

A prominent British editorialist and conservative takes a pessimistic look at the future of an increasingly centralized and socialist Europe.

Peter Hitchens

There is something about the Hitchens family that breeds controversialists with deft pens. The British expatriate Christopher Hitchens is one of America's most coruscant essayists; brother Peter, a Trotskyite turned Tory, has emerged as one of England's sharpest critics of the United Kingdom's absorption into the European Union. Peter, a columnist for the Mail on Sunday, is the author of The Abolition of Britain, an elegy for a land which he believes to be disappearing under the assault of junk culture, sexual immorality, and European homogenization.

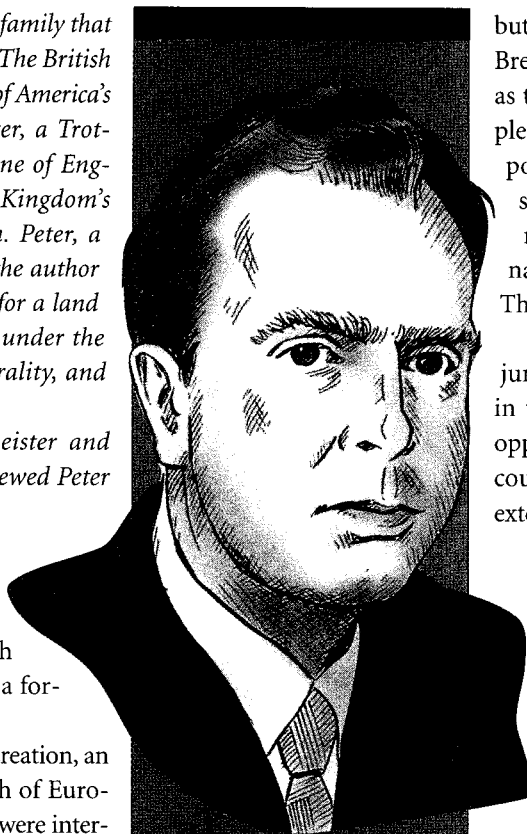
TAE editor in chief Karl Zinsmeister and associate editor Bill Kauffman interviewed Peter Hitchens at his home in Oxford.

TAE: You've said that the European Union has far more in common with the old Soviet Union than it does with the USA. Those are strong words for a former Moscow correspondent.

HITCHENS: The E.U. is a top-down creation, an elitist idea with its roots in the branch of European social democracy whose features were internationalism, a loathing of the nation-state, a belief in the benevolent intervention of the state in almost all areas of life, and a belief that capitalism untamed was necessarily evil. Remember that many of the founders of the Soviet Union were well-intentioned and didn't mean to end up where they did.

In the late 1980s, many socialists in the United Kingdom switched from being fervent opponents of what was then the Common Market to fervent supporters of it, and I've always thought that that was not an accident. The alleged parliament resembles the Supreme Soviet: highly privileged members, and no serious debates, no conception of an opposition.

I'm not saying it's like Stalin and the gulag,



Capitalism and socialism are quite capable of coexisting in a country. The only thing you have to sacrifice is liberty.

but I think the end result could well be quite like Brezhnev, and what some Russians still refer to as the golden time. There was plenty of vodka, plenty of sausage, national pride, but from the point of view of someone who wanted a free society, it was disastrous. The Brezhnev regime, though it wasn't Stalinist, was very nasty to those who persisted in dissenting. The European Union hasn't a gulag, but it also doesn't have *habeas corpus*, it doesn't have jury trial, or due process as it is understood in the U.S. and the U.K. It has no concept of opposition: Most of the press in the continental countries is complacent and sees itself to some extent as an arm of the government.

In Britain and other European countries, if you oppose the idea of the European Union, you are likely to be accused of xenophobia: the equivalent of "anti-Soviet activities."

TAE: Some E.U. defenders claim that the Catholic principle of subsidiarity is built into the Union, and that ceding powers to Brussels will actually promote decentralization.

HITCHENS: One of the main purposes of the European Union is to break down the nation-states into other units. The European Parliament will, if you press them, give you a map of these regions. England is divided into things called Northeast Region, Southeast Region, London Region, Eastern Region, which a lot of people don't even know they live in. There are shadow assemblies in these regions already being devised. The British Parliament at Westminster will continue to exist, but its powers, both internationally and nationally, will be sucked away: its international powers to Brussels, and its national powers will disappear to these artificial E.U. regions (along with the powers of our historic counties and city governments). This shift may be perfectly suited to

Germany, because it was built on provinces, and today's Germans are afraid of being German. But if you happen to be a confident and successful nation, it means death.

