

[Review]

A Book Review of *Death of the Liberal Class* by Chris Hedges

David N. Murchie
(マーチー デイビッド)

For those whose faith in the “liberal” Democratic Party was severely tested by George McGovern’s loss to Richard Nixon in the 1972 presidential election and finally put to rest as Democrats meekly accepted the shamefully bogus victory of George W. Bush over Al Gore in 2000, Chris Hedges’ *Death of the Liberal Class* may not provide much in the way of solace, but it will illuminate historical developments behind the metamorphosis of the Democratic Party into an instrument of the elite power and money brokers who had, also, long since had their way with the Republican Party. Faithful Democrats during this period of their Party’s decline could have been forgiven for not being terribly certain about what was meant by the term “liberal,” as in the “liberal” Democrat Party vs. the “conservative” Republican Party.

Hedges’ book is a kind of intellectual pilgrimage through the history of social and political liberalism in America. Though the origins of liberal thought lie in the Renaissance and Reformation, liberal principles became more definitive as social and political norms in the 18th and 19th centuries when liberal principles stressed, for example, the importance of individuals over classes, and of individual liberty as a social good. As David L. Edwards has pointed out, liberty took form in the rights to establish free political institutions, to practice freely religions of choice, and freely to express oneself intellectually and artistically. As 20th century political and economic systems developed in their extent and complexity, adjustments to the meaning of the term *liberal* were made in response to the rise of state systems such as fascism and increasingly dominant economic systems. Twentieth century American liberalism came to see government as a tool for protecting minority rights and for alleviating the ravages of a non-egalitarian society. As Edwards has further noted, the difficulty of accomplishing these liberal goals led to the championing of pragmatically less-demanding social values such as tolerance, rationality, minority rights generally considered, and the right to participate fully in the social and political life of the nation.

Hedges explains historically how modern liberalism differs from classical liberalism. A key factor in the divergence between the two has been the decline of radical voices and movements. The radicalism of Walter Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel Movement and the anarcho-syndicalism of Bill Haywood and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) which

sought to emancipate the working class from the bondage of capitalism were shattered by World War I, as the mass propaganda disseminated as part of the war effort enervated the capacities and appetites of the intellectual community for reason-based evaluation and critique. In other words, miseducation came to replace education. Intellectual debate gave way to popular appeal. As Dwight Macdonald has remarked, “communication to a large audience is in inverse ratio to the excellence of a political approach.”

It was a dark time for rational critique. When cultural trends and movements stoop to embrace simplistic solutions as substitutes for dealing with complex ideas, unfamiliar ideas and new ways of thinking are nudged out of the conversation. As American liberalism evolved in the first half of the twentieth century, it ceased to offer any serious critique of capitalistic structures in America, and, perhaps even more irresponsibly, American liberals also failed to oppose the purging of radical voices that took place in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, many prominent liberals and liberal organizations collaborated with the purges. Even the staunchly leftist Americans for Democratic Actions (ADA) were complicit in the vicious, right-wing attack on Henry Wallace. Hedges points out that many liberal organizations succumbed directly or indirectly to the witch hunts—even established groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), ADA, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and the American Committee for Cultural Freedom. Even unions, and in particular, the AFL-CIO, succumbed to the purges of radical voices. With the simplistic and fanatical anti-communism came the suspension of liberal sacred cows such as freedom of speech and the right to organize. One of the most destructive pieces of legislation for unions in American history, viz., the Taft-Hartley Act (1948), rolled back gains made by labor during the New Deal era. For example, the legislation made jurisdictional strikes, wildcat strikes, and secondary boycotts illegal; it further forbade secondary picketing, closed shops, and monetary donations by unions to federal political campaigns. Union leaders were forced to sign noncommunist affidavits. In short, because of Taft-Hartley, labor was decimated by the corporate state. By virtue of its uncritical acceptance of the deceptive propaganda of the corporate state, liberals gave up many rights and privileges that had been guaranteed by the US Constitution and Bill of Rights. Of such was the power of illusions created by the propaganda of America’s power elite.

