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MARIA IRENE RAMALHO

THE PRIVATE IS PUBLIC OR FURBIES ARE US*

Abstract: The article goes briefly over the formation of the US as an imperial power and resorts to Furbies as a symbol to reflect on the risk posed to a democratic society by the erosion of the distinction between the private and the public in the digital age.

Keywords: private, public, Furbies, NSA, risk society.

O PRIVADO É PÚBLICO OU *FURBIES ARE US*

Resumo: O artigo versa brevemente acerca da formação dos Estados Unidos enquanto poder imperial, recorrendo aos Furbies como símbolo motivador de uma reflexão sobre o risco que a erosão da distinção entre o privado e o público coloca a uma sociedade democrática na era digital.

Palavras-chave: privado, público, Furbies, NSA, sociedade de risco.

For Isabel Caldeira

The topic chosen for the conference that inspired this essay (Interventions: Public Spaces and Private Voices) puts American Studies center stage. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the rhetoric of Pax Britannica being replaced by the rhetoric of Pax Americana, even though the realities either phrase purported to identify had less to do with world peace than with imperial wars. In the 1920s, the American modernist poet William Carlos Williams lucidly wrote that history, for the United States, began not

* This is a slightly revised version of the closing lecture delivered at the Second International Graduate Conference in English and American Studies, entitled "Interventions: Public Spaces and Private Interventions" (University of Coimbra, Portugal, 2014).

“in discovery,” but “in murder and enslavement.”¹ He had in mind the construction of a powerful nation, which entailed the near extermination of the indigenous peoples of the continent and the ruthless starvation of indentured servants and slaves. From the time they set foot on North America, the colonists never stopped engaging in or mobilizing for war. The War of Independence is not to be distinguished from the so-called Revolutionary Wars, in the course of which a colony was evolving into a nation based on the extermination of the Indians and the brutal exploitation of the poor and enslaved – a country definitely not “born free,” as the triumphant rhetoric goes, but rather, as Howard Zinn put it, a country “born slave and free, servant and master, tenant and landlord, poor and rich”; in a word, a country with “the language of liberty and equality” but under “the rule of the [white, male, propertied] few.”² William Blake’s *America a Prophecy* (1793) comes to mind, the poem that is Blake’s prophecy of liberation from tyranny and emancipation of all people, which the American Revolution symbolized for him. Or which the poet wanted it to symbolize. Why, then, is the poet “ashamed of his own song,” in a troubled aside right at the beginning of his prophecy of human liberty and emancipation? Here are the relevant lines of Blake’s poem (2008: 52):³

*[The stern Bard ceas’d, asham’d of his own song; enrag’d he swung
His harp aloft sounding, then dash’d its shining frame against
A ruin’d pillar in glitt’ring fragments; silent he turn’d away,
And wander’d down the vales of Kent in sick and drear lamentings.]*

Blake was early on aware of the less noble reasons for American independence. Given the revolutionary role played by sailors, proletarians, and slaves (the “motley crew of the American Revolution”), the patriots felt the need to quench the power of the “mobs.” Growing abolitionism in England was a threat to the slave economy of the plantation, and keeping slavery in place helped contain class struggle as well.⁴ Blake had illustrated Captain John Gabriel Stedman’s gruesome *Narrative of a Five Year’s Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), while subverting the message of white supremacy underlying it. The shame of the poet of *America a Prophecy* is, to my mind, the result of his own awareness of the systems of terror that were part and parcel of a revolutionary America already carrying along the seeds of the ruthless capitalist empire-to-be. Of the first European settlers, only the Puritan Roger

¹ William Carlos Williams (1956), *In the American Grain*. Introduction by Horace Gregory. New York: A New Directions Paperbook, p. 39. The quote is from “The Fountain of Eternal Youth,” first published in the little magazine *Boon: An International Magazine of the Arts*, 5. 2 (September 1923).

² Howard Zinn, 2003 [1980], pp. 50, 57.

³ Italics in the original.

⁴ Cf. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2013 [2000]). See, especially, chapter 7: “A Motley Crew in the American Revolution.”

Williams acknowledged that the “discovered” land already had an owner. And that is why he was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1635.⁵

Throughout the nineteenth century the United States continued to wage aggressive wars, both on the continent, in order to expand and consolidate territory, and soon enough abroad, in order to secure world domination and political and commercial privileges. By mid-century, the American Civil War (which did not at all interrupt the ongoing violent attacks on the Indians for land grabbing) is still presented in textbooks as the bloodiest of all American wars because its casualties were overwhelmingly American citizens. This was not the case when, at the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century and beyond, the United States went on invading or aggressively intervening in or interfering with, among other nations, Mexico, Cuba, the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. In its 241 years of existence the United States never had a whole decade without wars, most of them aggressive, expansionist, exploitative, and imperialist. Many commentators would insist that a more appropriate name for the so-called Pax Americana would be Bellum Americanum.⁶ The United States of America became and continues to be a world hegemon through merciless conquest and subjection of the other.

