



The dark riders of the internet?

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review of

Coleman, G. (2014) *Hacker, hoaxer, whistleblower, spy: The many faces of Anonymous*. New York, London: Verso (PB, pp. 476, £9.99, ISBN: 9781781689837).

This is by far not the first review of Gabriella Coleman's book to begin with. But it is one that is written in the context of a concentrated effort to explore the various dimensions of anonymity within anthropology and further afield. Although Coleman's book is not exactly about anonymity as a concept, it is a worthwhile addition to the overall discussion in its very own way. In its mixture of social history and ethnography it provides a political anthropology of a social movement, whose ideology is intrinsically linked to the history of the Internet, its promises and a particular culture of anonymity that once used to be among the drivers behind many digital developments, but has ceased in importance since the corporate world took over and commodified every bit of information that we have.

Anonymity, which used to be part of the many narratives which were circling around the Internet in the 1980s and early 1990s, has been transformed from a possibility towards an almost futile necessity in the face of big data, doubtful data protection policies and the overall commodification of information and data. So with this back story in mind, Coleman's book can be read as a strong case for why anonymity as a social concept is an essential for a democratic society, and one that has been neglected lately. But the book itself is not about the concept itself.

So what is it about? Ultimately *Hacker, hoaxer, whistleblower, spy* (HHWS) is about a social movement, maybe the most important social movement that has its roots

in Internet culture. Coleman is telling the history of this movement, of the many individuals that shaped it, its culture and the impact it has made with its quite peculiar forms of activism. An activism that is not manifested in demonstrations, but recognisable in terms of the consequences Internet attacks have on our digital world. In this regard Coleman is providing an in-depth account of one of the most intriguing social movements in recent years, as its mode of action, its forms of protests and its identity are at the same time a product of the arising digital society, but also constantly questioning such a society's very integrity. Anonymous is a child of the digital age and conscious about its shortcomings and weak spots.

The book is built around 11 chapters that are more or less chronologically arranged. Each chapter focuses on a particular action and point in time in the development of Anonymous. It starts with the year 2007, when Anonymous appeared on the scene with their attack on the Church of Scientology who were really the first who fell prey to a collaborative effort of what is called a *distributed denial of service* attack (DDoS). From thereon Coleman recounts the origins of the group and most importantly the culture it emerges from, i.e. a hacker culture that was involved in trolling, pranks and hacks since the early 1980s, but which turned political in the sense Anonymous did only in the early 2000s. Coleman's task is described on [51], when she explains what her research is actually looking at, i.e. to find out whether 'the cesspool of 4chan (an online bulletin board serving as a communication channel, my addition), really [did] crystallize into one of the most politically active, morally fascinating, and subversively salient activist groups operating today?'

Coleman uses a different action of protest of Anonymous to explore its struggles and successes, while simultaneously explaining more about her own research methods and the ethnographic approach. So we learn about Anonymous' involvement in the Arab Spring, the so-called Green Revolution in Iran, the protest against the Anti-counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), and some of the more spectacular cases connected to Wikileaks and the US government, especially relating to the intelligence services. Most of the accounts are descriptive, however they provide a very thick description in their very own way. One could take issue with the fact that Coleman often puts herself at the centre of those accounts, which seems however necessary to understand her approach and the complicated entrance to the group. Hence the reader learns a lot about the movement and the hacker culture in general, but also about a wonderful piece of fieldwork in the digital age, which she reflects upon constantly. It is important to note that Coleman became involved with the group at a different level than just an observer. She was rather fully accepted as someone that could speak about (and sometimes it almost seems for) the group. Her research was largely viewed as important and trustworthy by those identifying as Anonymous.

In his review for his own blog ('media/anthropology') John Postill (2015) finds that Coleman has actually written two books, one in which the coming of age of the Internet is portrayed through the actions of Anonymous and a second in which what he calls 'an account of the continuity-in-diversity that makes Anonymous what it is' is being told. All is held together by an outstanding ethnography, which Haidy Geismar (2015) concentrates on in her review for HAU. And, indeed, the ethnography is rich, outstanding, inspiring. It has so many layers and dimensions that make it a prime example of what ethnography and anthropological analyses is able to achieve in a world that is spreading from the 'real' to the 'virtual' world and back so many times, it finally becomes clear that such distinction is of no further use. The shine of *HHWS* lies in the ethnography and especially the tone and Coleman's ability to tell a story right. It is as much an anthropological account as it is a crime story, a thriller, a journey into a world that lies hidden as the dark antipode of all our online lives, ready to threaten us just by way of a computer keyboard and the will to act from behind the scenes. Reviews in the mass media focus on this fascination with the movement, the clandestine, the secret, but also the resistance and the hints at conspiracies that lurk behind in the dark (e.g. Bartlett, 2014). Much of what we knew of Anonymous before *HHWS* was hearsay and borne in our imagination – *HHWS* gives it a form, even names, faces and an identity behind quirky nicknames and the prank the movement originates in. With the cases of Wikileaks, Assange and Snowden now being household issues, cyber resistance originating in the pranks and practical jokes, has grown from something to be regarded as childish and irrational to something many citizens around the world may feel to be utterly necessary to protect citizens' rights and democratic values. *HHWS* is providing the background for why this transformation has taken place, as it can show how this has also taken place within Anonymous itself.