One of the author’s most powerful examples of the corporate state’s power to destroy dissent is his recounting of the threat posed by artists to corporate dominance and the successful attempts of the American government and private corporate power to silence that artistic critique. It is a story of the daunting power of capitalism to emasculate social, artistic, and political forces. Hedges focuses on the theater dimension of the arts, but the same could be said about other dimensions such as painting, sculpture, music, *et al.* Of particular significance in this regard is the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Theater Project which fostered an exceptional number of creative works that would not otherwise have seen the light of day. Many of these projects, however, constituted powerful critiques

of political, economic, and corporate institutions. For example, one of the most interesting projects funded by the project was that of the “Living Newspaper.” The *Living Newspaper* was, in the words of playwright and director Karen Malpede,

an indigenous form of documentary drama dramatizing hot-button subjects of national debate. *Triple-A Plowed Under, Power, One-Third of a Nation, Spirochete*, were researched by journalists, written by dramatists, acted by huge casts with full orchestras and explored the struggle of farmers, the debate over the Tennessee Valley Association’s plan to bring subsidized electricity to the rural South ; the reasons behind the housing crisis—“One-third of the nation is ill-housed, ill-fed,” President Roosevelt had said—the race for the cure for syphilis. Labor intensive, provocative, using and inventing all sorts of non-realistic acting and staging techniques, the Living Newspapers, a new form of theater, were precursors of American 1960s experimentalism, documentary and collectively created political theater. (Quoted in Hedges)

As Hedges explains, the *Living Newspapers* were “wildly popular.” Unfortunately, however, the success of the project also turned out to be its undoing. Its bold statements and popularity with the broader populace drew criticisms that it was a breeding ground for communism. Many who opposed Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal social programs accused FDR of allowing communists to infiltrate the government through their participation in government programs like the Federal Theater Project. The program was shamelessly maligned by a congressional committee, and eventually the Federal Theater Project was killed. At the very least, the Federal Theater Project showed the power of the arts successfully to critique the power elite of American society. As Hallie Flanagan commented in retrospect,

If this first government theater in our country had been less alive it might have lived longer. But I do not believe anyone who worked on it regrets that it stood from first to last against reaction, against prejudice, against racial, religious, and political intolerance. It strove for a more dramatic statement and a better understanding of the great forces of our life today ; it fought for a free theater as one of the many expressions of a civilized, informed, and vigorous life. Anyone who thinks those things do not need fighting for today is out of touch with reality. (As quoted in Hedges)

Though the Federal Theater Project was scuttled, the spirit behind such creative drama was revived during the period of the Vietnam War in the many anti-war productions of that time. The problem these productions faced was the need to raise money on their own, which meant that the productions often had to be careful not to offend potential donors, a worry that can understandably curb the free spirit and creativity that are the driving force of artistic productions. Such funding problems tend to cause artists to shy away from works that express social and political commentary, encouraging them, instead, to focus on productions that are non-political, non-critical, or self-referential. Hedges sums up the problem well in his comments on an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York that clearly illuminated the difference between “an artistic movement that was, on one hand, integrated into social democracy and sought to eradicate the barriers between craftspeople

and artists, and on the other, an artis- tic [sic] movement that served its elitist needs.” A German exhibit illustrated the former, while the latter was illustrated by a collection of mostly postwar American art that was “flat, sterile, and self-referential.” Hedges remarks,

The iron control of the arts is vital to the power elite, as important as control of the political and economic process, the universities, the media, the labor movement, and the church. Art gives people a language by which they can understand themselves and their society. And the corporate power structure was determined to make sure artists spoke in a language that did not threaten their entitlement.

