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Among his works, we quote:

*Verità e comunità in Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (La città del sole, 1998); *Un'etica del nulla. Libertà, esistenza, politica* (Liguori, 2001); *Storia, filosofia e politica Camus e Merleau-Ponty* (La città del sole, 2003); *Le radici della disuguaglianza. La potenza dei moderni* (Mimesis, 2008); *ECity. Antropologia della tecnica* (Rubbettino, 2018); *Nocity. Antropologia della tecnica* (Castelvecchi, 2018).

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# THE INTERNAL TURN OF DEMOCRACY. THE ASSANGE CASE<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The essay wonders to what extent liberal democratic systems can be separated, in relation to freedom, from autocratic power devices. One of the analysis criteria followed by the A., is constituted by the story that saw as protagonist the activist Julian Assange. The Australian journalist, showed the very close bond between power and Internet communication nowadays, and the libertarian potentialities hidden in this bond. He also pointed out the existence of a “subversion” level that Occidental systems are not willing to tolerate, because even in them, as in any other power device, there is a need for survival that makes use of specific, well-defined and unavoidable immune mechanisms.

In the essay, finally, we analyze the problematization of the concept of freedom, and its political operability, facing the danger of conformism, media manipulation and depoliticization always looming in democracies.

## Keywords

Assange; Democracy; Freedom; Ideology; Power.

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## **Resumen**

El ensayo se pregunta hasta qué punto los sistemas liberales democráticos pueden ser independientes, en relación con la libertad, por los dispositivos de poder autocrático. Uno de los criterios de análisis enseguido por el A. consiste en el caso de Julian Assange. El periodista australiano ha demostrado el vínculo estrechísimo que existe entre el poder y la comunicación informática hoy, y las potencialidades libertarias escondidas en este vínculo. Assange ha resaltado también la existencia de un nivel de “eversión” que los sistemas occidentales no están dispuestos a tolerar, ya que también en ellos, como en cualquier otro dispositivo de poder, existe una necesidad de supervivencia que se sirve de mecanismos inmunes muy precisos e ineludibles.

En el ensayo, además, se articula en torno al problema del concepto de libertad, y de su funcionamiento político, ante el peligro del conformismo, de la manipulación mediática y de la despolitización siempre inminente en las democracias.

## **Palabras clave**

Assange; Democracia; Libertad; Ideología; Poder.

## Introduction

It is quite obvious to reiterate, that in democracy, one of the most important rights of “citizens” is freedom of expression. This right, however, is enshrined in the constitutions so it seems pointless to discuss it. It is quite obvious that, in freedom of expression, the right to publish any information of common interest is fully entitled.

When it happens that, as in the case of investigations and processes raged against the Australian journalist Julian Assange, all this is an outright violation, and there is no doubt that it must be denounced without hesitation.

The contradiction expressed by Euro-American political systems as for the case of Assange, however, cannot be easily dismissed as a violation, although sensational, of libertarian rules of which these same systems become advocates. Actually, we must carefully analyze the mishaps happened to Assange and *WikiLeaks* journalists, of which, however, we have not seen the epilogue yet, analyzing them from a philosophical and political point of view. In other terms, I think it is extremely important, and also urgent, to inquire this sad case, first of all asking ourselves how “The Assange case” could have happened inside the contemporary liberal democracies.

In short, what are the reasons why systems of power defining themselves “democratic” and guaranteeing freedom of expression yet in their constitutional charters, keep persecuting a journalist who published information able to shed light — with unquestionable, verified and never denied documents —, not about the activities of individuals but about the action of a state or those people who represent the institutions. Is this a simple abuse of power by the involved countries? Is this a coincidence or, as I believe, behind this behaviour — however non-occasional but systematic and long lasting — there is a cogent logic, almost a historical necessity that we have to lay bare?

Thus, I would begin with a fundamental question: are Western liberal democracies substantially different from other power devices that occurred in history or, at least on a main point, all of them are converging? I will adopt this second hypothesis: all power systems, also those liberal democratic, essentially agree on the need to protect themselves, denying, if necessary, also the freedom of expression.

I will try to explain the reasons why this happens, placing the Assange case inside this context of philosophical investigation.

