WikiLeaks
The Revolt of the Clerks, or Universality as Conspiracy

Boris Groys

Essay – November 18, 2011

Media theorist Boris Groys analyses the significance of WikiLeaks against the background of the democratic need for universal openness and communication. In doing so, he makes a remarkable observation: WikiLeaks' universal openness is based on total concealment, and this makes it a first example of a truly postmodern universal conspiracy. By devoting itself to being a universal, administrative service in the form of a conspiracy, WikiLeaks is not only a historic innovation – it also runs a great risk.

We have become accustomed to protests and revolts in the name of particular identities and interests – revolts in the name of universal projects, such as liberalism or communism, seem to belong to the past. But the activities of WikiLeaks serve no specific identities or interests. They rather have a general, universal goal: to guarantee the free flow of information. Thus, the phenomenon of WikiLeaks signals a return of universalism into politics. This fact alone makes the emergence of WikiLeaks highly significant. We know from history that only universalist projects can lead to real political change. WikiLeaks signals not only a return of universalism but also the deep transformation that the notion of universalism has undergone during recent decades. WikiLeaks is not a political party. It does not offer any universalist vision of society, political programme, or ideology designed to 'spiritually' or politically unify mankind. Rather, WikiLeaks offers a sum of technical means that allows universal access to any specific, particular content. The universality of idea is here substituted by the universality of access. WikiLeaks offers not a universalist political project but a universal information service. The ethos of WikiLeaks is the ethos of civil, administrative service – globalized and universalized.

In his famous essay 'La trahison des clercs' (1927) Julien Benda *[en.wikipedia.org - Julien Benda (26 December 1867, Paris – 7 June 1956, Fontenay-aux-Roses) was a French philosopher and novelist. He remains famous for his essay The Betrayal of the Intellectuals.]* aptly described this ethos – and a new universal class defined by it. He called its members 'clerks'. The word 'clerk' is often translated as 'intellectual'. But, in fact, the intellectual is for Benda precisely a protagonist of the betrayal of the clerk's ethos, because the intellectual prefers the universality of his or her ideas to the duty of universal service. The true clerk does not commit himself to any particular worldview – even the most universalist one. The clerk, rather, serves others by helping them to realize their own particular ideas and goals. Benda saw the clerk primarily as a functionary, as an administrator in the framework of the enlightened, democratic state that is ruled by law. However, today the concept of the state has lost the aura of universality that it still had when Benda wrote his book. The state – even if it is internally organized in the most universalist way – remains a national state. Its clerks, notwithstanding their universalist ethos, are necessarily embedded in the

apparatuses of power that pursue particular, national interests. This embedment is one of the reasons why the traditional clerk ethos, as it was described by Benda, became somewhat suspect.

However, I would argue that today we are witnessing a rebirth of the clerk – and of the clerk ethos. Internet clerks have replaced state clerks. The Internet was hailed originally as a chance to transcend and undermine the power of state bureaucracy. From the contemporary perspective it becomes obvious though that the Internet simply transferred the ethos and functions of the universal class from the state clerks to the Internet clerks. However, this transition did not go smoothly. And WikiLeaks is the best example of problems with which the new universalism is confronted in our contemporary world.

This new universalism sees its main political and cultural task in achieving the universal representation of multiple and heterogeneous cultural perspectives that are dictated by different cultural identities, gender and class determinations and personal histories of their subjects. One tries not to exclude any of these perspectives from what one can call universal exposure. This seems to lead to a certain downgrading of the universal because it signals a lack of faith in a possibility of universalist projects or ideas that would be open to all of mankind – and could unify it. Seemingly, the new Internet universalism leaves mankind spiritually, ideologically, culturally and politically divided – even if it becomes informationally and technically united. But things are not so simple. The historically known universalist projects were born out of the traditional religious and philosophical desire to transcend one's own particular perspective and reach a universal perspective that is open and relevant for everybody. It is the deep distrust towards the possibility of such an act of transcendence that discredited universalism during the twentieth century. However, the possibility remains open to reject one's own particular perspective without transcending it, without opening any universalist perspective. The act of transcendence is substituted here by an act of radical reduction. This reduction produces a subjectivity without an identity – or, rather, with zero-identity.

