The hypocrisy in modern politics

The word ‘idealistic’ is becoming increasingly linked to dogmatism, to extremes that few wish to identify themselves with. In this sense it is becoming dirty, foul, insulting; the hidden, or perhaps no longer hidden connotations associated with it suggesting a mindset of being undemocratic and irresponsible. Yet idealism may also be used in a very contrasting way, in the sense of political consistency: a fight against double standards and unjust, situational treatment of citizens. Idealism in this sense is a worthwile pursuit, because it allows not just the determination of underlying principles reflected in certain value-based needs, but far more the homogenous installation and application of these principles in a system that represents all citizens, and not just those who happen to find themselves in a specific jurisdiction at a particular moment in time.

Keep this in mind for a few minutes.

According to Article 15 of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, any statement made as a result of torture is inadmissible as evidence.[1] This rests on a common agreement that the dignity of each individual is the primary good to be protected by the state. Thus acts of torture cannot be advocated, regardless how successful they may be in extracting valuable pieces of information.

An inversion of this common agreement, as should be possible in a reflective society resting on a fixed set of principles that apply in all situations, leads to the following assumption: provided Article 15 stands, it must also follow that, in the exact moment in which procured information is lawfully used, its method of extraction is thereby legitimised.

Keeping this in mind, too, I want to talk about the continued imprisonment, for lack of a more fitting word to use in this context, of Edward Snowden and Julian Assange. The charges that have been brought against them, in both cases by the US government, fall under the US Espionage Act of 1917, in which they are accused of disclosing information that was strictly governmental property.

Yet what have been the consequences of this information being placed in the public domain? There was no refusal to use this information, nor any lawful constraints which prevented countless governments from doing so. Rather, the reactions were two-fold: on the one side, there was mass resignation to a big cloak of impotence to influence the judicial fate of the whistleblowers. And on the other, a constant discourse as a by-product of the information released that has culminated in heightened public awareness, changes to working relationships, and even the tailoring of new laws by numerous Western European governments, to name just a few.

As per usual, there appears to be a double standard set by our politicians. Surely, as the inversion of Article 15 of the UN Convention against Torture shows, the events which have taken place ever since Snowden and Assange placed masses of information into the public domain prove that this information, perhaps not all of it but without question certain parts of it, belong there. The lawful use of this information must legitimise the methods of extraction, or else we would be heading down a rocky path on which the contours between right and wrong, between torture or not, are hard to distinguish. For we cannot have it both ways: for the same reason that one cannot obtain information by torture and then use this to shape new laws, one cannot use the information published by Snowden and Assange and then criminalise these for giving access to precisely this information.

The discourse may then quickly change gears and shift onto the discrepency within the released information; the agreement that both Snowden and Assange were right to release parts A and B, for example, but not parts C and D, and thus the US government should be able to pursue the pair for the release of the latter parts. To this I would reply, quite simply, that it cannot be expected to be the responsibility of whistleblowers to filter through the masses of information they are holding and then decide, quite properly and prior to any rigorous public debate, which precise pieces of information belong in the public domain, and which do not. Consequently, so long as even the smallest piece of information is found within a leaked file that does belong in the public domain, this should be a sufficient legitimisation for the leak. The responsibility of preventing rightfully classified information from reaching the public rests solely on the shoulders of the respective governments, for were they to be fulfilling their jobs correctly, and disclosing to the public every last piece of information it is entitled to, then inherently whistleblowing would become obsolete.

Western European politicians are making a bad decision, born out of a dangerous pragmatism that prevents them from consistently following underlying principles. This type of politics is, to me, nothing short of hypocrisy. Thus, as citizens of Western European democracies, we should demand that Snowden and Assange be granted political asylum. This may well lead to strained relationships with the US. In light of the United States' omnipotence, it may well pose an economic threat. But is it not time for political integrity to emancipate itself from economic strategy? Therefore prioritising a notion which would finally reflect the common ctizens' view that they are not dangerous criminals, but whistleblowers acting in the public interest.

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[1] 'UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment' - Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 39/46 of 10 December 1984 entry into force 26 June 1987, in accordance with article 27 (1)