

The elites “have no credibility left:” An interview with journalist Chris Hedges

By David North
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On Monday, WSWs international editorial board chairman David North interviewed Chris Hedges, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, author, lecturer, and former *New York Times* correspondent. Among Hedges' best-known books are *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, *The Death of the Liberal Class*, *Empire of Illusion: the End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, which he co-wrote with the cartoonist Joe Sacco, and *Wages of Rebellion: the Moral Imperative of Revolt*.

In an article published in *Truthdig* September 17, titled “The Silencing of Dissent,” Hedges referenced the WSWs coverage of Google's censorship of left-wing sites and warned about the growth of “blacklisting, censorship and slandering dissidents as foreign agents for Russia and purveyors of ‘fake news.’”

Hedges wrote that “the Department of Justice called on RT America and its ‘associates’—which may mean people like me—to register under the Foreign Agent Registration Act. No doubt, the corporate state knows that most of us will not register as foreign agents, meaning we will be banished from the airwaves. This, I expect, is the intent.”

North's interview with Hedges began with a discussion of the significance of the anti-Russia campaign in the media.

David North: How do you interpret the fixation on Russia and the entire interpretation of the election within the framework of Putin's manipulation?

Chris Hedges: It's as ridiculous as Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. It is an absolutely unproven allegation that is used to perpetuate a very frightening accusation—critics of corporate capitalism and imperialism are foreign agents for Russia.

I have no doubt that the Russians invested time, energy and money into attempting to influence events in the United States in ways that would serve their interests, in the same way that we have done and do in Russia and all sorts of other countries throughout the world. So I'm not saying there was no influence, or an attempt to influence events.

But the whole idea that the Russians swung the election to Trump is absurd. It's really premised on the unproven claim that Russia gave the Podesta emails to WikiLeaks, and the release of these emails turned tens, or hundreds of thousands, of Clinton supporters towards Trump. This doesn't make any sense. Either that, or, according to the director of national intelligence, RT America, where I have a show, got everyone to vote for the Green Party.

This obsession with Russia is a tactic used by the ruling elite, and in particular the Democratic Party, to avoid facing a very unpleasant reality: that their unpopularity is the outcome of their policies of deindustrialization and the assault against working men and women and poor people of color. It is the result of disastrous trade agreements like NAFTA that abolished good paying union jobs and shipped them to places like Mexico, where workers without benefits are paid \$3.00 an hour. It is the result of the explosion of a system of mass incarceration, begun by Bill Clinton with the 1994 omnibus crime bill, and the tripling

and quadrupling of prison sentences. It is the result of the slashing of basic government services, including, of course, welfare, that Clinton gutted; deregulation, a decaying infrastructure, including public schools, and the de facto tax boycott by corporations. It is the result of the transformation of the country into an oligarchy. The nativist revolt on the right, and the aborted insurgency within the Democratic Party, makes sense when you see what they have done to the country.

Police forces have been turned into quasi-military entities that terrorize marginal communities, where people have been stripped of all of their rights and can be shot with impunity; in fact over three are killed a day. The state shoots and locks up poor people of color as a form of social control. They are quite willing to employ the same form of social control on any other segment of the population that becomes restive.

The Democratic Party, in particular, is driving this whole Russia witch-hunt. It cannot face its complicity in the destruction of our civil liberties—and remember, Barack Obama's assault on civil liberties was worse than those carried out by George W. Bush—and the destruction of our economy and our democratic institutions.

Politicians like the Clintons, Pelosi and Schumer are creations of Wall Street. That is why they are so virulent about pushing back against the Sanders wing of the Democratic Party. Without Wall Street money, they would not hold political power. The Democratic Party doesn't actually function as a political party. It's about perpetual mass mobilization and a hyperventilating public relations arm, all paid for by corporate donors. The base of the party has no real say in the leadership or the policies of the party, as Bernie Sanders and his followers found out. They are props in the sterile political theater.

These party elites, consumed by greed, myopia and a deep cynicism, have a death grip on the political process. They're not going to let it go, even if it all implodes.

DN: Chris, you worked for the *New York Times*. When was that, exactly?

CH: From 1990 to 2005.

DN: Since you have some experience with that institution, what changes do you see? We've stressed that it has cultivated a constituency among the affluent upper middle class.

CH: The *New York Times* consciously targets 30 million upper-middle class and affluent Americans. It is a national newspaper; only about 11 percent of its readership is in New York. It is very easy to see who the *Times* seeks to reach by looking at its special sections on Home, Style, Business or Travel. Here, articles explain the difficulty of maintaining, for example, a second house in the Hamptons. It can do good investigative work, although not often. It covers foreign affairs. But it reflects the thinking of the elites. I read the *Times* every day, maybe to balance it out with your web site.

