

American decay

Raymond A. Schroth | May. 5, 2010

Hedges portrays a diseased nation, corrupted by false narratives

EMPIRE OF ILLUSION: THE END OF LITERACY AND THE TRIUMPH OF SPECTACLE

By Chris Hedges

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Reviewed by RAYMOND A. SCHROTH

Chris Hedges is mad. As was Jeremiah. Whether Hedges is the best prophet to read the signs of our times as we hurtle toward a catastrophe will depend how his readers respond to his jeremiads.

In fall 2008, at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, N.J., Hedges shocked a room packed with students and faculty when he announced that in November he would vote not for Barack Obama but for Ralph Nader. Obama's Iraq strategy was little better than Bush's, he said. And on March 1, 2010, he wrote on his Web site, Truthdig, that "Obama lies as cravenly, if not as crudely, as George W. Bush."

Hedges had earlier shocked a college audience when, in a 2003 graduation address at Rockford College in Illinois, he opposed the Iraq war and was hooted from the stage. Though as a war correspondent for *The New York Times* for 15 years he was obliged to project impartiality, he left the paper rather than keep silent on that war's moral issues.



He went on to write two outstanding books. *War Is a Force that Gives*

Us Meaning was an ironic title, since combat both gives warriors a "high" and degrades them. *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America*, an analysis based on his *Times* reporting, lists our idols -- a rock band, drugs, sex, money, war, envy and greed -- that have taken the place of God.

Today Hedges works at the New York-based Nation Institute as a freelance apostle for a gospel he first learned from his father, a Presbyterian minister, and absorbed for himself at Harvard Divinity School.

Drawing on the scholarship of Daniel Boorstin, Theodor Adorno, Jared Diamond, C. Wright Mills, Karl Polanyi and others, Hedges implants his warning about the end of time in *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and*

the Triumph of Spectacle, on the forces that have corrupted the American spirit to the point that he no longer recognizes the country in which he grew up.

His targets include the media's adulation of celebrities, pornography, the elite universities that have sold their souls to capitalism and the military-industrial complex, the positive-thinking gurus and psychologists who have reduced employees to slaves of corporations, and finally the American left, which "has crumbled and sold out to a bankrupt Democratic party" and thoroughly abandoned the working class.

For Hedges, professional wrestling matches, the cemeteries of Hollywood celebrities, and TV "reality" shows corrupt us with false narratives. In his most bizarre example, on the FOX reality makeover show "The Swan," Cristina, a 27-year-old Ecuadorian-born office administrator from California, was transformed over three months by a brow lift; eye lift; nose job; liposuction of chin, cheeks and thighs; dermatological visits; collagen injections; LASIK eye surgery; tummy tuck; breast augmentation; dental bleaching; gum tissue re-contouring; a 1,200-calorie daily diet; 120 hours in the gym; plus a glamorous dress and hairdo, from a "completely ordinary person," to what resembles a beautiful celebrity. Seeing her new self she exclaimed, "I'm so beautiful! Thank you! Thank God! I'm in love with myself."

For the chapter on pornography, a business that raked in \$97 billion in 2006 and turns out 13,000 porn films a year, his researcher tours the annual Adult Video News expo in Las Vegas. Ninety percent of porn stars, we learn, work as prostitutes and can make \$30,000 a week. The chapter itself takes on the flavor of an X-rated film, with its males spilling seminal fluid onto and into brutalized whores, where the latest trend is torture porn that treats women as abject sexual commodities.

If we imagine that the elite universities will rescue our culture, think again. From Harvard to Paris, says Hedges, they do only a mediocre job of teaching students to question and think. Their standardized tests, entrance exams and Advanced Placement classes produce not intellectual leaders but competent systems managers. While the wealthiest elite schools assign dorm rooms by an egalitarian lottery, the University of California at Berkeley, which led the 1960s student revolution, now assigns rooms by how much a student can pay. In 2008 the University of California destroyed 40 huge oak trees to build an athletic training gym. One of Hedges' classmates, now on the Harvard Divinity School faculty, talks unintelligible academic jargon. Literature -- discarding the tradition of Charles Dickens, George Orwell and Upton Sinclair -- is "no longer a tool to enlighten societies about its ills."

Finally, with the force of a tank commander rumbling into enemy lines, Hedges argues that democracy as we knew it 50 years ago is dead, that "only the shell remains." The economy sustains only the wealthiest 10 percent, Wall Street, and insolvent banks. We witness the moral decay in the physical decay -- roads, bridges, sewers and mass transit in disrepair, while we sustain an empire through 761 military bases around the world and wars of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hedges introduces us to Elba Figueroa, 47, suffering from Parkinson's disease, jobless with no health care, negotiating the soup kitchen and food pantries of Trenton, N.J., to stay alive -- one of the 36.2 million Americans who suffer from hunger, and 50 million in poverty. Is she the image of the future?

Powerful corporate entities, says Hedges, are waiting for their moment to strike. Allied with the Christian Right, they will exploit the fear of terrorism and of left-wing dissent to impose draconian control. Hedges' portrait of a diseased America resonates. But, having beaten his readers into a coma, he offers no cure other than three pages in favor of hope and love.

Perhaps it's sufficient to alert us to the coming crash.

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