

First Julian Assange, Then Us

Monday 22 April 2019, by [HEDGES Chris](#), [PRASHAD Vijay](#) (Date first published: 16 April 2019).

In a recent episode of “On Contact,” Chris Hedges spoke with historian and Truthdig contributor Vijay Prashad about the arrest of Julian Assange and its possible ramifications. Read a transcript of their conversation below or watch the interview at the bottom of the post.

Chris Hedges: Welcome to “On Contact.” Today we discuss the arrest of Julian Assange with the historian Vijay Prashad.

Vijay Prashad: You know if Chelsea Manning hadn’t decided to download that material, if Julian Assange and the WikiLeaks organization hadn’t decided to put that material out there, you and I who know these things to be true because we’ve seen them, would never have been able to talk about these things in such an open way. And yet that’s not the conversation. The conversation became about Assange’s personality, about what he’d done in Sweden and so on.

CH: The arrest of Julian Assange eviscerates all pretense of the rule of law and the rights of a free press. The illegalities embraced by the Ecuadorian, British and U.S. governments, in the seizure of Assange, are ominous. They presage a world where the internal workings, abuses, corruption, lies and crimes, especially war crimes, carried out by the corporate states and the global ruling elite, will be masked from the public. They presage a world where those with the courage and integrity to expose the misuse of power will be hunted down, tortured, subjected to sham trials and given lifetime prison terms in solitary confinement. They presage an Orwellian dystopia where news is replaced with propaganda, trivia and entertainment. The arrest of Assange, I fear, marks the official beginning of the corporate totalitarianism that will define our lives. Under what law did Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno capriciously terminate Julian Assange’s rights of asylum as a political refugee? Under what law did Moreno authorize British police to enter the Ecuadorian Embassy—diplomatically sanctioned sovereign territory—to arrest a nationalized citizen of Ecuador? Under what law did Prime Minister Theresa May order the British police to grab Assange, who has never committed a crime? Under what law did Donald Trump demand the extradition of Assange, who is not a U.S. citizen and whose news organization is not based in the United States? Joining me to discuss the arrest and pending extradition of Assange is the historian Vijay Prashad. What have we just seen?

VP: You know it’s a very interesting situation we’re in. You and I have been [in] and reported directly from very ugly situations, and over the course of our careers we’ve tried to tell stories about atrocities, we’ve tried to tell stories about what are tantamount to war crimes—editors don’t believe you. Editors don’t want to publish those stories, the ownership of newspapers and of course televisions don’t want to run those stories, because they say ‘You don’t have the smoking gun,’ ‘You don’t have the evidence.’ And what both Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange and the entire team at WikiLeaks did when they provided the raw materials of war crimes, was they allowed us to tell the stories that we had seen with our own eyes. And I think that rather than have the conversation about the war crimes, rather than for the Reuters organization for instance, to concentrate on the fact that an employee of Reuters was killed, you know, in cold blood by the United States—

CH: Two—two of them—

VP: Two of them, one of them on contract, yes exactly. Two of them were killed by the United States military in cold blood. There was no reason. And the people in those helicopters in the video that was released as “Collateral Murder” were almost relishing the murder of ordinary people. If Chelsea Manning hadn’t decided to download that material, if Julian Assange and the WikiLeaks organization hadn’t decided to put that material out there, you and I—who know these things to be true because we’ve seen them—would never have been able to talk about these things in such an open way. And yet that’s not the conversation. The conversation became about Assange’s personality, about what he had done in Sweden and so on. We know very well, Chris, that the arrest, the violation of Ecuadorian sovereignty on display in London, we know that that has nothing to do with what Julian Assange is purported to have done in Sweden. This is entirely to put the genie of American war crimes back inside the bottle.

CH: And yet the press has—and I read every article on Assange, including the editorial and Michelle Goldberg’s horrible column—has just bought into this narrative without seeing that this is an assault on the ability of a press to shine a light into the inner workings of power and in particular, empire. That they, they are going after Assange. They’ve found a kind of legal trick. They’ll charge [Assange with] attempting to assist Manning to change a password, which even they admit he wasn’t able to do. But that’s not why they’re lynching him. They’re lynching him because he embarrassed them. He exposed their crimes. It was a bipartisan effort because later we got the Podesta emails that showed the mendacity of the Clinton campaign on many levels: her \$650,000 to speak in front of Goldman Sachs, a sum so large that it can only be considered a bribe; the millions of dollars that Saudi Arabia and Qatar—the chief supporters of the Islamic State—gave to the Clinton Foundation; the fact that the Clinton campaign worked to ensure Trump was the nominee; the kinds of statements she would make to the financial elites about how they were the best people to run the economy, which contradicted everything she was saying in the campaign; how she got the debate questions leaked to her in advance. And you [anyone] can argue, I suppose, that the public doesn’t have a right to know this or to know about the crimes of empire, but I don’t know how you can then call yourself a journalist.