The liberal class has gradually relinquished its position as a critic of the economic, political, social, and intellectual features of twentieth century life that are so critical to the life of any truly liberal society. Much has been lost and recovery of that earlier vitality is, sadly, not to be expected. Key words for Hedges’ historical analysis of 20th century thought include *illusion, distraction, lies, mythology, mediocrity, moral hollowness, sterility, and uncritical*, to offer only a few examples of his interpretive conclusions. No doubt reflecting the author’s seminary background, Hedges’ discussion has a noticeably prophetic tint to it. Though he is conversant with biblical and Christian sources, his critical stance is a kind of secularized version of Old Testament (OT) prophetic understandings of justice, love, wisdom, and truth. Drawing upon New Testament (NT) sources, Hedges speaks favorably of the Christian understanding of Christ-like sacrifice. However, he suggests implicitly that this Christ-like sacrifice has been turned on its head in contemporary Western Christianity, where we see a bastardized (“realistic”), interpretive return to OT sacrificial systems in which, by our choice, others are sacrificed that we ourselves might continue on our own pilgrimage, as opposed to giving our lives that others might live, an idea which receives little quarter from those of the self-consumed and self-serving Christian Right who appear to grasp little more than the force of their own mythical interpretations.

Hedges is much concerned with the absence of critical thinking in contemporary political thought and the resulting dilution of truth and dependence on mythologies that are continually trumpeted by the “power elite” to justify their self-serving aims and to stifle those who would challenge those aims. Whereas general intellectual inquiry (in all its subversive glory) should be deconstructing such mythologies, contemporary liberalism offers little of that kind of debate. Citing Noam Chomsky and Julian Benda, in a statement that could be a sub-theme for his book, Hedges formulates the key problem as a competition between two sets of principles, viz., power and privilege on the one hand, and truth and justice on the other. As Benda explains, one cannot have both ; i.e., when one goes up, the other goes down.

At the heart of the problem of a people overcome by illusions and the distractions of a social and political system that survives with only the bare trappings of democracy and is fully committed to the financial and social empowerment of the elite classes, is the denigration of reason. It is interesting how the ruling parties (Republicans and Democrats) in the United States (US) are able to distract citizens (the latter who continue to think they live in a

democracy) by these parties' openly collusive and even fascistic activities with cooperative corporate and media concerns. A good example of this is the national electoral charade that every two years causes people to think they have some say in what happens in their nation's political life ; that this is clearly not the case was eminently proven by the successful legal manipulations of the Republican Party in the first George W. Bush election when the Republican-leaning US Supreme Court gave the election to Bush in preference to recounting the ballots in a close election in Florida, arguably the worst Supreme Court decision since the notorious Dred Scott decision of 1857. The tragic result of such irrational illusions of the citizenry is captured well by Sheldon Wolin's idea of "inverted totalitarianism" (*Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*), which speaks of a totalitarianism that is neither a conceptualized ideology nor an objectified public policy. Rather, *inverted totalitarianism* denotes a totalitarianism that develops among citizens who are unaware of the deeper consequences of their actions or inactions. Of such is the increasingly totalitarian nature of American society as engendered by private, corporate power in the US. As Wolin puts it, "The emergence of the corporation marked the presence of private power on a scale and in numbers thitherto unknown, the concentration of private power unconnected to a citizen body."

In spite of a few positive signs of protest and critique during the period, Hedges is critical to the point of despair of the radical upheavals of the 1960s in America. Though many opposed the US's war in Southeast Asia and even spoke out against it, many were corrupted by the same hedonism that affected previous counterculture movements such as the Beats. Unions offered little help, with George Meany of the AFL-CIO backing the war. The New Left sought support in Mao, Stalin, and Trotsky but often gave in to the temptation to use violent means to express their opposition. Well-known groups like the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, and the Weather Underground were effective, but often in violent ways. Furthermore, their connection with working class people was, on balance, negligible. Most groups followed the road of disengagement or, as Hedges puts it, "self-indulgent disengagement" that involved drugs, occultism, Zen Buddhism, I Ching, *et al.* In short, for such groups the "self" became the center of concern, not the society in which they lived. To put it a bit more crassly, the 60s counterculture was always "in tune with the commercial culture."

