

WikiLeaks, the Printing Press and the Bible

New forms of technology are inherently destabilizing to the established order.

This is the whole basis of a materialist understanding of history. But this reality can sometimes be confirmed in a manner that catches everyone by surprise. Dominance that was once unchallenged is suddenly contested on all sides. The struggle for change breaks out in new and unexpected ways.

U.S. imperialism cannot put back into the box or shut down what has been opened by WikiLeaks. Instead, the struggle to contain WikiLeaks has the potential to bring millions of people into political consciousness and conflict with the established order.

The effort to suppress the release of information on WikiLeaks by the arrest of Julian Assange and calls for his assassination or trial on terrorism charges, the imprisonment of Bradley Manning and the threats against WikiLeaks activists, along with the cancelation of its services by Amazon, PayPal, American Express, MasterCard, and U.S. and Swiss banks is radicalizing many highly skilled youth internationally. Hundreds of thousands of cyber attacks were organized on the multinational information corporations and banks that attempted to shut WikiLeaks down.

Every effort to shut it down has only served to spread it further and make it far more widely available. Thousands of mirror sites were set up within days of the effort to close WikiLeaks.

Even if the U.S. government succeeds in temporarily shutting down WikiLeaks, millions of people worldwide know that it is

possible to break U.S. government and corporate secrecy. Many new sites are sure to follow.

The denunciations and attacks on the courageous individuals who have helped to provide access to government and corporate secret information will inspire many others who may have access to restricted information on all kinds of criminal and corporate skullduggery to join in leaking it.

All this undercuts the endlessly polished image of U.S. imperialism as an invincible power with all the most advanced technology at its disposal.

So much of cyber warfare is dominated by theft of information for profit or espionage. The impact of many thousands of cyber activists all over the world working simply for the idea that information and communication should be free and available — not kept secret or owned for private profit — has revolutionary implications.

WikiLeaks has exposed government secrets through the cooperation of courageous, highly skilled individuals who are able to communicate and willing to risk everything in the name of freedom of information. But those forces alone would not have had the mass access of the corporate media.

The choice of documents and the steady, well-publicized daily release of hundreds of documents provided by WikiLeaks on the front pages of newspapers in Germany, France, Spain and Britain may reflect that the U.S.'s own imperialist allies are no longer willing to just be pulled in tow by the U.S.-dominated military alliance known as NATO.

In the past these imperialist countries and their corporate media have been willing to ignore clear evidence of U.S. crimes and conspiracies. Previously, these crimes were not even considered newsworthy or relevant.

Now these imperialist countries — long-time thieves and rob-

bers themselves — can see that today U.S. imperialism is in a long period of decline and decay. It is unable to prevail in a long ground war in Central Asia against one of the poorest, least-developed countries in the world: Afghanistan. It is unable to reverse the global capitalist economic crisis or solve the growing unemployment faced by millions of workers. Its industrial capacity is now a mere fraction of global production.

It is hardly a secret that in order to maintain its deteriorating monopoly on power, U.S. imperialism has used invasions, occupations, coups, bribery and military dictatorship. To hold in place an archaic, corrupt system of exploitation, it has openly engaged in the most repressive measures, including mass raids, disappearances, secret detentions, targeted assassinations, preventive prosecutions and frame-ups.

Both the Bush administration and now the Obama administration have politically defended the use of the most brutal forms of torture, including waterboarding, sensory deprivation, solitary confinement and electric torture. And they have used and sold weapons of torture around the world, from stun guns to white phosphorous and anti-personnel grenades.

Much of the information and even some of the pictures, videos and documents now being released were already known both in some specifics and in general outline. But concrete information can have radical consequences.

To understand how futile the U.S. efforts to shut down WikiLeaks are, it is worth looking back to a struggle at the dawn of capitalism against the old feudal order in Europe.

In the 16th century the Roman Catholic Church was the largest landowner in feudal Europe, controlling a third of all land. As an institution, it had a stranglehold on enormous amounts of property, privilege, titles, inheritance and especially ideas. The privileged clergy had a total monopoly on law, politics, science and “salvation.”

But new technology, trade and communication were bubbling beneath the surface. It was the newly invented printing press and its ability to widely disseminate information that broke the authority not only of the Catholic Church but also of feudal class relations.

The printing press and indulgences

In 1440 Johannes Gutenberg built Europe's first wooden press, which used movable metal type. It took another 15 years, until 1455, to develop the rudimentary technology of movable type, metal molds, a special press and oil-based inks that together created mass production of the first printed book: 200 copies of the Bible. By 1499 — less than 50 years later — printing houses had been established in more than 2,500 cities in Europe. An estimated 15 million books had been printed of 30,000 titles, including hundreds of political and religious-political tracts which were distributed far and wide.

This new technology broke the monopoly of information once available only to a select few who had access to handwritten manuscripts that took years to individually copy or produce by laboriously inking carved wooden blocks.