However, with that said, there are a few issues the book does not explore further, although Coleman touches upon them. One is concerning a theory about hacktivism. Coleman does not provide the reader with a more analytical view stemming from the insights of her research, she remains on the level of description for most of the book. Thus, she does not situate her research in the existing forms of hacker research made by others such as Tim Jordan, who wrote extensively on hacking and digital forms of social protest (cf. 2002, 2004, 2008).

And then there are some issues Coleman's account instigates and which could be worth following. Beyond the ethnography itself, this to me is a real strength of her account, i.e. to provoke further thinking with a lot of ideas that are more or less implicitly stated within her text. From the perspective of a social anthropologist these ideas include questions of identification, deviant behaviour, norms and not least questions of equality in societies or social groups. One particular question I

became interested in when reading the book was circling around the issue of power in relation to anonymity and whether Anonymous had the possibility to become totalitarian precisely because of its anonymous structures – an issue also raised by Lovink (2012) and still one worth bearing in mind. Although this presupposition of mine has vanished with the progress of the book, I still feel it should be addressed as this is an important point, especially to avoid a mystification of the movement.

Concerning Anonymous' nature of communication and the social relations between members of Anonymous on the various IRC channels, it was one quote by Coleman that struck me instantly when reading it. On [180] Coleman, or *Biella* as she has nicknamed herself on IRC¹, recounts the following conversation, after she has been kicked out of a channel, but let back in straight after that:

<Topirary>: Hi biella, apologies for the kick.

<biella>: no it is ok

<biella>: you gave a fair warning :-)) and I have been too too idle

<biella>: more than i would like

<Topirary>: We're just usually very strict and sometimes a little paranoid of *unidentified* users here. [*my accentuation, nz.*]

Although she remarks on the issue of how reputations are being made and what is deemed acceptable behaviour in mutual conversations between members of an IRC channel, she does not take up this lead here. In this case, her interest lies in how trust is built up and how she experienced it in a real situation as part of her fieldwork. The incident leads her to discuss the often difficult and tricky relations between outsiders and the members of Anonymous. I was struck by the apparent contradiction that surfaced, i.e. the wish to remain anonymous and identify users on the IRC channel at the same time. Thinking about anonymity as a general concept and as a mode that classifies and hence regulates social interaction, this brief chat indeed raises a major question: how is identification possible under modes of anonymity? And, are these two categories mutually exclusive, or rather, as I would argue, different possibilities of social interaction that may overlap and even share a few aspects? It certainly needs further research to answer this

1 IRC = Internet Relay Chat is a text-only based communication platform that was developed in the 1980s. It is organised along channels and allows for group chats as well as 1-to-1-communication. It is an important technology for the communication of Anonymous.

question, but *HHWS* provides some examples as to why the connection is important and more complicated than one would think.

The inherent connection between anonymity and identity (which is an almost subterranean motive in *HHWS*, but not explicitly theorised by Coleman herself) also brought me to change my mind concerning the assumption that Anonymous as a group, although having the vital potential for becoming totalitarian, in practice does not. Coleman points out pretty much at the outset of the book that 'it (is) almost impossible to know when or why Anonymous will strike, when a new node will appear ...' [17]. This seems to vest them with ultimate powers, almost totalitarian. Their anonymity paired with the technological knowledge gives them such powers without accountability. However, it becomes clear in the book that this is not the case at all, i.e. it is not what Anonymous is after. Although Anonymous is about power relations – and the group very much questions existing modes and flows of power – they also have to deal with power structures and struggles within the group that make them vulnerable. Hence, they have to develop procedures of establishing trust, identifying mistrust and hence engage in identity formation, as their mode of organisation is rather loose, without much official regulation, mostly self-organised following informal codes of the hacker culture. From this point of view, *HHWS* is even more important than the geeky story of resistance against big business and the corporate world. *HHWS* is telling the story of how trust is possible among people and within a group that have a rather adverse attitude towards clear identification. The culture rather lives on the ideology of obscure nicknames and on the obfuscation of one's links to any form of 'real' life. Coleman does not use this, nor does she address these issues, but she gives enough accounts in her ethnography for others to follow up on this issue. And hence, on yet another issue that is connected to the question of identity, i.e. equality, social norms and the sanctioning of deviance.

