

Edward Snowden meets Arundhati Roy and John Cusack: 'He was small and lithe, like a house cat'

The Indian novelist recalls an extraordinary encounter in a Moscow hotel with the NSA whistleblower

Arundhati Roy

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The Moscow Un-Summit wasn't a formal interview. Nor was it a cloak-and-dagger underground rendezvous. The upshot is that John Cusack, Daniel Ellsberg (who leaked the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam war) and I didn't get the cautious, diplomatic, regulation Edward Snowden. The downshot (that isn't a word, I know) is that the jokes, the humour and repartee that took place in Room 1001 cannot be reproduced. The Un-Summit cannot be written about in the detail that it deserves. Yet it definitely cannot not be written about. Because it did happen. And because the world is a millipede that inches forward on millions of real conversations. And this, certainly, was a real one.

What mattered, perhaps even more than what was said, was the spirit in the room. There was Edward Snowden who, after 9/11, was in his own words "straight up singing highly of Bush" and signing up for the Iraq war. And there were those of us who, after 9/11, had been straight up doing exactly the opposite. It was a little late for this conversation, of course. Iraq has been all but destroyed. And now the map of what is so condescendingly called the "Middle East" is being brutally redrawn (yet again). But still, there we were, all of us, talking to each other in a bizarre hotel in Russia. Bizarre it certainly was.

The opulent lobby of the Moscow Ritz-Carlton was teeming with drunk millionaires, high on new money, and gorgeous, high-stepping young women, half peasant, half supermodel, draped on the arms of toady men - gazelles on their way to fame and fortune, paying their dues to the satyrs who would get them there. In the corridors, you passed serious fistfights, loud singing and quiet, liveried waiters wheeling trolleys with towers of food and silverware in and out of rooms. In Room 1001 we were so close to the Kremlin that if you put your hand out of the window, you could almost touch it. It was snowing outside. We were deep into the Russian winter - never credited enough for its part in the second world war. Edward Snowden was much smaller than I thought he'd be. Small, lithe, neat, like a house cat. He greeted Dan ecstatically and us warmly. "I know why you're here," he said to me, smiling. "Why?" "To radicalise me." I laughed.

We settled down on various perches, stools, chairs and John's bed. Dan and Ed were so pleased to meet each other, and had so much to say to each other, that it felt a little impolite

to intrude on them. At times they broke into some kind of arcane code language: "I jumped from nobody on the street, straight to TSSCI." "No, because, again, this isn't DS at all, this is NSA. At CIA, it's called COMO." "It's kind of a similar role, but is it under support?" "PRISEC or PRIVAC?" "They start out with the TALENT KEYHOLE thing. Everyone then gets read into TS, SI, TK, and GAMMA-G clearance... Nobody knows what it is..."

It took a while before I felt it was all right to interrupt them. Snowden's disarming answer to my question about being photographed cradling the American flag was to roll his eyes and say: "Oh, man. I don't know. Somebody handed me a flag, they took a picture." And when I asked him why he signed up for the Iraq war, when millions of people all over the world were marching against it, he replied, equally disarmingly: "I fell for the propaganda."

Dan talked at some length about how it would be unusual for US citizens who joined the Pentagon and the National Security Agency to have read much literature on US exceptionalism and its history of warfare. (And once they joined, it was unlikely to be a subject that interested them.) He and Ed had watched it play out live, in real time, and were horrified enough to stake their lives and their freedom when they decided to be whistleblowers. What the two of them clearly had in common was a strong, almost corporeal sense of moral righteousness - of right and wrong.

A sense of righteousness that was obviously at work not just when they decided to blow the whistle on what they thought to be morally unacceptable, but also when they signed up for their jobs - Dan to save his country from communism, Ed to save it from Islamist terrorism. What they did when they grew disillusioned was so electrifying, so dramatic, that they have come to be identified by that single act of moral courage.

I asked Ed Snowden what he thought about Washington's ability to destroy countries and its inability to win a war (despite mass surveillance). I think the question was phrased quite rudely - something like, "When was the last time the United States won a war?" We spoke about whether the economic sanctions and subsequent invasion of Iraq could be accurately called genocide. We talked about how the CIA knew - and was preparing for the fact - that the world was heading to a place of not just inter-country war but of intra-country war, in which mass surveillance would be necessary to control populations. And about how armies were being turned into police forces to administer countries they have invaded and occupied, while the police - even in places such as India and Pakistan and Ferguson, Missouri, in the United States - were being trained to behave like armies to quell internal insurrections.

Ed spoke at some length about surveillance. And here I quote him, because he's said this often before: "If we do nothing, we sort of sleepwalk into a total surveillance state where we have both a super-state that has unlimited capacity to apply force with an unlimited ability to know (about the people it is targeting) - and that's a very dangerous combination. That's the dark future. The fact that they know everything about us and we know nothing about them - because they are secret, they are privileged, and they are a separate class... the elite class, the political class, the resource class - we don't know where they live, we don't know what they do, we don't know who their friends are. They have the ability to know all that about us. This is the direction of the future, but I think there are changing possibilities

in this.”

