



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The masked anthropologist

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“A name makes reading too easy,” Michel Foucault writes in “The masked philosopher” (1998: 321). Choosing to remain nameless in a 1980 newspaper interview with *Le Monde*, the already-famous philosopher casts anonymity as a precondition for a more direct relationship with his audience, for “some chance of being heard” (1998: 321). Through anonymity, Foucault argues, “the surface of contact [is] unrippled”; it is “a way of addressing the potential reader” (1998: 321).

“In our societies,” Foucault asserts, “characters dominate our perception” (1998: 321) at the expense of truly hearing ideas and furthering critical thinking. He resists this obsession, denouncing the too-easy stand-in of the public persona for the content of speech. Turning to the disguise of anonymity is, perhaps counterintuitively, a means of establishing a more honest, candid discourse, and of unleashing a curiosity that might reconfigure our “relationship to truth” (327).

Ultimately, the Masked Philosopher writes against our tendency to know too much in advance; against critics whose propensities to judge smother “signs of existence” and “leaps of imagination” (Foucault 1998: 323); against the drab and deadly power to condemn and exclude. Instead, Foucault proposes a different mode of reception that is productive and enlivening, multiplying instead of stifling: “I can’t help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. . . . It would bear the lighting of possible storms” (323).

As Foucault decenters the figure of the celebrity “intellectual”—himself included—and calls for an opening to new information and to the previously unthought, he is well aware that “the channels of communication are too narrow, almost

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monopolistic, inadequate” (1998: 326). Writing in the predigital media era, when mass communication was still largely dominated by newspaper, television, and radio, he decried the undemocratic dissemination of information and ideas, and the forms of stale and condemnatory assessment that dominated public thought. Yet he also saw promise in the force of curiosity which, as he writes, “evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; . . . a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; . . . a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental” (325).

Much has changed since the 1980s context in which Foucault gave this interview and, in a certain sense, the channels of communication have widened in unforeseen ways. Our lives unfold in complex digital systems and markets that have reconfigured the dispersal and value of our personal information, and we inhabit societies which might, at least in part, be understood as what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1995b) called “control societies,” characterized by the emergence of a new, dispersive, modulatory form of power, in which the centralized panoptic gaze gives way to flexible yet omnipresent tracking, normalized surveillance, and increased technological, digital, and market involvement in the regulation of life and labor. The internet and a wide range of new digital technologies have transformed both media and the public sphere, altering the conditions of what can be spoken and by whom.

In light of today’s new regimes of media, data, and security, what does the donning of a mask do—for the masked him/herself, and for his/her audience? How does anonymity reconfigure the possibilities of what can be said or done or known, and of how what is spoken is received? Does anonymity today, as Foucault saw it then, create a more “truthful” relationship between speaker and listener, void of judgment and the most dulling and diagnostic forms of criticism that “hand down sentences” (1998: 323)? Does it open alternative modes of communication, destabilize hierarchies, occasion a “new age of curiosity” (325) and a distinct form of democracy? What kind of politics does anonymity enable or erase, and are there other, perhaps darker, implications of anonymous speech and action?

Anthropologist Gabriella Coleman’s brave new book *Hacker, hoaxer, whistleblower, spy: The many faces of Anonymous* (2014) speaks to such questions (and many others) from a number of diverse and unexpected angles. It offers a unique ethnographic exploration of the virtual and physical worlds of an affiliated group of hackers known as Anonymous and their digital activism. Coleman moves through the labyrinthine world of online hackers who commit wide-ranging mischief—minor and major crimes, politically charged acts of civil disobedience, and even banal bullying, among many other acts—and sets out to rebrand the (mostly) men who comprise the “many faces” of Anonymous, each participating in the collective to varying degrees and with varying levels of commitment, diversely situated in regards to the political, the (il)legal, the ethical, and the mischievous. Anonymous, she insists, is not comprised exclusively of nerdy, asocial, white teenage boys from middle class families who spend their days and nights glued to the computers in their parents’ basements. Instead, members of Anonymous hold political convictions, and range from libertarians to anarchists to Marxists and everything in between and outside of those distinctions. Contrary to popular opinion, Coleman



emphasizes the point that many members live in non-Western countries and, in fact, often do their work from—and with an eye toward—highly volatile parts of the world. She urges us to avoid the “gross fetish of stereotypes” (Coleman 2014: 175), which too readily assumes juvenile antics in place of “politically conscientious action” (176).

