

James T. Hong

The Suspicious Archive: A Prejudiced Interpretation of the Interpretation of Archives, Part I

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The Idea of an Archive

An archive is a non-random collection of things, or the place where such a collection resides. The concept of non-randomness or purposiveness implies that archivists have a reason for archiving – that an archive is a meaningful project with a set of goals. It is possible to generate an archive by accident, so long as some party in the future can attribute meaning to this accidental collection of things.¹ An accumulation of dangerous nuclear waste is not normally considered an archive, but the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico fits my definition of a “non-random collection of things.” Just as a collection of ruins functions as an archive for archeologists and other scientists, in the far future the vast collection of nuclear waste in the New Mexico desert should provide abundant clues to the civilization that produced it. In this case, the primary archival materials are injurious to human life, and if future generations are unaware of their danger, signage in multiple languages will provide clues. Accurate interpretation can be a life-and-death matter.

Three very basic questions are asked of any archive:

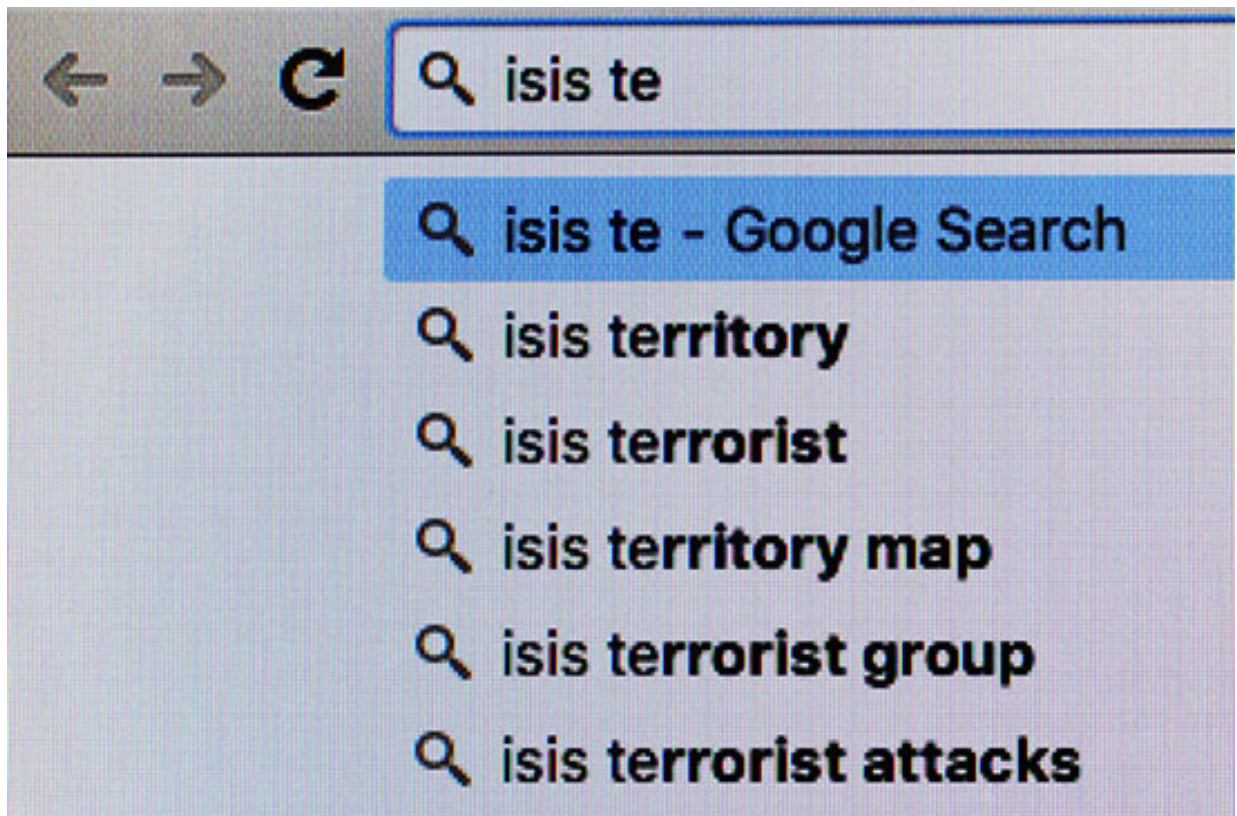
1. Why does this archive exist?
2. What is missing from the archive?
3. Why does this archive contain this item rather than another?

