

Review - Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt

Written by Elizabeth Austin

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Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt

By Chris Hedges

New York: Nation Books, 2015

In *Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt*, author Chris Hedges presents a far leftist's view of an America in crisis, where a revolution is inevitable. He sees the United States as a country in which political and corporate elites have the power, and repressed, increasingly impoverished Americans, have a "moral imperative" to revolt against this corrupt, totalitarian structure. This is a strong statement against the status quo. However, Hedges doesn't adequately support it or provide a viable path forward. He relies on rhetoric and the heralding of modern day martyrs, instead of presenting an action plan for revolution and a concrete vision of a post-revolutionary world.

Hedges believes that the U.S. government has become one of "totalitarian corporate power" or "inverted totalitarianism". He explains that unlike classic totalitarianism, the corporate state in inverted totalitarianism pretends to honor the U.S. Constitution and electoral politics, but instead manipulates the courts internally so that the executive and legislative branches of government serve corporate power, not the people who elected them. (pg. 17)

After establishing this premise, Hedges makes several analogies, from literature to foreign revolutionary movements, to show other scenarios in which greed and power have been confronted. He begins with a comparison of American culture to Captain Ahab's voyage in Herman Melville's classic novel, *Moby Dick* (pg. 30):

And those on the ship, on some level, know they are doomed – just as many of us know that a consumer culture based on corporate profit, limitless exploitation of the earth, and the continued extraction of fossil fuels is doomed. We too see the danger signs. The ecosystem is visibly disintegrating.

Hedges emphasizes that the fear which the U.S. government has created has "cowed the nation" to submit their freedoms to it and made them too fearful to revolt. He concludes, however, that throughout history the working class has eventually woken up and revolted, and we must do the same (pg. 66): "It is an old battle. It has been fought over and over in human history. The only route left to us, as Aristotle knew, is either submission or revolt.

Hedges then references the Russian Revolution under Lenin, and the Zapatista (or EZLN) movement in Mexico. Both movements sprung up as a revolt of the masses against the upper class, but the latter shifted to nonviolent tactics, which Hedges believes we should emulate (pg. 76):

This transformation by the EZLN is one that is crucial to remember as we search for mechanisms to sever ourselves from the corporate state and build self-governing communities. The goal is not to destroy but to transform. And this is why violence is counterproductive. We too must work to create a radical shift in consciousness.

Ideologically this is a sound argument, and one which was used by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States to end racial segregation.

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Hedges moves on to analyze the prison industrial complex in America and the effect capitalism has on society in Chapter Five: The Rebel Caged (pg. 126):

At the bottom, the problem is not race, although race plays a huge part in incarceration rates, nor is it ultimately poverty. It is the predatory nature of capitalism itself. And until we slay the beast of corporate capitalism, until we wrest power back from corporations, until we build social institutions and a system of governance designed not to profit the few but to foster the common good, our prison industry and the horror it perpetuates will only expand.

This could be the turning point in the book, where Hedges begins to introduce the reader to his game plan. His strategy for the revolution. The momentum has been built and we are ready to take action. Instead, Hedges brings in more examples, heralding the acts of rebels Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea Manning, among others, as heroes who would now be leading the revolution, if the U.S. government hadn't kept them from their calling through persecution and imprisonment (pg. 200):

The world has been turned upside down. The pestilence of corporate totalitarianism is spreading over the earth. The criminals have seized power... The persecution of these rebels is the harbinger of what is to come: the rise of a bitter world where criminals in tailored suits and gangsters in beribboned military uniforms – propped up by a vast internal and external security apparatus, a compliant press, and a morally bankrupt political elite – hunt down and cage all who resist.

This comes across as a scare tactic, and as such it lacks resonance. The acts of these modern day martyrs were done to promote freedom of information, and expose illegal government surveillance and corruption. That alone can inspire revolutionary action, if utilized effectively.

In the final chapter, Sublime Madness, I still held out hope for a cohesive, inspiring conclusion, one which would tie everything together and be more than just a call to arms. Instead, Hedges gives the reader more rhetoric, and the definition of “sublime madness”, which we, the readers and future rebels, should have in order to rebel successfully (pg. 211):

Sublime madness demands self-sacrifice and entails the very real possibility of death. Not that the rebel possessed of sublime madness wants to die, for the fight against radical evil is the ultimate affirmation of life. The rebel understands the terrible power of the forces arrayed against all rebels, and how far these forces, once threatened, will go to silence rebels, and yet is so possessed that he or she is unable to conform.

If Hedges' goal is to inspire the reader to revolt, to the point that we succumb to sublime madness and are ready to risk our lives to overthrow this corporate totalitarian government, he needs to provide more substance than rhetoric and analogies. Though he does make some valid points about the nature of corporate greed and corruption, and presents an interesting hypothesis about inverted totalitarianism and the corporate state, he doesn't present a solution. *Wages of Rebellion* calls for action from the people without a solid vision of how the revolution will evolve or its eventual outcome, and that's not enough to inspire the ultimate sacrifice.

About the author:

Elizabeth Austin is a writer in Los Angeles. Her debut novel, *Compass Rose*, was released in March 2017. Elizabeth has a master's in international affairs from the American University of Paris, where she was awarded a travel grant and completed thesis field work in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. She also has a master's in international relations from the University of St. Andrews, for which she completed dissertation field work in Cambodia. She has contributed articles to *International Policy Digest* and *Global Politics Magazine*, and book reviews to E-International Relations.

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