

# Postmortem for the left

A talk with Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist Chris Hedges on "Death of the Liberal Class"

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Another story largely missed or ignored by the mainstream media: On Thurs., Dec. 16, 2010, police arrested 131 antiwar activists outside the White House at a nonviolent demonstration led by Veterans for Peace to protest the U.S. wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. Among those arrested were Pentagon Papers whistle-blower Daniel Ellsberg and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author Chris Hedges.

Hedges saw the snowy White House protest as an act of hope.

"The normal mechanisms by which democratic participation are rendered possible in this country have been closed shut, and if we don't do this, we die," he said.

"This is what's left of hope in this country."

In his most recent book, "Death of the Liberal Class," Hedges argues that the traditional channels for democratic participation, the five pillars of the liberal class; the press, universities, unions, liberal churches and the Democratic Party, have become corrupted and permitted the rise of a terrifying corporate-national security state that has dismantled protections for ordinary Americans.

Hedges also wrote the bestsellers "American Fascists" and "Empire of Illusion," and was a National Book Critics Circle finalist for "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning." He was a foreign correspondent for the New York Times and won the Pulitzer Prize in 2002 as part of a team covering global terror. Hedges now is a Senior Fellow at The Nation Institute and a Lannan Literary Fellow. He has taught at Columbia University, New York University and Princeton University. Hedges recently talked about his recent arrest and new book by telephone from the East Coast.

**Robin Lindley:** I heard a brief mention of your December arrest with 130 other antiwar protesters on NPR, but otherwise it seems the mainstream media didn't even note the demonstration.

**Chris Hedges:** There's been a constriction in the kinds of things covered and those who still do journalism are very circumspect about what and how they report. They are very deferential to corporate and state structures of power. And that means that events like [the demonstration] don't get published.

**R.L.:** The mainstream media seems to ignore war, disease and poverty, while you focus on these difficult issues. Can you comment on the coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

**"(The wars) are not covered anymore, in the same way that poor people and a dispossessed working class have all become invisible. We are preoccupied with tawdry, running soap operas whether it's John Edwards' love child or Michael Jackson — I can't even keep up with it. We're distracted by the celluloid shadows on Plato's cave while what's left of our democratic state is dismantled and destroyed."**



PHOTO BY KIM HEDGES

**C.H.:** It's not covered anymore, in the same way that poor people and a dispossessed working class have all become invisible. We are preoccupied with tawdry, running soap operas whether it's John Edwards' love child or Michael Jackson — I can't even keep up with it. We're distracted by the celluloid shadows on Plato's cave while what's left of our democratic state is dismantled and destroyed.

**R.L.:** You're outspoken on portrayal of the poor and underclass in the media, as on "The Jerry Springer Show."

**C.H.:** Yes, they're figures of ridicule in the commercial media. The media propagates a message that corporations want, and there's a belittling and mocking of the poor and celebration of wealth. A kind of cutthroat, rapacious capitalism is celebrated on reality television shows where you betray and manipulate and push aside your competitors for fleeting fame and money. These are sick values, but they're disseminated through corporate media in almost every program you watch.

**R.L.:** Your new book is an obituary not just for the liberal class but also for democracy.

**C.H.:** Of course. You can't have a functioning democracy if liberal institutions have atrophied and died. This was something Dostoevsky understood: the breakdown of the liberal class propelled you into moral nihilism, which is what "Notes from the Underground" is about. He's right, and this is the book of our time: The defeated dreamer who went to all of the Obama rallies and chanted "Yes We Can," and was betrayed, and became cynical, and went underground, and realized only fools and idiots assumed power in this environment, and washed his hands of it all. Then you're trapped, and that's precisely what's happening.

**R.L.:** What is the role of the liberal class in a democracy?

**C.H.:** Liberal institutions, when they function, provide a safety valve. They offer a mechanism within the formal structure of

power by which the injustices and grievances of working and middle class members can be redressed. We saw this with the New Deal. The New Deal was not a product necessarily of Roosevelt but of very militant labor activity (such as) sit down strikes and Bonus marchers.

Now these institutions have calcified to such an extent that the suffering visited on our dispossessed working class, much of it created by self-identified liberals such as Clinton, has nowhere to go but outside the formal channels of power. That's what we're seeing with movements like the Tea Party and militias that assault not only government as the enemy but attack the liberal class with some justification, because those self-identified liberals — people like Obama and Clinton — have betrayed core liberal values. The anger is not misplaced (because of) the hypocrisy of the liberal class.

**R.L.:** You single out supposed liberals who supported the Iraq war.

**C.H.:** The liberal class played its, traditional function in the buildup to the war in that it argued the war was a necessary evil and defined themselves as reluctant hawks. That's traditionally why the power elite tolerates the liberal class. They give a moral veneer to activities that, in this case, were clearly criminal. People like Michael Ignatieff, George Packer, David Remnick of The New Yorker, even figures like Frank Rich, all supported the war with a kind of anguish that gave the war a moral patina that it didn't have. That's what liberals traditionally do.

**R.L.:** You wrote after the 2010 election that you see the Tea Party as a proto-fascist movement. Many view the Tea Party as buffoons, and you've mentioned that in Yugoslavia, Milosevic and his ilk were seen as buffoons before the war there in the 1990s, and in Weimar Germany before 1933, Hitler and his Nazis were seen as buffoons until Hitler's sudden and unlikely rise to power.

**C.H.:** When a liberal class no longer