One of the most famous archives in the world is the US National Archives and Records Administration, run by the US government. A lesser-known archive on the West Coast of the US is the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Containing an astonishing amount of documents and other objects, both present a controlled picture of the past and the present.² Access to these archives is restricted, and each contains items that frequently shed a poor light on the past actions of the US government. But the sustained presence of these items in the archive, and the existence of the entire archive itself, represent the continued power and justification of the US as an ongoing national concern. This understanding of the *raison d'être* of archives such as these should be uncontroversial, and in fact their mission statements reflect this interpretation.³

Furthermore, the vast breadth of these archives attests to the global superpower status of the US. Some items in their collections are contested and function like artworks plundered during the Age of Imperialism. For example, the diaries of Chinese generalissimo Chang Kai-shek are housed at the Hoover Institution, where access is restricted and copying forbidden. Given the historical importance of Chiang Kai-shek to the modern history of China and Taiwan, doesn't it make more sense for his diaries (or at least a



An ad hoc archive made from items taken from the author's pocket.



Some auto-typed keywords as suggested by Google.

copy of them) to be housed in an archive in Taiwan or perhaps China?⁴ Rather than languishing in a basement in California, shouldn't Chiang Kai-shek's diaries be accessible to the very public he so greatly affected? The fact that they're in the US, under lock and key, demonstrates the US's political relationship to Taiwan and China.

The whole internet itself can be considered a vast, if decentralized, archive. Due to its unfathomable size and ever increasing growth, a search engine like Google, Bing, or Baidu is required for examining and cataloguing its contents. Just as we are not unbiased (we have our own beliefs and preferences), Google and other search engines are not ideologically neutral research tools.⁵

As the dominant internet search engine in the world, Google can arrange and hierarchize information, putting what its engineers and their algorithms regard as most important at the top of search results. This ability to rank information gives Google enormous power, the operation of which is, for the most part, unrecognized by its users. Researchers have shown that SEME ("search engine manipulation effect") can be especially effective in altering perceptions of politicians during elections. Thus Google can also operate as an invisible kingmaker in world affairs.⁶

We should also consider the ideologies that social media corporations themselves promote. Corporate authorities collaborate with government entities to block and remove material that they deem unacceptable, such as support for terrorism and calls to violence. But who polices the web police? And isn't rational (or irrational) discussion of ideas, no matter how ugly they might be, a pillar of a "free society"? Removing the "ugliness" cleanses the archive, and the archive *is us* for future generations. This cleansing is thus a gross manipulation of the record of our present world.

Censorship is not only top down. As subjects and consumers we also knowingly and unknowingly censor ourselves to conform to society's standards. A good citizen knows that there are some beliefs and thoughts that she should not make public (even though reckless people habitually do so on social media). There are certain things we should not say and perhaps may not say. It is rare for us to actively gather information that might dispel or debunk our generic view of the world. Everyday, millions of people search Google for things they already know or already accept. Google even provides a list of key search-words before one finishes typing! According to internet pioneer Eli Pariser, "a world constructed from the familiar is a world in which there's nothing to learn – invisible

autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas."⁷

In other words, our prejudices are reaffirmed, digitally, everyday – and in an ever increasing fashion by the use of web personalization. According to former Yahoo executive Tapan Bhat, "The future of the web is about personalization ... now the web is about 'me.'"⁸

Pornography is one of the most profitable industries on the internet, so we can also consider the internet a gigantic archive of porn. Porn offers us seemingly any fetish, and though the porn consumer might try a few new kinky things, he knows what gets him off. When it comes to pornography, we already understand what we see before we even see it. Our expectations reveal a prior comprehension regardless of any particular content. This pre-recognition, or predisposition, can be understood as a pre-judgment or prejudice in a *hermeneutic* sense. Prejudices are usually considered unreflective, knee-jerk reactions. The word "prejudice" is a pejorative, and well-educated citizens of developed nations pride themselves on resisting prejudiced thinking and claims, especially those concerning social issues. This is a purely negative conception of prejudice – a prejudice against prejudice. In this conception, prejudices only serve to limit thinking and restrict interpretative horizons.

