

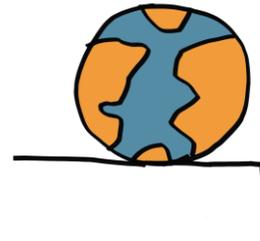
SEIZING AN ALTERNATIVE

Toward an Ecological Civilization

June 4-7, 2015

**Section I: The Threatening Catastrophe:
Responding Now**

Track 6: Political Collapse and the Alternative
John Culp, organizer



Chris Hedges on the Coming Collapse Of Nations and the World

by Joseph C. Hough

My assignment from John Cobb is to represent major themes in the writing Chris Hedges. Chris is one of the major prophetic voices who is calling attention to the inevitable catastrophes associated with climate change, the spread of major military conflicts, the displacement of huge populations, and the globalization of free market capitalism. In what follows, I shall quote sections from a variety of his essays and add comments from other sources relevant to the issues on which I have focused. If there is time, I shall also indicate my major point of disagreement with Chris' position in his most recent essay, "Mania for Hope," and in sections of his book, *Death of the Liberal Class*.

The Corruption of Democracy

In a 2013 essay, Hedges reports an interview he arranged with political philosophy Sheldon Wollin and philosopher John Ralston Saul, in which he lays out some of the implications of their views for the future of democracy in America. Hedges concludes that the corporate state exploits laws that once protected democracy to extinguish democracy: one example is the decision of the U. S. Supreme Court in the infamous case, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* in which the Court ruled that money is speech and is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. This applies not only to individuals but has also been extended to for-profit corporations, labor unions and other associations. The result, of course is the transformation of electoral power from individual voters to those who provide the billions of dollars to fund political campaigns at the state and federal levels.

Furthermore, the state has obliterated privacy through mass surveillance, a fundamental condition for totalitarian rule, and in ways that are patently unconstitutional, has stripped citizens of the right to a living wage, benefits and jobs security. And it has destroyed institutions, such as labor unions, that once protected workers from corporate abuse.¹

¹ Hedges, "Let's Get This Class War Started" on *Truthdig*, Oct. 20, 2013

In other words, the power of money has created in the United States a “managed democracy,” a classic case of what Wollin calls “inverted totalitarianism”.

Wollin insists that the use of the term “inverted totalitarianism” does *not* mean that the United States has morphed into a fascist government like those of Germany under Hitler, Italy under Mussolini, or Stalin in Russia. In all of these totalitarian states, the aim was to realize “an ideological idealized conceptions of a society as a systematically ordered whole, where the ‘parts’ (family, church, education intellectual and cultural life, economy, recreation, politics, state bureaucracy)” are subject to the will of the regime. In short, all of the practice, beliefs and institutions were subject to the will of the leader and his closest cohorts.²

Inverted totalitarianism is quite different. It does not destroy democracy—it “manages democracy.” By this is meant that government will be dedicated to the establishment of free markets, the maintenance of world dominance by insuring military supremacy, and the establishment and support of friendly regimes in areas of vital interest to the safety and economy of the nation. Its internal policies are focused on “containing” electoral politics, and essentially hostile to social democracy other than programs furthering literacy, job training, and education necessary for survival in an era of globalization. In Wollin’s view, “The United States has become the showcase of how a democracy can be managed without appearing to be suppressed.” This has not been the result of the imposition of a leader’s will. Rather, it has emerged through certain developments in the economy that have promoted the concentration of wealth and militarization of the nation both internally and externally.

“Voters are made as predictable as consumers, the university is nearly as rationalized in its structure as a corporation. The corporate structure is as hierarchical in its change of command as the military. The regime ideology is capitalism” and all institutions including markets, churches and entertainment media are eager to enlarge their market share.”³

In an earlier essay, Hedges turns to what he deems the rise of the security state within American Democracy. Focusing on the plight of Edward Snowden, Hedges writes that the government officials who, along with their courtiers in the press, castigate Snowden, insist that congressional and judicial oversight, the right to privacy, the rule of law, freedom of the press and the right to express dissent remain inviolate. They use the old words and the old phrases, old laws and old constitutional guarantees to give our corporate totalitarianism a democratic veneer. They insist that the system works. They tell us we are still protected by the Fourth Amendment:

² Sheldon Wollin, *Democracy Incorporated* (Paperback edition) Princeton University Press, 2010, p.46.

