



## **Empire of Illusion:**

### **The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle**

Author: Chris Hedges

Publisher: Nation Books

Date of Publication: July 2009

ISBN: 9781568584379

No. of Pages: 256

[Buy This Book](#)

[Summary published by CapitolReader.com on January 28, 2010]

[Click here for more political and current events books from Nation Books.](#)

### **About the Author:**

Chris Hedges is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and a senior fellow at The Nation Institute. For nearly two decades he was a foreign correspondent with the *New York Times*, covering wars in the Middle East, Africa, Central America, and the Balkans. He currently writes for *Harper's*, *Mother Jones*, and the *New York Review of Books*. He is the bestselling author of *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*.

### **General Overview:**

In *Empire of Illusion*, Chris Hedges charts the dramatic and disturbing rise of a post-literate society that craves fantasy, ecstasy, and illusion. He argues that we now live in two societies: One, the minority, functions in a print-based, literate world, which can cope with complexity and can separate illusion from truth. The other, a growing majority, is retreating from a reality-based world into one of false certainty and magic. In this "other society," serious film and theatre, as well as newspapers and books, are being pushed to the margins.

Hedges navigates this culture – attending pro wrestling contests as well as Ivy League graduation ceremonies – exposing an age of terrifying decline and heightened self-delusion.

**\* Please Note:** This CapitolReader.com summary does *not* offer judgment or opinion on the book's content. The ideas, viewpoints and arguments are presented just as the book's *author* has intended.

- Page 1

From the book *Empire of Illusion* by Chris Hedges. Copyright © 2009. Reprinted by arrangement with Nation Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group ([www.perseusbooks.com](http://www.perseusbooks.com)). All rights reserved.

Published by CapitolReader.com. Copyright © 2010, Capitol Reader and Shamrock New Media, Inc. No part of this summary may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior notice and consent from CapitolReader.com and Shamrock New Media, Inc. The respective copyrights of authors and publishers are acknowledged. "Political Book Summaries" is a registered trademark of Shamrock New Media, Inc. The material provided is for general informational purposes only.

## **Introduction**

Today, we live in a cultural wasteland. Our political system has been hijacked by corporate interests, our economic system is in shambles, and the media we watch is awash in sewage. The worse things get, the more the masses want to flee from reality. In these times of turmoil, charlatans entertain us and demagogues promise simple solutions to complex problems. As in Roman times, bread and circuses are being used to divert the masses as our culture slouches towards despotism.

Our society is experiencing a political, economic, and moral collapse. But rather than face reality, much of the public seeks escape by retreating into illusory fantasies such as professional wrestling, pornography, “reality television,” and the cult of celebrity worship. These escapes offer a cheap catharsis, providing make-believe dramas that inflate the egos of viewers so that they feel they transcend the mediocrity and social rot that permeates their lives.

“Celebrity images are reflections of our idealized selves sold back to us.” But celebrity worship is invariably infantilizing rather than liberating. Today, celebrity, politics, and sports are at the center of a mythological arena that provides instant emotional gratification, but little in the way of edification. In particular, politicians and powerful interests are adept at creating pseudo-events and fictional narratives in which illusion and stage-craft is accepted as reality by a public all too eager to be manipulated.

Meanwhile, as the realm of illusion increases its hold on the public’s attention, the challenges associated with reality mount. Our economic system has been hollowed out by corporate interests. However, the higher the foreclosure and unemployment rates go, the more it seems that our society turns to illusions. The movement known as “positive psychology” insists that individuals can manufacture happiness and be the masters of their fate, but this is more wishful thinking peddled by self-interested self-help gurus.

Many in our culture are losing the capacity to distinguish illusion from reality. Illiteracy rates in the United States are at mind-numbing levels. For instance, seven million Americans are illiterate, 27 million Americans cannot read well enough to complete a job application, and 50 million Americans read at a fifth-grade level or below. In fact, by some estimates 42 percent of the U.S. population is at best semi-literate. No wonder, then, that television – a medium dominated by images – exerts such a hold on us.

Illiteracy and democracy are not compatible. In fact, propaganda campaigns and totalitarian movements flourish in the absence of literacy. After all, images and slogans – not ideas – are the tools of choice that demagogues use to seduce and manipulate the masses. Today, a steep decline in literacy is creating the conditions conducive to new forms of corporate domination and perhaps even totalitarianism.

