

Snowden, Jesus

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This piece is a result of having, during a Christmas season, not only watched a documentary about Jesus, but also *Citizenfour*, Laura Poitras's documentary about Edward Snowden. At the same time I read George Packer's *New Yorker* article about Poitras and *Citizenfour*. My ruminations were, in particular, sparked by a conjunction. There was this from Packer: "In Poitras's terms," by the time Snowden arrived in Hong Kong to turn his National Security Agency (NSA) files over to the journalist Glenn Greenwald, he had "already created a narrative of himself—it's a 'locked path.'" And, in the Jesus story, there was this from Professor Michael White:

I don't for a moment think that Pilate would have been worried that Jesus could have challenged the power of the emperor. That's not the point. The point is any challenge to Roman authority, any challenge to the peace of Rome, would have been met with a swift and violent response.

It might be said then that Jesus, in coming to Jerusalem, was also on a “locked path,” one that led rather directly to his crucifixion.*

This essay will now proceed in six stages. It has seemed necessary to use the first stage to travel through some relatively familiar scenery in order to get to a special overlook, or series of overlooks. It may be seen, too, that by the fifth stage I have made my way back to two touchstones: Albert Camus’s *La peste* (The Plague) and chapter 10 of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

(1)

When faced with the canvas that Edward Snowden, his colleagues and others have—with not a little idealism and courage—painted for all eyes to see, it is possible to feel frightened, panicked even, and helpless. Most everything we are doing with the aid of electronic devices—the places we are going, the words we are using, the people we are contacting—all this is being constantly tracked. Not only have we little privacy, but should it come to seem (correctly or incorrectly) that we are in opposition to reigning powers, we may be arrested or have our travel restricted. Or, in the extreme case, we might be killed by a drone.

One may try—I have tried—to take refuge in the possibility that it is computers that are collecting all this data and scanning it, and computers are without self-interest. So the question becomes: Who controls the computers and has access to their information? Is it my

* A friend, Walter Cummins, has called attention to a possible difference between the “locked path” I am attributing to Jesus and the one Packer and Poitras attribute to Snowden. Jesus’s path involved a series of actions; Snowden’s path may seem rather to be words crafted after the deed: to explain his actions to Poitras’s camera and the world. We do not have, or we have yet to create, the story of what Snowden was thinking at the time he was downloading the NSA data and planning to go public with it. We may also imagine that Jesus, as the son of God or given the inflexibility of the Roman rulers of Judea, had quite a good idea of what the consequences of his actions would be. Did Snowden, however, have such a clear sense, or was he naïve, and thus, after his actions, he was scrambling to escape penalties much more severe than he had anticipated? This reading, however, confronts Jesus’s famous cry from the cross in Mark (15:34): “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Could Jesus, too, have been naïve?

friends or someone else's friends? Is it ISIS, the Chinese, the Russians, or the US? From this perspective, and particularly as regards industrial or economic espionage, the battle for information seems not all that different from previous battles for land, oil or other resources. Such battles can turn deadly, of course, but they are the devil we know, all too well.

But this is not how Snowden and others have presented the reality, nor is it how many of us see this situation most of the time. Although the battles over patents and other intellectual property and economic secrets may have large effects on our lives, we are not personally holding tight to such information, nor are we directly engaged in the battles for Africa's natural resources or along the front that now runs, roughly, from Kiev, through Kabul, Damascus, and Baghdad, to Cairo and Somalia. For us the battle is, or seems to be, for individual "freedom," autonomy, and privacy. In *Citizenfour*, Snowden frames this in political terms: How can the people of a putative democracy talk freely about what sort of government and governmental policies they would like if the government is tracking most everything they say and do? (And this "government" could be either a specific US presidential administration or police department, or the permanent government of the police and of bureaucrats at NSA, the CIA, FBI, Homeland Security, the Defense Department.[†])

[†] I happened to read recently of a group of Soviet scientists who were briefly imprisoned and then kicked out of their profession because they asked their secretary to make a *samizdat* copy of a banned book. Having long worked in a bureaucracy, I understood how this happened. The secretary was not necessarily a supporter of the government or an opponent of the particular book (Leon Uris's *Exodus*); she was eager to protect herself from being assigned work, and particularly extra work, not directly connected with the group's more purely scientific work. Her action might be seen as an individual act or as a moment in the class wars that have raged since social classes first emerged, in human pre-history. I also read once about how, after the Russian Revolution, young mathematicians got in the habit of denouncing their elders as anti-communist reactionaries. This led to the older mathematicians losing their jobs (and worse), which in turn allowed the younger generation to get "good" jobs. We see in these examples how "information," be it computer-based or not, can end up being used in power struggles, to advance personal and class interests.