## The survival of power

Liberal democratic systems, though firmly rooted in modern political speech, descend from a more than bimillenary history, sinking its roots inside the entire cultural and political path of the Occidental world. It is neither useful, nor possible outlines here a genealogy of this path. We just have to admit that, in our time, these systems have reached a considerable degree of structural articulation (we live in the world of complexity) and present a series of contradictions and paradoxes — the result of this same complexity.

In terms of freedom of expression, this complexity is ambivalent: on the one hand it promotes the structuring of legal and institutional mechanisms that make despot's life difficult, because it is not easy for a man of power (even the President of the United States of America), whoever is, a person or organ of the State, to dispose of power in an arbitrary manner, but on the other hand, it allows the unnoticed weakening of individual freedom. Actually, the great masterpiece of modern *soft power*, came nowadays to its most complete historical maturation, was convincing men to be free, just as this freedom is threatened.

The liberal democratic world is actually supposed to be libertarian, it makes of freedom its *ideological point d'honneur*, but condemns to nothingness those who are opposed to *mainstream* that dominates the public space. Certainly, even after having harshly criticized and condemned the government, in general, we can sleep relatively quiet because we hardly will be awakened by political police — as maybe it can happen in old-style, autocratic, and despotic power systems. It is also difficult to dissipate the heavy and claustrophobic feeling, that our complaint will be inexorably condemned to stand empty and insignificant — as well as, after all, the public life of most men and women who live in postindustrial societies, is insignificant.

If I could synthesize with a formula, I should say that, in liberal democracies, the forms of power, aim to resort to preventive war in foreign policy, while, concerning the formation of subjectivity, in such a preventive manner, let the political freedom abort at birth. After all, we cannot help agreeing with an American brilliant author, (Wolin, 2008, e-book), when he speaks about “inverted totalitarianism”:

Rather, in coining the term “inverted totalitarianism” I tried to find a name for a new type of political system, seemingly one driven by abstract totalizing powers, not by personal rule, one that succeeds by encouraging political disengagement

rather than mass mobilization, that relies more on “private” media than on public agencies to disseminate propaganda reinforcing the official version of events.

And, however, it does not always happen as described above, because the management of events can get out of hand. So it happens that liberal democratic systems are “obliged” to show a different side, more “primitive” and explicit, dangerously resembling that of autocratic power: historical situations in which such systems are forced to remove the mask of *soft power*, that is, the apparent tolerance and rule of law. A particular case attracted the attention of the international press, and globally stirred the conscience: “the Assange case”. Regarding that case, a scholar who followed the entire biographical itinerary of the Australian activist, on this point, appropriately highlights some differences but also dangerously continuities between autocratic and democratic systems:

Una dittatura avrebbe inviato sicari e manganellatori a liquidare Julian Assange e i giornalisti di WikiLeaks. Il complesso militare e d’intelligence degli Stati Uniti e dei loro alleati, invece, ha usato, e continuerà a usare, tecniche meno brutali. E questo è certamente preferibile. Ma il punto è che non c’è bisogno di essere brutali quando si può far crollare un giornalista con la tortura psicologica invece che con quella fisica. Non serve fare bruciature di sigaretta sulle braccia di Julian Assange, quando lo si può portare sull’orlo del suicidio, con dieci anni di detenzione arbitraria senza un’ora d’aria e senza via d’uscita. Non serve mandare sicari per fermare le pubblicazioni di una testata, quando basta usare la *lawfare* e tenere i suoi giornalisti e le sue fonti in un clima di perenne intimidazione (Maurizi, 2021, e-book).

How can this all happen? Why did what actually constitutes the concrete historical denial of freedom appear inside a liberal reality? I believe that the answer must be searched inside the deepest reasons that support any power association — even the liberal democratic State. If we go back, actually, to the time of its foundation, we have to acknowledge that theorists of sovereignty had thought the state institution as the shell designed, more than protect and subjugate the citizens to an order that could also conflict with their interests. The modern state is born on a precise, imperative, anthropological assumption: the absolute lack of limits which are intrinsic to human nature as to the explanation of freedom. Hobbesian definition of freedom (Hobbes, 1994, e-book) is “absence of opposition”: LIBERTY, or FREEDOM, signifieth (properly) the absence of

opposition (by opposition, I mean external impediments of motion) and may be applied no less to irrational and inanimate creatures than to rational.

