

Tout sur l'étonnante conversation entre Julian Assange et Cédric Villani, en visite à la prison de Belmarsh

All about the amazing conversation between Julian Assange and Cédric Villani, visiting Belmarsh prison

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[DeepL translation from French]

“Over quota.”

At the reception of Belmarsh prison, this morning of October 2023, the employee immediately delivered her verdict.

“Prisoner Julian Assange” will not be entitled to the book I brought him, he already has too many. How can you have too many books? Is a prisoner who reads too many books a more serious danger to society? I’m thinking of the thousands of books in my personal library that have overwhelmed so many movers, and I wonder what the administration would say. There is no time to ask myself too many questions, I must continue the formalities. My passport is checked, my proof of residence is registered, my hand stamped in invisible ink.

“You can only keep this with you. This is an administrative sheet that plays the role of permission to pass and a small sign to be kept tied around the neck, with the words “social visitor” and the number 658462. And everything else – electronic, pens, papers, wallets, notebooks, jackets, handkerchiefs, gourds, bags, newspapers ... – goes into the locker. Ah yes, I have the right to keep a maximum of 25 pounds sterling on myself, not of the books that are being read. I clear myself from everything, insert the 1-pound coin into the key mechanism of the instruction, wait quietly to be waved in. Ready to enter new territory.

A prison is a world in itself. With its own time and space, its permission to pass, its culture, its administration, its power relations, its economy. British prisoners have their own internal newspaper – full of failed escapes, miscarriages of justice, new prisons elsewhere in the world. And in a few moments, I will enter the most famous British prison, His Majesty’s Prison Belmarsh, which was once dubbed the “British Guantanamo.” One of the ten very high security prisons (category A) in Great Britain. It hosts some of the most wanted terrorists and serial killers, and more generally people whose escape “would pose a serious risk” to society. This is where Julian Assange, the most decorated journalist of the 21st century, survives.

“You see the first door open there in the big building on the other side of the courtyard?” You can go.”

Search by dog

This morning, ten or so visitors of all ages enter through this door. Papers and fingerprints checked. Waiting under guard. Barrier. Airport-style security check (not much left to deposit, but still shoes and belt). Metal detector search. Search of shoe soles. Body search. Examination of your throat, the underside of your tongue, your ears. Searching by dog, which comes jumping at you as if overflowing with affection. Examination of your accessories.

“Are your bracelets religious? Could you take them off?”

My wristbands for the Fête de l’Huma? Oh no, I wouldn’t call that a religion. Anyway, I can’t take them off unless I cut them off. A superior is consulted, and she authorises me to keep the suspect wristbands.

Next step. A door. A courtyard framed by very high walls. One door, two doors. We are silent, lined up behind a guard, like well-behaved ducklings behind their mother. Somewhere, someone on the verge of a nervous breakdown cries out. In the corridors, large posters lecture the prisoners, with close-ups of the face of a mother whose life has come to an end, of a little girl they have abandoned. And if you have drugs or prohibited items, this is your last chance to drop them off - the consequences can be terrible if you don’t.

Finally, after the last door, here’s the visiting room. It’s a refectory with around fifty tables, arranged in a regular grid, fixed to the floor with chairs around them. The walls are decorated with ‘social’ words - faith, family, friendship... I recite a poem by Aragon in a low voice, telling myself that this is probably the first time it has been spoken within these walls and that it is also our mission to spread poetry. Examination of my papers, my fingerprints, for the umpteenth time.

“It will be table C1, you see, over there.”

The prisoners haven’t arrived yet. They will have to stay firmly in place at their assigned table, their yellow armband indicating their status. You will be allowed to move around the visiting room, to buy small drinks from the refreshment bar. For an hour and a half, you’ll be their breath of fresh air, their link with human society.

I don’t really know what Julian will want, so I’ll start as simply as possible. “Two coffees, please. These are the slowest coffee machines I’ve ever seen in my life, and the employees admit it without complaint. All the more annoying as ‘my’ prisoner has just arrived and taken his place. Let it be said: the first time he appeared, there was no glowing moment between us, no magical Hollywood moment when I threw myself into his arms. At the time, I was stuck in the small world of reality, waiting for our coffees to be expressed by some flimsy technology.