“Our culture of illusion is, at its core, a culture of death.” The worse our culture becomes, the more people seek illusions as a means of escape. Reality television, celebrity gossip, and stage-managed politics are symptoms of an ailing culture. Nevertheless, humanity has always produced individuals who challenge systems that oppress and mislead. The antidotes to systems based on illusion are the virtues of courage, hope, and love. These virtues are real. Systems based on illusions crumble. But courage, hope, and love triumph and endure.

### **The Illusion of Literacy**

In the *Republic*, Plato presents his famous allegory of the cave. In Plato’s story, a group of prisoners spend their entire lives in a torch-lit underground cavern. These unfortunate men are shackled in a way so that the only reality they can see and know are the flickering shadows cast on the cave’s walls.

In many ways, “we are chained to the flickering shadows of celebrity culture, the spectacle of the arena and the airwaves, the lies of advertising, the endless personal dramas, many of them completely fictional, that have become the staple of news, celebrity gossip, New Age mysticism, and pop psychology.” Plato recognized the potential power illusion and entertainment had to subvert man’s reason. Today, powerful interests manufacture an illusory reality that includes stage-managed politics, “reality television,” and mind-numbing forms of entertainment and escapism. Their objective is to manipulate and exploit audiences.

Americans identify with the screen gods they see flickering on their movie and television screens. The Romans worshiped gods, but our culture worships celebrities. We see in celebrities our idealized selves. Indeed, most of Americans harbor a secret desire to be larger than life stars so that they might escape the unpleasant drabness of ordinary life.

The world that Hollywood and the media create – the world celebrities inhabit – is a fabrication. However, an increasing share of Americans cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. The media does everything it can to promote superficiality, self-absorption, and the religion of materialism. In our media saturated culture, wealth and fame are all that matter.

### **The Illusion of Love**

Americans are also consumed by crass forms of entertainment like professional wrestling and pornography. Professional wrestling, of course, involves cartoonish characters enacting clichéd scripts as part of entirely contrived “athletic” matches. Traditionally, the mock wrestling battles involved characters that purportedly represented the metaphysical clash of Good versus Evil – i.e., Sgt. Slaughter (representing the United States) vs. Colonel Mustafa (representing Middle Eastern despotism). Today’s wrestling characters, however, may be the good guys one week, but the bad guys next week. Indeed, today the elaborately concocted scenarios that play out in the professional wrestling world deliberately blur the distinction between fantasy and reality.

The concocted storylines found in professional wrestling also function as inverse allegories. That is, these scripts reinforce a viewpoint that is widely held in today's society; namely that no one can be trusted, lying and cheating to get ahead is acceptable, and everyone is in it for themselves.

American culture is also awash in pornography. In fact, the pornography industry accounts for some \$10 billion in sales. Of course, pornography reduces women to objects and sex to a purely narcissistic act of self-satisfaction. Needless to say, love, intimacy, and relatedness have no place in the culture of pornography, which turns women into commodities, degrades them, and encourages sadistic behavior. As one observer put it, "what does it say about our culture that cruelty is so easy to market?"

Pornography reflects the coarseness and sadistic nature of our society. Not surprisingly, there is a link between pornography and torture. For instance, both torture and pornography dehumanize their subjects. Indeed, the images from the Abu Ghraib torture scandal were not much different from the images found in some porn films.

### **The Illusion of Wisdom**

"The multiple failures that beset the country, (from) our mismanaged economy to our shredding of Constitutional rights to our lack of universal healthcare to our imperial debacles in the Middle East, can be laid at the doors of the institutions that produce and sustain our educated elite." Put simply, the emphasis on standardized tests, high-priced tutors, and narrow academic and vocational disciplines produces graduates who are extremely deferential to authority and without critical-thinking skills.

Today, graduates from America's elite universities lack the capacity to question authority or examine the injustices that plague our political and economic systems. Moral nihilism permeates the academic world. Further, the military-industrial complex and corporations have corrupted America's universities through grant money and sponsorships. As a result, few products of this system have the capacity or desire to challenge a corporate state that wages imperial wars and commits torture.