Where Deleuze (1995b: 178) wrote of the need to find “new weapons” suited to new mechanisms of control, Coleman playfully (and with a nod to James Scott [1987]) characterizes her subjects’ tactics as “weapons of the geek,” where “their political tools . . . emerge from the concrete experiences of their craft”; armed with technological savvy and computing skill, they “explicitly call attention to themselves via their volatile, usually controversial political acts” (2014: 107). As Coleman studies the history and workings of the hacker collective as a form of democratic political action, she engages in her own forms of masking and unmasking: as an anthropologist studying sometimes-illegal activity; a participant-observer in an online world; a go-between and translator of sorts between the collective and the public; a scholar navigating the uncertain ethical, legal, and academic boundaries of such intensive immersion with a highly ambiguous, multivalent group.

In his “Letter to a harsh critic,” published in the wake of the uproar created by *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze (1995a) asserts that there is much at stake in different forms of reading. If one takes a book “as a box with something inside” (7), one’s task is to interrogate what it contains. But, he suggests, there is also another kind of reading, less audit-like or prosecutorial; if we see the book not as a container, but as “a little non-signifying machine,” we might move away from judgment toward more interesting questions: “Does it work, and how does it work? How does it work for you?” (8). This form of engagement is “like plugging into an electric circuit. . . . It relates a book directly to what’s Outside.” A book, after all, “is a little cog in much more complicated external machinery” (8).

This active form of reading—“reading with love,” as Deleuze would say (1995a: 9)—is emancipatory. It makes it possible to engage in what texts unleash, the forms of understanding that they open up, and the larger external machineries they are a part of. Writing for a popular audience on a much criticized and often misunderstood technosocial “movement” lacking a fixed or overarching structure, Coleman’s book is most generative when approached through the kind of curious opening to the imaginative critique and more generous reading that both Foucault and Deleuze envisioned. Inviting into its pages a reader that does not a priori judge and wants to know things more deeply, the book elicits multiple readings that bring us closer to (if never overcoming) the contradictions and ambivalences of her subject matter, “plugging in,” in Deleuze’s sense, to the broader external sphere of the security state and our ever-more digital world.

Instead of solely pointing out places where meaning was hard to grasp or pin down—though Coleman is also explicit about what she sees as the “impossibility of arriving at a universal—much less neat-and-tidy—maxim regarding the group’s effects” (2014: 393)—the anthropological narrative creates an experience of reading in which meaning escapes constantly, throughout referencing her own “engrossed, dumbfounded, mystified, and addicted” feelings regarding Anonymous (129). It is in this spirit of “flow meeting other flows, one machine among others” (Deleuze 1995a: 9) that we here embrace the potentialities of unfinished readings and critical

questions posed to and by the anthropologist gone anonymous. In this way, we need not search for truths or the ultimate meanings of Anonymous—staying inside the box, so to speak—but rather might consider how the book—and the anthropologist—draws us toward such figures of thought, probing the social, ethical, and political spheres of democracy, direct action, and voice in our contemporary world.

In the early 1980s, Foucault decried “institutions administering shortages” (1998: 324) and the ivory-tower critique of a supposed decadence of thought and spoke, instead, of inhabiting a “situation of superabundance” of ideas and information (324). The present-day world in which Coleman writes—and in which Anonymous operates—exists through and alongside its own excesses and abundances: of new digital technologies, their widespread dissemination, and constant repurposing. The contemporary security state simultaneously makes possible and depends upon unprecedented collection of data, living out the paradoxical coexistence of regulation as both surplus (of state intervention and control of information) and lack (of state accountability and transparency). In a moment of ever-deeper corporate power, heightened security rhetoric, and previously unthinkable tracking of individual behavior and macrolevel patterns, the world of big data unfolds against an encroachment of acquired rights and (supposedly) guaranteed freedoms.

Anonymous calls attention to these complex and troubling forms of knowledge and secrecy at work in the new security state, which they (and Coleman) argue is a grave threat to democracy as we understand it: we are simultaneously known (unmasked, as it were) and tracked by invisible (and often illegal) security apparatuses, and kept unaware of these mechanisms, themselves masked from public view. Indeed, Anonymous prides itself on attacking these forms of hidden surveillance and restricted information, seeking to bring to light the unseen structures of control and security that limit the free circulation of information and make our own right to anonymity, as citizen-subjects, impossible.