In the documentary, Snowden astutely points to the problem of “self-policing.” Our behavior may be less affected by the trouble we get into for saying this or that than by how we ourselves limit what we say or think in order to avoid getting into trouble. A ready example is how, through centuries, fears (to include of pregnancy and disease) and a desire or need to conform led one woman after another, more or less on her own, to limit her sexual behavior and responses, and even to shape her desires, her feelings, to deaden her nerves. The self-policing concept brings us, too, to the nineteenth-century idea of a central prison watchtower from where guards could see into every cell, arranged in a circle around the tower. If the guards could see everything the prisoners did, then the guards did not even have to look. Thinking they were being watched, the prisoners would limit what they did.

I am writing of the Panopticon, about which Michel Foucault, in the late twentieth century, made so much. “The major effect of the Panopticon,” he writes in *Surveiller et punir* (Discipline and Punish) is “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”[‡] And while each individual can be seen, “he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication.”

I am reminded of a twenty-first century saying about gmail, et al.: “If the product is free, you are the product.” I note, too, that both the housing complex where I live and the large organization where I work have, in addition to electronic pass systems, eye-like cameras placed throughout their facilities, and there are rooms where the images from these many cameras are playing on screens that are in fact watched by security staff. And the other day Microsoft—whose Word software I am using, for example, to write this text—came on my computer screen and showed me a list of all the words it had been finding in my documents.

[‡] Except if it was to avoid a certain linguistic awkwardness, I do not know why the original English translators of Foucault’s book decided to translate “surveiller”—to watch or to watch over—as “discipline,” but the English seems to bypass a good deal of Foucault’s point.

Microsoft, or its computer systems, seemed to be thinking that it was asking my permission to use the information it had gathered in order to improve its spell-checker for future customers, but what I felt above all, or underneath all, was a chill: Microsoft was already collecting the information, already reading every word I checked, if not every word I typed (and am now typing).

That in the current period we also seek to celebritize ourselves; instead of keeping private journals and family photo albums, we put it all online, where most anyone can see it—this must be the subject for a future piece.

(2)

My personal interest is ever in the ethical question: How should “I” live? In general and right now. If the section above has sketched some of the dominant aspects of our present circumstances, how should or might an individual respond to these circumstances? We know the response of the vast majority of us: to deny or ignore the circumstances. They do not stop some “me” from enjoying my grandchildren, or visiting my favorite porn sites, watching my favorite TV shows, etc. They do not change the overwhelming challenges of human existence: mortality, consciousness, being a social animal that has to cooperate-compete in order to survive. As we can say of computers, so of computer-based espionage: what is most demoralizing about them is that the paradise or nightmare to which they introduce us has so little effect on the fundamental predicament of our lives. We might appreciate either the technology or the spying for how it helps us distract ourselves.

Snowden’s response has *not* been that the terms of human existence are intolerable (and thus have long been intolerable), but that there is something in the current reality, something that is different from what was before, and this has made life worse. But a

broader perspective suggests that he is responding to a contemporary iteration of a situation in which we human beings often, but not always, find ourselves—oppressed by a regime that has a tremendous amount of power over our lives, to include over how we are able to associate and what we are able to say. Previous such regimes that come quickly to mind include Maoist China, Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, the Roman Empire, and, in a slightly different sense, the Roman Catholic Church in the centuries of its hegemony.

One of the particular challenges posed by the present regime is to know its name and find its seat of power. I would use some phrase like “techno-capitalist.” Our lives are dominated by some combination of capital, with its logic, demands, and values, and technology, with its logic, demands, and values. There is no one dictator or college of cardinals (or of CEOs); the most powerful forces are impersonal, and both prominent and unprominent, too-well and too-poorly paid people are doing these forces’ bidding. It could be said—and perhaps many a sociologist and some Freudians as well would say—that human beings are reaching an important moment in their intellectual development: when we are able to appreciate the extent to which our acts (thoughts and feelings included) are channeled by impersonal forces. We may, like ditch diggers since time immemorial, be actively engaged in the building of the channels, but in this work we are serving non-human masters and certainly masters that are beyond our control.

Were I to find myself in conversation with Mr. Snowden, this is the sort of thing I would like to ask him about. How do you see your actions fitting within the larger scheme of things? would be a way of summarizing the question. I have already a sense of how human beings like Snowden would answer such a question. (And, in this regard, many, many human beings may be like Snowden.) My idea is that we alternate between idealistic responses to our predicament and realistic glimpses of it. “[O]therwise there would be no hope, but there is

no hope” is how the unnamed and immobile protagonist of Beckett’s *L’Innommable* (The Unnamable) has put it.

(3)

In Jesus’s time the Romans were ruling Judea with a hand perhaps more “iron” and less insidious than that of the “techno-capitalist” regime that rules us now. Again, the Romans used different techniques than powers today use to maintain their hegemony. For example, Pontius Pilate and his colleagues and predecessors prominently crucified any who publicly opposed Roman rule or who rocked the boat with rabble-rousing.