By the end of the twentieth century, the American war for imperial domination was already rampant on the worldwide web as well, precisely by messing with the frontiers separating and confusing public and private spaces and voices, while at the same time punishing those who denounce such kinds of undemocratic intervention.

I am already engaging with the problematic proposed for reflection in the conference that is at the origin of this volume: “Interventions: Public Spaces and Private Voices”. Or perhaps the challenge could be rather “Interventions: Public Voices and Private Spaces”? And why “interventions”? What are “interventions”? In the organizers’ original proposal it becomes clear that the purpose of the conference was to elicit “interventions” in the fields of English and American Studies concerning what is meant by “public” and what is meant by “private,” even though the very concept of “privacy” remains largely undiscussed. For example, what happens to (private) human agency once artificial intelligence invades the internet? The recent cyberattacks all over the world show to what extent the “privacy” of the “public” is threatened.⁷ Nonetheless, both the conference and the volume that results from it stand witness to the major

⁵ Roger Williams (1633 [1643]). An African fable, registered in English in the 1660s, has a bat tell the first king of Niimi (Gambia): “I do not deny your claim of having found a country, but whatever country you have found, it has an owner.” Quoted by Linebaugh and Rediker, 2013, p. 131.

⁶ Cf. e.g. Chalmers Johnson, 2007, pp. 18 ff.

⁷ Amply reported in the media everywhere, but see “Ransomware Attack Hits 99 Countries with UK Hospitals Among Targets,” The Guardian, 13 May 2017. Accessed on 13.11.2017 at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/live/2017/may/12/england-hospitals-cyber-attack-nhs-live-updates>.

objective in question. Scholars of various denominations, though always hinging on English and American Studies, have “intervened,” more or less explicitly, on the articulation of the binary concepts of “public” and “private,” a dichotomy definitely in need of closer scrutiny in our digital age, an age of real and fake emails and SMSs, often strategically disclosed for political purposes, as happened in recent presidential elections, both in the USA and France.

As acknowledged in the original announcement and call for papers, the memorable feminist slogan of the 1960s and 1970s – “the personal is political” – had something to do with the formulation of the general topic of the conference. But whereas proclaiming the personal political, and having women rightfully claim their active role in the polis, chimes like a strident herald of liberation and emancipation, pronouncing the private public sounds rather somberly menacing to all human beings in general. Particularly so in the modern western cultures that so dearly cherish individual privacy. Hence, I do admit, there is a certain ominous ring to my title. “The Private is Public” points to the gradual dismantling of human life’s privacy in western modernity. Let the facetiousness of the subtitle – “Furbies Are Us” (yes, like “Toys R Us”)⁸ – reassure us that perhaps, if some of “us” resist the insidious powers of the internet, the problem is not yet so terribly serious, after all. Were he still with us today, Howard Zinn would no doubt add a new chapter on the electronically-made myths of American ideology and political discourse to his 1990 *Declarations of Independence*. “Historically,” wrote Zinn then, “the most terrible things – war, genocide, and slavery – have resulted not from disobedience, but from obedience.”⁹

The original conference proposal laid out the problematic eloquently: the threats brought about by the most recent developments in digital technologies, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks; the shocking WikiLeaks revelations of major powers’ political and economic intervention in, if not manipulation of, governments, political leaders, policies, and financial markets; the surveillance techniques of the National Security Agency, both domestic and international, easily slipping into “surveillance”; and the massive invasion of public and private spaces, both of allies and rival or competing nations, soon followed by the harsh condemnation of whistleblowers like Julian Assange, Chelsea (Bradley) Manning or Edward Snowden, among others – all this has forced us to revise our own conceptualization of private and public spaces and what private voices are still left for us. Or, ironically, “them.” Just think of the famous 2014 telephone conversation (supposedly a “private diplomatic conversation”) between the major US diplomat for European and Eurasian affairs, Victoria Nuland, and the US

⁸ But see Benjamin A. Gorman, 1985.

⁹ Howard Zinn, 1990, p. 129.

ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, in the course of which the former expressed, in highly arrogant and disparaging terms, the opinion that the European Union needn't have a say on what was going on in Ukraine ("Fuck the EU," Nuland roundly stated). To be sure, electronic technology these days teaches you lessons about the public, the private, the secret, and the classified. In this regard, the most interesting piece of news may well be that the US military has prohibited its employees from accessing certain news websites on the internet on the grounds that they may contain classified information. The explicit target is The Intercept, the online journal created by Glenn Greenwald and Pierre Omydar. Greenwald is the journalist who reported on Edward Snowden's NSA leaks for The Guardian in 2013.