“What we are suffering,” writes Foucault, “is not a void but inadequate means for thinking about everything that is happening” (1998: 325). And so it is today. As real people and their struggles are erased as “uninteresting and unimportant” (324), the meaning of “intellectual” itself has shifted. With economists and quantitative modelers speaking as the dominant figures of our time, and experts like psychologists “legally” advising on torture (Risen 2015), we find ourselves well-beyond Pierre Bourdieu’s cost-effective technocrats (1998). At the same time, the cumulative encroachment of neoliberal economization into all spheres of life, as political theorist Wendy Brown argues, casts the very existence of the *demos* under threat, engendering a “vanquishing of liberal democracy’s already anemic *homo politicus*,” of catastrophic consequence to “democratic institutions, cultures, and imaginaries” (2015: 35).

In this space of shrinking public discourse, where the delineation of whose voices count is increasingly circumscribed, Anonymous, Coleman argues, exposes and intervenes in and against the suppression of information and the narrowing of thought. Like the Foucauldian “right to knowledge” which “one must be able to exercise . . . constantly and in many different ways” (1998: 326), might Anonymous’ activities, as the anthropologist asks, broaden the scope of public debate and the political field itself? Do their hacking interventions—from targeted campaigns and online direct-action against companies or governments, to the collection and



publication of confidential information and correspondence, to the rallying of bodies for protest IRL (in real life)—act as a form of what Jacques Rancière (2014: ix) would call *dissensus*: “a tear in the common fabric, a new possibility that makes itself visible and that challenges the obviousness of a given world”?

Much of Coleman’s powerful narrative unfolds as an implicit response to a question she poses early on: “Are Anonymous and its adherents principled dissidents? Or are they simply kids screwing around on the Internet as lulz-drunk trolls?” (2014: 3). For the masked anthropologist, the answer seems to lie closer to the former. While never discounting the persistent humor-seeking trickery of many of her informants and their online campaigns, she comes to view them through a primarily political lens, especially in the context of an increasingly present contemporary security state and its pervasive forms of surveillance, regulation, and control. Indeed, by the end of 2013, as Coleman states, Anonymous could be understood as “the raucous party at the funeral of online freedom and privacy” (2014: 377). In light of the Edward Snowden revelations (Poitras 2014), our growing awareness of the ever-wider nets of surveillance that threaten and infringe upon democratic life, and the “frighteningly narrow” “sanctioned channels for political change” in the United States today, Coleman finds hope in the “politically engaged geek family” (2014: 382) of Anonymous. More than a simple recounting of this history—itsself an important task, given widespread misunderstanding of Anonymous in popular media accounts—Coleman seeks to recast members of Anonymous as a loose band of democracy’s greatest allies, who daily attempt “to end the dark reign of injustice” (390) worldwide. Referring to her subjects as “radical tech warriors” (280), she casts them as revolutionary rogues, simultaneously subversive and principled—a new kind of political subject facing the machineries of power in the twenty-first century.

And yet, there is also space for other possible readings that exist alongside such engagements with Anonymous, opening productive frictions that might complicate or deepen our understandings of techno-democracy, politics, and the configurations of the social and the ethical in the present day. The masking of individual identity that is fundamental to Anonymous’ operation—shielding (if incompletely) individuals from the criminal justice system—also allows for the proliferation of violence in language and action, from the targeting of epilepsy patients “for the lulz,” to widespread racist and sexist language, to the exercise of vigilante justice or the release of sensitive information of sometimes-uninvolved subjects. What kinds of self-fashioning and othering, then, does this “masking” render possible, and in what ways are they less emancipatory or constructive than Coleman’s largely optimistic account implies? Does purposive attention to the broader social relevance of Anonymous against contemporary threats to democratic life itself mask something more sinister in their deployment of particular “weapons”?

While the anthropologist does not all out ignore the less savory aspects of Anonymous’ tactics and ways of operating, her argument centers less on dealing with these (admittedly) problematic features—from racist/sexist discourse to illegal activity that varies widely in its activist qualities and potential harm to uninvolved bystanders—and more on reading Anonymous as a new and important kind of political collective exposing and acting against the security state and its attacks on fundamental freedoms. Against a backdrop of commentary that has

largely demonized Anonymous, she offers this perspective—more enchanted than critical, one could say—perhaps in part as a corrective to the prevalence of dominant negative framings. Her generous reading opens space to consider the new possibilities for politics, direct action, solidarity, and organizing that are, perhaps, too easily erased or distorted. Yet, the broader question of violence and discrimination, within the collective and in its outwardly directed activities, sits in awkward tension with Coleman's portrayal of the group as democratic, revolutionary, political subjects. Even as Anonymous does enact a kind of renegade activism, its invocation of well-worn racist, homophobic, and otherwise offensive language belies its liberatory politics, coalescing into a different character that speaks to a darker and lasting side of contemporary life, ever rife with bigotry and oppressive violence.

