



Apocalypse Now? The Strange Jeremiads of Christopher Hedges

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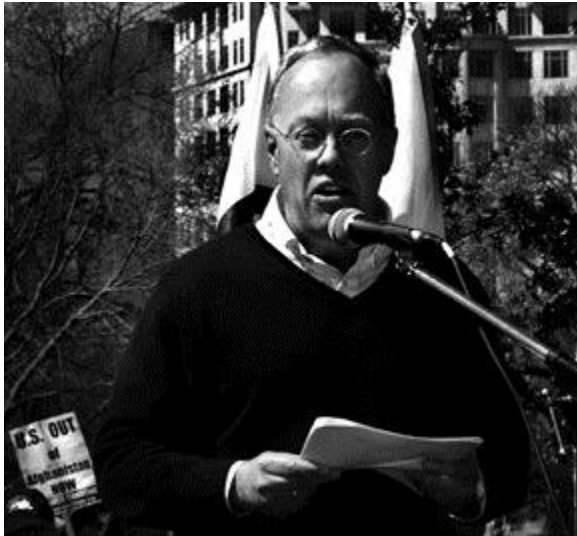
Chris Hedges is the former *New York Times* war correspondent turned tribune for the antiwar resistance. In a series of articles and interviews over the past six months, Hedges has elaborated on his belief that former channels of democratic redress and reform, whether swift or incremental, are foreclosed in today's repressive political climate. Barack Obama in this scenario is much more than a disappointment. He is described by Hedges in a rather obscure formulation as "like Herod of old" in league with all the dark elites in our society that are driving the American people toward "bondage." For those who refuse quiet "submission" to such a fate hope lies only in "repeated and substantial acts of civil disobedience."

The concept of *hope* looms large in the Hedges cosmology, as in the following riff-like sequence from a recent polemic.

"Hope now will come when we defy physically the violence of the State... Those who resist today with nonviolence are the last thin line of defense between a civilized society and its disintegration... all who succumb to fear... become enemies of hope... The more futile, the more useless, the more irrelevant and incomprehensible an act of rebellion is, the more potent hope becomes. Hope never makes sense." Here at least, neither does Chris Hedges.

The thoughts and words above, whether quoted or paraphrased, are representative of Hedges blend of mysticism and muddled thinking, sprinkled with flashes of erudition and much poetic elegance. Some of his millennial comparisons and historical readings – the simile linking Obama to Herod – elsewhere equating the U.S. political system to Egypt under Mubarak – are downright bizarre. But I'm really stuck on that startling

revelation that hope's potency rests upon futile, useless, irrelevant and incomprehensible acts of rebellion. Really? Does that mean failure will make better people of us? This strikes me as stuff for the sectarian pulpit, not the public forum.



Chris Hedges (Photo: John Grant)

And yet I hasten to confess that, almost without qualification, I agree with Hedges' assessment of the mounting woes and blows that we as a people have grown unaccustomed to bearing during the salad years of the American Century. And, maybe, we progressives, having lapsed into complacency after the great cultural victories of the sixties and seventies, are stunned to suddenly feel more keenly the presence of Big Brother... again. It seems very true to me, as I believe it does to Hedges, that our already imperfect democracy is growing measurably weaker right before our eyes.

Can Hedges be right that the options of fighting back through familiar social and institutional struggles are indeed "closed in advance," and that only acts of individual purification can – what? That's where he loses me. Anyway, I'm not convinced, scanning over the American past, that these are the worst of times, as opposed to exceedingly bad times for which our history presents ample precedent. For political repression and suppression of civil liberties alone, I can tick off John Adam's Alien and Sedition Acts, a blatantly autocratic attempt to silence opposition. Lincoln, our American saint, suspended *habeas corpus*. All the Haymarket Martyrs, including three who were hanged, were later found to have been innocent. What about Debs being railroaded to an Atlanta, Georgia jail cell with a ten year sentence for advocating resistance to WWI? Check out how the Espionage Act and the Palmer Raids in the teens and twenties targeted the Left and the foreign born. Domestic communist witch hunts were jump-started with passage of the Smith Act in 1940. Hedges himself is too

young to have lived through the subsequent rout of American communists and their sympathizers during the McCarthy era. We no longer have a House Un-American Activities Committee, although the Honorable Pete King in the U.S. Congress today seems eager to recreate one to admonish the latest hyphenated immigrant bogeys, the Muslim-Americans.

Those repressive cycles were always superseded by popular counter-struggles, and hard won victories long taken for granted have been hard wired into our social contract. But nothing is permanent. What has been won can be snatched away. When oligarchs rise and seek to erode economic and democratic gains through deception, demagoguery and repression, the tools and means available to defend ourselves – assuming average citizens can be stirred to act in their own best interest – will differ from one age to the next.