Like the imperial wars of yore, the internet, that wonderful device invented by an Englishman and developed in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century for easy, transparent, and democratic exchanges, has proven to be a superb mechanism for consolidating public power and private money in the hands of a few, while giving the rest of us plenty of entertainment and minor voices; or cute toys. And here is where my symbolic, fluffy Furbies come in. Or perhaps, as I claim, the Furbies "the rest of us" have become.

Furbies constitute a fine American Studies topic. As you will easily find out by checking Wikipedia, a Furby is an electronic, robotic toy looking rather like a hamster with owl-like features. This domestically-aimed robot was created by two American inventors, Dave Hampton and Caleb Chung, in the 1990s, and was first introduced to the public at the American International Toy Fair in 1998. The Furby official website tells you that Furbies have locations all over the world, but for some reason not in Portugal, though I do remember having seen Furbies in the hands of Portuguese children a decade ago.



FIGURE 1 - Furby (Voodoo Purple version - 2012 - of the American electronic robotic toy first released in 1998 by Tiger Electronics)

Credits: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/70/Furby_picture.jpg.
For the Furby Official Website, go to <https://www.hasbro.com/en-us/brands/furby>.

Furbies speak only Furbish to start with (you will find hilarious examples online), but they are programmed to begin speaking English gradually, a process intended to resemble language learning. The robotic capabilities of the toy kept being improved. Allegedly, Furbies gradually became capable of repeating, parrot-like, overheard information. No wonder the toys were a big hit in the United States during the holiday season up until 2007, and became favorite playthings at home and even in the workplace, evidently, in the latter case, for much needed relaxation in boring, bureaucratic jobs (like NSA). They had a comeback in 2012 and again in 2014. A recent development was that Furby eggs hatched and colorful Furblings mushroomed. The latest news is that a Furby film is on the making.¹⁰



FIGURE 2 - The Furblings, the egg-produced Furbies' children

Credits: <http://www.furbymanual.com/furblings-are-here/>

In 1999, the NSA banned Furbies from its headquarters in Fort Mead, Maryland, for security reasons. The concern appeared to be that, if employees took the little cuddly, electronic creatures home with them, the toys might repeat classified information for potential enemy spies to hear.¹¹ The Wikipedia page on Furbies reassures us, however, that such extravagant capability is a myth; in other words, there is no danger

¹⁰ See <http://variety.com/2016/film/news/afm-bob-weinstein-furby-movie-twc-dimension-1201907667/>. Accessed on 01.10.2017.

¹¹ Julian Borger, 1999.

that Furby blabber might put the security and might of the United States at peril. But the opposite might be the case. For is it not true that, more often than not, the public mechanisms that supposedly keep the American nation and world democracy safe do so by violating the constitutional rights of American and other citizens? Like prying into and meddling with computers and smartphones. What is truly at stake is our right as citizens to privacy, as well as our right to know how our governments govern us, and to what extent our governments justify that they have the right to invade our privacy and spy on us without a court warrant for our own good.

In 2014, Edward Snowden revealed that the cute little creatures that Furbies are had been used by NSA for the domestic spying of ordinary Americans. In a Skype interview with Adrian Pang for The Arena, Snowden explained how Furbies were used to spy on children and profile American families and their values for political and commercial purposes.¹² Furthermore, it appears, since 1999, the British surveillance agency we know as GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters), with help from NSA, actively spied on (or is it, “intervened” in?) thousands of Furby users via built-in webcams and microphones. According to Snowden, leaked documents show that GCHQ intercepted millions of video images as part of a secret program code-named OPTIC NERVE. No wonder a movement to resist surveillance began then speaking of the need to have the cute Furbies destroyed.

Some commentators dismiss accusations that NSA uses the Furby toys to spy on innocent individuals, by arguing that the articles denouncing such spying are just facetious anecdotes tampering with people’s credulity. Perhaps this is also the case of the hightech coke cans said to have been offered in a promotion by the Coca Cola Corporation, and subsequently banned by security officers from classified meetings for security reasons.¹³ Be that as it may, the fact is that the revelations of Edward Snowden about NSA as reported by journalist Glenn Greenwald and documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras leave no doubt as to the ominous cyber surveillance/surviolence of which we may all be targets already. The purple voodoo Furbie I selected as an illustration is just my metaphor for the kind of risk society in which the unprecedented technological progress the internet represents may already have us all trapped as well.

Risk society was a term coined in the 1980s in western cultures and canonized by German sociologist Ulrich Beck in his 1986 title: *Risikogesellschaft* (Risk Society).¹⁴

¹² Accessed on 02.04.2014, at <http://flagra.pt/noticias/sociedade/furbies-usados-pela-nsa-para-espionagem-18394>.