Elite universities rely on standardized tests, which tend to produce intellectual drones. In fact, today's elite students are trained in narrow fields and their specialized learning is designed to maintain coercive and unjust political and economic structures. In particular, the humanities – literature and philosophy, for example – are given short shrift. As a result, most graduates of elite institutions lack the deep empathy and reflective capacity that wise leadership requires.

Today, education can be a soul-crushing experience. Educational rewards and economic remuneration reinforce utilitarian ends. In fact, only eight percent of today's college graduates pursue degrees in the humanities. On the other hand, business majors have skyrocketed to nearly 22 percent of the degrees granted.

Industry has been subverting education for more than a century. Historically, leading capitalists dismissed the “life of the mind” and educational subjects that were not pragmatic. Many of the robber barons dismissed the value of universities because they were unprofitable. Today, the humanities are under siege and universities tailor their services to a corporate ideology, where the accumulation of wealth and power are the only values. However, “the flight from the humanities has become a flight from conscience.” Simply put, the product of our elite universities – be they in Congress or on Wall Street – lack the capacity to fix the financial and social messes they have created.

Moral autonomy is indispensable for resisting evil. But as the philosopher Immanuel Kant recognized, moral autonomy is not possible without the capacity for self-reflection. Yet, the corporate state instinctively seeks to obliterate moral autonomy. In its place, the corporate state extols a contrary ideal: “the manipulative character.”

The manipulative character is an emotional cripple who views people as objects to be manipulated. Such an individual is incapable of true relatedness and true experience. In fact, the manipulative character resembles “certain mentally ill or psychotic characters, namely schizoids.” Unfortunately, many such people have been running our political and financial systems. It is naive to think that the people who brought down our political system could help fix it.

### **The Illusion of Happiness**

Broadly speaking, “positive psychology” is a pseudo-scientific movement that insists that positive thinking can transform the human condition. Positive psychology encapsulates academic researchers, self-help gurus, and corporate consultants. What these different factions have in common is that they are peddling the notion that changing mindsets is all that’s necessary to usher in a new age of individual, corporate, and social harmony. However, the gurus of positive psychology never challenge or question the corporate agenda. In fact, “positive psychology is to the corporate state what eugenics was to the Nazis.”

Positive psychology abounds in buzzwords, catchy slogans, and faddish techniques designed to facilitate personal growth and/or workplace efficiency. At its most insipid, positive psychology insists that a positive mental attitude can help people attract the good things in life. However, it is an ideology that implicitly puts the blame on the victims of poverty, foreclosure, and joblessness for their lack of success.

In a nutshell, positive psychology is about as much help solving real problems as alchemy. Positive psychology is largely about creating “life-lies,” illusions that may make us feel better temporarily, but which ultimately break down when reality overwhelms the fantasies we’ve spun.

The psychological profession, in fact, has a long tradition of developing techniques which have helped corporations and governments manipulate people. For instance, psychological researchers have pioneered techniques to make workers more malleable and efficient. Further, the American Psychological Association (APA) refined psychological techniques later authorized by the Bush administration as part of its “enhanced interrogation” program. In fact, many APA psychologists participated in coercive interrogations that involved torture.

Positive psychology treats political dissent as a deviancy to be corrected. Social conformity – as opposed to moral autonomy – is held up as the ideal. Positive psychology, in short, aims at turning individuals into conformists.

### **The Illusion of America**

America has never been perfect, but it once set the standard for democratic values and human rights. Unfortunately, today’s America is a shell of its former self. America no longer embodies its ideals.

This nation has been taken over by oligarchs and self-serving political elites. Our country’s manufacturing sector has been systematically dismantled, our treasury has been robbed, the political system corrupted, and the financial system decimated. Meanwhile, the American people are being distracted by the shadows on the wall that pass for entertainment. Corporate cannibals and political elites have hollowed out our country. All that is left is the illusion of America.

America cannot borrow its way back to prosperity. We now have a phantom economy, which is kept functioning with smoke and mirrors. Our leaders are desperately trying to revive the bubble economy, but massive borrowing will not restore manufacturing jobs that have gone overseas, re-inflate real estate prices, or revive America’s sagging fortunes.