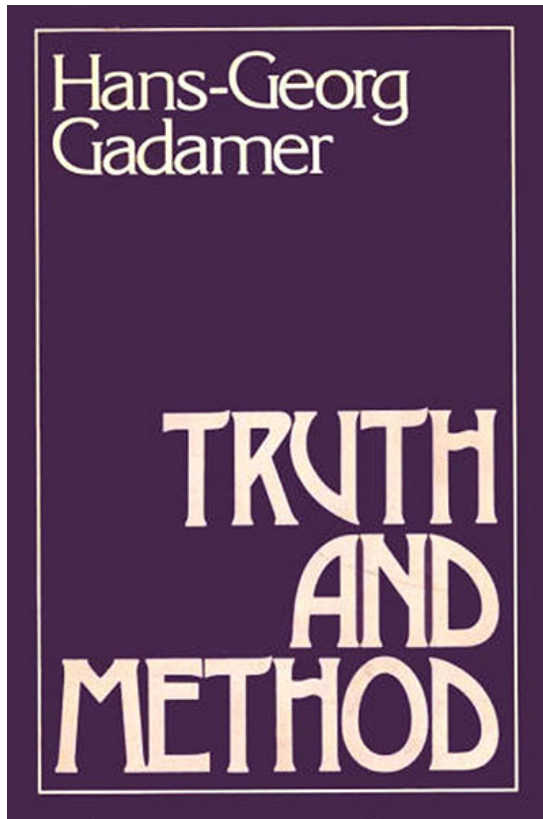
In his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (1960), the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer takes pains to rehabilitate the hermeneutic positivity of prejudice. While prejudices can and frequently do limit the horizons of thinking, they are also an essential part of an anticipatory structure of human understanding. We do not produce cultural objects, such as texts and artwork, spontaneously out of nothing. Rather, we create them within a social world this is already loaded with meaning before we ever come into existence. In the jargon of Gadamer's infamous mentor Martin Heidegger, we are thrown into a world that "always already" has meaning. Education is a form of conceptual and social training that prepares us for whatever events might occur in the future, short of total catastrophe. This conceptual training is the indoctrination of prejudices, which equips us with the skills for understanding our shared social world.

The Hermeneutic Circle: Human Existence Is Itself Interpretative

As a young philosophy student, Gadamer trained with Heidegger, who had expanded the conventional method of textual interpretation, or hermeneutics. Traditionally, hermeneutics

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The cover of the English translation of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* uses a font in an art nouveau style.



A special edition swipe card for Taiwan's metro system features a Japanese porn star and special packaging. Photo: EasyCard Corporation, Taiwan.

focused on biblical exegesis and the development of a rigorous procedure for interpreting sacred texts. German theorists such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey applied the methodology of hermeneutics to the interpretation of any text and to the human sciences and humanities themselves.

When we pick up a text – the Bible, a dime-store novel, or even an artwork – we already have a general, if vague, idea of what it *will* contain. This original anticipatory awareness of the text guides our understanding, while also being revised as we read further. In Heidegger's words, "Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted."⁹ This basic interpretative structure is called the "hermeneutic circle." We have initial expectations concerning the whole text, which influence our understanding of its parts, which then affect our understanding of the whole. Our analysis of a text also complements and perhaps reframes our initial prejudices concerning it.