Radical politics did not completely die in the latter half of the twentieth century, but it was successfully marginalized by pressures from the power elite and hobbled by its own inertia. Though few, radically critical voices did survive. There were Daniel and Philip Berrigan and Dorothy Day of the Catholic Church, William Sloane Coffin of the Protestants, and anarchists like Dwight Macdonald and Murray Bookchin. Bookchin decried, in Hedges' words, "the transition from street protestor to grant applicant." According to Macdonald, the problem of the liberal class was its faith in the inevitability of human progress. Another problem with the liberal class, however, was its separation from radical movements and the consequent loss of new ideas. Late twentieth century movements have, in many ways,

become movements unto themselves. While tolerance can be an important virtue, it can also be a way of opting out of responsible critique. As Russell Jacoby has remarked, “Pluralism . . . has become the opium of disillusioned intellectuals, the ideology of an era without an ideology.” (Quoted in Hedges) Careerism has also done much to encourage self-censorship among intellectuals. When tenure is on the line and dependent upon “fitting in,” the repercussions of speaking truth to power may be more than most faculty want to face. The willingness to sacrifice one’s public reputation in order to speak the truth in critical response to the immoral acts of the power elite takes courage that has not been abundant in recent years. Few there are that are willing to take the path trod by those like I.F. Stone, Howard Zinn, or Ralph Nader, to name a few. Radical journalist and scholar Stone was suspicious of victories, uneasy at the idea of a Movement, and convinced that “every government is run by liars.” Historian Zinn has been castigated by traditional, academic historians for writing his “history from below,” i.e., history as experienced by regular people rather than history about the great and powerful. His antiwar activities and vigorous support of the civil rights movement resulted in Federal Bureau of Investigation surveillance of his comings and goings. Zinn was guilty of believing that a government should serve its people. He felt that if the government did not serve the people, it should not be obeyed. In his own words, “to be patriotic, you may have to be against your government.” Nobody knows how many lives have been saved and injuries prevented by the work of Ralph Nader since he established the Center for Auto Safety (the first of many such consumer protection agencies) in 1970. His dogged pursuit of legislation to benefit and protect consumers has been going on for a half a century. Nevertheless, in recent years Nader has declined as a major force in American life due to the refusal of the commercial media to interview him or even to consider the fruits of his work in their “news reports.” From the government’s side, President Ronald Reagan was successful in gutting 20 years of legislation that Nader had fought for and seen passed by Congress. In recent years, Nader has become a pariah who is continually prevented from having a national voice by both the government and the media. As Hedges explains, “a culture, once it no longer values truth and beauty, condemns its most creative and moral people to poverty and obscurity. And this is our destiny.”

Hedges concludes that “we are living through one of civilization’s seismic reversals.” The ideology of globalization has imploded. In the matter of climate change, those of the power elite and those who fail to critique them are living on the illusion that “our secular god of science will save us.” Hedges is not a prophet of hope ; it is not his intent to offer some salvific solution, secular or otherwise. Rather, he is arguing for living the life we have with integrity. Though we face destruction and should expect defeat, we can nevertheless confirm our integrity through our *resistance* to the powers that are leading us to destruction. Our victory will be a victory of truth and justice over power and privilege ; our redemption will be the redemption of a remnant that must be satisfied with having done what was right in the face of overwhelming opposition. Such an approach does not deny the possibility of future hope ; it just says, don’t count on it. Hope lies in truth and justice, regardless of how

successful we are in pursuing them. As the OT prophets might have phrased it, hope depends on the integrity of our response to current events. Perhaps the author would agree.

This is a powerful book. For those who have wrestled conscientiously with the decline of liberal thought and influence over the past several years, the book offers historical answers to queries about just what has happened to bring us to our current point in history. The book will probably challenge its readers more than give them new information, though many may find plenty of the latter. Now is a time for rational, creative, and humanitarian thinking about love and justice. A serious reading of *Death of the Liberal Class* could well get the process going. The book is both well-written and readable. The author offers numerous sources in the text for further study by those who wish to explore further the implications of any of his points or historical discussions.