In Hobbes' perspective, viewed the absence of ethical and ontological limits to freedom, it is necessary to give the sovereignty over a territory and people who live there, to a monopolist of legitimate physical force (*auctoritas non veritas facit legem*). Only in this way, that mass of atomized individuals, free and equal, usually anarchist and undifferentiated, may become a political corps, or, in widely used words, may become a people.

It is clear that we must not only interpret the State in its Hobbesian absolutistic version but we need to also consider its historical reinterpretations. The liberal and democratic criticism (Locke, Rousseau) provided some decisive objections to absolutism, contributing fundamentally to the contemporary conception of statehood. They intended to achieve two different but parallel aims: to reduce the interference of the State, as an autonomous apparatus, and increase the chances of action and participation of citizens to the management of common affairs. This "democratic" turn, however, the libertarian tradition that goes from Alexis de Tocqueville (1811) to Hannah Arendt (1958) says it very well, took rather a "biopolitical" turn, depriving the citizens of the sphere of active politics, confining them to much less significant role of producers/consumers. Those distinct but convergent expressions are born exactly from here. They were so successfully in the interpretation of mass societies, namely *individualism and depoliticization*.

In this perspective, the figure of State as it manifested itself in modern times and as it remains in the period characterized by globalization, appears even better: it is a living organism that cannot hold the same needs of life, typical of any collective body.

If all this is true, it is necessary, then, to wonder why it should behave in a different way from other bodies — all structured to defend organic life. Why should the State not "organize itself" as a real military device capable of defending and offending any entity external to it? If we enter into this perspective, we fully understand that also the liberal democratic State — as a form of power like all the others — is intended to display the forces that wanted to put him in crisis, or even just threaten its conservation, as a real challenge from which it is necessary to defend. From the state point of view does not care whether these forces are internal or external. The State corps — is made to defend its identity— if this identity has internal threats to its security, the organism will provide to fight and expel it by itself.

Consequently, the result is an evident, relentless and nihilistic position: this attitude is poorly democratic or not democratic at all. It is clear that, actually, not always the fighting between the endogenous principle of the organism that wants to survive (the

power) and the external threat to it (the radical critique) can unfold in the sun light, since, if they were revealed, some conflicts might endanger precisely that survival to which the State cannot give up. That is why I talk about nihilism: by raising the relationship between the identity and alterity, as a military relationship of logical and existential opposition, transforming the other into an enemy. It is relentless to involve in a potential destruction both terms of the relationship.

### **The *via crucis* of extradition**

We are dealing with the Assange case now. Particularly, it is necessary to remember some of recent judicial events that have seen him on the stand, taking into accounts the general conditions within which those events have developed. So, on January 5th, 2021 the medical motivations did not suffice to British justice to deny the extradition of Assange.

The same year, on October 27th, as attested by the doctors who visited him, the journalist had a transient ischemic attack. The trauma occurred during his appearance in video conference, at The Belmarsh Superior Court. According to the opinion of the American physician Bill Hogan, member of the international group, *Doctor for Assange*, the ischemic attack occurred to Assange is very rare for a man of fifty years. It is, therefore likely, that “a direct chain of psychological events” determined it. Dr. Hogan also affirmed that accident was “entirely and avoidable” but USA and Great Britain “ignored the alarms”.

The deteriorating health of Assange has been documented for a long time: it is the subject of several appeals, as well as repeated critics addressed to the British Government by humanitarian organizations, physicians and the United Nations itself. But despite this, USA and Great Britain, that is, the flag-bearers of Occidental liberal democracies, appear adamant, while continuing to use against Assange hardly conform methods to the rules of imprisonment that should connote the rule of law.

From this, is it not legitimate to conclude that both governments are “responsible” for the conditions of the *WikiLeaks* founder? It can be assumed that those measures intended to cause his death, considered as the right punishment for his militancy in the interest of justice and historical truth.