We tend to understand subjectivity as a bearer of a certain individual, original message, as a source of a unified worldview, as a producer of specific, personal, individual meanings. But there is a possibility of a subjectivity without an individual message or worldview – a neutral, anonymous subjectivity producing no original, individual meanings or opinions at all. In fact, such a subjectivity is not simply a theoretical possibility but an ever more present reality nowadays. It is a subjectivity of the subjects that do not want to express their own ideas, or insights, or desires – but merely to create possibilities, the conditions for other subjectivities to express their ideas, opinions, worldviews and desires. I would call these subjects universal subjects. They are not universal subjects because they transcend their particular viewpoints towards a universal viewpoint. Rather, they simply erase everything private, personal and particular through a peculiar act of self-reduction. They are neutral, anonymous subjects – not the meta-subjects of classical theology or metaphysics but, so to say, infra-subjects – populating the infrastructure of contemporary life.

They are clerks in Benda's sense of the word, creating the universal infrastructural, networking, rhisomatic conditions that allow other people to satisfy their particular desires and realize their particular projects. The infrastructure of the Internet is today the privileged place for the current generation of clerks. They run companies like Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Wikipedia, etcetera. And WikiLeaks belongs, in fact, in the same mould, because it does not seek to relay its own message, but only to transport the messages of others – even if it does mean to distribute these messages ever further against the will of their producers. The subjectivity of the clerk cannot be deconstructed because it does not construct any meanings. It is in itself a medium – and not the message. It immunizes itself against any opinions and meanings that it perceives as signs of corruption. The clerks are

all-inclusive because they are all-exclusive. They have pure service mentality and ethics. They may have their secrets – but these secrets just wait to be revealed as new means of communication that will again be open for everybody. They build, indeed, something like a contemporary universal class that does not have any own ideas and goals – even universal ideas and goals. Instead of expressing his or her own views the clerk creates the conditions for others to express their views. This operation is in no way innocent, however.

Let us assume that the strategy of inclusion of every existing worldview and cultural perspective into the global media networks of universal exposure has been successful. And there are some indications that it can be successful in the long run: the Internet and other contemporary means of communication offer – at least potentially – the possibility to avoid censorship and exclusion and to make everyone's particular message universally accessible. However, we are all well aware today of the fate of any subjective message, particular viewpoint or individual idea – the fate to which they are necessarily submitted after they are put into circulation through the media of communication. We have heard already from Marshall McLuhan that the message of the medium undermines, subverts and shifts every individual message using this medium. We heard from Heidegger that *die Sprache spricht* (the language speaks), and not so much the individual that is using the language. These formulations undermine the subjectivity of the speaker, of the sender of the message – even if the hermeneutical subjectivity of the listener, reader or receiver of the information seems to be left relatively intact. However, Derridian deconstruction and Deleuzian machines of desire also got rid of this last avatar of subjectivity. Here, an individual reading of a text or interpretation of an image goes down in the infinite sea of interpretations and / or is carried away by the impersonal flows of desire. Mastery over communication is revealed by contemporary media theory as a subjective illusion. This incapacity of the subject to formulate, stabilize and communicate its message through the media is often characterized as the 'death of the subject'.

Thus, we are confronted with a somewhat paradoxical situation. On the one hand, in our epoch we believe in the necessity of inclusion of all subjects with all their particular messages into the networks of universal exposure and communication. On the other, howeve, we know that we are unable to guarantee unity and stability of these messages after this act of inclusion. The information flows dissolve, shift and subvert all the individual messages by turning them into more or less accidental aggregates of floating signifiers. Believing in the politics of inclusion, we no less strongly believe in the unavoidable death of the included subjects – together with their particular messages – through the same act of inclusion. Looking at the Internet as the leading medium of our time we find ourselves confronted with a potentially anonymous mass of texts and images in which their particular origins – together with the particular intentions of their authors – have been erased. The copy-and-paste operation that defines the functioning of the digital media turns any individual expression into an anonymous, impersonal readymade that can be used by any Internet user at any moment. The universal presents itself through the Internet as an impersonal sign flow. The subjectivities of the 'content providers' unavoidably drown in this flow. In this sense the new universality – universality of Internet clerks – creates a universal image after all. It is not a universal idea, project or commitment but, rather, a universal event – a fact that the sign flow took this and not that form at a particular moment in time.

