

Some remarks on spying

I finished my last book in early 2013. At this time, I was still rather optimistic about the internet being an open forum, a rather comfortable public space, bringing together people from all over the world on an equal basis, storing and disseminating the knowledge of mankind. The book closes with some remarks on the internet's future. Figuratively, I speak of fishermen and fish ("Fischer" and "Fische" in German), and I say that it is up to us, the citizens, to decide whether we are going to be the masters or the victims of the web.

Like many, given Mr. Snowden's disclosures, I discovered in 2013 that we are (almost) all helpless fish. That, at least since 2001, the internet had been used as a net to gather information about everyone and everything. Thanks to Snowden and his collaborators, that is no longer a crude conspiracy theory, but hard evidence. In other words, the world wide web is not only used for open communication and worldwide business; much more than that, its main purpose has become to spy upon the world's population. Anyone participating in modern life falls prey to permanent observation / surveillance. Dictators have always dreamt of such a superb tool, giving them immense knowledge of each and every one of us.

Since knowledge means power, those who are in command of the web - whose mesh is becoming ever tighter - possess enormous power. At first sight, it may seem fortunate that the West, with its long democratic tradition, is in charge. However, a closer look reveals that it is mainly the secret services of a now narrow-minded and rather nationalistic US that are pushing the buttons. Why is this risky? First, if history teaches us one thing, it is that inadequately controlled power is dangerous. Secret courts that inspect a secret service's actions can hardly be said to constitute an effective element of checks and balances. But without such counterweights the secret services do what they think is appropriate. It is an open question who will be the more powerful in the longer run: elected parliaments, governments or the ministries of truth (in George Orwell's words).

Second, the task of US intelligence is first and foremost to protect US-American interests. Violating other people's human rights - in particular their privacy - seems to be a legitimate means if this increases the security of the USA. Moreover, at least since WW II, the intelligence services of the Anglo-Saxons powers have enjoyed the advantage of an information lead. It is always comfortable to know what others, in particular your opponents (but also, at times, your friends) are thinking and what they are up to. Thus the five eyes: United by language, culture and history, the secret services of the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand are spying upon the rest of the world. Sharing this data with each other means that they have gained complete knowledge over all that is going on electronically. However, although all-embracing, at the same time, the corresponding mentality is that of a corral surrounded by less trusted allies (Germany, the EU), friends in South America and elsewhere, curious institutions like the UN, competitors (China, Russia), and enemies, mainly in the Arab world.

Thus, in 2014 we are living in a completely different world that is far less pleasant than the world of the year 2000, say. It is a bitter irony that the secret services of the USA, founded to protect the land of the free, are now thoroughly undermining everybody's freedom. It has taken centuries, cruel wars and immense intellectual struggle to reach the heights of modern constitutions, liberating the

ordinary man from the despotism of the mighty. That's the heritage of the West (at least an important part of it), and it is this heritage that, if anything, legitimates the West's leading role. At least, it is a promise to all those being subdued in closed societies - in particular women, minorities, and critical thinkers. Therefore it is all the more shocking that the terrorists of 2001 and their successors, united by a radically inhuman attitude, have had such tremendous success. As of 2014, with the help of the most advanced technology, handled by their very enemies, they are about to win their war against freedom.

Are these lines anti-American, or even anti-Anglo-Saxon? No! I like the optimistic North-American attitude, and the tolerant British way of life. Without English (and Hollywood ;-)), we would still live in isolated realms and could not share a global culture. In other words, I am not a fundamental critic who would like to go back to medieval times. No, I am a citizen of the modern world, a democrat and an ally. It is because of this standpoint that I am defending its liberal foundation and rallying behind whistle-blowers who share this goal. Like them, I think it would be foolish to sell the best of our cultural heritage down the river. I also side with Benjamin Franklin who said that "those who surrender freedom for security will not have, nor do they deserve, either one."