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Beyond Whistleblowing

Ret Marut, CrimethInc., Anonymous

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Citizenfour is just the latest expression of public fascination with the figure of the whistleblower. Jesselyn Radack, Thomas Drake, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden—the whistleblower defects from within the halls of power to inform us about how power is being misused, delivering forbidden information to the people like the holy fire of Prometheus.

But can the whistleblower save us? Is whistleblowing enough? What limitations are coded into a strategy of social change based around whistleblowing, and what would it take to go beyond them?

Certainly, whistleblowers look good compared to the institutions they expose. Faith in authorities of all stripes is at an all-time low, and for good reason. In a news clip in Citizenfour, we see Obama claim to have ordered an inquiry into the NSA before Snowden’s revelations surfaced, petulantly implying that he was Snowden before Snowden. The President calls cynically for a “fact-based” discussion—when the only useful source of facts has been the illegal leaks of the man he is decrying. It is difficult to imagine a starker contrast between courage and cynicism.

Yet it’s one thing to unmask tyrants—it’s another thing to depose them.

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”The greatest fear that I have... is that nothing will change. People will see in the media all of these disclosures. They’ll know the lengths that the government is going to grant themselves powers unilaterally to create greater control over American society and global society. But they won’t be willing to take the risks necessary to stand up and fight.” –Edward Snowden

The theory of social change implicit in whistleblowing is that if the crimes of a government are revealed, popular outrage will force the government to fix itself. ”I believed that if the NSA’s unconstitutional mass surveillance of Americans was known,” Snowden said, ”it would not survive the scrutiny of the courts, the Congress, and the people.” Yet Snowden’s greatest fear has been realized: reforms to restrict NSA surveillance programs have been defeated by the elected representatives Snowden pinned his hopes on.

Snowden and other whistleblowers have succeeded in discrediting governments, but not in halting the expansion of the surveillance state. They have revealed how invasive and unaccountable our rulers are, but they have not equipped us to defend ourselves. Is it possible that the same factors that position whistleblowers to achieve such an impact also hinder their revelations from bearing fruit?

Why does the whistleblower make such a compelling protagonist? Above all, because he is positioned to speak from within the system: he is invested with all the legitimacy of the institutions he exposes. He did not begin as a rebel or an outsider; he believed in the system, and felt betrayed when he learned it did not adhere to its own regulations. Whistleblowing is premised on a democratic discourse: if people know enough, they can ”speak truth to power,”

¹ The idea that the mere revelation of some hidden truth could somehow awaken people into freedom is most evident in the 9/11 Truth movement and similar purveyors of conspiracy theory. But those are simply extreme manifestations of a narrative that is pervasive in our society, in which millenarian powers are ascribed to information itself.

programming skills to the clarity that comes of having nothing to lose—we will be more powerful than any of us could be alone.

”I am not trying to bring down the NSA, I am working to improve the NSA,” Snowden insisted in his more innocent days. Today, any real pragmatist must acknowledge that it would be easier to dismantle the NSA and all the unaccountable institutions it defends than to reform them. The simple desire to be granted privacy and left in peace brings us into direct conflict with globally networked state power. This is a daunting prospect, but it’s also a good time for it, as millions of other people around the world are being propelled into the same conflict by the ecological, economic, and racialized crises produced by this top-heavy power structure.

And here we arrive at the heart of the matter. The chief target of the NSA has never been so-called ”terrorists,” but grassroots movements that challenge the distribution of power. In this light, the decision to broaden the scope of NSA surveillance to include the entire population of the United States is not surprising after all. The goal never really was to find the proverbial terrorist needle in the haystack. The real targets of the surveillance apparatus have always been the activists in Tunisia, the revolutionaries in Egypt, the anarchists in Greece, #M15, #occupy, #blacklivesmatter, the revolution in Rojava—and all the social movements yet to come, as crisis begets crisis.

It is no longer realistic to imagine social change as a matter of policy discussion, if it ever was. We need to be thinking in terms of revolution. Whether you act from behind a keyboard or a barricade, let’s find each other and learn to be powerful together.

Footnote

cause an insider revealed that his killer violated some statute. Objecting to government activity on the grounds that it is illegal or corrupt leaves us powerless against all the forms of brutality and abuse that are already legal. We need to develop the capacity to stand up to the authorities, regardless of the laws. Otherwise, all the whistleblowing in the world will be futile.

Today, we don't lack awareness of the surveillance state so much as we lack concrete examples of how to take action against it. In the spirit of Jeremy Hammond, we might hypothesize that what we need is not just to reveal the misdeeds of the state, but to identify its strategic vulnerabilities. From protecting Tunisian activists against surveillance to revealing the names of members of the Ku Klux Klan, Anonymous has demonstrated the tactical advantages of hacking in concert with social movements. Richard Stallman himself has pointed out that denial-of-service actions are simply a new form of blockading—just as protesters from New York to the Bay Area blocked interstate highways, online activists blockade the information superhighway. Protests that combine online and offline direct action offer opportunities for new alliances cutting across class, race, and geography.

Meanwhile, the functionaries who keep the surveillance apparatus running operate out of offices in placid suburbs from Fort Mead to Hawaii. Following the lead of the protesters who targeted Google in San Francisco, we can imagine offline demonstrators opening a new front in the struggle. Perhaps this could turn the tables on those who consider themselves the masters of the digital universe from the comfort of their desks.