A first time, yes! Not my first time in the prison world, all cold slowness and barriers - I’ve already been there to give popular science lectures, or to visit a member of parliament - but it’s the first time I’ve visited someone I care about in prison.

An air of wisdom from Tolkien's tales

I guess I'll have to get used to it: there are more prisoners in the world than ever before - 11 million, according to the observatories, the two biggest suppliers being the two great economic and technological empires, China and the United States of America. The most recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Narges Mohammadi, is languishing in an Iranian dungeon; one of my mathematician colleagues has tried his hand in Turkish jails; and I've come across quite a few journalists and intellectuals who have escaped from prison, not to mention the environmental activists who are regularly caught in police custody. In France, too, we have more prisoners than ever, and the Cour des Comptes has just published a damning report on the subject. Prison is in vogue.

But my first question, of course, is that of anyone visiting a loved one in prison. How are they doing?

Not very well, obviously. Overweight, neutral, weary, and how could it be otherwise? It's been over a decade since he's been able to walk down a street, go to a cultural event or climb a hill. Yet the long white-blond hair gives his face the air of a sage from Tolkien's fairy tales, and the sturdiness of his posture suggests a rock, rather than a defeated man. I approach without haste, finally making eye contact, and we embrace for a long time. We've never met before, but he's like a friend, we've already spoken to each other, and I know his wife, his children and his father well. But there's another, almost biological reason for the embrace: for a prisoner who lives in a 6 square metre box, spends 23 hours a day in complete isolation, and only has a friend around for two or three hours a week, this is the only time he can satisfy his natural need for human contact.

"Thank you for coming."

The Australian accent is barely perceptible - he joked that he was losing his accent already in seclusion at the Ecuadorian embassy in London (seven years). And the tone is soft and calm. It's not resignation, but the economy of a marathon runner, who knows he has to keep his emotions in check if he is to last - his ordeal has already lasted for so long, and may unfortunately last for a long time yet.

"Thank you. We should be thanking you, everyone."

Yes, we should all be grateful to Assange. No journalist has exposed as many scandals as he has. War crimes, corruption in the world of finance or politics, industrial espionage, tapping the phones of heads of state (including three presidents of the French Republic)... The list of powerful people, conspirators and crooked entrepreneurs who have something against him is endless. But the gigantic smear campaigns waged by his enemies and the length and complexity of the proceedings have reduced his team of active supporters to a trickle. For my part, it's only been three years since I joined them, proclaiming his unjust fate from the rooftops, including in Parliament, with François Ruffin and a few others - but if I have one regret, it's that I didn't open my eyes sooner.

I told him that I had grouped my visit with a trip to the Isle of Wight - a mythical place for the arts, poetry and budding photography, home of the greatest music festival of all time... But he had another angle, which I hadn't expected!

"Ah, the Isle of Wight, they've got a prison on it. That's where a former Yugoslav leader is imprisoned."

This is the first time, but not the last, that Julian has surprised me with his erudition. Yes, you can check, Radovan Karadzic is locked up on the Isle of Wight. In a category B prison, less secure than Belmarsh. But Karadzic was only found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity [committed during the Bosnian war (1992-1995)]. You have to believe that the journalist Assange is more dangerous.

What a symbol that he is being held in this very prison in Belmarsh. It was here that munitions were manufactured to conquer the world and maintain order and terror throughout the British Empire. This is the Arsenal district - after which the famous football club is named. And the prison is located right next to a gigantic historic warehouse of sensitive government data. Who could have imagined a more symbolic place to incarcerate a pacifist who dared to stand up against the misuse of defence secrets?

Political persecution

Julian and I start talking. I'm used to taking notes on everything and everywhere, but this time I'll have to rely on my memory alone. It's likely that our conversation is being discreetly eavesdropped on, but it's unlikely that I'll have access to the recording. We don't have a well-organised plan, we just move from one subject to another.