A failure to distinguish fantasy from reality is a characteristic of dying civilizations. When elites are blinded by illusions of omnipotence and infallibility, they lead their societies to ruin. America’s crumbling infrastructure – its dilapidated roadways, bridges, airports, and public transportation systems – are a visible expression of its moral decay.

America is also hemorrhaging jobs while the military-industrial complex “drains the lifeblood out of the body politic.” Concomitantly, our for-profit health care system will devour 20% of the nation’s GDP by 2017. For the first time in America’s history, future generations can expect lower standards of living than their parents. There is little, if anything, that President Obama can do to reverse America’s steep decline.

We are on the verge of political instability. Social chaos is likely and could push America towards full-blown totalitarianism. In fact, the philosopher Sheldon Wolin describes America’s current political system as an example of *inverted totalitarianism*, a

condition where the ruthlessness and anonymity of the corporate state subverts democracy and replaces it with a soulless consumerism and compassionless conformity. Wolin believes that imperial overextension abroad and economic collapse at home will push America's political system in an even more repressive direction. In fact, demagogues from the Christian Right are poised to exploit future crises by presenting themselves as the only leaders who can avert moral, economic, and social anarchy.

President Obama is exceptionally intelligent and well-intentioned, but it is doubtful that he can achieve the structural changes that are needed. Further, the political Left has sold out, abandoned the working class, and lost its ability to organize and thus be a counterweight to the corporate state.

### **Conclusion**

America's woes have been a long time in the making. Since the end of World War II, we have gone from a country that primarily produced goods to one that primarily consumes them. As a result, we have bankrupted ourselves. "The bill is now due. America's most dangerous enemies are not Islamic radicals but those who sold us the perverted ideology of free-market capitalism. They have dynamited the foundation of our society."

Corporations run our lives and those that run them want to maintain the status quo. However, corporations exhibit many of the same traits as psychopathic personalities. For instance, both psychopaths and corporations exhibit deceitfulness, recklessness, a callous disregard for others, remorselessness, and lawlessness.

Corporations have cannibalized this country and corrupted the political system.

The assault on the working class continues as 20 percent of American workers have been laid off in the last three years. By some estimates, 12.7 percent of America's mortgages will be in foreclosure by 2012. The wealthiest one percent of the population controls 40 percent of the country's wealth, while 60 million Americans are near or below the poverty line.

We are now a nation of oligarchs and serfs. We are beginning to resemble the Weimar Republic before the rise of Hitler's fascism.

America is not dealing with the challenges that are contributing to its unraveling. Our society is plagued by corruption, mismanagement, and narcissism. The idea of sacrificing for the common good is roundly ridiculed in the circles of privilege. The public is only now beginning to realize the betrayal, fraud, and abuses the elites have perpetrated. Simply put, both the Democrats and the Republicans have proven to be tools of the corporate state.

The Christian Right – like all radical movements – is prepared to capitalize on the climate of “personal and economic despair.” America is facing challenges on many fronts. The manufacturing system has been dismantled, workers are impoverished, and the value of the dollar could crumble.

But we are facing more than just an economic crisis; faith in the free-market capitalist ideology is also crumbling.

The Hungarian intellectual Karl Polanyi insisted that unregulated financial systems invariably devolve into a form of Mafia-style capitalism. In Polanyi’s view, unfettered markets turn human beings and nature into objects and commodities to be manipulated and exploited. Such systems exclude the sacred dimension of life – and love – altogether.. Without Eros, “societies cannibalize themselves until they die.”

The perils from global warming are also increasing. America’s imperial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are draining the country’s blood and treasure. And corporate bailouts are redistributing wealth upwards. America is well on the way to becoming a feudal society. Meanwhile, the Christian Right and extremists will undoubtedly exploit fear of social disorder in a bid to gain power.

The erosion of literacy feeds a culture of escapism. Put simply, our “mass culture is a Peter Pan culture.” No amount of magical thinking or retreat into fantasy can turn debt into wealth. America will have to face reality, or it will suffer from an overdose of illusions.

A culture that worships celebrities and illusions is a culture of death. But even in the worst of times, there will always be individuals who serve as small sparks of hope. In a dark world, individual acts of love can still light a path that leads us out of the realm of shadows.

- [Buy A Copy of \*Empire of Illusion\*.](#)

- [Click here for more political books from \*Nation Books\*.](#)