VP: Well, let’s be frank. We know what has happened to the journalist profession. I prefer to call many of my colleagues stenographers of the state, people [who] take press releases from the government or they accept what an official says. You just need to read the story, what is the sourcing of the story? An official said, another official said, a third official said, a fourth official said. Have you tried to verify the information? What is your moral standard? The moral standard of what appears in corporate media is largely the morality of the state and of the national security system—they take that as *ipso facto* the truth. That’s a problem for me. I understand the profession, the tribe of journalists to be people who are constantly asking questions, not accepting a press release as the finished project. But what we see is so many times people rewrite the press release. They rewrite the statement made by the president, some national security official, and they put that out as the news. I want to say something very important. Julian Assange was already in the Ecuadorian Embassy when the Podesta emails were leaked.

CH: Right.

VP: What they are really going after him for was the leaks that came through Chelsea Manning. Because what Chelsea Manning—who is in fact an international hero and should not be right now in prison—what Chelsea Manning showed us was, of course as I said, the “Collateral Murder” video, but much more than that; she deeply embarrassed the United States government for the way its diplomatic corps was operating during, for instance, the Arab Spring where they were colluding with Mubarak in Egypt to try to maintain his power, despite the fact that there were huge numbers of

people not only in Tahrir Square but across Egypt. It also showed you—and this is very important—for a keen reader of the State Department cables, it showed you how the ambassadors were no longer actually running policy. So, you saw the ambassadors in Yemen, the ambassadors in Egypt, write letters back to Washington, D.C., saying that the Defense Department officials are coming here, national security officials [are coming here] and they are just sidelining us. And what's interesting is the ambassador in Egypt is a woman and she says in one of the cables essentially "I'm becoming like a secretary; I'm taking notes in these meetings. These are MY meetings." That's not only embarrassing; for an American citizen that should be very chilling. Diplomacy, as we see from these cables, is no longer being run in a political way by the State Department. Diplomacy is being run by the Defense Department and even more dangerously, by the anonymous national security state. That's something that the U.S. government doesn't want out there in the public. It's OK for you and me to make those allegations, but to have the evidence for that is, I think, very significant.

CH: That's an important point. You have ambassadors who admit that they don't know what the CIA station chief is up to or doing, who they're contacting and what they're orchestrating. They're not even informed.

VP: They're not even informed, which is a question in a liberal democracy about who is in charge of the military? Who is in charge of the shadows? Right after 9/11, Vice President Dick Cheney famously said, "Well now it's time to work in the shadows." Who's in charge of the shadows? Vice President Cheney? In a liberal democracy you assume that the political branch, which includes the State Department, is leading some of these matters and is the one you hold accountable. After all, Chris, you can't hold the shadows accountable. We don't know what's happening in the shadows. If you're going to permit the shadows to operate—people to operate in the shadows—then the only agency that's accountable to the citizenry is the State Department. I don't mean to sound naive here. I don't mean to sound like "Oh my god, how silly of him," because what happens is, there's a kind of patina of cynicism that enters the public. The public says, "Of course it's going to be like that." That "of course" is the road to authoritarianism. You have to hold your values very close to you, not just close to your chest but you've got to hold those values out there in public because once you start taking a cynical attitude to the institutions and ideology of your society, you're going to end up giving license for authoritarianism.

CH: We've just watched with the seizure of Assange, the violation of several laws, of international law, the right to political asylum, the violation of sovereignty under the Ecuadorian institution. You can't—on Ecuadorian soil which is what the embassy is considered—you can't send foreign police in. The whole imprisonment of Assange, who has never committed a crime or even—certainly within Britain—been charged for a crime. This whole bail thing was resolved. The Swedish charges were dropped. This is a kind of microcosm of how these global elites and this imperial power creates the kind of facade of law, but behind the scenes eviscerate the law. It's how we in the United States have a right to privacy with no privacy. It's how we have due process with no due process. It's how our rights are supposedly protected and the executive authorizes—under Obama—assassinate Anwar al-Awlaki and his 16-year-old son. Both U.S. citizens. It's how you have the mirage of free elections that are corporate funded, corporate controlled and reported on by a corporate media. I look at what's happened to Assange as a window into the breakdown of the rule of law.