Moreover, the interpreter is always situated within a specific meaningful context, viewing the text from a certain cultural (or multicultural) perspective. The interpreter is versed in a particular social vocabulary or set of vocabularies and concepts, which affect and comprise his or her judgments concerning a text. A completely objective "view from nowhere" is impossible,¹⁰ and a situated view is necessarily a prejudiced one. For Heidegger, hermeneutic or interpretative understanding is not limited to the understanding of literal texts, but applies to our very human existence. Put nicely by the philosopher Cristina Lafont, "to be human is not primarily to be a rational animal, but first and foremost to be a self-interpreting animal."¹¹ In other words, interpretation is not simply an activity in the course of life; it is the very form of human life.¹² Understanding is always also interpretation, which is made possible and informed by prejudices.¹³

The notion of "being-in-the-world" (*In-der-Welt-sein*) is one of the most important concepts in Heidegger's early masterpiece *Being and Time* (1927). The world as traditionally conceived by philosophers and scientists is the totality of all entities in the universe – the entirety of the physical cosmos. In Heidegger's analysis, the world as it *usually* is to us is not some cold abstract entity, but rather a "referential context of significance" (*Verweisungszusammenhang der Bedeutsamkeit*). We are born or "thrown" into a society that already has meaning and value to many other human beings. We can understand this hermeneutic notion of the world as something akin to a culture. Infants are socialized and acculturated within an already

established cultural context – a nexus of potentialities, senses, paths, choices, histories, etc.¹⁴ This present and historical context communicates to us as "tradition." In *Truth and Method* Gadamer notably claims that

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*¹⁵

When referring to conventional or hackneyed interpretations, Heidegger uses the seemingly derogatory term "idle talk" (*Gerede*) – "the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one's own."¹⁶ Examples include the news, elections, scandals, and even what we assume to be our country's past. Notwithstanding the dreck that makes up gossip or the comments sections of websites, idle talk is a genuine social phenomenon that makes it possible for people to communicate despite having different levels of education, experience, and knowledge. Idle talk and the way in which things have already been interpreted are unavoidable and inescapable.

"Being that can be understood is language"¹⁷

We grow up in a cultural world of significance, and we share this world with everyone else within it largely through the mediation of language. In other words, the hermeneutic notion of the world is one that is *linguistically articulated*. As limited beings, we can never have a complete awareness of the entirety of our cultural world, but we can read or hear about it and thus share a common understanding of it. As Heidegger explains, "It is not so much that we see the objects and things but rather that we talk about them. To put it more precisely: we do not say what we see, but rather the reverse, we see what *one says* about things."¹⁸

In a linguistically articulated world, language is not simply a set of arbitrary signs that refer to objects within the world; language is rather the very means with which the world shows itself to us. Interpretive understanding is always a mediation between the strange and the familiar in some kind of *language*.¹⁹

Since we cannot escape our linguistic upbringing and its concomitant prejudices, it would seem as if we were trapped inside a vicious hermeneutic circle, and indeed Heidegger does consider it as such. His advice is not to attempt to avoid the circle, but rather to enter



A sizeable English language school for children across the street from a McDonald's in central Taipei, Taiwan. According to the motto of the Giraffe English School in Taiwan: "English is a beginning; character is forever."

into it “correctly.”²⁰ For Gadamer, being blindly imprisoned inside the hermeneutic circle, or conversely, being free to create any interpretation willy-nilly no matter how fanciful, would result in “hermeneutic nihilism,” which he opposes. The question is: How can we come up with satisfactory interpretations that are also truthful?

Understanding and knowledge occur within normative (and contestable) contexts. This is most obvious in scientific claims, which can be considered interpretations working within established scientific paradigms.²¹ The “politics of poetics” – the interpretation of artworks – is no less fraught with orientating prejudices. (An archive can be understood as one accumulation of history.)²² (The archive can be understood as the accumulation of history according to these matrices.)

Any normative context is prejudicial and betrays a basic interpretative attitude. The hermeneutics of trust or faith is Gadamer’s basic optimistic position; he believes that meanings can essentially be “restored” via philosophical hermeneutics. This is also the standard attitude of the biblical or religious scholar.