I asked Ed whether the NSA was just feigning annoyance at his revelations, but might actually be secretly pleased at being known as the All Seeing, All Knowing Agency - because that would help to keep people fearful, off-balance, always looking over their shoulders and easy to manage. Dan spoke about how even in the US, a police state was only another 9/11 away: “We are not in a police state now, not yet. I’m talking about what may come. I realise I shouldn’t put it that way... White, middle-class, educated people like myself are not living in a police state... Black, poor people are living in a police state. The repression starts with the semi-white, the Middle Easterners, including anybody who is allied with them, and goes on from there... One more 9/11, and then I believe we will have hundreds of thousands of detentions. Middle Easterners and Muslims will be put in detention camps or deported. After 9/11, we had thousands of people arrested without charges... But I’m talking about the future. I’m talking the level of the Japanese in the second world war... I’m talking of hundreds of thousands in camps or deported. I think the surveillance is very relevant to that. They will know who to put away - the data is already collected.” (When he said this, I did wonder, though I did not ask - how different would things have been if Snowden had not been white?)

We talked about war and greed, about terrorism, and what an accurate definition of it would be. We spoke about countries, flags and the meaning of patriotism. We talked about public opinion and the concept of public morality and how fickle it could be, and how easily manipulated. It wasn’t a Q&A type of conversation. We were an incongruous gathering. Ole von Uexküll from the Right Livelihood Foundation in Sweden, myself and three troublesome Americans. John Cusack, who thought up and organised this whole disruptive enterprise, comes from a fine tradition, too - of musicians, writers, actors, athletes who have refused to buy the bullshit, however beautifully it was packaged.

What will become of Edward Snowden? Will he ever be able to return to the US? His chances don’t look good. The US government - the Deep State, as well as both the major political parties - wants to punish him for the enormous damage he has inflicted, in their perception, on the security establishment. (It’s got Chelsea Manning and the other whistleblowers where it wants them.) If it does not manage to kill or jail Snowden, it must use everything in its power to limit the damage he’s done and continues to do. One of those ways is to try to contain, co-opt and usher the debate around whistleblowing in a direction that suits it. And it has, to some extent, managed to do that.

In the Public Security v Mass Surveillance debate that is taking place in the establishment western media, the Object of Love is America. America and her actions. Are they moral or immoral? Are they right or wrong? Are the whistleblowers American patriots or American traitors? Within this constricted matrix of morality, other countries, other cultures, other conversations - even if they are the victims of US wars - usually appear only as witnesses in the main trial. They bolster either the outrage of the prosecution or the indignation of the defence.

The trial, when it is conducted on these terms, serves to reinforce the idea that there can be a moderate, moral superpower. Are we not witnessing it in action? Its heartache? Its guilt?

Its self-correcting mechanisms? Its watchdog media? Its activists who will not stand for ordinary (innocent) American citizens being spied on by their own government? In these debates that appear to be fierce and intelligent, words such as public and security and terrorism are thrown around, but they remain, as always, loosely defined and are used more often than not in the way the US state would like them to be used.

It is shocking that Barack Obama approved a “kill list” with 20 names on it. Or is it? What sort of list do the millions of people who have been killed in all the US wars belong on, if not a “kill list”? In all of this, Snowden, in exile, has to remain strategic and tactical. He’s in the impossible position of having to negotiate the terms of his amnesty/trial with the very institutions in the US that feel betrayed by him, and the terms of his domicile in Russia with that Great Humanitarian, Vladimir Putin. So the superpowers have the Truth-teller in a position where he now has to be extremely careful about how he uses the spotlight he has earned and what he says publicly.

Even so, leaving aside what cannot be said, the conversation around whistleblowing is a thrilling one - it’s Realpolitik - busy, important and full of legalese. It has spies and spy-hunters, escapades, secrets and secret-leakers. It’s a very adult and absorbing universe of its own. However, if it becomes, as it sometimes threatens to, a substitute for broader, more radical political thinking, then the conversation that Daniel Berrigan, Jesuit priest, poet and war resister (contemporary of Daniel Ellsberg), wanted to have when he said, “Every nation-state tends towards the imperial - that is the point” becomes a little inconvenient.

I was glad to see that when Snowden made his debut on Twitter (and chalked up half a million followers in half a second), he said, “I used to work for the government. Now I work for the public.” Implicit in that sentence is the belief that the government does not work for the public. That’s the beginning of a subversive and inconvenient conversation. By “the government”, of course, he means the US government, his former employer. But who does he mean by “the public”? The US public? Which part of the US public? He’ll have to decide as he goes along. In democracies, the line between an elected government and “the public” is never all that clear. The elite is usually fused with the government pretty seamlessly. Viewed from an international perspective, if there really is such a thing as “the US public”, it’s a very privileged public indeed. The only “public” I know is a maddeningly tricky labyrinth.