The cost of Gutenberg's first run of a two-volume printed Bible was the equivalent of approximately three years' wages for an average clerk. This was far cheaper than a handwritten Bible, which could take a single monk 20 years to transcribe.

As Gutenberg was developing the technology to print an entire book, he sustained himself by mass producing for church officials tens of thousands of printed "indulgences." These were printed slips of paper sold by the Catholic Church that promised to remit punishments in the afterlife. These aggressively marketed notes could only be sold by agents or commissaries, who bought the rights to sell them from the pope in Rome.

Indulgences quickly became an enormous new source of

wealth for Rome — a commodity that could be bought and sold. It was a new form of extracting profits: onerous taxation and mass exploitation for all who wished for salvation. For 50 years it appeared that the wealth and power of Rome was growing based on indulgences, the currency of the age.

All these enormous changes — a new marketable source of wealth, an emerging capitalist class, new technology, new communication, a beleaguered peasantry and growing numbers of poor, urban workers — were brewing when a monk, Martin Luther, challenged Rome's absolute authority.

Nailing a declaration of 95 theses to the cathedral doors in Wittenberg in 1517, Luther opposed the buying and selling of indulgences and demanded the right to interpret the Bible. This bold challenge to papal authority is credited with unleashing 100 years of revolutionary upheaval known as the Protestant Reformation.

Luther's translation of the Bible from Church Latin into the vernacular German spoken by common people had an even more revolutionary impact.

The Peasant War

For hundreds of years historians described the resulting wars that convulsed Europe as religious wars. The burning issue that moved millions of people to revolutionary action was the freedom to read the vernacular Bible and the right to interpret it. It was a break with the absolute power of the Catholic Church and its privileged clergy.

In the small book, *The Peasant War in Germany* Fredrick Engels shed new understanding on this period of upheaval with his explanation of the class forces emerging that challenged the authority of decaying, corrupt Rome. Local princes, lower nobility and landlords could quickly grasp the advantage of breaking with Rome and thereby lessening its enormous taxation and tithes. It was an opportunity to seize the wealth of church lands and be free of the burden of buying indulgences.

By 1524 large sections of the besieged German peasantry, who were being hammered by the tithes and taxations of both the church and the feudal lords, took the right of each person to interpret the Bible to heart, along with the right to seize the lands of the church and free themselves from ownership by lords and abbeys.

A radical challenge to property took root. The idea that all wealth of the church and the local lords should be held in common led to peasant uprisings that convulsed Germany for two years.

Technology cannot be turned back. And the new ideas that arise from a society changed by technology cannot be stamped out by threats and repression.

Thomas Munzer, the leader of the most radical thinkers, merged his biblical interpretations with the Anabaptist movement, a peasant-based, communist mobilization with the rainbow flag as its symbol. In this struggle millions of peasants and plebeians acted for the first time in their own interests, though following a religious program. They built a revolutionary army and contended for power.

Munzer, the Anabaptists and their movement were militarily defeated within two years. To make an example to other insurrectionary efforts, the leaders were horribly tortured and publicly executed. But revolutionary peasant uprisings continued across Europe.

The upheavals spread to Scandinavia, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands and England. The peasant movements, too disorganized, unskilled and illiterate to prevail, were again and again defeated by a bloc of the newly rising capitalist class and frightened princes and landlords.

The Catholic Church used every form of repression to reclaim its authority and privilege. Inquisitions used secret detention, horrendous forms of torture, mass campaigns of terror and

witch-hunts that consumed thousands in flames. Whole countries faced papal excommunication — a punishment similar to sanctions today.

Rome financed military campaigns and invasions, such as the Spanish Armada's attempt to invade Britain in 1588 in an effort to reverse the British monarchy's break with Rome. But no form of threats, terror or torture could restore the Church's uncontested position in feudal Europe.

No turning back for U.S. imperialism

U.S. imperialism cannot shut down the flow of information or the drive it ignites for wider access and the end to the impossibly narrow constraints of private property and ownership of information and communication. The U.S. military may have originally developed the Internet for its own emergency military communication in time of war. But the Internet has long since escaped those bounds.

U.S. corporate power cannot shut down the Internet without totally disrupting their own businesses, production and marketing. The contradiction is that the immediate financial interests of the bourgeoisie make the Internet ever more accessible.

The much bigger problem for U.S. imperialism is that today, as consciousness grows and access to communication technology expands to include the whole world, it is not facing an isolated, illiterate and oppressed peasantry.

It is facing the increasingly educated and skilled multinational working class whom they created. This class will come to a consciousness of its own interests in unexpected and uneven ways. But this class is a force that cannot be stopped by feudal or modern repression and threats.

The rising consciousness of millions of the powerless can be more powerful than technology.

Published December 22, 2010



New York. Dec. 15, 2011.

WW PHOTO: ELLEN CATALINOTTO