³ *Ibid*, pp.46, 47

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

Yet the promise of that sentence in the Bill of Rights is pitted against the fact that every telephone call we make, every email or text we send or receive, every website we visit and many of our travels are tracked, recorded and stored in government computers. All of this is, in Hedges' view, a violation of the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution.⁴

According to Hedges, we live in what the German political scientist Ernst Fraenkel called "the dual state."⁵ Fraenkel argues that totalitarian states are always dual states. In the dual state civil liberties are abolished in the name of national security. The political sphere becomes a vacuum "as far as the law is concerned." Hedges continues:

There is no legal check on power. Official bodies operate with impunity outside the law. In the dual state the government can convict citizens on secret evidence in secret courts. It can strip citizens of due process and detain, torture or assassinate them, serving as judge, jury and executioner. It rules according to its own arbitrary whims and prerogatives. The outward forms of democratic participation—voting, competing political parties, judicial oversight and legislation—are hollow, political stagecraft.

In his book, *The Death of the Liberal Class*, Hedges argues that the corruption of democracy has historical roots in times of national peril, especially during the periods of World War. He writes that:

[The] hysteria of World War I destroyed values and self-perceptions of American life and replaced them with fear, distrust, and the hedonism of the consumer society. The new propaganda designed to appeal to emotions rather than disseminate facts proved adept at driving competing ideas and values underground...Populists and reformers were vilified and driven underground.⁶

President Wilson pushed through a series of "draconian laws to squelch dissent...Congress passed the Espionage Act in 1917, which criminalized not only espionage but also speech deemed critical of the government....That plus the passage of the Sedition Act silenced progressives. A few thousand people were arrested. The Socialist politician Eugene Debs was arrested for the denunciation of the war and calls for draft resistance and strikes...In June of 1918 the Wash-

⁴ Hedges, *Our Sinister Dual State* 2014

⁵ Ernst Fraenkel, *The Dual State: A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship*, 2006

⁶ Chris Hedges, *Death of the Liberal Class*, 2010, p59ff.

ington Post denounced Debs as a “public menace” and other reformers who dared speak out against the war were physically attacked or even lynched.⁷

As a result...Progressives in World War I shifted from the role of social critics to that of propagandists. They did this seamlessly. The crusades undertaken for the working poor in mill towns and urban slum were transformed into an abstract crusade to remake the world through violence, a war to end all wars...The former socialists and activists were, perhaps the most susceptible to Wilson’s dreams. Very few found the moral fortitude to resist, and their combined efforts to sell the war fatally corrupted the liberal class.⁸

This was a dramatic reversal of an era of social reform that had arisen in the preceding years. It preceded an age of opulence culminating in the roaring twenties when the distribution of wealth exhibited nothing less than obscene economic inequality, and ended in the spectacular collapse of the entire economic order known as the Great Depression.

Hedges clearly believes that the current troubles in the financial sector were rooted in the events surrounding World War I. This view is confirmed and documented in a Pulitzer Prize winning book entitled *Lords of Finance*, written by Liaquat Aamed. Aamed’s book is an exhaustive account of the role of the economic elite in the funding of World War I, and the failure of the world’s most powerful bankers to avoid the massive and deadly mistakes leading to the Great Depression.⁹

The period of the New Deal under Franklin Roosevelt brought much needed reform focused on those of great need and the restoration of infrastructure, but that was overwhelmed by a new lust for war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. Once again, a second world war and unceasing propaganda overwhelmed civil discourse, and the enormous expenditures required for mobilization, cemented the alliance of capitalists and government to a degree greater even than that of World War I. According to Andrew Bacevich, after the end of the cold war, the United States entered into a state of “permanent war.”¹⁰ Following the Korean War, there was Vietnam and then the first Iraq war under President George H. W. Bush. With the election of George W. Bush came the permanent war cabal of Cheney, Wolfowitz, Rice and Rumsfeld beginning with the second Iraq war and the war in Afghanistan. We are all aware of the consequence of this ill-fated move that now sees the entire Middle East in chaos from ISIS to Syria to Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond. For this reason, 80 % of our national

⁷ *Ibid.* p.65

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 65, 66

⁹ Liaquat Aamed, *Lords of Finance: The Bankers Who Broke The World*, The Penguin Press, 2009.

¹⁰ See Andrew J. Becevich, *Washington Rules: American’s Path to Permanent War*, Metropolitan Books, 2010 for a comprehensive discussion of the process and consequences of the march to permanent war.

budget is assigned to the military complex, leaving only 20% of the national budget to address all of the programs of assistance to the unemployed, programs in health care, and assistance to the chronically impoverished in our population that includes as many as 25 million children. That this is immoral is clear, but the control of the political life of the nation by the centers of private and corporate wealth allows little hope for any significant alteration in our current policies.