On the other hand, the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” as developed by philosopher Paul Ricoeur, pursues and uncovers conspiracies, lies, and omissions.²³ Ricoeur’s examples are Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, the three “masters of suspicion.” For Nietzsche, all interpretations, be they of texts or of one’s own life, betray a fundamental desire for a “will to power.” Marx focuses on class positions and cultural and economic products as hiding and justifying relations to the “means of production.” And Freud sees dream images and symbols as deceptive expressions of fantasies, wishes, and drives – usually sexual in nature – while the real truth remains unconscious. For each of these thinkers, the underlying meaning of a text is disguised or concealed. We should not simply trust the ostensible meanings we encounter in the world; we must decipher them. And if we can alter an already established interpretation (i.e., alter the status quo), then there is space for some kind of freedom.

For the suspicious theorist, if we become aware of our imprisonment inside the circle of false consciousness, then there is a possibility for liberation. But this suspicious attitude can easily turn so bitter that when we approach a text that we consider unreliable, we discern only malevolent intentions and outright lies. We should remember that propaganda is sometimes true and that even a lie is but one interpretation. Sometimes wading through the lies can reveal a pathway to the truth.²⁴

Edward Snowden described his cache of

classified documents as an “archive.”²⁵ He said he reviewed the archive of damning documents himself before selectively disclosing them to Western journalists, who themselves screened the documents again before publication. According to the journalists involved, “Several [documents] gave details of previously undisclosed intelligence operations abroad. There was no public interest in betraying them.”²⁶ In other words, the public release of only some of the documents is aimed at reinforcing the public’s suspicions and prejudices concerning American surveillance overreach – more confirmation than revelation. Moreover, without direct access to the archive, much of what the public really knows is mere idle talk.

Some American experts and politicians accuse Snowden of damaging national security, such as when he “carelessly” leaked information about the US government’s covert surveillance of Al Qaeda.²⁷ Snowden of course claimed that he was motivated by public interest. But which public? Like other libertarians, Snowden opposed the American program of Social Security, which, despite its critics, was implemented with the intention of enhancing the public good.²⁸ And like other young American nationalists, he also joined the US military hoping to fight in “the war on terror.” In his own words, “I wanted to fight in the Iraq war because I felt like I had an obligation as a human being to help free people from oppression.”²⁹

Deemed a hero by many in the US and around the world, Snowden’s actions have effectively buttressed American soft power (the dominant culture in the world) by showing that despite any crimes the US might have committed, there are still some great Americans who promote American exceptionalism and the US Constitution – an idealized American notion of liberty. According to Snowden, “America is a fundamentally good country ... We have good people with good values.”³⁰

Ultrationalists frequently believe in their own nation’s patriotic rhetoric and nationalist traditions more than their own governments do. As such, ultrationalists can become a threat by fomenting revolution or seeking radical governmental reform. Snowden sees himself in a similar light: “Perhaps, in such times, loving one’s country means being hated by its government.”³¹ In my reading, Snowden’s archive is designed to represent a form of ultrationalist American conscience.

WikiLeaks and Facts

Publicly represented by Julian Assange, WikiLeaks is both an organization and an archive. Like any good curator, Julian Assange and his

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team are guilty of selection bias, since WikiLeaks does not publish every submission it receives through its website. Moreover, the timing of its releases is designed for maximum propaganda value.

WikiLeaks' original mission was broadly journalistic – to create an “uncensorable version of Wikipedia”³² that was “designed to maximize the flow of information to maximize the amount of action leading to just reform.”³³ Assange's prejudices lean toward social justice, opposition to state violence, and the exposing of governmental lies and corruption – what he calls “positive political reform.”³⁴ Despite WikiLeaks' protestations to the contrary, its releases increasingly seem to reflect Assange's own convictions and grudges, e.g., against the US government and Hillary Clinton. WikiLeaks claims that its searchable database consists of “pristine primary source archives.”³⁵ “Pristine” implies completeness, but any real-world archive is unavoidably incomplete. And what is missing from an archive can be just as important as what is included.

