

Book Review

Chris Hedges.

The Death of the Liberal Class.

New York: Random House, 2010.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

It might be an outlandish stretch, but I cannot help drawing at least a tenuous parallel between the political processes outlined by Chris Hedges in *The Death of the Liberal Class* and any number of recent books dealing with the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the triumph of the Nazis in Germany (Eric Kurlander's *Living with Hitler: Liberal Democrats in the Third Reich*, 2009, is only one of several to come prominently to mind).

At stake is the breakdown of the ideals of liberalism, as its proponents displayed wavering moral courage, disintegrating intellectual integrity and a readiness to exchange principles for opportunistic gain in a political bait-and-switch wherein they and the traditions of the Enlightenment that they purported to cherish were largely swept away.

Writing about the contemporary United States of America, Chris Hedges reveals the bankruptcy of such liberal institutions as the print and broadcast media, labour unions, the great citadels of higher education, the patrons and practitioners of the arts, the US Democratic Party and (of special interest to him as a former Presbyterian seminarian) the church. These and other stalwarts of reason, progress, humanitarianism and optimism have, he believes, collapsed. They have utterly betrayed their heritage and irredeemably spoiled their potential legacy.

Would it be too much to look upon the rise of populist politicians and media personalities and see in them intimations of Goebbels and the brownshirts? If it is, Chris Hedges does not seem to think so. At the very least, they represent the flotsam and jetsam that ride deeper currents in an ocean of willful ignorance and unfocussed resentment. However easy it may be to dismiss these people, their associates and disciples as blowhards and buffoons, the deeper currents need to be addressed.

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Drawing inspiration from the best proponents of the once robust liberal tradition (the name of Sheldon Wolin now figures large), Hedges not only dissects the impotence of American liberalism in its response to the vast corporate takeover of the US political economy in the past forty years, but he expressly connects it to a failure of will and a willingness to lie supine as the price of the retention of social privilege and worldly comfort in the embrace of what may properly be called the “national security state.”

Over the presidencies of Ronald Reagan, George Bush the elder, Bill Clinton, George Bush the younger and now Barack Obama, a depressing pattern has emerged. Despite the apparent success of the Civil Rights Movement and the lionization of Martin Luther King, racism (now including Hispanics) seems to thrive. Though feminism is out of fashion, misogyny remains. Economic disparity is growing almost exponentially and the natural environment is being ignored except in the mantra, “Drill! Drill! Drill!” Culture, education and civil society are suffering while what Hedges calls the “lunatic fringe of the Republican Party” is rallying the disenfranchised working class and the increasingly fearful middle class around a hideously distorted view of American history and a fantasist version of the *Constitution of the United States*. Melding fundamentalist religion, mindless patriotism, xenophobia and genuine grief at the demise of the American Dream, the Tea Party and its followers are forming the unwitting vanguard of the plutocracy. Or, so Hedges believes.

So-called conservative forces, of course, are nothing new, and a moment’s reflection will allow the comparison of today’s politics with the not-so-distant past when the Ku Klux Klan was visible, public drinking fountains were labeled “Whites Only,” the John Birch Society was an influential organization and federal agents were seeking communists under every bed. Compared to the era of segregation and the Red Scares, Bill O’Reilly’s America seems almost tame. And not only that, but women can aspire to executive and professional careers, working class people can go to college and (here and there) gay couples can marry. Certainly, some imagine, though progress is slower than we might wish, the direction is set and obstacles are surely to be overcome. There is a (half-)black man in the Oval Office. What could be more telling than that?

Chris Hedges will tell you. His conclusion is exceedingly troubling to the liberal mind: the American polity is in ruins, he says, and it is *not* going to get better.

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It is easy to mock American political leaders and American political life. There are plenty of commentators in the alternative media, magazines such as *Harper’s* and *The Nation* who will deftly criticize American public policies and practices. From its stubborn retention of capital punishment to its paranoia about what it calls “socialism” or (worse) “European socialism,” the USA brings much discredit upon itself because of its grotesque self-image as “the shining city on the hill,” its claim to be the “greatest nation in the history of the Earth,” and its self-assurance as “God’s gift to humanity.” It seems unparalleled in pretentiousness, a naked Emperor strutting upon the stage, noisy and furious. More to be feared than to be pitied, moreover, its commitment to perpetual war is wasting vast “blood and treasure” as globalization lays the world open to economic collapse, ecological degradation and ethical ruin. Chris Hedges does not let us forget that the progressive liberal road may not simply be temporarily blocked, but wholly washed out.

In fact, it is that aura of optimism, that Panglossian assurance that all will work out well in the end that is one of Chris Hedges biggest targets. Like Barbara Ehrenreich, in her contrarian essay *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (2009), he takes aim at society's superficial understanding and short attention span. Citizens living in the specious present are easily distracted by celebrity culture, by the political parties and mass media which reduce policy debates to sound bites and photo ops, and which bombard us with emotionally charged but intellectual vapid rhetoric. Whether contrasting the daily deaths of thousands of children with the sentimental cheeriness of the Oprah Winfrey Show or trying to make salient the science of peak oil and the ecology in the face of boisterous shouts of "Drill! Drill! Drill!" it is understandable that the opportunities for authors of jeremiads are endless. So, even the ordinarily attentive citizen, caught between Wal-Mart "happy faces" and international angst, seem increasingly ready to take the "end of civilization as we know it" almost for granted, and to reply with little more than an ironic shrug.

And yet ...Chris Hedges still confounds us.

Richard M. Nixon the last successful liberal president of the United States of America.