Julian Assange eloquently describes this new, if one will, postmodern, posthistorical universalist vision in a recent interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist (in: e-flux / journal, no. 24, 25): 'There's a universe of information, and we can imagine a sort of Platonic ideal in which we have an infinite horizon of information. It's similar to the concept of the Tower of Babel *[en.wikipedia.org - The Tower of Babel forms the focus of a story told in the Book of Genesis of the Bible. According to the story, a united humanity of the generations following the Great Flood, speaking a single language and migrating from the east, came to the land of Shinar.]*. Imagine a

field before us composed of all the information that exists in the world – inside government computers, people's letters, things that have already been published, the stream of information coming out of televisions, this total knowledge of all the world, both accessible and inaccessible to the public. We can as a thought experiment observe this field and ask: If we want to use information to produce actions that affect the world to make it more just, which information will do that?'

This vision is especially striking by how un-Platonic and even anti-Platonic it is. Plato *[en.wikipedia.org - Plato was a philosopher in Classical Greece. He was also a mathematician, student of Socrates, writer of philosophical dialogues, and founder of the Academy in Athens, the first institution of higher learning in the Western world. Along with his mentor, Socrates, and his most-famous student, Aristotle, Plato helped to lay the foundations of Western philosophy and science.]* hoped to find his 'Platonic' ideas beyond the stream of information. And Plato tried to find these ideas in people's thinking – not in what they have written or archived. He looked for something stable, permanent, being able to withstand the flow of impressions and thoughts – and at the same time immediately evident, radiant, beautiful. Now Assange also assumes that the information that does not move, that remains stable, is the most interesting. But his reasons to think so are equally very un-Platonic. In the same interview he says: 'Some of the information in this tremendous field, if you look at it carefully, is faintly glowing. And what it's glowing with is the amount of work that's being put into suppressing it ... So, if you search for that signal of suppression, then you can find all this information that you should mark as information that should be released. So, it was an epiphany to see the signal of censorship to always be an opportunity, to see that when organizations or governments of various kinds attempt to contain knowledge and suppress it, they are giving you the most important information you need to know: that there is something worth looking at to see if it should be exposed and that censorship expresses weakness, not strength.' In other words: the epiphany here is not a Platonic epiphany, not an ecstasy of evidence. It is, rather, a negative epiphany leading to a moral obligation to liberate information from captivity and to let it flow. The concept of the information flow is here obviously the normative, regulatory, universal idea – even if it is a very un-Platonic one. At the same time, the criterion of universality obviously remains an aesthetic as well as an ethical one. The censorship, the artificial interruption of the sign flow is perceived here as an attempt to distort the sublime vision of the universal landscape of knowledge. Particular interests tried to damage this vision, even though they had already been recognized as irrelevant and obsolete.

And, indeed, the particular subjectivities that were already theoretically deconstructed and practically expropriated through the Internet become here reconstructed artificially as owners of a 'private sphere' – an area of private access that is supposed to remain secret. In our media-driven, postdeconstructive age the dead subject has become a secret. The individual is defined today by the pass codes and passwords that delineate his or her area of access. The area of access is assumed at the same time to be protected and concealed. Thus the area of access substitutes the unity of the individual message, the personal, authorial intention, the subjective act of thinking and feeling. Technical protection replaces metaphysical certainty. For a very long time subjectivity was understood as being metaphysically inaccessible – as something that can be only interpreted but not directly experienced. Today we no longer believe in this metaphysical place of subjectivity. Thus, hermeneutics have been replaced by hacking. The hacker overcomes the borders of individual subjectivity that is understood as an area of privileged access. It opens its secret and appropriates its message – instead of interpreting it. And he releases this message – and lets the media networks dissolve it.