In his declaration as the Masked Philosopher, Foucault is concerned with the ossification of thinkers into celebrity-like characters who, once well established, are made knowable ahead of time and will not be heard “unless they shout louder and pull a rabbit out of the hat each week” (1998: 324). There is an important way in which *the work of the character* also hovers throughout Coleman's critical project, animating its core tensions and drawing us into the potentialities and limitations of how Anonymous can be known, thought, and represented. If, for Foucault, the intellectual becomes a character about which “more and more is said” while ever less is truly heard or read, Coleman is concerned with mainstream media's rendering, and the public's understanding, of Anonymous as a static (and uniform) character, and one of her explicit goals involves countering misconceptions of the collective.

Yet, even as the anthropologist seeks to hold such commonsense stereotypes at bay, in her account, too, Anonymous perhaps becomes a kind of character—the mythic trickster; the political activist; the “revolutionary hacker outlaw” (Coleman 2014: 293). While Coleman rightly insists on the heterogeneity of purposes, tactics, and identities within the digital collective—“anonymous is not unanimous,” (311) she reminds us—through her closeness to her subject matter and evident sympathy for her interlocutors, her subjects come alive in a particular way. And so, we might ask: what happens when fieldwork subjects morph into anthropological characters? In a virtual world of pseudonymous subjects who, for their own protection, remain masked at all times, do ethnographic representations by necessity speak to their personas as characters rather than identities as people—and how does this transform them (or not) into figures of thought? What does this do to writer and reader, and to the possibilities for both generous and critical thinking, and the fine, often fluid, line between them? Is this form of characterization, both from without—by the media, the anthropologist—and from within—through a kind of collective self-fashioning and representation—sometimes expedient, and to what ends? Does disguise, or masking—metaphorical and sometimes literal, as with the Guy Fawkes mask that has become the de facto symbol of the Anonymous movement—hold particular sway in the making and unmaking of characters?

Alongside such questions of identity and (self) presentation, it is worth considering also how Anonymous does, or might, theorize *themselves*, and what work teasing this out further could accomplish. Perhaps the most purposive use of theory in Coleman's book is the citation of Jane Bennett's argument that the deliberate elevation of enchantment is a meaningful political act, and that Anonymous' generation of enchantment serves as an object lesson in Ernst Bloch's “principle of



hope” (2014: 395–96). In her final sentences, the anthropologist leaves us with mystical, otherworldly metaphors: Anonymous as a “vision, confounding as we watch the bright flashes of its delightful (and offensive and confusing) dreams”; “like observing the northern lights”; a spectacle like “a quiet but mythic battle of gods and tricksters in the night sky, a sky all the more enchanting because it is everyone’s to watch” (399–400). Enchantment, here, presents as ethical and political possibility, a means of sustaining or cultivating hope and solidarity, propelling “disruption and change” (396).

Coleman’s account assumes a generally shared definition of many controversial key terms, with “political,” “activist,” “democracy,” “resistance,” and even “force for good” deployed as if every reader understands them in the same way. While she alludes to the varying willingness of her subjects, their critics, and the broader public to view particular actions as “political,” there is perhaps untapped potential for more critically probing these concepts, their understandings, and their invocations, especially by members of Anonymous themselves. Such an attempt to engage the activities *of* and conversations *with* her subjects in this light could prompt an even more robust and dynamic engagement with core concepts in political thought, destabilizing our assumptions about freedom, democracy, and activism. Approached on this register, we might ask what new language and concepts emerge for an incipient thinking of political and digital life.

For all of Anonymous’ complexities and contradictions, Coleman’s telling provides rich insight, thorough history, and stimulating analysis. As she exposes the pseudopoliticization that accompanies present-day intelligence and security maneuvers, and draws us into the largely invisible and unstable worlds of digital activism, she also generously offers us her own enchantment while leaving space for multiple possible readings. The optimism of the masked anthropologist resonates with Foucault’s refusal to view his time as a moment of decline or stagnation: “I don’t subscribe to the notion of a decadence,” he writes, “of the sterility of thought, of a gloomy future lacking prospects . . . on the contrary, I think there is a plethora” (1998: 325). In opening new channels of thought and characterizing new (if imperfect) forms of politics in-the-making, this brilliant scholar of our technological present rejects deadening futility. In so doing, she allows us to ask how and where such forces emerge—to render politics otherwise, and ourselves a bit freer.

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