In my view, Jesus had his realist moments when he understood full well the fact and means of Roman rule and how Jewish leaders were complicit in it. But of course he also had his extraordinarily idealistic side. Or we might say that he balanced the harshness of his reality with the extravagance of his hopes—for a kingdom built on love, forgiveness, and altruism. (And it is perhaps Jesus’s greatest and most terrible miracle that, centuries later, after internal corruption and external forces brought down the Roman Empire, versions of his preaching were used to build a new love-less empire among the ruins of the old.)

In Snowden’s case—having worked in the bowels of the computerized espionage system and having been given “clearance” to see into many of its most intimate operations—Snowden came to know much better than most of us this regime’s, or its police’s, power and reach. He remarks in Poitras’s film that there is no point in trying to conceal his identity; among other reasons, the powers-that-are will have quickly uncovered it. And there is a sense in which, although we come to *Citizenfour* eager to learn more about this remarkable man, Edward Snowden, and although the film paints a simple and strong portrait, his “identity” turns out to be a “supporting actor.” The principal actor is the

technology—all the laptops and flash drives we see, and Snowden’s and his colleagues’ ongoing dependence on them, and on cellphones, encryption systems, etc. The film itself is an electronic device that strips Snowden and Greenwald of their privacy and autonomy, turning them and their lovers into public “figures”—Hollywood or HBO celebrities. As we once did, say, with Marilyn Monroe, we now have some, at best limited idea of who Snowden is, and while—as we have, say, with Robert Redford—we might be able to allow our limited idea to evolve and expand, what we are not going to let go of is the deeper idea: that this celebrity is now someone to us and for us.

An obvious message of *Citizenfour* is: if you want to retain some measure of privacy and autonomy, disconnect—don’t use a cellphone or e-mail, don’t search the Web, pay with cash, get out your old typewriter, avoid celebrity or notoriety, etc. But this Snowden and his colleagues seem completely unable to do. They are in this regard “worse,” more enmeshed, more on the grid than most of us.

It is also the case that—not entirely unlike Jesus coming to Jerusalem and rabble-rousing, guaranteeing his crucifixion—Snowden (or Poitras’s Snowden?) is unwilling to seek some private, partial solution, some way of saving a little of his autonomy and dignity in the face of techno-capitalist oppression. He has to take on the whole system, revealing not that the regime has no clothes or is two-faced, acting contrary to the values its champions, but that the regime is in fact much more heavily armed than we have realized. The regime doesn’t only crucify, kill with drones or imprison for treason people who get out of line; it and its servants watch every one of us, even the most seemingly virtuous, even the watchers themselves, constantly. I have an image of a giant insect in the process of consuming itself.

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that Edward Snowden does not meet the same fate as Jesus did. And this seems the place to note that in one of the theoretically private e-mails made public by Poitras, Snowden writes:

My personal desire is that you paint the target directly on my back. No one, not even my most trusted confidant, is aware of my intentions and it would not be fair for them to fall under suspicion for my actions. You may be the only one who can prevent that, and that is by immediately nailing me to the cross rather than trying to protect me as a source. [My underscoring.]

(4)

If only it were that simple. Apparently, when Rome ruled, if a slave tried to murder his or her master, the Roman response was to kill all the slaves in the household. And of course the work of Snowden and his colleagues is a gift to the surveillance regime they are ostensibly combating; it helps the regime to further refine and develop both its surveillance and enforcement systems.

More fundamentally, when human beings seek to alter the seeming course of history and to do this on the scale that a Jesus or Snowden, consciously or not, points toward—championing love in the face of oppression, privacy and autonomy in the face of relentless personal-information seeking and gathering—success is out of the question. This is not because history may not indeed change course, but because it is impossible to know the directions human institutions may take when courses begin changing, when the channels which we have been digging and in which we are running rupture. The history of Christianity offers one large example, as also do the French and Russian revolutions. If Homer, Euripides, Virgil, et al., are to be believed, the result of the Trojan War was not only the destruction of Troy and the slaughter of its citizenry; the victorious Achaeans were condemned to a return that was no return. Reflecting on the “brown decades” after the American Civil War, Lewis Mumford wrote:

[T]he very method of warfare upset, as it always does, the ideals and rational purposes for which it was fought, leaving greed, arrogance, and vindictiveness piled up behind the bodies of the dead heroes who often did not get even their due six feet of earth.