Oddly, when I think back on the meeting in the Moscow Ritz-Carlton, the memory that flashes up first in my mind is an image of Daniel Ellsberg. Dan, after all those hours of talking, lying back on the bed, Christlike, with his arms flung open, weeping for what the United States has turned into - a country whose “best people” must either go to prison or into exile. I was moved by his tears but troubled, too - because they were the tears of a man who has seen the machine up close. A man who was once on a first-name basis with the people who controlled it and who coldly contemplated the idea of annihilating life on Earth. A man who risked everything to blow the whistle on them. Dan knows all the arguments, For as well as Against. He often uses the word imperialism to describe US history and foreign policy. He knows now, 40 years after he made the Pentagon Papers public, that even though those particular individuals have gone, the machine keeps on turning.

Daniel Ellsberg's tears made me think about love, about loss, about dreams - and, most of all, about failure. What sort of love is this love that we have for countries? What sort of country is it that will ever live up to our dreams? What sort of dreams were these that have been broken? Isn't the greatness of great nations directly proportionate to their ability to be ruthless, genocidal? Doesn't the height of a country's "success" usually also mark the depths of its moral failure? And what about our failure? Writers, artists, radicals, anti-nationals, mavericks, malcontents - what of the failure of our imaginations? What of our failure to replace the idea of flags and countries with a less lethal Object of Love? Human beings seem unable to live without war, but they are also unable to live without love. So the question is, what shall we love?

Writing this at a time when refugees are flooding into Europe - the result of decades of US and European foreign policy in the "Middle East" - makes me wonder: who is a refugee? Is Edward Snowden a refugee? Surely, he is. Because of what he did, he cannot return to the place he thinks of as his country (although he can continue to live where he is most comfortable - inside the internet). The refugees fleeing from wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria to Europe are refugees of the Lifestyle Wars. But the thousands of people in countries such as India who are being jailed and killed by those same Lifestyle Wars, the millions who are being driven off their lands and farms, exiled from everything they have ever known - their language, their history, the landscape that formed them - are not. As long as their misery is contained within the arbitrarily drawn borders of their "own" country, they are not considered refugees. But they are refugees. And certainly, in terms of numbers, such people are the great majority in the world today. Unfortunately, in imaginations that are locked down into a grid of countries and borders, in minds that are shrink-wrapped in flags, they don't make the cut.

Perhaps the best-known refugee of the Lifestyle Wars is Julian Assange, the founder and editor of WikiLeaks, who is currently serving his fourth year as a fugitive-guest in a room in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. Until recently, the police were stationed in a small lobby just outside the front door. There were snipers on the roof, with orders to arrest him, shoot him, drag him out if he so much as put a toe out of the door, which for all legal purposes is an international border. The Ecuadorian embassy is located across the street from Harrods, the world's most famous department store.

The day we met Julian, Harrods was sucking in and spewing out frenzied Christmas shoppers in their hundreds, or perhaps even thousands. In the middle of that tony London high street, the smell of opulence and excess met the smell of incarceration and the Free World's fear of free speech. (They shook hands and agreed never to be friends.) On the day (actually the night) we met Julian, we were not allowed by security to take phones, cameras or any recording devices into the room. So that conversation also remains off the record.

Despite the odds stacked against its founder-editor, WikiLeaks continues its work, as cool and insouciant as ever. Most recently it has offered an award of \$100,000 for anybody who can provide "smoking gun" documents about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), a free trade agreement between Europe and the United States that aims to give multinational corporations the power to sue sovereign governments that do things

that adversely impact corporate profits. Criminal acts could include governments increasing workers' minimum wages, not seen to be cracking down on "terrorist" villagers who impede the work of mining companies, or, say, having the temerity to turn down Monsanto's offer of genetically modified corporate-patented seeds. TTIP is just another weapon like intrusive surveillance or depleted uranium, to be used in the Lifestyle Wars.

Looking at Julian Assange sitting across the table from me, pale and worn, without having had five minutes of sunshine on his skin for 900 days, but still refusing to disappear or capitulate the way his enemies would like him to, I smiled at the idea that nobody thinks of him as an Australian hero or an Australian traitor. To his enemies, Assange has betrayed much more than a country. He has betrayed the ideology of the ruling powers. For this, they hate him even more than they hate Edward Snowden. And that's saying a lot.

We're told, often enough, that as a species we are poised on the edge of the abyss. It's possible that our puffed-up, prideful intelligence has outstripped our instinct for survival and the road back to safety has already been washed away. In which case there's nothing much to be done. If there is something to be done, then one thing is for sure: those who created the problem will not be the ones who come up with a solution. Encrypting our emails will help, but not very much. Recalibrating our understanding of what love means, what happiness means - and, yes, what countries mean - might. Recalibrating our priorities might.

An old-growth forest, a mountain range or a river valley is more important and certainly more lovable than any country will ever be. I could weep for a river valley, and I have. But for a country? Oh, man, I don't know...

. This is the concluding part of Things That Can And Cannot Be Said, a series by John Cusack and Arundhati Roy. A longer version of this article appears in Outlook magazine, in India. Arundhati Roy is the author of the Booker prizewinning novel The God Of Small Things. Her most recent non-fiction work is Capitalism: A Ghost Story.

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