

Stockholm Syndrome - Julian Assange and the Limits of Guardian Dissent

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Nothing happened on September 2 in central London. Roger Waters, co-founder of Pink Floyd, did not initiate a protest outside the Home Office. He did not [sing](#) and play the Floyd classic 'Wish You Were Here', or say:

'Julian Assange, we are with you. Free Julian Assange!'

The renowned journalist and film-maker John Pilger did not [say](#):

'The behaviour of the British government towards Julian Assange is a disgrace – a profanity on the very notion of human rights.

'It's no exaggeration to say that the persecution of Julian Assange is the way dictatorships treat a political prisoner.'

None of this happened for any major UK or US newspaper, which made no mention of these events at all. Readers of Prensa Latina, Havana, were more fortunate with two articles before and after the event, as were readers of Asian News International in New Delhi. Coverage was also provided by Ireland's Irish Examiner (circulation 25,419) in Cork, which published a Press Association piece that was available to the innumerable other outlets that all chose to ignore it.

Four months after he was dragged from the Ecuadorian embassy, Assange is still locked up in solitary confinement for 21 hours a day or more. He is still being denied the basic tools to prepare his case against a demand for extradition to the United States where he faces incarceration and torture. He is not allowed to call his US lawyers, is not allowed access to vital documents, or even a computer. He is confined to a single cell in the hospital wing, where he is isolated from other people. Pilger commented at the protest:

'There is one reason for this. Julian and WikiLeaks have performed an historic public service by giving millions of people facts on why and how their governments deceive them, secretly and often illegally: why they invade countries, why they spy on us.

'Julian is singled out for special treatment for one reason only: he is a truth-teller. His case is meant to send a warning to every journalist and every publisher, the kind of warning that has no place in a democracy.'

On the Sydney Criminal Lawyers website, journalist Paul Gregoire [discussed](#) Assange's declining health with his father, John Shipton, who said:

'His health is not good. He's lost about 15 kilos in weight now – five since I last saw him. And he's in solitary confinement for 22 hours a day, in the hospital ward of the gaol.'

Gregoire responded:

'As you've just explained, Julian is being held in quite extreme conditions. He's isolated from other inmates. And as well, his visits are restricted and so are his communications with his legal representation. Yet, he's only being held for breach of bail, which is a rather minor charge.'

'Yes, very minor.'

'How are the UK authorities justifying the restrictions around his imprisonment seeing he's being incarcerated on such a minor offence?'

'I don't know if they feel the necessity to justify these decisions. Their decisions are arbitrary.'

'So, they're giving no explanation as to his treatment.'

'No.'

It does seem extraordinary, in fact medieval, for such brutal treatment to be meted out to someone for merely breaching bail, with almost zero 'mainstream' political or media protest. This is only one reason, of course, why the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer, penned an [article](#) titled, 'Demasking the Torture of Julian Assange'. Melzer commented:

'What may look like mere mudslinging in public debate, quickly becomes "mobbing" when used against the defenseless, and even "persecution" once the State is involved. Now just add purposefulness and severe suffering, and what you get is full-fledged psychological torture.'

Investigative journalist Peter Osborne courageously challenged conventional wisdom on Assange this month in a British Journalism Review [piece](#) titled, 'He is a hero, not a villain'. Osborne described how, in July, the Mail on Sunday had [published](#) a front-page story revealing the contents of diplomatic telegrams – 'DipTels' – sent to London by the British ambassador to the US. The memos described President Trump's administration as 'inept' and Trump himself as 'uniquely dysfunctional'.

'All hell broke loose. The May government announced an official leak inquiry. The Metropolitan Police launched a criminal investigation. The intelligence services got involved.

'The Metropolitan Police assistant commissioner Neil Basu warned the press not to publish any further documents as this could "constitute a criminal offence". The Mail on Sunday paid no attention. It published further leaks and other papers came to its support. So did politicians. Tory leadership candidates Boris Johnson and Jeremy Hunt were among those who criticised Basu's

comments.

'Hunt, who was then foreign secretary, said: "I defend to the hilt the right of the press to publish those leaks if they receive them and judge them to be in the public interest...'

'Meanwhile, that leaker-in-chief Julian Assange continued to languish in Belmarsh prison, where he is serving 50 weeks for skipping bail...

'Julian Assange is a controversial figure, to be sure. Many of those who have dealt with him have found him difficult. But I find myself wondering what exactly the difference is between his alleged crime of publishing leaked US diplomatic cables and the Mail on Sunday's offence of publishing leaked Foreign Office cables.