The control of American politics by the economic elite was not the result of a gradual evolution of political understanding. It was the result of a covert strategy that led to the domination of the political process, a result of careful planning by the economic elite. More than any other single person, it was Lewis Powell, a lawyer for the tobacco industry and, later, a Supreme Court Justice, who was responsible for what Bill Moyers has labeled the rise of an impenetrable plutocracy that has erased an illusion of the “American Democratic Process.” Hedges has detailed the focused attack on Nader in *The Death of the Liberal Class* that has led to the formation of a huge army of conservative “think tanks;” and with Bush’s presidency, the number of corporate lobbyists increased more than tenfold.¹¹ Powell’s strategy for the control of the American political system began in 1974 when Richard Nixon made a speech to the Congress indicating his intent to create a government-based health care system. This enraged conservatives and led to a consistent pattern of organizing to combat any socialist tendencies. These meetings apparently continue from time to time focusing on the major issues in which corporate leaders have a vested interest.

In Hedges’ view:

the U. S. financial system...is a mirage. The Federal Reserve purchases \$85 billion in U. S. Treasury bonds—most of it worthless subprime mortgages— each month. It has been artificially propping up the government and Wall Street like this for five years. It has loaned trillions of dollars at virtually no interest to banks and firms that make money—because wages are kept low—by lending it to us at staggering interest rates that can climb to as high as 30 percent....or our corporate oligarchs hoard the money or gamble with it in an overinflated stock market. Estimates put the looting by banks and investment firms of the U.S. Treasury at between \$15 trillion and \$20 trillion. But none of us know. The figures are not public. And the reason this systematic looting will continue until collapse is that our economy would go into a tailspin without this giddy infusion of free cash.¹²

The consequences are clear. Ellen Brown, in sections II, III, and IV of her book, *The Web of Debt*, describes in detail the consequences of this alliance.¹³ “Before 1913, if

¹¹ See p.174-183. See also, Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than it Looks*, Basic books, 2012.

¹² Hedges, *The Myth of Human Progress and the Collapse of Complex Societies*

¹³ Ellen Hodgson Brown, *The Web of Debt, The Shocking Truth About our Money System and How We Can Break Free* Third Millennium Press, 2007 (December 2008 update) p. 103-330

too many of a bank's depositors came for their money at one time, the bank would have come up short and would have had to close its doors. That was true until the Federal Reserve Act shored up the system by allowing troubled banks to 'borrow' money from the Federal Reserve, which would create it on the spot by selling government securities to a select group of banks that created the money as bookkeeping entries on their books." Brown concludes that the banks should have been declared bankrupt and the bankers should be jailed as embezzlers. However, today the huge banks can be assured that they will be covered, creating a "moral hazard" that skews the decision-making process when there is a crisis. Meanwhile, the "mega-banks" will continue to engage in highly questionable practices with impunity that will magnify their profits, while at the same time small businesses have no such protection and workers suffer job losses with only minimal provisions to preserve a semblance of a national safety net.¹⁴

In his essay, "Stand Still for the Apocalypse," Hedges is clear that propaganda supporting those who deny climate change, especially interventions on the part of the major corporations such as the coal and petroleum industries, constitute a major threat to the future of human life and our entire ecosystem.¹⁵ "The political and corporate elite in the industrialized world continue, in spite of overwhelming scientific data, to place short term corporate profit and expediency before the protection of human life and the ecosystem." As a result:

the ecosystem is at the same time disintegrating. Scientists from the International Programme on the State of the Ocean, recently issued a report that warned that the oceans are changing faster than anticipated and increasingly becoming inhospitable to life. The oceans, of course, have absorbed much of the excess CO₂ and heat from the atmosphere. This absorption is rapidly warming and acidifying ocean waters. This is compounded, the report noted, by increased levels of deoxygenation from nutrient runoffs from farming and climate change. The scientists called these effects a "deadly trio" that when combined is creating changes in the seas that are unprecedented in the planet's history. The scientists wrote that each of the earth's five known mass extinctions was preceded by at least one [part] of the "deadly trio"—acidification, warming and deoxygenation. They warned that "the next mass extinction" of sea life is already under way, the first in some 55 million years...research from the University of Hawaii says global warming is now inevitable, it cannot be stopped but at best slowed, and that over the next 50 years the earth will heat up to levels that will make whole parts of the planet uninhabitable. Tens of millions of people will be displaced and millions of species will be threatened with extinction. The report casts doubt that [cities on or near a coast] such as New York or London will endure.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 328-329

¹⁵ Hedges, *Stand Still for the Apocalypse*

¹⁶ Hedges, *The Myth of Human Progress and the Collapse of Complex Societies*

According to William Nordhaus, attempts to organize an international response to this crisis have been very disappointing. A major effort, the Kyoto Protocol, was undertaken in 2008 and ended in 2012. A second commitment period was proposed in 2012, known as the Doha Amendment, in which only 37 countries had binding targets: Australia, the European Union (and its 28 member states), Belarus, Iceland, Kazakhstan, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland, and Ukraine. Others of the original 190 participants have withdrawn from the original agreement or simply have taken no action to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Negotiations were held in Lima in 2014 to agree on a post-Kyoto legal framework that would obligate all major polluters to pay for CO₂ emissions, but China, India, and the United States have all signaled that they will not ratify any treaty that will commit them legally to reduce CO₂ emissions.