(5)

The final point I would make, or pass through, is that in *Citizenfour*, at least, Snowden seems quite happy. And Greenwald and the other collaborators—Jacob Appelbaum, William Binney, and Ben Wizner, as well as Poitras behind the camera—seem quite happy too. Of course the word “happy” has been subject to myriad definitions, and we are not going to argue for some correct one here. The happiness I sensed in looking at the on-screen Snowden and hearing him speak, his words, was a happiness born of connection, of engagement with life. The bull is much, much bigger than him, but he has taken it by the horns. There may be a sense here, too, that life is a struggle, a fight, and those of us who lack the courage or heart to lace up our gloves spend our lives on the mat. “Men are whipped oftenest who are whipped easiest,” as Frederick Douglass put it. Those who step forward into the fray may be brought down in the prime of life like Jesus, Hector, Achilles or Martin Luther King. They may even, in their end, suffer greatly and suffer great pangs of regret. “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”— “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But these brave souls know what I am calling a happiness—perhaps it is an ecstasy. Denying the reality of their circumstances they have stood up for themselves, for their dignity, and for other people and other people’s dignity.

With a philosopher friend, a great reader of Kierkegaard, I have been in dialogue about faith without belief and about the leap of faith (and about ballet dancers). My friend

has mentioned Kierkegaard's idea of a "double movement" of giving up and getting back.[§]

This has led me to an idea of courage—that in acting courageously we may find the strength we need to act courageously and with success. It takes a good deal of strength to have courage, but courage "gives back" strength.

I often come back to Camus's *La peste*, which itself is often thought to be an allegory for the struggle against fascism. Toward the end of the novel it is concluded that it was not because of the heroic, courageous actions of Dr. Rieux and his associates that the plague ended.

On était obligé seulement de constater que la maladie semblait partir comme elle était venue. . . .

All we could do was observe that the disease [the plague] seemed to have gone much as it had come. The strategy we had employed to combat it had not changed. Yesterday it was ineffective, today apparently a success. All we could think was that the disease had exhausted itself, or perhaps, having attained all its objectives, it had withdrawn.

And thus the existentialist point: that the goal is but a means to an end: the struggle. And the struggle benefits above all those who commit themselves to it, who throw themselves into the fight. (Would Jesus here be the exception that proves the rule? I do not have a sense that, as the saying goes, he "enjoyed the ride." Or is this a shortcoming of the Gospels: they skip over the camaraderie, traveling and dining nightly with a group of friends?)

What has always struck me most about *La peste*, and I assume that this aspect of the work was quite transparent to its creator, is the isolation of Dr. Rieux and his associates before the plague arrives and they begin to struggle against it. And during the struggle, and presumably only while it lasts, they find camaraderie. They seem, too, to be, temporarily,

[§] See Edward F. Mooney, *Excursions with Kierkegaard: Others, Goods, Death, and Final Faith* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

living longer lives, longer days—not only filled with the grim work of caring for the dying and the dead, but also with moments of intimate, honest conversation.

I cannot say that this is the way I live, and I do not know that human beings are really able to make significant choices. Instead, as I have suggested, like marathoners or water, we run in channels, when we're not tasked with the digging. But if I have been able to choose, then I must say that I have not made Snowden's choice. I lack a certain belligerence—a taste for the fight. And I lack Snowden's extraordinary courage. In an either real or imagined world of significant-choice-making, courage—no longer a species of everyday recklessness—would seem to require a sense of security, of equanimity, and, I believe, this could only come from a feeling in early childhood of having been able to have complete confidence in one or both of one's parents or in one's most intimate caregiver. In any case, the anxiety I am capable of feeling would not allow the extraordinary level-headedness that Edward Snowden exhibits in *Citizenfour*.

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In Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he describes the moment, the two hours, when he physically resisted, wrestled with one of his slavemasters. “[C]ome what might . . . he had used me like a brute for six months, and . . . I was determined to be used so no longer.”

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. . . . I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.

I am tempted to write that this decision “to be used no longer” was the rolling away of the stone and indeed, as Douglass observes, the resurrection. And so, too, for Jesus. We might say that the great decision was to give up carpentry, to give up building the state, and to take to preaching. It was at this moment that Jesus’s “spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place.”

The decision also led, as Jesus must have known at times that it would, to his being physically crushed, or, rather, suffocated. (According to Professor White, the crucified do not die from the wounds themselves but because they cannot hold themselves “up enough to breathe properly, and so over time really it’s really the exposure to the elements and the gradual loss of breath that produces death.”)

In John’s account of the Last Supper, Jesus has many words for his disciples, and many of these words have resonated down through many ages. A phrase less noted: “Your joy no man taketh from you.”

In their determination to be used no longer, Snowden and his colleagues have found a way to live. On a political and physical level it is a quite dangerous way. Let us, and in part therefore, not ignore the joy.

Credits

The Frontline documentary, ***From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians***, first aired April 6, 1998. Written and produced by Marilyn Mellowes; William Cran, Senior Producer and Director. The quotations from Michael White are from an online transcript, accessed via www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/etc/script1.html, January 2015.

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George Packer, "**The Holder of Secrets**: Laura Poitras's closeup view of Edward Snowden," *The New Yorker*, October 20, 2014.

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