In this sense the activity of WikiLeaks is a practical continuation of Derridian deconstruction. It is a practice that liberates the signs that are captured and controlled by subjectivity. The difference is only this: in the case of Internet we have to do not with the

metaphysical but with purely technical control over the signs. Accordingly, hacking is used here instead of philosophical critique. Hacking is often criticized as an intrusion into the private sphere but, in fact, the *telos* of all contemporary media is the complete abolition of the private sphere. Traditional media do nothing but hunt down celebrities to reveal their personal lives. In a certain sense WikiLeaks does the same in the framework of the Internet. Not accidentally, it cooperates with the international press – *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, etcetera. The abolishment and confiscation of the private sphere (but not of private property!) is what unites WikiLeaks with traditional media. Wikileaks can be seen as an avant-garde of the media. But it is not a rebellion against it. Rather, Wikileaks moves more audaciously and faster in the direction of the common *telos* of the modern and contemporary media by realizing the goal of the universal class – new universalization of the world through the means of universal service.

But here a following question arises: In what respect and to what degree is this universal service inscribed into the contemporary market economy, into the contemporary global flow of capital that also pretends to be a neutral, non-ideological and universally accessible means for achieving private goals and satisfying private desires? It is obvious that the corporations operating the different aspects of the Internet are totally inscribed into the global capitalist markets. But what about WikiLeaks? Its attacks are directed more against state censorship than against the flow of capital. One can formulate the following hypothesis concerning the attitude of WikiLeaks towards capitalism. From the perspective of WikiLeaks capital is not universal enough, because it is ultimately dependent on the patronage of the national states and relies on their political, military and industrial power. That is why mainstream Internet corporations collaborate with state censorship and block the free flow of information through different means of protection. As a rule, we think about capitalism as a power that corrupts the state – the democratic, universalist, national state. But WikiLeaks indirectly reverses this accusation. And, indeed, one can see the situation from another perspective: capitalism does not fulfil its global promise because it is permanently corrupted by the national states and their security interests. In this perspective, WikiLeaks offers a perspective of a universal service that exceeds the universality of capitalism – that is more radically global than the global markets.

The practice of WikiLeaks is often discussed and criticized in terms of invasion and breach of privacy. But, in fact, this practice does not affect the privacy of private individuals so much. For sure, Assange, as many others from the Internet crowd, does not believe in copyrights and, in general, the rights of individuals to block the flow of information. But his activity is mostly directed against so-called state privacy – because state censorship seems to contradict the promise of universality that was and is still given by the modern state. In this sense the breach of state privacy simply means the restoration of the original goal of the state, giving the state a chance to move towards a greater universality.

Thus one can say that WikiLeaks is an expression of the revolt of the clerks against the betrayal of their ethos, of their universal vocation by the national states. And the cause of this betrayal is seen by Wikileaks in the incapability of the existing state apparatuses to become truly universal by redefining their national interests in a universal perspective. But now the question arises: Is radical, uncompromising universality possible at all? The answer is yes – but under one condition: the universal has to become isolated, protected from the world of particularities that is constantly corrupting it.

And, indeed, to remain truly universalist any universal project should be protected from corruption, for instance from the private, particular interests that could undermine its universality. But if a universal project has been designed as open and publicly accessible it necessarily becomes corrupted because the realization of this project unavoidably involves compromises with exiting institutions and private interests. The only way to avoid corruption and to keep the universality of a universal project and its realization intact is to

separate this project from the outside world as radically as possible – to make this project publicly inaccessible. Or, in other words, the universality can function in our world of particularities only in a form of conspiracy and only under the conditions of perfect inaccessibility, non-transparency and obscurity. Otherwise, it will be immediately betrayed and corrupted.