He knows all the facts by heart and the whole world knows them, at least the people who are honestly interested in the case. It is more than two years since the Swiss humanitarian law professor Nils Melzer published his exhaustive work, now published in five languages; the French version came out in 2022 under the title "l'Affaire Assange. Histoire d'une persécution persecution" (Editions Critiques). The case was referred to him in his capacity as rapporteur to the United Nations on torture and inhuman treatment. In hundreds of pages, Melzer has methodically dismantled the smokescreen that shrouded the affair - and which had initially deceived him. He has brought to light a world of dark miracles, where depositions are altered without the consent of the plaintiffs, where judges suddenly forget their procedures, where conflicts of interest are resolved by word games, and where Western democracies betray their Constitutions and their commitments on a daily basis. It is a painstaking, long-term piece of work, which has not prevented the British government (despite its involvement in the investigation) from dismissively describing its report as "amateurish". How can a Western democracy be taken seriously if it rejects the clear and substantiated voice of the United Nations, while brandishing international rules whenever it suits it?

Julian knows all this and knows that I know it. But what I can offer him today is discussion. Human contact, intellectual stimulation, the time of a conversation - something almost as precious to survival as hope or drinking water. Julian and I have been immersed in the same cultural bath, we've been fed a scientific-geek culture, we understand each other. He's read the great mathematicians - Turing, G.H. Hardy and Tim Gowers' 'The Princeton Companion to Mathematics'. When I tell him, in passing, that I recommend a homomorphic encryption company, he knows very well what we're talking about. Julian:

“Oh yes! I didn’t think homomorphic encryption was possible. So to convince myself I programmed a baby homomorphic encryption. Just the +1 function. Like the number of friends.

- Ha ! an encryption baby. You should also think about programming the -1 function, when you lose friends.

- It’s like public key encryption. The first time I heard about it, I couldn’t believe it.

- For homomorphic encryption, you need skills in both algebra and number theory and in numerical analysis.

- And you have both.

- No, I don’t. I understand numerical analysis, but algebra and number theory are foreign to me. It’s rare to master both. Among the great mathematicians of the moment, perhaps only Terry Tao can do that.

- Ah, Tao... He was at my university, in Melbourne.

- I thought you were at ANU [Australian National University, Canberra]?

- I went there too, for a while.

- I was there for a few months, in Canberra, they have a team working on fully non-linear PDEs [partial differential equations, a class of mathematical equations], perhaps the best in the world. I had to go and learn directly from them.

The conversation goes back and forth, multiplying references to our common pantheon. We talk about Erwin Schrödinger, his walks in the Tyrolean mountains, the forum for European integration that he founded in Alpbach. Heisenberg and his concept of technology reproducing itself like an organism. G.H. Hardy and his controversial vision of mathematical applications. Ramanujan’s supernatural intuition. Or the holy trinity of computer science, Turing-Shannon-Von Neumann, who achieved a synthesis between the pure abstraction of logic and the most concrete issues of war...

Systems thinking

A quick glance to the side. Looking embarrassed, Julian quietly interrupts the conversation to ask me if I can go and get him something else to eat and drink, now that there’s no queue at the refreshment bar. Of course, I should have thought of that. Coffee. Chocolate. Fruit. Julian is turning geopolitics on its head, but right now he’s physically dependent on me, his visitor for the day. He, a symbol of freedom in this infantilising environment, is incapable of feeding himself. Fortunately his wit is still there, and his ability to laugh - recently he leaked a funny letter to King Charles III, describing with panache, derision and black humour the sad life at Belmarsh, its vile food and its suicides.

“I suffer from not being able to move. You need to move, to walk, to get your thoughts moving. But I’m not complaining. Solzhenitsyn describes the gulag in Siberia... Being imprisoned in Siberia is even harder.

- But Solzhenitsyn was a genius, the wealth of detail and erudition in his works!

- He made himself a fake rosary from breadcrumbs (Julian uses his fingers to make an invisible rosary), which he used as a mnemonic aid for the chapters of his book that he kept in verse in his memory...

- A friend of a friend, who was imprisoned during the war, survived by writing poems in his head.