The issue of deviance and norms is a constant issue in her book, albeit not explicitly brought to the fore by her. Whom to trust, what is acceptable behaviour, how to punish? These are core questions – sociologically and anthropologically – of how society actually works and what keeps a collective together, despite the infringement of norms. In the case of Anonymous this brings us back to discussions from the early 1990s and whether the Internet could foster new utopian ideas about equality based on anarchistic concepts rather than on hierarchical ones. Coleman uses the !Kung of the Kalahari desert to make her points of how alternative ways of resisting domination may be played out [189]. In this case it is by use of ridiculing a person to keep her or him in line. Such procedures are well known in research on social control, i.e. the use of laughter, shame, gossip, naming and so forth (cf. Gluckman, 1963). The lack of hierarchy in a society or social group is not a sign of weakness or a deficit, but in many cases

a conscious decision to resist domination and centralised powers as e.g. Pierre Clastres has shown in *'société contre l'état'* or Christian Sigrist in *'Regulierte Anarchie'*. In Coleman's own words: *'The teasing helps keep egos in check'* [189].

HHWS provides a rich resource on how social control does work in which trolling, harsh language, deviant behaviour and the resistance of domination are endemic, but that is also able to generate collective actions and form social bonds despite the unlikely surroundings. The forms of communication the members of Anonymous choose to organise for themselves are built in such a way that they may remain anonymous to each other – and to outsiders in particular. Coleman shows that this is only one way of looking at it, as they do put a lot effort in regulating their social interaction, establishing trusts and knowledge about each other, while trying to remain anonymous to their outside world, especially the media or law enforcement agencies. The Internet makes it easy to fake identities, to pretend you are someone else, but for Anonymous to work as a social movement and to stage collaborative actions, they need to get together as a group and act accordingly. This means to trust each other. Coleman shows how the sensitivity of these processes, and that to be anonymous does not necessarily mean to be unknown to one another or to mistrust each other. And while they always remain anonymous to the outside world, they have developed forms of communication and ways of knowing and passing that open up new ways to think about this issue.

In this regard Coleman could have taken up discourses about the emancipatory potential of the Internet and the digital that were more common 20 to 25 years ago and seem forgotten today. Maybe HHWS is a possibility to bring back these discussions, as it clearly shows that anonymity and the threat that Anonymous may pose for some does have a bigger social potential than just it being a movement of protest and covert action against the rulers of the world. Its socially relevant potential should not be dismissed and it is Coleman who provides new material, new perspectives and new questions to again engage in this discussion, despite the fact that she does not address it herself.

Gabriella Coleman has made an important and convincing contribution to understand what goes on in the underbelly of the digital. If I should have to choose one point to criticise, it would be that the descriptive site of the whole narrative has way too much room, while the analyses does not go too much beyond the material, does not address those issues that concern the very nature of what Anonymous maybe is all about as a movement, a social group, especially with reference to the concept the group borrowed its name from. While Coleman wrote a book about Anonymous as a social movement performing its actions on the threshold between the clandestine and the limelight, the concept of anonymity remains untouched. But even so, HHWS provides food for thought on a variety of questions, e.g. on

the relationship between anonymity and power or how trust can be manufactured beyond the usual regimes of identification and so-called transparency. If we take trust to be a central element to engage in collective action or to establish social relations, HHWS is giving examples of how this is possible despite the personal knowledge of a person. New forms of accountability could be explored, social formation may be theoretically explored based upon different, if not new and largely changed conditions. With Coleman, we can discuss the possibilities and limits of egalitarianism, but also find arguments as to why anonymity has to remain possible in a world that is eager to have everything identifiable, surveilled and controlled. The research project Reconfiguring anonymity, which is also responsible for this special issue here, will hopefully help to engage in these discussions.

Regardless of this point the book is a goldmine when it comes to understanding how Anonymous as a group work, how its very existence is bound to global politics and how its dynamic is shaped by the ongoing struggle of resistance against domination, ignorance of and misconduct against human rights. Anonymous are neither the White Knights of the digital age, nor are they the new Robin Hoods. They are somewhere in between and yet entirely different.

If Eric Hobsbawm would have written his book *Bandits* today, he would have certainly included Anonymous and rightly so in all its ambivalence and importance in an age of big data, unfettered spying on citizens and an apparent powerlessness against the powers that be. And Gabriella Coleman's account would have been a prime source.

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