This suspicion is endorsed by the subsequent decision promulgated on December 10th, 2021 by the High Court of London. The court overturns the sentence that denied

the extradition, on March 14th, 2022, the United Kingdom Supreme Court dismisses the appeal lodged by Assange's lawyers, leaving the last decision to the Home Secretary. On April 21st, 2022, The Westminster Magistrates' Court issues a formal order of extradition in USA, during an audience to which Assange attends in video-conference. The Court with its verdict and behind an appearance of legality, took a political position that will be perhaps resolved with the detention for life or more likely with the death of Assange — these methods are, out of any doubt, worthy of a despotic regime. The judges decided to deliver Assange into the hands of a government that, if did not try to kidnap or get killed him, as well as trusted sources state, certainly violated his democratic rights: for example, by subjecting him to a very pervasive surveillance system, secretly implemented during the forced permanence in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.

In light of recent events, thus, it would appear that, in the substantial indifference of the Australian government, the opposition politicians in Great Britain and of the international press itself, the last hopes to avoid extradition to USA, reside in the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom and in the European Court of Human Rights. However, it is very difficult to expect some favorable outcomes for WikiLeaks founder, without a massive mobilization of consciences viewed the relationships inside these institutions, and the progressive deterioration of the Occidental "democracies" too.

## **Assange, the Subversive**

Let now see in details how Assange became a real and intolerable danger. Is he liable for serious misconduct (infringements) such as to undermine the benign and tolerant face of *soft power*? To penetrate the heart of the problem, we have to approach the Internet issue.

What kind of freedom do we enjoy when we browse the Web? In Internet, the individual freedom is limited to what the software on the server (that is their owners) allows. On this point, the same Assange well expresses: In Internet quello che puoi fare è deciso dai programmi che esistono, dai programmi che girano, e pertanto il codice è legge. (Assange, 2013, e-book)

If this is true, we can already obtain an initial answer to our question. Actually, freedom opportunities are very small inside a sociopolitical situation in which the rules of participation are written by others. If we consider, for example, that a social network like Facebook, has more subscribers than the number of the inhabitants of China, we

can well conclude that the power of impact, of manipulation of public opinion, of data control by a private body (and the public authorities to which that body gives account) far surpasses that of any other country in the world. The owners of the network, in fact, have the control over everything that is published. Through mysterious algorithms they can hide, highlight or delete news, facts and people. The data we send to the platforms could turn against us at any time and, in any case, could allow the exercise of a “listening” power to forces whose existence we even ignore.

Moreover, computer systems produce noise, a lot of noise: a huge amount of materials is called to obscure the facts that they want to hide. Is this not also the strategy of normal television programming?

Among the thousands of news that could be offered to citizens, are selected, with surgical precision, exactly those that appear in line with the masters of information: whether it is a government or a private enterprise. Public television, also Italian, shows it clearly — it changes very little. It comes again here, dramatically, the famous Orwellian expression of the “non construction of nonperson or non news”.

Sponsors’ money and the approval of those who really matter: these are the requirements on which “the guiding criteria of free information are based”. The same criteria, however, inspire the sale of books, the cultural choices, the construction of the visions of the world and the same policy options.

In the reign of “acquired” freedom, that is where freedom is ideology, information is thought and managed as the possibility of excluding or marginalizing. In our time it is almost impossible to break the wall of insignificance, for those who want to produce something really free and in/formative, and not what the system is perfectly capable of recovering dialectically in the society of entertainment.

Perhaps originality and even subversion were easier at the time of the absolute sovereigns rather than in a historical phase that is assumed to be liberal and libertarian. But Assange made it! *WikiLeaks* managed to pierce the reinforced concrete stopper that controls the information. The founder of *WikiLeaks*, in fact, penetrated the system and had the courage to turn it against itself. How did this happen? Obviously, by electronic means. If we assume that the real essence of contemporary power, in fact, focuses on the technocratic communication apparatus, if we admit that our historical world is dominated by what we might call *the global electronic city* (Martone, 2018; Martone 2021), then the only way to attack the system is to enter on its main stronghold, that *Matrix* from which everything departs and where everything is brought back. In this context, it becomes understandable that only ingenious hackers, like Julian Assange and his

collaborators, could undermine the system in the truest and deepest sense, and, to do this, the Australian journalist hit the power in the most delicate point:

Come un gruppo di ribelli che fa un blitz e poi si dilegua, colpivano e poi sparivano. Cambiavano contatti e avevano un'acuta consapevolezza della sorveglianza che forze di polizia, eserciti, servizi segreti, giganti della finanza mettevano in campo contro i giornalisti che percepivano come una minaccia. (Maurizi, 2021, e-book)

In the case of Julian Assange, the fight for freedom has been activated by electronic means in the knowledge that the system of power not only Occidental, at the time of globalization, finds right on Internet, in its uses and abuses, the diamond tip. The digitalization of data, in fact represents, at the same time and for the same reasons, the main axis of power but also its highest level of exposure.