So whistleblowers, sysadmins, and hackers of all hats must make common cause with other movements and populations, understanding whistleblowing as one of many tactics in a much larger struggle. Alone, whistleblowers and other digital dissidents will be tracked down and imprisoned like Chelsea Manning and Jeremy Hammond, or trapped like Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. Together, with all our diverse abilities and perspectives—from pro-

and this speech itself will somehow catalyze change.¹ Of course, this presumes a political system based in dialogue.

Snowden's own revelations show how naive this conception is. The departments that built this surveillance infrastructure—that now seek to imprison Snowden alongside Chelsea Manning—hold power by virtue of coercive force, not persuasive arguments. Merely speaking truth is insufficient; we are not in a dialogue, but a power struggle.

Likewise, it is a mistake to treat the backroom machinations of politicians and bureaucrats as temporary malfunctions in an otherwise transparent and egalitarian order. These are not excesses, but business as usual; they are not exceptions to the rule, but essential to rule itself. Since the heyday of whistleblowing in the 1970s—Daniel Ellsberg, Deep Throat, the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI—investigative journalists have exposed scandal after scandal. Treating all of these as anomalous implies that the state itself is inherently legitimate, and simply needs reforming. But it's backwards to think that citizens can police the state. The stronger the state, the more power it will bring to bear against its citizens—not to mention everyone else.

There are other drawbacks to framing the whistleblower as the primary protagonist of social change. Not only can this imply that the system is fundamentally legitimate, it also presents those who hold privileged positions within the system as the agents of change. Yet for the most part, these people are the least likely to step out of line; a thousand mechanisms of selection, insulation, and incentive ensure that they are not susceptible to crises of conscience. It should be no wonder that Mannings and Snowdens are so rare, relative to the faceless thousands who collude in the functioning of the state apparatus. The problem is not that human beings are naturally selfish or insensitive, but that the infrastructure of power promotes selfishness and insensitivity.

It is a mistake to stake the future of humanity on those within the halls of power. Instead, we should be asking how people from

all walks of life might work together to disable the infrastructure of oppression.

System administrators like Edward Snowden do indeed wield disproportionate influence over the fate of our species, but sysadmins cannot create a solution by themselves. Centralizing a few computer experts as the subject of social struggle only obscures all the other demographics whose participation is essential in any movement for liberation. This oversight explains the despair Julian Assange and Jacob Appelbaum hinted at in their 2013 talk at the Chaos Communication Congress, when they described sysadmins as a class that should organize to defend its own interests, warning that it would soon be too late to halt the descent into digital tyranny. In fact, people outside the institutions of power will go on fighting against injustice regardless of the consolidation of power on the internet—many frankly have no choice. The rapidly increasing numbers of the marginalized, unemployed, and oppressed must figure at the center of any strategy for change alongside defectors from the programming caste. If programmers conceptualize their interests as distinct from the rest of humanity, and organize to defend those interests rather than to participate in a struggle much greater than themselves, they will be doomed, along with the rest of the species. Programmers should not organize themselves as a class—they should switch sides in the class war.

As Snowden feared, in the absence of proposals for how to fight it, the revelation of state surveillance only exacerbates the chilling effect it is intended to achieve. The average newspaper reader, upon learning that the NSA is tracking his whole life via his smartphone and credit card, is not likely to take to the street in outrage, but to become more guarded and submissive. Yet silence and obedience will not protect us: they only embolden those in power to target ever broader circles of potential enemies. Nor can encryption and other security measures suffice to keep us safe: the government will always have superior technology at its disposal. If we conceptualize resistance as a merely technical issue, we will be defeated

from the start. Encryption is important, but the only real security we could achieve would be a movement powerful enough to stand up for anyone targeted by the state. However much intelligence government agencies gather, they can only utilize it to the extent that they are able to bear the political consequences. The sooner we join in an open struggle against them, the safer we all will be.

Let's return to the figure of the whistleblower. The ideal hero is like us: an Everyman, only endowed with supernatural courage and destiny. Heroes represent a step we could take, but do not—a step we often do not take for fear that we are not gifted the way they are, not chosen by destiny. And this is precisely what is dangerous about heroes: they tend to sideline those who believe in them.

This is not to denigrate whistleblowers. Snowden and Manning have given everything to be true to their consciences, out of the most selfless intentions. But the best way to honor their courage and sacrifice is to step onto the same path. The message they have for us is not just the information they delivered, but above all their conduct itself, their decision to defect from the side of oppressive power to the side of the people. Rather than simply revering Snowden's exceptional bravery, let us ask ourselves what the equivalent to his deed would be in each of our own lives. It might not be whistleblowing, but something else.

What would it mean for the rest of us to defect from the power structures that we participate in? To identify what is intolerable in our own mundane complicities, and break them off once and for all? This is a step each of us can take, wherever we are situated in the architecture of power.

Whistleblowing alone will not bring about social change. That takes direct action. Remember, there was no whistleblower in Ferguson—it was not a revelation of police misconduct that triggered the most important wave of protest against police brutality in two decades, but the fact that people acted on their outrage. The killing of Michael Brown was understood nationwide as a tragedy because people protested, not because a video recorded it, nor be-