'Why is Assange treated by the bulk of the British media as a pariah? And the Mail on Sunday as a doughty defender of press freedom? After all, Julian Assange is responsible for breaking more stories than all the rest of us put together.'

Oborne commented:

'This looks to me like a monstrous case of double standards, even by the ocean-going standards of Britain's media/political class.'

Focusing On Other Issues

Assange was offered rare 'mainstream' support on September 12 when Guardian columnist George Monbiot [tweeted](#):

'Never forget: #JulianAssange is still in Belmarsh prison, facing the prospect of extradition and life imprisonment in the US, for the "crime" of releasing information that governments have withheld from us. This is not justice.'

Tweeter jaraparilla was quick to [spot](#) what happened next:

'George Monbiot just posted this tweet supporting Julian Assange then deleted it within minutes (before I could respond).'

We [asked](#) Monbiot what had happened. He [replied](#):

'I realised that the US extradition issue was tangled up with the Swedish one, and that I don't yet know enough about Assange's legal situation, exactly what he is awaiting and why. I will read up and return to the issue.'

In response, we recommended Melzer's superb work in challenging the establishment smear campaign. Monbiot [replied](#):

'Thank you. Has he written a paper on the subject? I find it much easier to absorb information in writing.'

We [answered](#):

‘Amazed you need to ask, have you really not been following his interviews and written pieces? Mind you, according to ProQuest, @NilsMelzer has been mentioned twice in the Guardian this year – so maybe it’s not so strange. See here, for example’

Monbiot [tweeted](#): ‘No, I’ve been focusing on other issues.’

We [commented](#) again:

‘True enough. According to the ProQuest newspaper database, you’ve never mentioned Assange in your Guardian column. Is that right?’

Monbiot [confirmed](#): ‘Yes, that is correct.’

It was curious that Monbiot felt the need to ‘read up and return to the issue’. After all, as jaraparilla [noted](#), Monbiot has tweeted about Assange and WikiLeaks dozens of times. Many of these comments make for grim reading. For [example](#):

‘Moral line on #Assange is crystal clear: we shld support qu-ning on rape charges & oppose any extrad attempt by US. #wikileaks’

In his latest piece on Assange, Osborne [discussed](#) this egregious error:

‘His critics attach special weight to rape charges laid against Assange in Sweden. But it’s important to remember there have never been any “charges” in Sweden.

‘This is a myth reported literally hundreds of times. There has only ever been a “preliminary investigation” in Sweden looking into allegations of rape.’

In 2011, Monbiot [tweeted](#):

‘To me Assange looks unaccountable, paranoid, controlling and prone to blame others for his mistakes. #wikileaks’

As we now know, Assange’s ‘paranoia’ was actually astute awareness that ‘they’ really were out to get him.

[And](#): ‘Why does Assange still have so much uncritical support? Seems to me he’s acting like a tinpot dictator.’

[And](#): ‘#JulianAssange takes Kremlin’s dollar, reversing all he claimed to stand for: bit.ly/wT4PoO Love #wikileaks, not Assange’

To his credit, Monbiot subsequently [tweeted](#) the deleted tweet defending Assange a second

time.

In April 2019, Monbiot won huge applause for using harsh language and [calling](#) for the overthrow of capitalism. He insisted that, to save the planet, we need to forget 'pathetic, micro-consumerist bollocks':

'We have to overthrow this system which is eating the planet with perpetual growth.... We can't do it by just pissing around at the margins of the problem; we've got to go straight to the heart of capitalism and overthrow it.'

And yet, as Osborne noted, Assange is 'responsible for breaking more stories than all the rest of us put together', 'each and every one in the public interest', 'which any self-respecting reporter would sell his or her grandmother to obtain'. One could hardly think of a more powerful example of someone not 'pissing around at the margins of the problem'.

Monbiot is hardly alone in 'focusing on other issues', year after year, while Assange rots. Fellow Guardian great white leftist hope, Owen Jones, last mentioned Assange in his Guardian column in 2014. In fact, this was his only ever mention in the paper, a single [comment](#) in passing focused on then Respect MP George Galloway:

'his past praise for dictators and appalling comments about rape following allegations against Julian Assange have left him largely isolated'.

Like Monbiot, Paul Mason – a former BBC and Channel 4 broadcaster who has somehow reinvented himself as a [war-supporting](#), [NATO-loving](#), [Trident-renewing](#) 'man of the people' (with 618,000 followers on Twitter) – has never mentioned Assange in the Guardian.