We can generally agree that the state of the world is shaky, that oil spills and drone bombers combine with homelessness and tremorous financial markets to make the future seem daunting. We can also agree that the vigorous liberalism of the past, with its promotion of the arts and sciences, public education, civil rights and social safety nets seems now to be exhausted. And, of course, for most of us, socialism or some other ideological option seems to have been abandoned as somehow impractical or preternaturally unattractive. Furtively mouthing vacuous slogans and mystified by the ease and extent to which it has been marginalized, Hedges compares what he calls the liberal class to the déclassé aristocracy immediately before the French revolution. It has become redundant and surplus to requirements in the new corporate era.

Those who still cling to the liberal dream of rational and humane governance are further unnerved when Hedges calls Richard M. Nixon the last successful liberal president of the United States of America. Nixon? It seems absurd even when we momentarily recall the words attributed to him: "We're all Keynesians now!" Yet, when we re-examine his social and economic policies, and when we reflect upon his opening up diplomatic relations with China, he does not fare as badly as we might have imagined in comparison with Bill Clinton's "welfare reform" and Barack Obama's perpetuation of George W. Bush's military adventures and domestic surveillance. When not actively colluding with the corporate elite in turning the reform of "Wall Street" over to precisely the people who enabled the financial melt-down in the first place, or timidly abandoning comprehensive health care reform (even to the point of taking the "public option" of the table *before* entering into negotiations with the health care industry), contemporary icons of liberalism make Mr. Nixon and especially the unfulfilled promise of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" look almost attractive.

So, even as we at least partially accept Sheldon Wolin's description of the current state of the American union as "inverted totalitarianism," we continue instinctively to resist Hedges' unforbearing and unhesitating prognosis. We are used to expressions of anxiety. We understand dire warnings. We know that things are tough all over. But Hedges goes further.

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This is what he says: the liberal class is finished, done, *kaput*. It has left a vacuum that has already been filled by grafters and demagogues shilling for mainly nameless corporate executives (with only the likes of Donald Trump and Bill Gates craving public adulation). Citizens no longer play a part in the affairs of their nation, other than to participate in electoral charades which pit personalities against one another, but allow policy differences only in the form of dueling slogans. The "class war" is over and, as billionaire speculator Warren Buffett chortled, "my class won."

In the end of his political analysis, Chris Hedges hints that the only way for things to get better is for things to get worse, that the liberal class of politicians, philanthropists, pundits and public intellectuals must be forgotten and almost everyone else must face final ruination before anything of value can be reclaimed and restored. It is a suggestion of potentially apocalyptic proportions.

What, however, are we to learn from so persistent a pessimist? That question is answerable only when we change the subject. Chris Hedges' main point is not political but moral. We are told that the ancient Greeks and Trojans were less concerned about the outcome of a battle than about a soldier's comportment within it. Whether we win or lose is in the hands of the gods. Our conduct is in our own. If we are fortunate enough to live in a society on the rise, we will prevail. If we are unfortunate and live in a society on the decline, we will be defeated. But, winners and losers are chosen by fate. Our duty is to principles, and we will be judged not by success, but by virtue. Modernity's preoccupation with success and indifference to virtue is the primary marker of its impending decline.

Exhibiting human decency is betokens virtue. While examining future prospects (or their absence), Chris Hedges retains a profound sense of human decency. In November, 2010, at a public lecture in Toronto, where he resides as the Johnson-Connaught Distinguished at the Centre for the Study of the United States, Hedges deeply moved his audience with a reminiscence about Bosnia where he was a war correspondent in the 1990s. He relayed the story of a poor Muslim farmer who, at considerable risk, brought milk to the home of a newborn Serbian infant whose mother was unable to nurse him and who had no other source of sustenance. In the larger scheme of things or, perhaps, in the unschematic chaos of life in a war zone, such individual acts do not matter much. Babies are born and babies are slaughtered all the time. Still, the nobility and humanity of such deeds need to be recognized. It is hard to admit that we may be left with only those small instances of

morality in a world turned hopeless. They are, however, our final defence against nihilism which otherwise has two main outcomes: suicide or terrorism.

Those who remember George Grant may recall his summoning of the words of the sixteenth-century English philosopher Richard Hooker which he used to grace his obituary for Canada, *Lament for a Nation* almost half a century ago. In full threnody, Grant instructed a larger audience than Hedges' as follows: We say what we say and we do what we do with no hope of victory, but merely to allow posterity to know that we "did not, loosely through silence, let things slip away as in a dream." Likewise, perhaps the best Hedges allows us is the opportunity to "testify" to current events. Or, perhaps it is to call upon us to jettison our illusions about those who purport to embody our finest values. We have, after all, seen bad times before, but the world did not wholly collapse. Even Grant's beloved Canada is not quite dead yet. And, more generally, despite plagues, inquisitions, depressions and world wars at some point we have collected ourselves, risen bloodied but not broken, and moved onward and arguably upward.

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If such thoughts stir us now, then Hedges, Grant and, for that matter, Cervantes would simply ask us not to waste moral indignation and desperate hope on anything but reality. His is not an invitation to quietism or resignation. The stakes are too high.

So, if there are any shattered liberals about with a putative claim upon our loyalty, it is required of us that we interrogate them fearlessly. Their once proud aims of human enlightenment and liberation from poverty, disease, ignorance and tyranny are no less virtuous for having been compromised almost out of recognizable existence. But the liberals themselves have been unfaithful to their finest traditions and aspirations too often to be entirely trusted again.

About the Author:

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