Since 2006, Assange is among the promoters of the website *WikiLeaks*: in the course of some years he publishes documents and secret information from anonymous sources. Among these, there are also confidential reports on the bombing in Yemen, on corruption in the Arab world, extrajudicial executions by the Kenyan police on the Tibetan uprising in China in 2008, the oil scandal in Peru and the e-mails of the Turkish government after the purges of Erdogan in 2016. *WikiLeaks* gained international attention in 2010, when it made public a series of reports provided by Chelsea Manning. Among these news, were also present the video *Collateral Murder*, the diaries of the war in Afghanistan, and the diaries of the war in Iraq.

After the leaks in 2010, the government of the United States understood that it was necessary to destroy *WikiLeaks* and promptly initiated an investigation. The accusations that in sequence have been addressed to him, in one of the most intricate judicial events of contemporary history, not being able to blame him for having denounced heinous crimes committed by politicians, military, etc., and thereby pilloried the public image of American democracy, more simply they first challenged him sexual offenses, then filed, and later, after various, complex and pretext judicial events, accused him of having violated The "*Espionage Act*", a law dating back to 1917, through the hacking of reserved passwords.

This decision, however, was criticized by editors of some newspapers including *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. In any case, it remains very problematic to accuse someone of having violated the state secret when to be involved are facts that do

not risk harming the security and integrity of the state itself, understood as a community of associates and not as an apparatus of organs, structured to coordinate and provide for the needs of the former. In other words, one can not use the alibi of the secret to prevent the detection and punishment of facts contrary to the constitutional order, concerning the defense of civil, social and humanitarian rights.

Internet, its management and control, in this sense, is confirmed to be the top of power of our time. Assange himself tells us so:

Perciò alla base della rivoluzione delle comunicazioni hitech, e della libertà che ne abbiamo ricavato, c'è l'intera economia moderna di mercato, neoliberale, transnazionale e globalizzata. In realtà ne è il vertice. È il massimo, in termini di risultato tecnologico, che la moderna economia neoliberale globalizzata può produrre. Internet è sorretta da interazioni commerciali estremamente complesse tra produttori di fibre ottiche, fabbricanti di semiconduttori, compagnie minerarie che estraggono tutta questa roba e i vari lubrificanti finanziari che permettono i commerci, i tribunali per far rispettare le leggi sulla proprietà e così via. Così diventa il vertice della piramide dell'intero sistema neoliberale (2013, e-book).

The Australian journalist showed gloomy, sad and even criminal pages — power could not accept to view them published without taking big risks from the point of view of its ideological self-entitlement and therefore of its own survival.

Also, thanks to *WikiLeaks*, the Occident had to witness the fall of prestige and respect by the world community not included in the zone of American influence. Consequently, the arrest and the tormenting detention of Assange, as well as the processes to which it has been subjected, require us to reflect on the profound geopolitical transformations of these years, that is the ways in which the American Empire is reacting to current geopolitical historical events that seem to direct history towards the transformation of the World Order from unipolar to multipolar.

In this framework, it is well understood that one could not deal with the informative mechanism of *WikiLeaks* in the same way that liberal democratic capitalism always does, that is to consider antagonism as the engine of its own dynamism. The *WikiLeaks* device, very differently, was thought as a real masterpiece of anti-power production.

Both the macro-sectoral system of politics and the micro-sectoral one of Internet, failed to sustain the impact and is well understood, returning to the initial question of my essay, that The United States and its allies had to mobilize their immune defense

system. They did so because those systems possess a Deep-state level, or *arcana imperii*, that can not be drawn in any way and less even closer, less than ever disclosed. Exactly, from this point of view, as it happens in autocratic systems.