DN: Well, I hope more than balance it.

CH: Yes, more than balance it. The *Times* was always an elitist publication, but it wholly embraced the ideology of neo-conservatism and

neoliberalism at a time of financial distress, when Abe Rosenthal was editor. He was the one who instituted the special sections that catered to the elite. And he imposed a de facto censorship to shut out critics of unfettered capitalism and imperialism, such as Noam Chomsky or Howard Zinn. He hounded out reporters like Sydney Schanberg, who challenged the real estate developers in New York, or Raymond Bonner, who reported the *El Mozote* massacre in El Salvador.

He had lunch every week, along with his publisher, with William F. Buckley. This pivot into the arms of the most retrograde forces of corporate capitalism and proponents of American imperialism, for a time, made the paper very profitable. Eventually, of course, the rise of the internet, the loss of classified ads, which accounted for about 40 percent of all newspaper revenue, crippled the *Times* as it has crippled all newspapers. Newsprint has lost the monopoly that once connected sellers with buyers. Newspapers are trapped in an old system of information they call “objectivity” and “balance,” formulae designed to cater to the powerful and the wealthy and obscure the truth. But like all Byzantine courts, the *Times* will go down clinging to its holy grail.

The intellectual gravitas of the paper—in particular the Book Review and the Weekend Review—was obliterated by Bill Keller, himself a neocon, who, as a columnist, had been a cheerleader for the war in Iraq. He brought in figures like Sam Tanenhaus. At that point the paper embraced, without any dissent, the utopian ideology of neoliberalism and the primacy of corporate power as an inevitable form of human progress. The *Times*, along with business schools, economics departments at universities, and the pundits promoted by the corporate state, propagated the absurd idea that we would all be better off if we prostrated every sector of society before the dictates of the marketplace. It takes a unique kind of stupidity to believe this. You had students at Harvard Business School doing case studies of Enron and its brilliant business model, that is, until Enron collapsed and was exposed as a gigantic scam. This was never, really, in the end, about ideas. It was about unadulterated greed. It was pushed by the supposedly best educated among us, like Larry Summers, which exposes the lie that somehow our decline is due to deficient levels of education. It was due to a bankrupt and amoral elite, and the criminal financial institutions that make them rich.

Critical thinking on the op-ed page, the Week in Review or the Book Review, never very strong to begin with, evaporated under Keller. Globalization was beyond questioning. Since the *Times*, like all elite institutions, is a hermetically sealed echo chamber, they do not realize how irrelevant they are becoming, or how ridiculous they look. Thomas Freidman and David Brooks might as well write for the *Onion*.

I worked overseas. I wasn't in the newsroom very much, but the paper is a very anxiety-ridden place. The rules aren't written on the walls, but everyone knows, even if they do not articulate it, the paper's unofficial motto: *Do not significantly alienate those upon whom we depend for money and access!* You can push against them some of the time. But if you are a serious reporter, like Charlie Leduff, or Sydney Schanberg, who wants to give a voice to people who don't have a voice, to address issues of race, class, capitalist exploitation or the crimes of empire, you very swiftly become a management problem and get pushed out. Those who rise in the organization and hold power are consummate careerists. Their loyalty is to their advancement and the stature and profitability of the institution, which is why the hierarchy of the paper is filled with such mediocrities. Careerism is the paper's biggest Achilles heel. It does not lack for talent. But it does lack for intellectual independence and moral courage. It reminds me of Harvard.

DN: Let's come back to this question of the Russian hacking news story. You raised the ability to generate a story, which has absolutely no factual foundation, nothing but assertions by various intelligence agencies, presented as an assessment that is beyond question. What is your evaluation of this?

CH: The commercial broadcast networks, and that includes CNN and MSNBC, are not in the business of journalism. They hardly do any. Their celebrity correspondents are courtiers to the elite. They speculate about and amplify court gossip, which is all the accusations about Russia, and they repeat what they are told to repeat. They sacrifice journalism and truth for ratings and profit. These cable news shows are one of many revenue streams in a corporate structure. They compete against other revenue streams. The head of CNN, Jeff Zucker, who helped create the fictional persona of Donald Trump on “Celebrity Apprentice,” has turned politics on CNN into a 24-hour reality show. All nuance, ambiguity, meaning and depth, along with verifiable fact, are sacrificed for salacious entertainment. Lying, racism, bigotry and conspiracy theories are given platforms and considered newsworthy, often espoused by people whose sole quality is that they are unhinged. It is news as burlesque.