It seems likely that Guardian columnists have felt under increasing pressure to back off from supporting Assange over the last five years. As Matt Kennard and Mark Curtis [reported](#) this month:

'The Guardian has lost many of its top investigative reporters who had covered national security issues... The few journalists who were replaced were succeeded by less experienced reporters with apparently less commitment to exposing the security state. The current defence and security editor, Dan Sabbagh, started at The Guardian as head of media and technology and has no history of covering national security.

'"It seems they've got rid of everyone who seemed to cover the security services and military in an adversarial way," one current Guardian journalist told us.'

Kennard and Curtis concluded:

'The Guardian had gone in six short years from being the natural outlet to place stories exposing wrongdoing by the security state to a platform trusted by the security state to amplify its information operations. A once relatively independent media platform has been largely neutralised by UK security services fearful of being exposed further.'

This pattern of sparse, or non-existent commentary extends to other issues. In 2018, Monbiot [tweeted](#) of the Venezuelan President, Nicolas Maduro:

'Just because Maduro claims to be on the left does not mean we should support him. There are far better ways of breaking the power of the old elites.
#Venezuela'

Monbiot thus simply wrote off the democratically elected President of Venezuela who had won entirely [credible elections](#) after the death of Hugo Chavez. Because Monbiot is respected by many readers as an honest, principled progressive, this will have looked to many like the final nail in the coffin of Maduro's credibility. Many doubtless assumed that Monbiot knows and cares a great deal about Venezuela, that he has strongly supported the Bolivarian revolution. And in 2015, Monbiot *did* [write](#) this in the Guardian:

'Between 1989 and 1991 I worked with movements representing landless rural workers in Brazil. As they sought to reclaim their land, thousands were arrested; many were tortured; some were killed...

'In Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador, Venezuela, Uruguay and Chile, similar movements transformed political life. They have evicted governments opposed to their interests and held to account those who claim to represent them. Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain have been inspired, directly or indirectly, by the Latin American experience.'

Many readers will have hailed these comments as evidence that Monbiot is an outspoken leftist. After all, in 2003 he had [written](#) in the Guardian:

'While younger activists are eager to absorb the experience of people like Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, Lula, Victor Chavez, Michael Albert and Arundhati Roy, all of whom are speaking in Porto Alegre [the World Social Forum], our movement is, as yet, more eager than wise, fired by passions we have yet to master.' (Our emphasis)

But according to the ProQuest media database, the single sentence from 2015 contains Monbiot's *only mention* of Venezuela in his Guardian column in the last ten years. Monbiot has mentioned Hugo Chavez's name exactly twice, in passing, in two articles. He has mentioned Maduro – who is facing relentless internal and external state-corporate attempts at regime change, not least by means of US sanctions – once, in passing, in July 2019. Monbiot has said not a word to challenge the military, economic and propaganda campaign to overthrow Maduro.

According to ProQuest, Owen Jones has never mentioned the Venezuelan President in his Guardian column. Paul Mason's only [mention](#) of Maduro in the Guardian damned Maduro's use of the 'repertoire of autocratic rule' in his supposed 'crackdown', being 'clearly engaged in a rapid, purposive and common project to hollow out democracy'.

Ironically, corporate dissidents like Monbiot, Jones and Mason benefit enormously from the fact that they are published by tyrannical, monopolistic, unaccountable, power-friendly

media that filter 'all the news fit to print'. How so?

It is precisely because these systems of power function as such forensic, long-armed Thought Police that even tiny crumbs of compromised dissent – a single sentence on 'landless rural workers' here, a four-letter word on the need for revolution there – elicit pitiful shrieks of delight and admiration from corporately incarcerated consumers who *need to believe* that 'mainstream' media are *not that bad*, not that destructive. In other words, public awareness is heavily skewed by a version of 'Stockholm syndrome'.

Consider Gaza as a further example. Again, we can find this dissenting [comment](#) from Monbiot in the Guardian in 2006:

'I agree that Hizbullah fired the first shots. But out of the blue? Israel's earlier occupation of southern Lebanon; its continued occupation of the Golan Heights; its occupation and partial settlement of the West Bank and gradual clearance of Jerusalem; its shelling of civilians, power plants, bridges and pipelines in Gaza; its beating and shooting of children; its imprisonment or assassination of Palestinian political leaders; its bulldozing of homes; its humiliating and often lethal checkpoints: all these are, in Bush's mind, either fictional or carry no political consequences.'