Contemporary capitalism, as mentioned, different in form but not in substance from the despotisms of always, elaborated refined methods to transform the opposition into new expansive possibilities of itself. In the case of Julian Assange, this strategy could not be realized because what emerged was not only a scandalous matter (that one can cover up or even use as mass distraction material), but attempted the state secret and the news that are daily hidden in the palaces of power — what, in fact, coincides with power itself and its survival. If it had been allowed, perhaps, others could have imitated or perfected Assange's action, inevitably leading the system to collapse.

Pandora's box uncovered by *WikiLeaks* is emblematic and exemplary. He showed, and his historical-biographical story, made it even better to see, that there is not even transparency in the political power that makes transparency its ideological point of honour. In this sense, *WikiLeaks* did not simply challenge the system but put it into crisis: *WikiLeaks* reporters witnessed an unprecedented and unusual way of democratic subjectivization:

En d'autres termes, avec Snowden, Assange et Manning, ce ne sont pas seulement de nouveaux objets politiques qui apparaissent ; ce ne sont pas uniquement de nouveaux points de dissensus qui voient le jour et sont portés sur l'arène publique: ce sont de nouveaux modes de subjectivation. Ces trois personnages n'interrogent pas seulement ce qui se déroule sur la scène politique et la façon dont cela s'y déroule: ils mettent en crise la scène politique elle-même (Lagasderie, 2014, e-book).

That is why they could not let him get away with it:

L'obiettivo del complesso militare e d'intelligence degli Stati Uniti e dei loro alleati è distruggere WikiLeaks, far fuori un'organizzazione giornalistica che, per la prima volta nella storia, ha creato una crepa profonda e persistente in quel potere segreto, che da sempre non risponde a nessuno e usa il segreto di Stato non per proteggere la sicurezza dei cittadini, ma per garantirsi l'impunità, nascondere incompetenza e corruzione (Maurizi, 2021, e-book).

Apart from the personal fate of the Australian activist, therefore, his story marks a very dangerous drift for democracies in their ethical substance. Assange's story shows that the question of "Reason of State" not only does not move away from its modern structure, in the direction of processes of democratization perhaps more transparent and free, but it becomes more and more explicit that governments demand from journalists, and intellectuals, the support to the political lines of "national security". The implications of the Assange case for press freedoms and democracy are difficult to overestimate. Therefore, they require us to think deeply about who we are and what we want to become.

## Heroes of freedom

From Socrates onward, the heroes of freedom are many as significant. The same way as Socrates, Spartacus, Christ, Giordano Bruno, in a very sober but deeply ethical sense, Assange is a hero, in the "erotic" sense of expression — a hero of freedom precisely. After years of imprisonment and harassment, none of the reasons for obtaining release was accepted:

Nonostante il Working Group on Arbitrary Detention delle Nazioni unite avesse ripetutamente chiesto il suo rilascio, il relatore speciale dell'Onu contro la tortura, Nils Melzer, avesse riscontrato tutti i sintomi della tortura psicologica e 117 medici di tutto il mondo avessero scritto una lettera all'autorevole rivista di medicina 'The Lancet' per chiedere di porre fine alla 'tortura di Assange e assicurargli l'accesso alle migliori cure prima che sia troppo tardi (Maurizi, 2021).

Commenting on the Assange case, therefore, the British movie director and activist Ken Loach asks a question that seems inevitable: Per quanto ancora possiamo accettare che il meccanismo del potere segreto, responsabile dei crimini più vergognosi, continui a farsi beffe dei nostri tentativi di vivere in una democrazia? (Pref. Maurizi, 2021, e-book).

To answer Loach's questions, we must first of all be aware that there are "free countries", where by this expression we mean an acquisition of freedom given once and for all. Freedom is essentially an experience, not an individual property of the subject, or of a community. In this light, we must also consider heretical figures who, with somewhat

emphatic expression, the history of all ages pointed out as *heroes of freedom* (Bazzicalupo, 2011): human beings, that is, capable of standing as apostles, and even as martyrs, of freedom itself. Why are they the heroes? Obviously, what comes most spontaneously to say is that they are so for the courage they show in their public action. There is no doubt, but there is also another aspect. The heroes of freedom, like Assange, have the ability to identify the exposed point of the problem, its specific *vulnus*, the exposed nerve to which it is really sensitive. It is not easy to reach that point, and, in fact, not everyone has the hero's hardening: this is all more true in a reality that boasts an ideology of freedom capable of metabolizing antagonisms, making it the engine of its own dynamism. Assange said loud and clear that the King is naked. In an anti-heroic time, a time where heroes are paper and digital, a time deeply farcical, instead, Assange is a dramatic hero. And, on the other hand, a hero of freedom can only be dramatic, because he is destined to relate to death and self-sacrifice.

