
August 2010

Book Review: Chris Hedges, Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and The Triumph of Spectacle

Herb Hirsch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

Recommended Citation

Hirsch, Herb (2010) "Book Review: Chris Hedges, Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and The Triumph of Spectacle," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2: Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol5/iss2/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Book Review

Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and The Triumph of Spectacle*. New York: Nation Books, 2009. Pp. 232, cloth, \$24.95.

Reviewed by Herb Hirsch, Professor of Political Science, L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, Virginia Commonwealth University; Co-Editor, *Genocide Studies and Prevention*

At first glance, a book that is a critical analysis of US culture might appear not be relevant to the study and prevention of genocide. This would be a profound mistake. Chris Hedges' analysis is not only applicable but important. Hedges, author of the National Book Critics Circle–nominated *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (2002), has given those who consider themselves genocide scholars much to think about and to apply to their concerns. With the possible exception of chapter two, “The Illusion of Love,” he digs into modern American culture and casts a critic’s glare on what is wrong and how it might eventuate in possible violations of human rights or even genocide. By way of reviewing his argument, I will attempt to spell out these connections.

Hedges is uniquely qualified for his journey through the depressing explication of the illusions of modern American society. A senior fellow at the Nation Institute and a former foreign correspondent in Central America, the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans, he previously wrote for the *New York Times*.

Hedges concentrates on the mechanisms used to divert individuals from confronting the political, economic, and moral realities that surround the modern citizen. Instead, he argues, reality is disguised by rituals of denial and entertainment spectacles. In a very real sense, the connection to genocide is not difficult to advance: similar rituals are used by states wishing to deny that they have perpetrated or allowed others to commit genocide. We will see how this works as we advance through the complexities of Hedges’ argument.

The book begins with an over-long introduction, fourteen pages, that compares contemporary American culture with professional wrestling—both are characterized by ritual and spectacle and devoid of content. A culture of “celebrity” dominates, and “real life, our own life, is viewed next to the lives of celebrities as inadequate and inauthentic” (19). It is no stretch to note that this type of diversion also draws attention away from the realities of life in other parts of the world and from what the United States is or is not doing in response to human-rights crises elsewhere. A culture focused on ritual and celebrity has no room for more substantive—and, one might add, depressing—realities. If, consequently, the US citizen is so diverted, it is highly unlikely that he or she will in any way pressure the US government to be concerned. This means, of course, that important issues remain on the periphery of consciousness and that, therefore, they are not on the agenda and will not be addressed.

But, Hedges argues, there is no reason to worry, since this celebrity culture provides expiation for whatever guilt may exist. Since, as portrayed in US culture, those

who win are the “Best and the Brightest,” it follows that “those who lose deserve to be erased. Compassion, competence, intelligence, and solidarity with others are forms of weakness” (30). The losers are “responsible for their rejection. They are deficient” (30). Here we find a ready-made rationalization for allowing crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide to proceed unimpeded and, in many instances, unrecognized, as the media do not cover them and the population does not care about them.

Hence, as Hedges writes, “celebrity culture plunges us into a moral void. No one has any worth beyond his or her appearance, usefulness, or ability to ‘succeed.’ The highest achievements in a celebrity culture are wealth, sexual conquest, and fame. It does not matter how these are obtained” (32). This focus masks the problems within US society and diverts attention from problems anywhere else. In fact, Hedges accurately notes that “the fantasy of celebrity culture is not designed simply to entertain. It is designed to keep us from fighting back” (38). Apathy and ignorance feed the majority values of the culture, and we become not victims or perpetrators but bystanders. We watch everything. Not only do we sit and observe “reality” television: we sit and observe Darfur and the Congo as well.

It is often argued that education will overcome these obstacles to consciousness, the ignorance of diversion. Hedges points out, however, that “honest intellectual inquiry, which is by its nature distrustful of authority, fiercely independent, and often subversive” (89), has become a rarity. Corporate hierarchy has become the dominant educational model, and business ethics dominate the modern university: “We have bought hook, line and sinker into the idea that education is about training and ‘success,’ defined monetarily, rather than learning to think critically and to challenge” (95). These are the new primary values of the American educational establishment. The “bottom line” triumphs over any concept of morality or ethics, and critical thinking is not only banished but becomes a threat to the profit motive. Learning must be utilitarian, as defined by this culture and not by any notion of humanitarian action. As for education as the panacea, Hedges concludes that “most universities have become high-priced occupational training centers” (109). Education, in such an environment, has become “a flight from conscience” (11), and a flight from conscience dooms large portions of humanity to suffer, with no recognition that anything is wrong. Hedges goes even further, noting that

the single most important quality needed to resist evil is moral autonomy. As Immanuel Kant wrote, moral autonomy is possible only through reflection, self-determination, and the courage not to cooperate. Moral autonomy is what the corporate state, with all its coded attacks on liberal institutions and “leftist” professors, have really set out to destroy. (112)

Absent these qualities, there is no danger to the status quo and no possibility that pressure will be forthcoming to confront the human-rights violations taking place in remote (at least, remote from the United States) part of the globe.