VP: Let's be frank here. There was a case in Sweden. The statute of limitations runs to August 2020. The Swedish government can run the charges against him. But this arrest inside the Ecuadorian Embassy by, in a sense, an invading British police force, has nothing to do with the statute of limitations in Sweden. OK, Julian, there is a case against you in Sweden, go and face the charges. That's a perfectly acceptable thing to talk about. I don't think one should be evasive about it. On the other hand, it's not about Sweden. This is about the United States. We should be clear about that. Sweden is being used as an alibi to bring him to the United States and face a Guantanamo situation

in terms of legality. There is something very off-putting happening not only in the British government, not only with the United States, but with Ecuador. Right after Julian Assange is evicted, essentially, by the Ecuadorian government, in Quito, Ecuador, a young open-source advocate, privacy advocate, Swedish national by the name of Ola Bini, was picked up by Ecuadorian authorities. They began to leak information to the press saying that he's a friend of Julian Assange. They began to say that he's working with the previous government to overthrow this government—all ridiculous statements! But coming at an interesting moment, when the government of Lenín Moreno, inside Ecuador, is facing enormous pressure because of leaked documents call the "INA Papers" which show flagrant evidence of corruption.

CH: There are pictures of him eating lobster in his hotel room and his wife talking about trips to Switzerland. We'll come back to that. When we come back, we'll continue our conversation about the arrest of Julian Assange with the historian Vijay Prashad.

Break

CH: Welcome back to "On Contact." We continue our conversation about the arrest of Julian Assange with the historian Vijay Prashad. You were talking about the Ecuadorian government before the break.

VP: Generally, in the media, outside places like Ecuador, when something happens in the arrest of Julian Assange immediate focus goes to Donald Trump. What is Trump interest? Or the focus goes to Theresa May. What's her interest? But there is an Ecuadorian story here which is very important. We have a government in Ecuador that is desperate to get a loan from the International Monetary Fund, which has approached the fund, which is trying to mend relations with the United States. I'm not casting aspersions on the government of Ecuador. These are things that are in the public record. They are seeking the loan. They want to improve relations with the United State government. We know in the world of diplomacy, when you talk to ambassadors and so on, that there are quid pro quos. It's very clear that the quid pro quo was they're going to say, "off with Assange" and then all things are good with Ecuador. And inside Ecuador they started this very bizarre campaign to say that the INA Papers, which were leaked recently, which showed deep corruption in the Lenín Moreno government and him personally. ... These are things people don't like to have in the public record, about how they live and so on. Nonetheless, this is out there now. They want to suggest that this is a sort of malignant plot by somebody. They've said, two Russian hackers and a Swede who has seen Julian Assange 12 times and who travels with former government officials, Ricardo Patiño, a close associate of Rafael Correa and that they are ...

CH: We should say Rafael Correa, the former president who gave Julian Assange political asylum.

VP: Right, and then worked closely to get him his citizenship—

CH: And is now living in exile.

VP: And is now himself living in exile in Europe, exactly. So, they concocted this quite delicious story. The media loves a delicious story. My god, Chris, two Russian hackers! The moment you've got a headline "Two Russian Hackers" it's all done.

CH: Well, you know, they shut down the electric grid in Vermont ...

VP: This Russian hacker business is going to become something that governments are going to use routinely. It doesn't matter what the veracity. So, this is their story. They're trying to deflect attention from a very damaging set of revelations by saying that Julian Assange, plus a Russian

hacker, plus a Swedish man who is a world-renowned software designer, intellectual of the internet, they're all been maligning us. Therefore, we need to basically get rid of them and what they're saying about us is not true. Innocent people are essentially being put on a sacrificial block in order to clean up the reputation of [these] people. I didn't make up those stories. I didn't "photoshop" those pictures. Those are real pictures. Why don't you address the real story? In the same way the United States government has refused to address the story of war crimes. This is [also] happening in Ecuador.

I want to say something very specific about the United States government and war crimes. The International Criminal Court has been looking very seriously at the question of U.S. war crimes in Afghanistan, Iraq and so on. The chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, normally comes and addresses the U.N. Security Council. She gives a report on what the ICC has been doing, the criminal court, what's in the docket, what are they looking at and so on. But to enter the U.N. in New York she must land in John F. Kennedy International Airport, which is sovereign U.S. territory. Well last week they were informed that the visa that permits her to land in the United States so that she can come to, essentially, U.N. territory, that visa is not guaranteed. What is going on here? You don't actually want to talk about the real issues, actual textual and visual evidence of war criminal activity in one case, the United States and in the Ecuadorian case you don't want to talk about actual evidence of corruption, personal corruption plus institutional. You don't want to talk about that, so you start demonizing people.