Given this history, Nordhaus indicates that another approach is necessary. He proposes something called “Climate Clubs” in which countries would at least agree to some attempts to reduce carbon emissions such as a carbon tax. Countries refusing to participate in the Clubs would be penalized through the imposition of a uniform tax on all of their exports to the members of the Climate Clubs. Nordhaus admits that his proposal for Climate Clubs may not be realistic, but he thinks that there is little hope for much success from efforts like the Kyoto Protocol so that other means are needed to deal with the threats to life and civilizations.¹⁷

With the Supreme Court Decision “Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission” in 2010, the future is more or less permanently shaped. That decision allows virtually unlimited corporate contributions to candidates for political office and for advocacy of particular congressional proposals for enactment of laws. In this situation, it is difficult to generate any substantial hope for significant reversal of state or national legislation except through the intervention of the courts. In this case, both parties are complicit in the support of the agenda for major corporate interest, and there is no indication of a general uprising among negatively affected groups in the society. Hedges writes:

The naive belief that history is linear, that moral progress accompanies technical progress, is a form of collective self-delusion. It cripples our capacity for radical action and lulls us into a false sense of security. Those who cling to the myth of human progress, who believe that the world inevitably moves toward a higher material and moral state, are held captive by power.

Hedges continues:

The yearning for positivism that pervades our corporate culture, ignores human nature and human history. But to challenge it, to state the obvious fact that things are getting worse, and may soon get much worse, is to be tossed out of the circle of magical thinking that defines American and much of Western culture. The left

¹⁷ William Nordhaus, “Climate Clubs, Overcoming Free-Riding in International Climate Policy”, *American Economics Review*, Vol. 105, No. 4 April 2015.

is as infected with this mania for hope as is the right. It is a mania that obscures reality even as global capitalism disintegrates and the ecosystem unravels, potentially doomed us all. ... There is nothing inevitable about human existence except birth and death. There are no forces, whether divine or technical, that will guarantee us a better future. When we give up false hopes, when we see human nature and history for what they are, when we accept that progress is not preordained, then we can act with an urgency and passion that comprehends the grim possibilities ahead.¹⁸

And, further:

As global capitalism disintegrates, the heresy our corporate masters fear is gaining currency. But that heresy will not be effective until it is divorced from the *mania for hope* that is an essential part of corporate indoctrination. The ridiculous positivism, the belief that we are headed toward some glorious future, defies reality. Hope, in this sense, is a form of disempowerment.

So where do we go from here? During a panel discussion in New York in 2014, Hedges said:

We will have to carry out acts of civil disobedience that seek to cripple the mechanisms of corporate power. The corporate elites, blinded by their lust for profit and foolish enough to believe they can protect themselves from climate change, will not veer from our path towards ecocide unless they are forced from power. And this means the beginning of a titanic clash between our corporate masters and ourselves.¹⁹

And to whom does he refer as “ourselves?” At one point, Hedges stated that:

the best opportunities for radical social change exist among the poor, the homeless, the working class and the destitute. As the numbers of disenfranchised dramatically increase, our only hope is to connect ourselves with the daily injustices visited upon the weak and the outcast. Out of this contact we can resurrect, from the ground up, a new social ethic a new movement.²⁰

Yet, in later conversations, he is not even optimistic about a possibility of renewal within a foreseeable time frame. The growing danger of the now visible threat of climate change to human life and the whole ecosystem has introduced a new strain of pessimism.

¹⁸ Hedges, *Our Mania for Hope Is a Curse*, May 2015

¹⁹ Hedges, panel discussion in New York City titled “*The Climate Crisis: Which Way Out*” New York, September 21, 2014

²⁰ Hedges, *The Death of the Liberal Class*, p156.

Only those who accept the very real possibility of dystopia, of the rise of a ruthless corporate totalitarianism, buttressed by the most terrifying security and surveillance apparatus in human history, are likely to carry out the self-sacrifice necessary for revolt.²¹

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²¹ Hedges, *Our Mania for Hope Is a Curse*, May 2015