Notably, Assange's organization is incapable of actually validating the content of its releases; that is to say, it cannot actually verify that what it publishes is true – it cannot verify facts. The best WikiLeaks can do is verify that the documents it publishes are authentic, e.g., that a diplomatic cable is a real one and not forged. But its authentication process remains mysterious, and we should remember that governments do at times document falsities. Moreover, if any of WikiLeaks' pristine primary source archives were in fact surgically tampered with (a word here, a short sentence there), there is currently no effective mechanism for catching such minute but perhaps significant manipulations.

So Assange's leaks have meaning, but this meaning is malleable. To WikiLeaks and its supporters, its archive represents proof of “the greatest unaccountable power of today – the United States and our Western democracies.”³⁶ For others, “WikiLeaks stands to improve our democracy,”³⁷ since “ours is shown to be a democracy that daily operates on the basis of lies, secrets, and mass ignorance.”³⁸ When it comes to WikiLeaks, “there are no facts, only interpretations,”³⁹ and if we search long enough on WikiLeaks – or Wikipedia for that matter – we'll find what we're looking for.

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All photos courtesy of the author, unless otherwise noted.

James T. Hong is a filmmaker and artist based in Taiwan. He has produced works about Heidegger, Spinoza, Japanese biological warfare, the Opium Wars, and racism and most recently completed a documentary about nationalism and disputed territory in the East China Sea. He is currently researching the concept of morality in East Asia and will present a new experimental work about Nietzsche and metempsychosis at the 2016 Taipei Biennial.

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1
So when the photographer Allan Sekula claims, for instance, that “clearly archives are not neutral: they embody-- the power inherent in accumulation, collection, and hoarding,” he is really talking about our interpretations of archives. See Allan Sekula, “Reading an Archive: Photography between Labor and Capital,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2002), 446.

2
Of all documents and materials created in the course of business conducted by the United States Federal government, only 1%–3% are so important for legal or historical reasons that they are kept by us forever”
<http://www.archives.gov/about/>

3
For example: “With its eminent scholars and world-renowned Library & Archives, the Hoover Institution seeks to improve the human condition by advancing ideas that promote economic opportunity and prosperity, while securing and safeguarding peace for America and all mankind”
<http://www.hoover.org/libraries/archives/about/our-mission>

4
Despite the wishes of the former dictator and his wife.

5
The “Great Firewall of China” is an all too obvious example of ideological bias, but at least the Chinese government is openly unapologetic about its comprehensive censorship program. Facebook claims in bad faith that “we as a company are neutral – we have not and will not use our products in a way that attempts to influence how people vote.” Quoted in Brandt Ranj, “Facebook promises not to use its product to influence the US presidential election,” *Business Insider*, April 15, 2016
<http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-promises-not-to-use-its-product-to-influence-the-us-presidential-election-2016-4>

6
See, for example, the study “The search engine manipulation effect (SEME) and its possible impact on the outcomes of elections”
<http://www.pnas.org/content/112/33/E4512.abstract>.
Facebook has recently been criticized for its ideological manipulation of “trending topics” and its blocking of WikiLeaks. See
<https://www.rt.com/news/353340-facebook-blocked-wikileaks-dnc/> and
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/24/facebook-changes-trending-topics-anti-conservative-bias>.

7

Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 15.

8
Quoted in *ibid.*, 8.

9
Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 194.

10
For the philosopher Thomas Nagel, objectivity as “objective ascent” is possible in stages, as some perspectives are obviously more objective than others. See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

11
Cristina Lafont, “Hermeneutics,” in *A Companion to Heidegger*, eds. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 265.

12
In Heideggerian patois: “Interpreting is a being which belongs to the being of factual life itself [Die Auslegung ist Seiendes vom Sein des faktischen Lebens selbst].” Heidegger, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 12.