I was on the investigative team at the *New York Times* during the lead-up to the Iraq War. I was based in Paris and covered Al Qaeda in Europe and the Middle East. Lewis Scooter Libby, Dick Cheney, Richard Perle and maybe somebody in an intelligence agency, would confirm whatever story the administration was attempting to pitch. Journalistic rules at the *Times* say you can't go with a one-source story. But if you have three or four supposedly independent sources confirming the same narrative, then you can go with it, which is how they did it. The paper did not break any rules taught at Columbia journalism school, but everything they wrote was a lie.

The whole exercise was farcical. The White House would leak some bogus story to Judy Miller or Michael Gordon, and then go on the talk shows to say, ‘as the Times reported...’ It gave these lies the veneer of independence and reputable journalism. This was a massive institutional failing, and one the paper has never faced.

DN: The CIA pitches the story, and then the *Times* gets the verification from those who pitch it to them.

CH: It's not always pitched. And not much of this came from the CIA. The CIA wasn't buying the “weapons of mass destruction” hysteria.

DN: It goes the other way too?

CH: Sure. Because if you're trying to have access to a senior official, you'll constantly be putting in requests, and those officials will decide when they want to see you. And when they want to see you, it's usually because they have something to sell you.

DN: The media's anti-Russia narrative has been embraced by large portions of what presents itself as the “left.”

CH: Well, don't get me started on the American left. First of all, there is no American left—not a left that has any kind of seriousness, that understands political or revolutionary theories, that's steeped in economic study, that understands how systems of power work, especially corporate and imperial power. The left is caught up in the same kind of cults of personality that plague the rest of society. It focuses on Trump, as if Trump is the central problem. Trump is a product, a symptom of a failed system and dysfunctional democracy, not the disease.

If you attempt to debate most of those on the supposedly left, they reduce discussion to this cartoonish vision of politics.

The serious left in this country was decimated. It started with the suppression of radical movements under Woodrow Wilson, then the “Red Scares” in the 1920s, when they virtually destroyed our labor movement and our radical press, and then all of the purges in the 1950s. For good measure, they purged the liberal class—look at what they did to Henry Wallace—so that Cold War “liberals” equated capitalism with democracy, and imperialism with freedom and liberty. I lived in Switzerland and France. There are still residues of a militant left in Europe, which gives Europeans something to build upon. But here we almost have to begin from scratch.

I've battled continuously with Antifa and the Black Bloc. I think they're kind of poster children for what I would consider phenomenal

political immaturity. Resistance is not a form of personal catharsis. We are not fighting the rise of fascism in the 1930s. The corporate elites we have to overthrow already hold power. And unless we build a broad, popular resistance movement, which takes a lot of patient organizing among working men and women, we are going to be steadily ground down.

So Trump's not the problem. But just that sentence alone is going to kill most discussions with people who consider themselves part of the left.

The corporate state has made it very hard to make a living if you hold fast to this radical critique. You will never get tenure. You probably won't get academic appointments. You won't win prizes. You won't get grants. The *New York Times*, if they review your book, will turn it over to a dutiful mandarin like George Packer to trash it—as he did with my last book. The elite schools, and I have taught as a visiting professor at a few of them, such as Princeton and Columbia, replicate the structure and goals of corporations. If you want to even get through a doctoral committee, much less a tenure committee, you must play it really, really safe. You must not challenge the corporate-friendly stance that permeates the institution and is imposed through corporate donations and the dictates of wealthy alumni. Half of the members of most of these trustee boards should be in prison!

Speculation in the 17th century in Britain was a crime. Speculators were hanged. And today they run the economy and the country. They have used the capturing of wealth to destroy the intellectual, cultural and artistic life in the country and snuff out our democracy. There is a word for these people: traitors.

DN: What about the impact that you've seen of identity politics in America?

CH: Well, identity politics defines the immaturity of the left. The corporate state embraced identity politics. We saw where identity politics got us with Barack Obama, which is worse than nowhere. He was, as Cornel West said, a black mascot for Wall Street, and now he is going around to collect his fees for selling us out.