Hedges concludes with a discussion of the “Illusion of America.” By this he means that the myth of the United States is out of line with the reality. Our self-image, reinforced through the process of political socialization, political rhetoric, and self-absorption, is obsolete. “Our nation has been hijacked by oligarchs, corporations, and a narrow selfish, political, and economic elite, a small and privileged group that governs, and often steals, on behalf of moneyed interests” (142). These interests have no interest, so to speak, beyond money, and, Hedges argues,

in the name of patriotism and democracy, in the name of all the values that were once part of the American system and defined the Protestant work ethic, [have] systematically destroyed our manufacturing sector, looted the treasury, corrupted our democracy, and trashed the financial system. Seeing this plundering we remained passive, mesmerized by the enticing shadows on the wall, assured our tickets to success, prosperity, and happiness were waiting around the corner. (142)

Manipulated into passivity, diverted from reality and unable to see what has taken place, American citizens have lost the habit of democracy, the determination to take action to improve their own and others' well-being. Political will is not only absent in situations where genocide is being committed but has virtually disappeared from American society. The process of divergence has been so successful that it probably is the case that most US citizens have a difficult time recognizing their own self-interest, let alone the self-interest of the nation. The rabble-rousing discussion of health care is a perfect example. How there can be any debate over whether to provide health care for the 32 million people currently uninsured is baffling. Health care should be considered a right, and providing it for those currently without health care or the means to access it should be an honorable undertaking, as should stopping violence where innocent people are being slaughtered. Yet, as Hedges continually points out, the world has changed, and this perspective appears to have been driven out of Americans' cultural value structure, to be replaced by apathy and, if the present public discourse be any measure, hostility.

In this last chapter, Hedges adds more detail to his view of the decay of American culture. The economic decline and the reasons behind that decline—in particular, corporate domination of American political and social life—have, according to Hedges, caused Americans to lose the ability to distinguish between morality and immorality and to support action to combat evil—or to even recognize its occurrence.

“The government,” he writes, “stripped of any real sovereignty, provides little more than technical expertise for elites and corporations that lack moral restraints and a concept of the common”; “cultures that cannot distinguish between illusion and reality die” (143). Or, more appropriately for this discussion, allow others to die, unable or unwilling to distinguish between events that actually call for active intervention and interventions in the pursuit of corporate or national interest. So, no intervention in the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda, or in Darfur—but invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States has become a culture characterized by “war and rampant militarism” (144), and Hedges cites the usual statistics on US military spending, bases around the world, and arms sales to make his point. This leads, in Hedges' persuasive argument, to a kind of national psychopathology that is transferred from the modern corporation to the nation-state. Hedges borrows the typology of psychopathology from Joel Bakan's book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*,¹ providing this checklist of psychopathic traits:

- Callous unconcern for the feelings of others;
- Incapacity to maintain enduring relationships;
- Reckless disregard for the safety of others;
- Deceitfulness: repeated lying and conning of others for profit [or for your own interests];
- Incapacity to experience guilt;
- Failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behavior [as in failure to abide by international law]. (163)

It would not be difficult to note how US policy conforms to these traits, and this raises an interesting question: Is it possible for an entire nation-state to manifest a version of psychopathy?

Hedges appears to conclude that this is, indeed, the case. The decaying culture, he writes, “turns alienation and anxiety into a cheerful conformity. It turns a nation that wages illegal wars and administers off-shore penal colonies where it openly practices torture into the greatest democracy on earth” (190). And yet, despite his pessimistic (some might say “realistic”) analysis, Hedges’ conclusion sounds as though it were derived from some of those hucksters preaching motivation and happiness as he posits that, somehow, love must triumph over evil.

While that is certainly a result to be devoutly wished for, it is scant consolation for the victims of human-rights disasters—both historic and contemporary. For them, more concrete action and more direct confrontation with the forces so disturbingly described by Hedges must be the order of the day.

Finally, what may we conclude about the relationship between Hedges’ argument on the decline of American culture and the prevention of genocide? For a start, a society that is incapable of assessing and confronting its own internal problems, a society that cannot organize the political will to confront problems that are perhaps leading to the demise of its domestic culture, is clearly not a society with the means or the will to confront international issues in far-off places. If, as Hedges argues, America is diverted by ritual and celebrity, plagued by a declining educational and political structure that allows the decision-making process to be captured by corporate elites, it cannot be an America that will be in the forefront of defending human rights around the globe in places such as Darfur or the DRC. To expect otherwise, if Hedges’ analysis is accurate, is to engage in our very own version of missing the reality of twenty-first-century international politics. It has in fact been demonstrated over and over again that those of us interested in protecting and advancing human rights must depend on those nations and groups not so hell-bent on the pursuit of celebrity, money, and power.

Note

1. Joel Bakan, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (New York: The Free Press, 2005).