Basically, the main fault of Assange is to have put images, e-mails and videos online. He reacted against the distorted information, using, however, Internet. Perhaps with this action, the activist conclusively proved that today the heroic figure indisputably can only use — in a perhaps pirate way — the same tools that make the system large and powerful. It is a sort of inverted Schmittian ruler, in which the ruler is the *hacker* who inaugurates a state of anti-power exception.

The Australian journalist forced the Occident to witness helplessly the display of an undesirable image: that is the one that highlights an imperialism that provokes wars, deaths and destruction in the world for its own geopolitical and economic advantage. In other words, the concrete damage to which Assange and WikiLeaks exposed the Western Empire was to show how completely false the justifications of those wars, as well as the manner in which they were fought, despite these were confirmed by self-proclaimed experts and amplified and endlessly repeated by the powerful media device of the Occident. In this way, the Australian journalist managed to become the main enemy of the military/industrial apparatus, as well as the most relevant power lobbies in USA and allied countries. Against him an unusually unanimous agreement was created: the prison for Assange became a goal that agreed all Washington (usually very divided). All this says a lot about how the Australian journalist was able to do his job well. From his action, however, we will not only retain the awareness that freedom has always a cost; neither we can only remember it as something memorable that deployed powerful state organizations against a single man. As it always happens when it comes to heroes, the memory of an exemplary act persists. The sad story of the Australian journalist leaves

us, as a gift, a positive opportunity from the democratic point of view: an immune system that defends itself, got on the ropes by a man who denounces its unmentionable truths, can exaggerate with the self-preservation and fall victim to itself. In other terms, it may happen that the denial of the other (in this case, in the form of democracy and truth) can produce unexpected heterogenesis of the ends. If a level of defense is necessary for any living system, an excess of immunization can cause implosion, or the crisis of the system itself.

## Voluntary servitude?

Leaving in the background, the critical discussion of the Assange case, with some concluding reflections, now I would like to broaden my gaze on the typically modern category of freedom, in the conviction that, without an adequate perception of its, it is impossible to understand the story that saw *WikiLeaks* and its founder protagonists.

There are good reasons to believe that man, if wanted to follow his natural impulses, and this in every age, would tend to seek servitude rather than freedom. There are important classical texts on this point and it is pointless to dwell. Here, I mention only two of them: the essay on the voluntary servitude of Étienne de La Boétie (2014) and the fifth book of *Karamazov brothers* of Fëdor Michajlovič Dostoevskij (2017), the latter of them dedicated to «the myth of the great inquisitor».

For most people, it is more comfortable and easier to depend on the will of others than assume the burden, sometimes very heavy, of thinking, judging and deciding on their own.

In the concept and, especially, in the experience of freedom there are great paradoxes. When we dedicate ourselves to an imposed task, perhaps, we wish to free ourselves from that engagement to take back our freedom. But when this goal was reached, the result could disprove our expectations: feeling free means not being protected by the banks of the command of others and by heteronomous engagement — that can also mean protection. Here are the reasons why the devotion to an external cause can be for many people a mandatory reason for living. Outside of that, in fact, there is something to avoid at all costs: perhaps the loneliness and the thought that it conveys. Without freedom there can be no thought and so is vice versa: for most people/mass there is nothing more disorienting than free thought.

Individual in mass societies fears the responsibility of choosing: the risk of destabilization of one's own identity remains a looming danger over each and there are few who agree to face it. Behind scrubs, uniforms we feel instead reassured and the world becomes habitable again.

To the use of conscious freedom, mass/men always oppose "voluntary servitude". This is the great internal turn, the great unsolved *riddle*, that democracy will always be faced. As also the Assange case proved well, liberal democratic systems are based on the *ideology* of freedom: the essence of this ideology is to make that freedom is with us, then deny itself when freedom, radically experienced by a single rebel, puts at risk the conformism of imposed freedom. All this is cloaked by an apparent freedom (which is similar to indifference and consumer apathy) that remains so only to the extent that it does not come to contest closely the power of the tyrant.