¹³ Accessed on 03.05.2014, at <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/armysecurityagencyvets/conversations/topics/84893?var=1>.

¹⁴ Ulrich Beck, 1986 and 1992.

According to Beck and other risk sociologists, the process of industrialization of modern western society has entailed deep structural changes, both internally and in society's relations with nature. New technologies brought about new problems that are inextricably linked to the concept of "risk." It is not so much that the said new problems imply more dangers than before, but that most dangers are now viewed as being human made and socially generated. Social actors are thus both producers of risk and made accountable for risk management. The risk society is concerned with (often, it seems, helplessly) climate change, financial crises, unemployment, inequality, poverty, epidemics, street unrest, terrorism. And, more recently, digital information. Needless to say, the powerful 1% are almost 100% immune to risk.

In a recent interview, Ulrich Beck broadened the concept of risk society to include electronic communication and went on to assert "that digital freedom risk is one of the most important risks we face in modern society." Other societal risks have often resulted in catastrophes – the Love Canal or Chernobyl; 9/11 or murderous US drones; exclusion of migrants coming from poor countries who get killed before reaching their destiny; massive migration of highly educated young people of supposedly bailed-out European semi-peripheral countries or from war-devastated countries in the Middle East. In the case of digital freedom risk, the catastrophe will be truly of global proportions, when we find ourselves in a global digital empire, an empire in which surveillance can literally go beyond social and territorial units and the lives of all the individuals within the empire will be totally transparent and can be thoroughly profiled, monitored, and manipulated. For their own good, of course, and for the good of all. Big Brother transmogrified into ubiquitous, cute little Furbies, while, at the same time, as inscrutable and unaccountable as the fluffy little Furbies themselves.

The real catastrophe resides, however, in our not seeing it coming, not feeling as though our freedom is being violated. "There is no physical coercion," I'm quoting Ulrich Beck again, "and we even uphold an illusion that better technology can provide answers to the problem [...] We could find ourselves living in a global state of surveillance and we wouldn't even recognise it until it was too late."¹⁵ Now, who knows? We might be there already, regardless of the well-meaning Charter for Human Rights and Principles for the Internet, if it weren't for the resistance and civil disobedience of courageous whistleblowers like Edward Snowden, investigative journalists like Glenn Greenwald, and newspapers like The Guardian and The Washington Post. The good news is that both these periodicals, and I quote from The Guardian, were awarded the 2014 Pulitzer Prize "for public service for their

¹⁵ Social Europe Journal (interview 08.04.2014).

groundbreaking articles on the National Security Agency's surveillance activities based on the leaks of Edward Snowden."¹⁶ Both papers were credited with sparking a much-needed discussion about the relation between the secrecy of national security surveillance and the right of citizens to both security and privacy, as well as to the democratic transparency in governance that ought to ground one and the other. The bad news is that The Washington Post ended up dishonoring its responsibility. After being awarded the Pulitzer, and having eagerly accepted it, for publishing information provided by Edward Snowden on the unconstitutional surveillance activities of the National Security Agency, the paper recommended that the former contractor be condemned for having broken the law. The Post's unwittingly ironic editorial of 17 September 2016, at a time when the campaign for Snowden's presidential pardon was at its height, is very instructive. Regardless of his many admirers, whose support is expected to double once Oliver Stone's film is widely seen,¹⁷ the editorial surprisingly states, Edward Snowden committed several crimes and does not deserve Obama's pardon; he should return to the United States and face espionage charges. That is to say, for his courageous whistleblowing, Snowden should accept the harsh consequences endured by Chelsea (Bradley) Manning for denouncing the wrongdoing of the American military abroad. The Post's dishonesty and hypocrisy was promptly denounced by Glenn Greenwald in The Intercept on 18 September 2016. The piece's title says it all: "WashPost Makes History: Paper to Call for Prosecution of Its Own Source (After Accepting Pulitzer)." No wonder Glenn Greenwald is the most vocal advocate of resistance to State electronic surveillance.¹⁸

Still worse news is that civil disobedient Edward Snowden remains in forced exile in Russia, his life in jeopardy. He would have been praised by the most famous civil disobedient American, Henry David Thoreau, who once said: "Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. The obedient must be slaves" (1847).¹⁹

As scholars of English and American Studies, what else should we be but properly disobedient Anglicists and Americanists?

¹⁶ The Guardian, 14 April 2014. Accessed on 13.11.2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/apr/14/guardian-washington-post-pulitzer-nsa-revelations>.

¹⁷ Oliver Stone's biographical political thriller Snowden was released in September 2016.

¹⁸ See Glenn Greenwald, 2014. A good survey of the Snowden affair and Greenwald's concern regarding State secret surveillance is Rebecca Rice, 2015.

¹⁹ Apud Roderick MacIver, 2006, p. 23. See also David Hackett Fischer, 2005, p. 29.

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