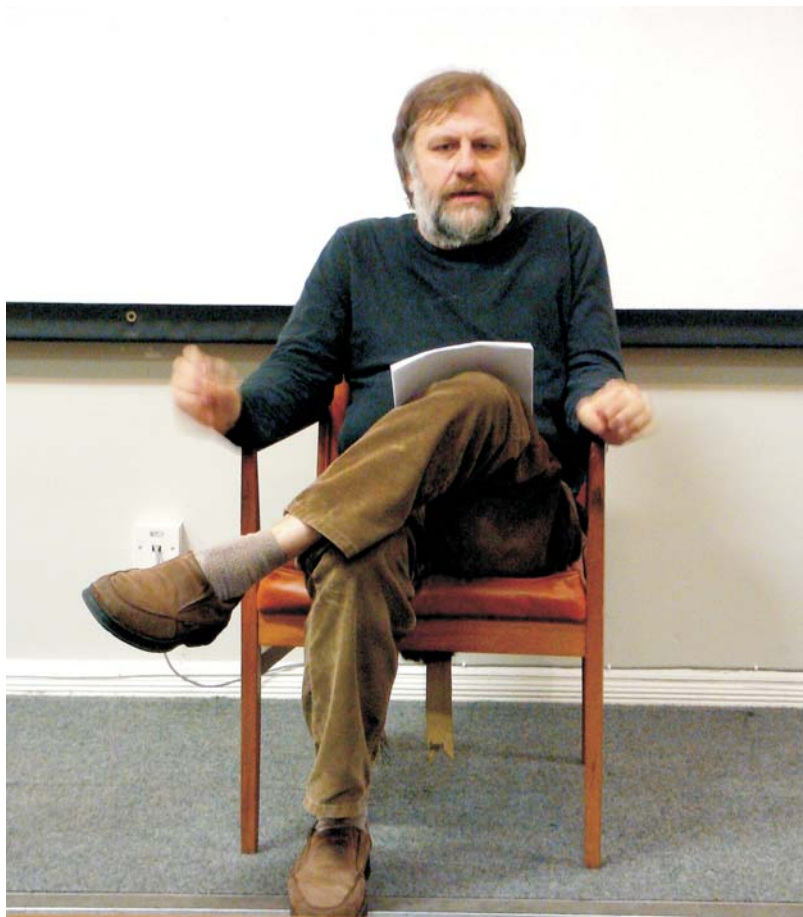
Wikileaks revelations do not target only ‘constituted’ corruption, what they threaten is the ‘constituent’ corruption inscribed into the very form of multi-party liberal democracy which ‘represents’ a precise vision of social life in which politics is organized in parties which compete through elections to exert control over the state legislative and executive apparatus, etc. One should always be aware that this ‘transcendental frame’ is never neutral — it privileges certain values and practices.

This non-neutrality becomes palpable in the moments of crisis or indifference, when we experience the inability of the democratic system to register what people effectively want or think — this inability is signaled by anomalous phenomena like the UK elections of 2005: in spite of the growing unpopularity of Tony Blair (he was regularly voted the most unpopular person in the UK), there was no way for this discontent with Blair to find a politically effective expression. Something was obviously very wrong here — it was not that people ‘did not know what they wanted,’ but, rather, that cynical resignation prevented them to act upon it, so that the result was the weird gap between what people thought and how they acted (voted). It was already Plato who, in his critique of democracy, was fully aware of this second corruption; and this critique is also clearly discernible in the Jacobin privileging of Virtue: in democracy, in the sense of the representation of and the negotiation between the plurality of private interests, there is no place for Virtue.

There is no reason to despise democratic elections; the point is only to insist that there is not *per se* an indication of Truth — as a rule, they tend to reflect the predominant *doxa* determined by the hegemonic ideology. Let us take an

example which surely is not problematic: France in 1940. Even Jacques Duclos, the second man of the French Communist Party, admitted in a private conversation that if, at that point in time, free elections were to be held in France, Marshal Petain would have won with 90% of the votes. When de Gaulle, in his historic act, refused to acknowledge the capitulation to Germans and continued to resist, he claimed that it is only he, not the Vichy regime, who speaks on behalf of the true France (on behalf of true France as such, not only on behalf of the 'majority of the French'!), what he was saying was deeply true even if it was 'democratically' not only without legitimization, but clearly opposed to the opinion of the majority of the French people. There *can* be democratic elections which enact an event of Truth — the election in which, against the sceptic-cynical inertia — the majority momentarily 'awakens' and votes against the hegemonic ideological opinion; however, **the very exceptional status of such a surprising electoral result proves that elections as such are not a medium of Truth.**

There is, however, a counter-argument whose strength we should not underestimate (to quote President Bush). The premise that telling the entire secret truth of what went on behind the closed door, all the dirty personal details, etc., will liberate us is wrong. Truth liberates, yes, but not **THIS** truth. Of course one cannot trust the facade of official public documents — but neither is the truth the dirty personal details or remarks behind the official facade. Appearance, public face, is never a simple hypocrisy whose truth is the secret dirty details beneath. Edgar Doctorow once remarked that appearances are all we have, so we should treat them with great care — it happens quite often that, as a consequence of destroying an appearance, one ruins the thing itself behind the appearance.



This, however, is only one — misleading — side of the story. **There are moments — moments of crisis of the hegemonic discourse — when one should take the risk and provoke the disintegration of appearances.** Such a moment was superbly described by the young Marx back in 1843, when, in his 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*,' he diagnosed the decay of the German *ancien regime* in 1830s and 40s as a farce-repetition of the tragic fall of the French *ancien regime*: this regime was tragic 'as long as it believed and had to believe in its own justification.' Now, however, the regime 'only imagines that it believes in itself and demands that the world should imagine the same thing. If it believed in its own *essence*, would it...seek refuge in hypocrisy and sophism? The modern *ancien régime* is rather only the *comedian* of a world order whose *true heroes* are dead.'² In such a situation, to put shame on those in power becomes a weapon — or, as Marx goes on: 'The actual pressure must

be made more pressing by adding to it consciousness of pressure, the shame must be made more shameful by publicizing it.'

And this, exactly, is our situation today: **we are facing the shameless cynicism of the existing global order whose agents *only imagine that they believe in their ideas of democracy, human rights, etc.*** and through moves like Wikileaks disclosures, *the shame (our shame for tolerating such power over us) is made more shameful by publicizing it.* When the US intervenes in Iraq to bring secular democracy, and the result is the strengthening of religious fundamentalists and the much stronger role of Iran, this is not a tragic mistake of a sincere agent but a case of cynical trickster getting caught in his own game.

Exclusively for Yaroslavl initiative

2. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>