CH: Well, in a functioning judicial system, the people who committed the war crimes that Chelsea Manning exposed, would be put on trial. But of course, Chelsea Manning is in a jail cell because she is refusing to go before the grand jury that is investigating Assange, without her lawyer, and testify. She's been under tremendous pressure, she spent seven years in a military prison, to implicate Assange in the theft of the documents. She has said repeatedly that it's untrue and under pressure, especially under solitary confinement, she tried to commit suicide twice in these dark sites. If Assange is extradited, he won't be flying back on a British Airways flight. He'll have a hood over himself and be shackled. He will enter the underworld that is so well known to many Muslims around the globe.

I want to talk about the concerted effort to smear Assange. There was a leaked document that was prepared by the Cyber Counterintelligence Assessment Branch [of the U.S. Defense Department] on March 8, 2008. It called on the U.S. to build a campaign to eradicate "the feeling of trust of WikiLeaks and their center of gravity" and to destroy Assange's reputation. The press became the echo chamber for this.

VP: You've spent a lot of time at the New York Times. If you and I were sitting there in that beautiful office in New York City, a gorgeous office, and we were somehow in an editorial board meeting, I would imagine that you and I would insist that today's editorial—that is the day after Julian Assange has been picked up from the Ecuadorian Embassy—today's editorial must lead with that quotation. We must show, as a media house, that there has been an attempt—a conspiracy even—an attempt to create distrust in an organization that has revealed this important—which we also reported on!

CH: Right. And they destroyed [WikiLeaks] financially by blocking its Paypal accounts and everything else. WikiLeaks and Assange, at a certain moment, were heroes, even within the mainstream press. We must not forget The New York Times and Washington Post, Der Spiegel, Le Monde—they all published this material.

VP: That's very important! They published this material. At the time they understood the value of the material, even though they hedged and they this and that, nonetheless they published the material. They have amnesia about their own sense of trust of that organization. That's should be

something we remind them of. You utilized the material when it was convenient to you. When the United States government said smear their reputation, destroy them you joined the bandwagon.

CH: Coming out of the New York Times culture, what Assange did was shame them into telling the truth. This is what the alternative media traditionally does to the commercial media. They realized that for WikiLeaks to put this material out and for them to ignore it, would essentially destroy their credibility, although they've done a pretty good job of destroying their own credibility as a newspaper organization. I want to close by talking about—and this is from Julian Assange's book, "Cypherpunks"—where he talks about what he calls "The layers of indirection and obfuscation about what is happening." He said: "These layers give the deniability to censorship" and he says:

"You can think about censorship as a pyramid. This pyramid only has its tip sticking out of the sand and that is by intention. The tip is public libel suits, murders of journalists, cameras being snatched by the military and so on, publicly declared censorship. But that is the smallest component. Under the tip, the next layer is all those people who don't want to be at the tip, who engage in self-censorship, to not end up there."

CH: I covered the Middle East. That is almost every reporter who covers, in particular, the Palestinians. Then:

"The next layer is all the forms of economic inducement or patronage, inducement that are given to people to write about one thing or another. The next layer down is raw economy, what it is economic to write about even if you don't include the economic factors from higher up on the pyramid. The next layer is the prejudice of readers, who only have a certain amount of education so therefore on one hand they're easy to manipulate with false information and on the other hand, you can't tell them something sophisticated that is true. The last layer is distribution; for example some people just don't have access to information in a particular language. So that is the censorship pyramid—what The Guardian is doing with its Cablegate redactions is the second layer."

CH: He's right. You have all these forces, many of which that are subterranean, that essentially block [the truth]. I used to say that the unofficial motto of The New York Times is do not significantly alienate those on whom we depend on access and money. As a reporter you might be able to alienate them once in a while, but if you consistently alienate them you become a management problem, as I did.

VP: You become a management problem. You also are portrayed as unhinged. This is a very important. Why are there so many conspiracy theories in the 20th and 21st century? Secrecy breeds that. The secrecy state, or the culture of secrecy of governments, sends people into the sewers looking for explanations. You want people to have a rational, reasonable understanding—tell us what's happening. When you actually look at what's happening, it doesn't look very reasonable and rational. It looks very ugly.

CH: Thanks, Vijay. That was the historian Vijay Prashad.

We must now all resist. We must in every way possible put pressure on the British government to halt the judicial lynching of Julian Assange. If Assange is extradited and tried, it will create a legal precedent that will terminate the ability of the press, which Trump repeatedly has called "the enemy of the people," to hold power accountable. The crimes of war and finance, the persecution of dissidents, minorities and immigrants, the pillaging by corporations of the nation and the ecosystem, and the ruthless impoverishment of working men and women to swell the bank accounts of the rich, and consolidate the global oligarch's total grip on power, will not only expand, but will no longer be part of public debate. First Assange. Then us.

The transcript was prepared by Naila Kauser.

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