

"How Radical Christian Conservatives May Succeed in Destroying Democracy"

by Chris Hedges

There will be no swastikas this time but seas of red, white and blue flags and Christian crosses. There will be no stiff-armed salutes, but recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance.

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The ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes spent his life battling the assault on democracy by tyrants. It is disheartening to be reminded that he lost. But he understood that the hardest struggle for humankind is often stating and understanding the obvious. Aristophanes, who had the temerity to portray the ruling Greek tyrant, Cleon, as a dog, is the perfect playwright to turn to in trying to grasp the danger posed to us by movements from the tea party to militias to the Christian right, as well as the bankrupt and corrupt power elite that no longer concerns itself with the needs of its citizens. He saw the same corruption 2,400 years ago. He feared correctly that it would extinguish Athenian democracy. And he struggled in vain to rouse Athenians from their slumber.

There is a yearning by tens of millions of Americans, lumped into a diffuse and fractious movement, to destroy the intellectual and scientific rigor of the Enlightenment. They seek out of ignorance and desperation to create a utopian society based on "biblical law." They want to transform America's secular state into a tyrannical theocracy. These radicals, rather than the terrorists who oppose us, are the gravest threat to our open society. They have, with the backing of hundreds of millions of dollars in corporate money, gained tremendous power. They peddle pseudoscience such as "Intelligent Design" in our schools. They keep us locked into endless and futile wars of imperialism. They mount bigoted crusades against gays, immigrants, liberals and Muslims. They turn our judiciary, in the name of conservative values, over to corporations. They have transformed our liberal class into hand puppets for corporate power. And we remain meek and supine.

The huge amount of taxpayer money doled out to Wall Street, investment banks, the oil and natural gas industry and the defense industry, along with the dismantling of our manufacturing sector, is why we are impoverished. It is why our houses are being foreclosed on. It is why some 45 million Americans are denied medical care. It is why our infrastructure, from public schools to bridges, is rotting. It is why many of us cannot find jobs. We are being fleeced. The flagrant theft of public funds and rise of an obscenely rich oligarchic class is masked by the tough talk of demagogues, themselves millionaires, who use fear and bombast to keep us afraid, confused and enslaved.

Aristophanes saw the same psychological and political manipulation undermine the democratic state in ancient Athens. He repeatedly warned Athenians in plays such as "The Clouds," "The Wasps," "The Birds," "The Frogs" and "Lysistrata" that permitting political leaders who shout "I shall never betray the Athenian!" or "I shall keep up the fight in defense of the people forever!" to get their hands on state funds and power would end with the citizens enslaved.

“The truth is, they want you, you see, to be poor,” Aristophanes wrote in his play “The Wasps.” “If you don’t know the reason, I’ll tell you. It’s to train you to know who your tamer is. Then, whenever he gives you a whistle and sets you against an opponent of his, you jump out and tear them to pieces.”

Our democracy, through years of war, theft and corruption, is also being diminished. But the example Aristophanes offers is not a hopeful one. He held up the same corruption to his fellow Greeks. He repeatedly chided them for not rising up and fighting back. He warned, ominously, that by the time most citizens awoke it would be too late. And he was right. The appearance of normality lulls us into a false hope and submission. Those who shout most loudly in defense of the ideals of the founding fathers, the sacredness of Constitution and the values of the Christian religion are those who most actively seek to subvert the principles they claim to champion. They hold up the icons and language of traditional patriotism, the rule of law and Christian charity to demolish the belief systems that give them cultural and political legitimacy. And those who should defend these beliefs are cowed and silent.

“For a considerable length of time the normality of the normal world is the most efficient protection against disclosure of totalitarian mass crimes,” Hannah Arendt wrote in “The Origins of Totalitarianism.” “Normal men don’t know that everything is possible, refuse to believe their eyes and ears in the face of the monstrous. ... The reason why the totalitarian regimes can get so far toward realizing a fictitious, topsy-turvy world is that the outside non-totalitarian world, which always comprises a great part of the population of the totalitarian country itself, indulges in wishful thinking and shirks reality in the face of real insanity. ...”

All ideological, theological and political debates with the representatives of the corporate state, including the feckless and weak Barack Obama, are useless. They cannot be reached. They do not want a dialogue. They care nothing for real reform or participatory democracy. They use the tricks and mirages of public relations to mask a steadily growing assault on our civil liberties, our inability to make a living and the loss of basic services from education to health care. Our gutless liberal class placates the enemies of democracy, hoping desperately to remain part of the ruling elite, rather than resist. And, in many ways, liberals, because they serve as a cover for these corporate extremists, are our greatest traitors.

Aristophanes too lived in a time of endless war. He knew that war always empowered anti-democratic forces. He saw how war ate away at the insides of a democratic state until it was hollowed out. His play “Lysistrata,” written after Athens had spent 21 years consumed by the Peloponnesian War, is a satire in which the young women refuse to have sex with their men until the war ends and the older women seize the Acropolis, where the funds for war are stored. The play called on Athenians to consider radical acts of civil disobedience to halt a war that was ravaging the state. The play’s heroine, Lysistrata, whose name means “Disbander of Armies,” was the playwright’s mouthpiece for the folly and self-destructiveness of war. But Athens, which would lose the war, did not listen.

The tragedy is that liberals and secularists, like Obama, are not viewed as competitors by the corporate forces that hold power, but as contaminants that must be eliminated. They have sought to work with forces that will never be placated. They have abandoned the most basic values of the liberal class to play a game that in the end will mean their political and cultural extinction.

There will be no swastikas this time but seas of red, white and blue flags and Christian crosses. There will be no stiff-armed salutes, but recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance. There will be no brown shirts but nocturnal visits from Homeland Security. The fear, rage and hatred of our dispossessed and confused working class are being channeled into currents that are undermining the last vestiges of the democratic state. These dangerous emotions, directed against a liberal class that as in ancient Athens betrayed the population, have a strong appeal. And unless we adopt the radicalism held by Aristophanes, unless we begin to hinder the functioning of the corporate state through acts of civil disobedience, we are finished.

Let us not stand at the open gates of the city meekly waiting for the barbarians. They are coming. They are slouching towards Bethlehem. Let us, if nothing else, like Aristophanes, begin to call our tyranny by its name.

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