- For me, the hardest part was the first three months here, I had no books, and I was sharing my cell with a serial killer, I didn’t want to talk to him. I found the resources within me... I began to think about such simple things, to focus my attention on elementary geometry... starting again with a triangle... independent of its orientation, its lengths... a triangle that can be described with a single number... I reconstructed the most elementary geometry for myself, in my head... And little by little, more and more complex, until I reconstructed special relativity”

Julian’s correct and effortless use of the terms “special relativity” and “Vlasov equation” when referring to my own work is a reminder that he has a real background in physics. In a fascinating account, his former university classmate Niraj Lal explained how Julian’s contribution was to import into the field of democracy the systems thinking dear to scientists, the dimensional analysis that underpins physics courses. Having recognised the system’s tendency to concentrate information to its own advantage, he wondered how it could be structurally reversed. Giving citizens more control, and the powerful more obligations to be transparent: and that’s exactly why he belongs in a famous conference programme by the famous cryptographer Phillip Rogaway, “The Moral Character of Cryptographic Work”.

Snowden and Assange, bound by destiny to the point of sacrifice

When I ask him what a good training course in today’s journalistic challenges would be, he hesitates, thinks, and sidesteps the question: what he has been able to do, he has succeeded because he was thinking in terms of information flow and technology, but he does not have the academic culture of journalism, and he has no advice or instructions to give. And he’s not so sure he still has a say, after all.

“I think... I’ve become a symbol. Someone who stands up against the system.”

He said this in a thoughtful tone, as if apologising, as if prison had annihilated the flesh of his public persona to leave only an abstract, disembodied skeleton. I’m not going to let him devalue himself.

“It can be very powerful, a symbol or an image. Like the lone demonstrator facing the tanks in Tiananmen Square. Or David against Goliath.

- And people have a vague feeling that if Goliath wins, they lose everything...

- In politics, a symbol is often much more important than a programme.

- Ah ah, I was a very bad politician. I got 1.2% in the senatorial elections [in Australia in 2013]... It has to be said that my head wasn’t in the campaign, I was busier helping Snowden escape...

That's probably why I'm still in prison today..."

A mist in his eyes, and we understand. Manning, Snowden, Assange - the two whistleblowers and the publisher - these three have linked their destinies to the point of sacrifice. When the US administration blackmailed Manning into charging Assange in exchange for his release, she replied that she would rather starve than deviate from the truth. And Assange has every reason to be proud of having facilitated the escape of Snowden, the man who revealed the mass spying carried out without warrant by the NSA and the CIA on millions of citizens, Americans and foreigners alike, presumed to be suspects for no reason. Intercepting telephone conversations, tapping Internet cables. Snowden was convinced that he would probably receive a bullet in the head for his revelations, but it was something bigger than himself, and he let his ideals speak for themselves. Without his heroism, Europe would never have decided to adopt the General Data Protection Regulation. When Snowden asked for political asylum in France, France declined, twice. Heroism on the part of the individual, cowardice on the part of governments. And few nations have grasped what is at stake, locked in their own political game.

The actors in a global play

A guard passes by to say that my coffee must remain covered at all times. Good point: in my powerful hands, the lidless coffee cup could be a formidable weapon.

- Australian public opinion is for you now, and not just because you're one of them.
- Australian politics is shallow, it's a young democracy. But there is also good.

States are positioning themselves around Assange like actors in a play. In the role of persecutor, the United States. Mortally vexed at having had its war crimes and techno-control delirium exposed. In the role of the zealous damned soul, enforcer of evil deeds, the United Kingdom. Ready to betray its values, its constitutional rules, its glorious history, and to lie, lie and lie again through the voices of its ministers. In the role of the weak, collaborating under pressure, Sweden, which made it possible to set in motion the titanic legal procedure. In the role of the ingenuous, the butt of the joke, holding on to its alliances but hoping for the return of its brilliant, turbulent child: Australia. And what about France? The role of the cowards who look the other way. What pathetic excuses I've heard from members of the government for not dealing with Assange...