My favorite kind of anecdotal story about identity politics: Cornel West and I, along with others, led a march of homeless people on the Democratic National Convention session in Philadelphia. There was an event that night. It was packed with hundreds of people, mostly angry Bernie Sanders supporters. I had been asked to come speak. And in the back room, there was a group of younger activists, one who said, "We're not letting the white guy go first." Then he got up and gave a speech about how everybody now had to vote for Hillary Clinton. That's kind of where identity politics gets you. There is a big difference between shills for corporate capitalism and imperialism, like Corey Booker and Van Jones, and true radicals like Glen Ford and Ajamu Baraka. The corporate state carefully selects and promotes women, or people of color, to be masks for its cruelty and exploitation.

It is extremely important, obviously, that those voices are heard, but not those voices that have sold out to the power elite. The feminist movement is a perfect example of this. The old feminism, which I admire, the Andrea Dworkin kind of feminism, was about empowering oppressed women. This form of feminism did not try to justify prostitution as sex work. It knew that it is just as wrong to abuse a woman in a sweatshop as it is in the sex trade. The new form of feminism is an example of the poison of neoliberalism. It is about having a woman CEO or woman president, who will, like Hillary Clinton, serve the systems of oppression. It posits that prostitution is about choice. What woman, given a stable income and security, would choose to be raped for a living? Identity politics is anti-politics.

DN: I believe you spoke at a Socialist Convergence conference where you criticized Obama and Sanders, and you were shouted down.

CH: Yes, I don't even remember. I've been shouted down criticizing Obama in many places, including Berkeley. I have had to endure this for a

long time as a supporter and speech writer for Ralph Nader. People don't want the illusion of their manufactured personalities, their political saviors, shattered; personalities created by public relations industries. They don't want to do the hard work of truly understanding how power works and organizing to bring it down.

DN: You mentioned that you have been reading the *World Socialist Web Site* for some time. You know we are quite outside of that framework.

CH: I'm not a Marxist. I'm not a Trotskyist. But I like the site. You report on important issues seriously and in a way a lot of other sites don't. You care about things that are important to me—mass incarceration, the rights and struggles of the working class and the crimes of empire. I have read the site for a long time.

DN: Much of what claims to be left—that is, the pseudo-left—reflects the interests of the affluent middle class.

CH: Precisely. When everybody was, you know, pushing for multiculturalism in lead institutions, it really meant filtering a few people of color or women into university departments or newsrooms, while carrying out this savage economic assault against the working poor and, in particular, poor people of color in deindustrialized pockets of the United States. Very few of these multiculturalists even noticed. I am all for diversity, but not when it is devoid of economic justice. Cornel West has been one of the great champions, not only of the black prophetic tradition, the most important intellectual tradition in our history, but the clarion call for justice in all its forms. There is no racial justice without economic justice. And while these elite institutions sprinkled a few token faces into their hierarchy, they savaged the working class and the poor, especially poor people of color.

Much of the left was fooled by the identity politics trick. It was a boutique activism. It kept the corporate system, the one we must destroy, intact. It gave it a friendly face.

DN: The *World Socialist Web Site* has made the issue of inequality a central focus of its coverage.

CH: That's why I read it and like it.

DN: Returning to the Russia issue, where do you see this going? How seriously do you see this assault on democratic rights? We call this the new McCarthyism. Is that, in your view, a legitimate analogy?

CH: Yes, of course it's the new McCarthyism. But let's acknowledge how almost irrelevant our voices are.

DN: I don't agree with you on that.

CH: Well, irrelevant in the sense that we're not heard within the mainstream. When I go to Canada I am on the CBC on prime time. The same is true in France. That never happens here. PBS and NPR are never going to do that. Nor are they going to do that for any other serious critic of capitalism or imperialism.

If there is a debate about attacking Syria, for example, it comes down to bombing Syria or bombing Syria and sending in troops, as if these are the only two options. Same with health care. Do we have Obamacare, a creation of the Heritage Foundation and the pharmaceutical and insurance industries, or no care? Universal health care for all is not discussed. So we are on the margins. But that does not mean we are not dangerous. Neoliberalism and globalization are zombie ideologies. They have no credibility left. The scam has been found out. The global oligarchs are hated and reviled. The elite has no counterargument to our critique. So they can't afford to have us around. As the power elite becomes more frightened, they're going to use harsher forms of control, including the blunt instrument of censorship and violence.

DN: I think it can be a big mistake to be focused on the sense of isolation or marginalization. I'll make a prediction. You will have, probably sooner than you think, more requests for interviews and television time. We are in a period of colossal political breakdown. We are going to see, more and more, the emergence of the working class as a

powerful political force.

CH: That's why we are a target. With the bankruptcy of the ruling ideology, and the bankruptcy of the American liberal class and the American left, those who hold fast to intellectual depth and an examination of systems of power, including economics, culture and politics, have to be silenced.

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