Trying to fashion those tools is the task that confronts progressive-thinking people today. Many of us who have devoted decades to antiwar politics have been frustrated to distraction by our inability to mobilize a sizeable movement to stir and focus public opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even among youth privileged with higher education, few today have seen fit to make common cause with us against these wars. They have their own distractions. The economic pressures facing most Americans Hedges is quite correct to associate with an increasingly corrupt political system and an insatiably greedy class of elites who perceive their lord-of-the-world status steadily and visibly eroding in the twilight of the empire.

It is widely known that empires rise and fall. Those who study or observe such things assume that America too will one day fall. No one has the play book on how quickly we will arrive at the moment when someone looking back will be able to say, Rome, Britain, and the United States of America were all once great empires that passed from the scene. At that point, the global balance of power will have finally shifted from our shores, and my sense is that, in the absence of dystopia, those who then occupy this land may experience the transition as virtually seamless, and not necessarily cataclysmic. The point is, we're not there yet, but that the greedy plutocrats who rule us, whose fear of the inevitable decline does seem wildly heightened, are up to more looting and hoarding than usual these days. How do we stop them? To review Chris Hedges' plan, return to the top two paragraphs.

Hedges' rise to prominence as a voice of the antiwar movement has been rapid. That he is a man of impressive accomplishments is undeniable. Hedges' top drawer education was matched by his academic excellence. As a journalist he was at the pinnacle of his profession, a war correspondent with the *New York Times*, in the historic company of

Homer Bigart, Neil Sheehan, and David Halberstam, and other legendary reporters who covered world battlefields for *The Times* before him. Hedges is an enviably prodigious – not to mention successful – writer. And yet, his resume in the peace movement seems a trifle lite.

Amy Goodman interviewed Hedges on Democracy Now! just after the December 16th action at which he read “Hope: An Affirming Flame,” which I have quoted from above. Hedges is explaining his hopeless plan of action, when, about midway through the interview, Goodman seems to shift gears. Instead of asking a question, she makes a statement:

“You were actually quite muted about the government when you were at *The New York Times* [until 2005] and you were being interviewed, like by us.”

“Yeah,” retorts Hedges, obviously miffed, “*The Times* wouldn’t consider it muted.”

Point Goodman; she drops it and returns to the usual hagiographic style she reserves for movement celebrities in her interviews. From the above quote, it’s impossible to really guess what Goodman had in mind. What comes to my mind is that Hedges has had no deep life experience with radical politics or mass movements, and very probably missed much in the major mass movement against war in our lifetimes that roiled the American population during Vietnam. He has a lot of experience with war, and his exposure to the disasters of war is, I sense, layers deeper than anything I went through in Vietnam, with the major exception that I carried a gun and he a pen. The resulting PTSD, which Hedges claims, does not take sides between soldiers and journalists or civilians in the crossfire. And it is in our shared burden of that malady that I locate my deepest affinity for Chris Hedges, and embrace this tender comrade as a brother veteran-victim of war.

Clearly I am not a disciple of his politics. In fact I must say that I am completely confounded by the fact that Hedges went out of his way this January to interview Ralph Nader, and then – even in light of recent events in Madison, Wisconsin – has completely failed to integrate the lessons Nader was attempting to teach him. Nader, who probably understands civil, political and corporate cultures in the U.S. – and how they interact – better than any other American political figure, does not as far as I know subscribe to the ‘throw our bodies into the machinery’ brand of political evangelism currently being pushed by Hedges. Rather, Nader suggests an alternative imperative:

“Every major movement starts with field organizers, the farmers, unions, and the civil rights movement... But there’s nothing out there. We need to start learning from what was done in the past.”

There’s a surprisingly whimsical side to Nader too. He momentarily waxes poetic describing for Hedges a vision he calls the “black swan question... whether something will erupt that is rare, extreme and unpredictable.”

This is before Wisconsin, so Nader muses that it’s “amazing that it hasn’t happened in any pocket of the country. How much more can the oppressed take before they revolt? And can they revolt without organizers? “

Nader, with his sensitivity to rapidly changing historical currents, impatiently awaits the ever-anticipated push-back as we are witnessing now among public sector workers and nurses, firmly resisting the latest union busting challenge confronting a labor movement long in decline. Is this the ‘black swan’ moment? Maybe yes, maybe no. Minimally, Hedges and those who follow his doomsday strategy must concede that “repeated and substantial acts of civil disobedience” are not the only avenues of struggle available to us today. There is an opening here, an opportunity to end our wars more quickly by building support for this revived labor movement, which in turn must come to understand that obscene levels of military spending and tax breaks for the greediest are the major obstacles, not only to their interests and the popular welfare, but to democracy itself.

It’s an iffy proposition. As Nader says, “You have got to have organizers, and now, we don’t.”