"Ah, you know, I prefer Snowden..." "We have a conflict of interest because one of our ministers was his defender..." "How can you argue that Britain is not a state governed by the rule of law?" "The geopolitical context is not favourable..." No member of the government dares say a word when the Biden administration demands extradition to try an Australian journalist, and uses all the drawers of a 1917 Espionage Act to demand 175 years in prison (yes, you read that right). To send a signal to the world: wherever you are, whoever you are, if you expose truths that disturb us, we will prosecute you.

"I tell them that books are my friends".

Julian is the centre of a global play, but he is also a human

being suffering in his body. I notice that his fingers are having trouble peeling the banana, so I help him as I would a clumsy child. And the discussion continues. Julian is not only a geek, as you'd expect, he also has a solid political culture. He's read Churchill ("a good writer but not a good person, an oppressor, and he cost a lot of soldiers their lives with his tactics. That's why the elections were so unfavourable to him after the war), Solzhenitsyn ("You absolutely must read 'The First Circle'") or Gramsci. We slide into futurism and fantasy, Philip K. Dick and Neil Gaiman... Assange and I have known books since we were children and we grew up with them, they are indispensable friends.

"Books. It's a good thing they let me read them now. I'd be dead without them. I made piles of them in my cell. I took away the bed, which wasn't doing me any good, I just kept a little mattress, like a yoga mat, and the space I gained I filled with books. From time to time, they want to take them away from me, expel them. I tell them they're my friends".

I'm talking about Pavel Florensky, the unclassifiable scientist and thinker who was crushed by the Soviets, who went so far as to destroy his library. I promise to send him his writings if they are translated into English.

5 minutes to go.

It's amazing how fast this has gone. I've still got £5 to spend and I want to go and buy him some more fruit. But it's too late, they've already closed the refreshment area. Damn them. I take stock with him, the authors I really need to look into are Gramsci and Solzhenitsyn. We have to end on a note of hope. Once again I stress the dedication of his luminous friends on the outside. Sylvi, who passed on my file to the prison authorities and looks after Julian's children when his wife has to go abroad to collect some prize or other awarded in the name of journalism or freedom of speech. Niels, the volunteer who gave up his job to help the cause and who will join me when I get out of prison to record a testimonial video. And the countless others who are aware, precisely or confusedly, of the investment of this David who has committed himself for them against the Leviathan-System.

It's time to say goodbye. The embrace will be even longer than at the finish. I set off again, returning the meal tray. One last look at the prisoner on table C1, his yellow armband on his forearm. He's already regained his stable, neutral air. Still on the long-distance run. I raise my left fist and he responds in kind. The fight goes on, despite everything. Eluard's lines come back to me:

"A man... who continues the fight
Against death against oblivion
Because everything he wanted, we wanted too.
We want it today."

Julian Assange “dangerously close to extradition” to the United States

Julian Assange, who has been imprisoned in the UK for four years, is “dangerously close to extradition” to the United States. This was the warning issued at the beginning of June by the NGO Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) following the rejection by the High Court in London of the WikiLeaks founder’s appeal against the extradition order signed by the British government a year earlier. In the US, where he is accused of espionage for the publication of more than 700,000 confidential documents on US military and diplomatic activities - particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan - the Australian faces up to 175 years’ imprisonment. An appeal, the last of its kind in the UK, was immediately lodged by his defenders. A hearing is due to take place shortly. In the event of another setback, the European Court of Human Rights, to which the case was referred in December 2022, will be their last hope. “If the US government succeeds in extraditing Julian Assange and prosecuting him under the Espionage Act, all those who publish articles based on leaks of classified information could be prosecuted and, ultimately, it is our right to be informed that will be affected”, warns RSF in a campaign launched in mid-October. Julian Assange, now 52, has been held since 2019 in the high-security Belmarsh prison, after seven years of seclusion in the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

Cédric Villani | Brief bio

Born in 1972, Cédric Villani is a mathematician and member of the French Academy of Sciences. He was awarded the prestigious Fields Medal in 2010 and has published several popular science works. Elected as an MP in 2017 under the LREM party, he then joined Génération Ecologie.



Outside Belmarsh Prison