The conspiratorial dimension of universality is historically well known. The politics of conspiracy is characteristic of all religious sects and revolutionary groups having a universal claim. And this conspiratorial politics was time and again criticized in the name of openness, democracy and universal public access. The critique saw the reason for their rigorous politics of conspiracy and exclusion, primarily, in the narrow and exclusive character of the ideologies that the individual religious sects or revolutionary groups have professed. Or, in other words, the critique saw this reason in their commitment to the notion of universal truth. Every truth that was professed by these sects and groups raised a claim to be universal – but at the same time it remained particular because it was defined from the beginning in an opposition to other truths raising the same universal claim. This paradox of universal truth was made responsible for ideologically motivated conspiracies and politics of exclusion. Accordingly, the remedy was seen in the rejection of the notion of universal truth as such. The universal truth was substituted by a plurality of identities and perspectives that was supposed to not lead to any radical conflict – because all of these identities and perspectives lacked the universal claim that could provoke a real conflict between them. It is the political reason behind the substitution of the universal idea, or universal truth by universal access and universal service.

But now the practice of WikiLeaks demonstrates that universal access can be also provided only in the form of universal conspiracy. In the same interview mentioned before, Assange says: 'It was not just the intellectual challenge of making and breaking these cryptographic codes and connecting people together in novel ways. Rather, our will came from a quite extraordinary notion of power, which was that with some clever mathematics you can, very simply – and this seems complex in abstraction but simple in terms of what computers are capable of – enable any individual to say no to the most powerful state. So if you and I agree on a particular encryption code, and it is mathematically strong, then the forces of every superpower brought to bear on that code still cannot crack it. So a state can desire to do something to an individual, yet it is simply not possible for the state to do it – and in this sense, mathematics and individuals are stronger than superpowers.' And later Assange described a possibility of a name for an URL that can protect its content far beyond any possibility of its protection by the conventional copyright regulations.

In other words, universal public access is possible only under the conditions of a complete inaccessibility of the means that guarantee this accessibility. Transparency is based on radical non-transparency. Universal openness is based on the most perfect closure. WikiLeaks is a first example of a truly postmodern universal conspiracy. It operates beyond any claim to truth – universal or particular. But at the same time it demonstrates that universal access is possible only as universal conspiracy. Not accidentally, Assange refers time and again in his texts and interviews to Solzhenitsyn as the main source of his inspiration. And, indeed, the whole activity of Solzhenitsyn can be described as a clever combination of conspiracy and publicity. As many other Soviet dissidents of that time he discovered the international press as a source of power that is comparable with the power of the Soviet State. And as the other Soviet dissidents – at least during his Soviet time – he did not profess any ideology. He simply wanted to give testimony. He wanted to provide access to what was hidden. But to be able do so, he, as well as other dissidents, had to be highly conspiratorial.

Now the trajectory of WikiLeaks becomes understandable: it interprets and embodies the universal service as conspiracy – and conspiracy as universal service. And this understanding puts WikiLeaks itself and its members at risk. Already in the 1930s

Alexandre Kojève proclaimed in his famous lectures on Hegel that the history of the universal visions is over, that the human being has ceased to be a subject of truth and became a sophisticated animal having only particular interests and desires. For Kojève that meant that the posthistorical mode of existence excludes the possibility of substantial risk because such a possibility arises only as a result of commitment of the subject to a universal truth. Thus, for Kojève the only possibility to remain a philosopher after the end of history was to enter the universal service in a form of European administration. And Kojève understood the way of universal service and administration as a secure one. Now WikiLeaks and Assange himself proved that the way of universal service can also lead to a substantial risk. They became dissidents of universal service – and invented in this way a new form of risk. Or, rather, they thematized this risk and made it explicit by committing themselves to universal service and administration in a form of conspiracy from the very beginning. It is a true historical innovation. And it is to be expected that this innovation will have interesting consequences.

Boris Groys is since 2009 a Full Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, New York. As of December 2009, he is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Academy of Design in Karlsruhe, Germany. He additionally curates various exhibitions and publishes articles and books, including *Art Power* (2008), *Going Public* (2010) and *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* (2012).

Tags

Control, Democracy, Philosophy, Transparency

This text was downloaded on November 28, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
onlineopen.org/wikileaks