One of the most blatant manifestations of hypocrisy of the ideology of freedom is that the autonomy of citizens is not as important as the economic strength of the oligarchs of the regime, by virtue of which they can buy more media, more votes, more judges — they can corrupt and threaten more than others. All this is more true, as we saw, in the time when the Internet can form and distort subjectivities at will.

It is clear that the commitment to freedom can only be singular: in it must always be alive the awareness, that despite all evidence to the contrary, another world is possible. This because freedom is not a reality placed within the subjects, although it must necessarily be born in the minds of men, but reveals itself as an act of contestation of the existing.

In this sense, freedom is always subversive. Freedom is an existential thrill, an unease, a desire that does not find satisfaction in the existing. Freedom is also the courage to assert this uneasiness against all those who cry out to scandal hoping not having, as Assange, to witness with prison, suffering, defamation. Freedom is therefore risky, since it is a question of combating the homologation to which any human community is founded even more that of post-industrial advanced consumerism.

The greatest feat a man can accomplish is the translation of the *novum* he feels inside in a recognizable act, with the hope that this action of rupture will become the founder of a new history. On this regard, it is useful to remember that ancient belief in Aristotelian ethics that took new impetus in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, according to which politics does not belong to the scope of necessity, but enters fully into the field of things that "can also be different", and that for this reason they are free (Arendt, 1948).

In short, politics belongs to the realm of freedom and, conversely, freedom is essentially political activity, because it is the privileged place of application of imagination and courage. Politics is the front end between our corporeity and the world. Finally, politics is the place where the possible can become real.

If only a few turn to a certain vision of the world, they will be crazy, but if they are so many to oppose — slowly weaving a canvas capable of rebuilding a democratic fabric worthy of this name, by creating new criteria that do not respond only to the dominant techno-financial power structure — perhaps, they can actually change something important, and that is trying “to retrain life”. When a system of power is accepted “because there are no alternatives”, in reality political servitude has already won us. In our contemporaneity these dangers are several, strong and looming (Mounck, 2018).

Men can be divided into two categories: there are those who seek the truth and those who seek the belonging, who tries to protect himself in the reassuring ranks of the majority, and who instead pursues his own way, for all that is bumpy and tiring, towards peace and dialogue.

If we care the fate of democracy, we must encourage this second along with the critical thinking that characterizes it. The construction by web slogans of political speech, instead, the criminalization (Assange), or the pathologization of *parresiasta* through the militarization of ideological language, does not build democracy but the cancellation of its very nature. If that “militarization”, however, as it always happens, is supported by a powerful media apparatus it is even worse, as the approval of the public debate is thus being carried out through a *reductio ad unum* that is exactly the opposite of democratic spirit and practice.

To face the challenges of digital technology, we should do much more than just keep writing our protests on social media or be disgusted by the manipulations of the system. Our task is more difficult and fundamental: we will have to change our way of thinking technology, ourselves and the others (Susskind, 1922).

In the minds of citizens, yet, it is not hard to see so much confusion and some accommodation on dominant positions. The news overlap and are almost never inspired by the will to make understand how things are actually. The intent, rather, is to push in the ideological direction decided by the masters of media. All this produces information chaos and provides the opportunity to less aware citizens to react by taking narcissistically any position that can be fanatically flaunted and defended on social media. In short, it came determining a great labyrinth from which, sometimes, emerges some crazed Icarus who flies for a few moments before sinking miserably into the Aegean.

In this horizon, however, we risk not considering a decisive event: if the world now assumed the architectural features of a labyrinth without real exits, the centre of power is instead well established in its place. Today the difference between citizens and power is given by the fact that the first are in the labyrinth, while power is itself the labyrinth. Not even power can come out of it, because it would be like coming out of oneself, but in relation to citizens, it knows its form and, has huge benefits. It strives in every way to increase the number of its corridors to make it increasingly difficult to recognize the labyrinth as such. If this were happening, in fact, the story of Assange showed it very well, the whole system would melt like a huge hologram behind which there is nothingness.

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