13
These prejudices are not only the ideas, beliefs, and reactions that we have learned, recited, and absorbed in and from the past. They are also informed by the future – how we understand things in the present is also influenced by our desires and aims for the future. As Heidegger puts it, “In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself ... The latter does not arise from the former. Nor is interpretation the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding.” *Being and Time*, 188–89.

14
Even those children who purportedly lived among animals learned a “way of doing things,” though for Heidegger, nonhuman animals lack an understanding of being (*Sein*), which is unique to humans.

15
Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 278, italics in original.

16
Being and Time, 213.

17
Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 470.

18
Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 56.

19
Our conceptual vocabulary makes it possible for us to comprehend things in the world, but its limits (biases and preconceptions) can also restrict our understanding. A culture can be considered a linguistic interpretation of the world, and to grow up within this linguistic interpretation is to grow up in this world. Some cognitive scientists, such as Steven Pinker, argue that we do not actually think in different natural languages, but rather in a pre-cultural “mentalese” that is independent of words and spoken languages – some kind of syntax of brain states. See Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), chapter 3. Hermeneuticists focus on aspects of the cultural world; they do not claim that all thinking is performed in one’s native tongue, which is trivially false.

20
Being and Time, 194–95.

21
See Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).

22
See Suely Rolnik, *Archive Mania* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2012). Rolnik does not detail the prejudices, but instead only refers to such a “poetics.”

23
Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32–36.

24
What was formerly despised as unholy, forbidden, contemptible, fateful – all these flowers grow today along the lovely paths of truth.” Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 252.

25
Alan Yuhas, “John Oliver presses Edward Snowden on whether he read all leaked NSA material,” *Guardian*, April 6 2015
<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/apr/06/edward-snowden-john-oliver-last-week-tonight-nsa-leaked-documents>

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Luke Harding, *The Snowden Files: The Inside Story of the World’s Most Wanted Man*, (New York: Random House, 2014), 127.

27
Stewart Baker, “As evidence mounts, it’s getting harder to defend Edward Snowden,”

August 3, 2014, *Washington Post*
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/08/03/as-evidence-mounts-its-getting-harder-to-defend-edward-snowden/>

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Joe Mullin, “In 2009, Ed Snowden said leakers ‘should be shot.’ Then he became one,” *Ars Technica*, June 26, 2013
<http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2013/06/exclusive-in-2009-ed-snowden-said-leakers-should-be-shot-then-he-became-one/>

29
Harding, *Snowden Files*, 20.

30
Quoted in *ibid.*, 104.

31
Quoted in Glenn Greenwald, “Email exchange between Edward Snowden and former GOP Senator Gordon Humphrey,” *Guardian*, July 16, 2013
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/16/gordon-humphrey-email-edward-snowden>

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WikiLeaks homepage
<https://wikileaks.org/wiki/Draft:About>

33
Nick Davies, “Julian Assange profile: Wikileaks founder an uncompromising rebel,” *Guardian*, July 25, 2010
<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/jul/25/julian-assange-profile-wikileaks-founder>

34
Quoted in the documentary *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks*, dir. Alex Gibney, Focus World, 2013.

35
So said a spokesperson for Sunshine Press, of which WikiLeaks is a project. Quoted in Akbar Shahid Ahmed and Dana Liebelson, “WikiLeaks’ Motivations Aren’t What You Think,” *Huffington Post*, August 3, 2016
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/wikileaks-motivation_s_us_57a2575ee4b04414d1f365b1

36
Sarah Harrison, “Exposing the secrets of unaccountable power,” Press Release for Deutsche Welle, July 2, 2014
<http://www.dw.com/en/exposing-the-secrets-of-unaccountable-power/a-17753718>

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Evan Hansen, “Why WikiLeaks is Good for America,” *Wired*, December 6 2010
<http://www.wired.com/2010/12/wikileaks-editorial/>

38
Maximilian C. Forte, “On Secrecy, Power, and the Imperial State: Perspectives from WikiLeaks and Anthropology,” in *Force Multipliers: The*

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Instruments of Imperialism, ed.
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Alert Press, 2015), 213.

39
See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*,
267.

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