Again, leftists will have lapped up this rare supportive comment in a major UK newspaper. A search for further comments finds [this](#) sentence from Monbiot in November 2007:

'In February 2001, according to the BBC, it [Israel] used chemical weapons in Gaza: 180 people were admitted to hospital with severe convulsions.'

And a sentence from September 2013, when Monbiot [wrote](#) in passing of how Israel 'refuses to ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention' having 'used white phosphorus as a weapon in Gaza'. A [further](#) sentence appeared in September 2014:

'In Gaza this year, 2,100 Palestinians were massacred: including people taking shelter in schools and hospitals.'

Monbiot [wrote](#) again one month later:

'Israeli military commanders described the massacre of 2,100 Palestinians, most of whom were civilians (including 500 children), in Gaza this summer as "mowing the lawn".'

But, remarkably, these are the only substantive comments Monbiot has made about one of the great crimes and tragedies of our time. The last quote above, his most recent, was published nearly five years ago, in October 2014.

While other progressives like Noam Chomsky, John Pilger, Norman Finkelstein, Jonathan Cook and others have written whole books, made whole films, and written reams of articles about the catastrophe being inflicted on the people of Gaza, Monbiot has said virtually nothing.

According to ProQuest, Owen Jones' sole, substantive [article](#) devoted to Israel's assault on Gaza came in July 2014. Even this was a philosophical piece on the 'moral corruption that comes with any occupation', with few details about the suffering in Gaza. Stockholm syndrome ensured that the title alone, 'How the occupation of Gaza corrupts the occupier', persuaded many readers that here was a stellar example of a principled journalist who really cared about Gaza, who was shouting the truth from the rooftops. Jones' last mention of Gaza in the Guardian was also five years ago, a mention in passing in August 2014.

Paul Mason's last substantive [mention](#) of Gaza was, again, five years ago, in November 2014, an emotive reference to a harrowing report he made from Gaza while working for Channel 4 News, with little detail on conditions. Mason referenced the same Channel 4 coverage in August 2014.

Or consider Yemen – how much have Monbiot, Jones and Mason written about the blood-drenched, UK-backed Saudi Arabian war that began in 2015? Monbiot [wrote](#) in June 2017 of then Prime Minister Theresa May:

'She won't confront Saudi Arabia over terrorism or Yemen or anything else.'

Ironical words, given that, according to ProQuest, this is Monbiot's only meaningful comment on the Yemen war (in April 2019, he [noted](#) in passing that climate change 'has contributed to civil war' in Yemen). In the Morning Star, Ian Sinclair [reported](#) that the editor of the Interventions Watch website had conducted a search of Monbiot's Twitter timeline in December 2017:

'He found Monbiot had mentioned "Syria" in 91 tweets and "Yemen" in just three tweets.'

To his credit, Owen Jones has written several substantial pieces focused on the war in Yemen [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). In June 2017, Paul Mason [wrote](#) one substantial paragraph on the conflict:

'Saudi Arabia is meanwhile prosecuting a war on Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen, using more than £3bn worth of British kit sold to it since the bombing campaign began. In return, it has lavished gifts on Theresa May's ministers: Philip Hammond got a watch worth £1,950 when he visited in 2015. In turn, Tory advisers are picking up lucrative consultancy work with the Saudi government.'

Again, we can celebrate an example of superficial dissent, or reflect on the fact that this is Mason's *only* comment on the Yemen war in the Guardian.

It is important to remember that the most popular and revered British dissidents – including radical comedians like Russell Brand, Frankie Boyle and Eddie Izzard – were made famous by corporate media. The difference between a 'cult' following and national fame is often the difference between popular and 'mainstream' support. People willing to compromise from the start, to jump through the required corporate hoops to achieve fame, are (often unwittingly) stooges of a system that *must* allow glimpses of dissent, a semblance of free and open discussion.

The system needs an occasional honest paragraph on Gaza from a Monbiot, a comment on Yemen from a Mason, if it is to retain credibility. Nobody is fooled by total silence, by a complete lie – a half-lie is far more potent. We are complicit in this charade when we make dissident mountains out of molehills, loaves out of corporate crumbs, and keep buying the product.

Update – 17 September 2019

A reader has reminded us that Owen Jones also mentioned Julian Assange in an online, April 2019 [article](#) in the Guardian opposing his extradition to the US.

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