TAE: On the relatively rare occasions when the rank and file in Europe have been allowed to vote on aspects of European unification, the answer has often been "no thanks." Yet the steam-roller keeps rolling, and everyday Europeans just stand by like sheep.

HITCHENS: You've got to remember that representative democracy based on individual rights has never really been a homegrown plant on the European continent. The real question is why people in *Britain*, where self-rule has deep roots, have been so complacent. It's true that Britain never really developed a strong enough attachment to the idea that no man was entitled to rule anybody else without his permission. But this didn't matter so long as you had a conservative elite which was wedded to the principles of liberty. Now that that elite has died away, it matters immensely.

If Britain were the country it was 60 years ago, E.U. activists would be having a lot more difficulty than they are. I'm afraid the First and Second World Wars did a great deal of damage to our traditions of liberty, because they relied on centralization and state power and welfare. Imagine the effect on a country where what you eat, down to the last ounce of bread, is governed by state regulation for more than a decade. And imagine the effect on a country when its best and brightest people are exposed to the greatest dangers in two wars, so that twice in the space of 40 years large numbers of the most self-reliant people are killed. That could explain why we British are less protective of our liberties than we once were.

TAE: There is a story in your family in which a local squire once reminded your grandfather rather pompously that "I came over with the Normans." And your grandfather answered, "Yes, we were waiting for you." Where is that impulse now? Why aren't more Europeans screaming, "I don't need a Brussels bureaucrat to pat me on the head and direct my life"?

HITCHENS: Most people in Britain are reasonably prosperous, and they think freedom is like the air they breathe and the water they drink: It doesn't need defending. Most people under 35

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don't know that things were ever different. If you say to them that *habeas corpus* is important, they'll say, "I'm not sure about that." A lot of people are all too willing to sacrifice their liberties. A number of times I've attacked the idea of identity cards and people have written me, "If you haven't done anything wrong, what have you got to fear?" Just wait until the first time you're stopped on the street by a policeman and you don't have your papers.

TAE: There are two separate and nearly opposite arguments against the E.U. today. One is that all of the red tape and bureaucracy is going to suffocate the continent. The second, contradictory, argument is that the E.U. is turning into a socialist superstate. Which is it? Are the Europeans becoming dangerously weak, or dangerously strong?

HITCHENS: The Soviet Union is evidence that you can be both. You can be a hopeless disaster internally and on the other hand an important threat externally.

The E.U. would like to expel American power from the European continent and weaken it everywhere else. If British military forces come under a European command, they won't any longer be used to support American operations. In that, and other, senses, the creation of the E.U. is an obstacle to American power.

TAE: Many Americans would love to talk the Europeans out of their adventure with centralism. But if this is what Europeans have decided they want to do, who are we to tell them otherwise?

HITCHENS: When British people like me ask the United States to resist further European integration, we're asking for assistance against Europe as we did in 1917 or 1940. We're expressing our own self-interest in trying to persuade you that it's in some way beneficial for you to intervene on our behalf. From a British point of view, further absorption into the European Union will be a disaster. And if America values the British alliance, then we do have a common interest.

This may well be a lost cause; reason tells me that it probably is. And the consequences will be awful—as the consequences of idealist projects almost always are.

TAE: There's no mechanism for a country to back out of the E.U.?

HITCHENS: No. The obvious danger to point to is what happened to the United States when there was a determined conflict over centralization and states' rights. The United States had to take a plural verb before 1865; it took a singular one afterwards. U.S. history is evidence that forcing the pace of federation and destroying local independence can be a pretty quick way to serious conflict.

TAE: Is it conceivable that a pan-European government might lead to a backlash big enough to launch a genuine revival of liberty and decentralization?

HITCHENS: I find it far-fetched.

TAE: Is it possible that one of Britain's political parties might evolve into an anti-E.U. party?

HITCHENS: It doesn't seem very likely, because there is a general acceptance that European integration is beneficial. It would be very difficult to run an election campaign in which you said you were going to leave the E.U., as proponents of continued Union membership would insist that this would lead to serious job losses and economic privation. That's a risk that nobody wants to take.

And if you are a professional politician, the European Union offers many very nice career opportunities. Plus that wonderful luxury (which all politicians seek) of power without responsibility.

The parties in Britain are hollowed-out shells that hardly have any members. Meetings are barely attended. Political activism has practically ceased, and the generation which would have taken conservative views has faded.

Broadcasting is almost the only venue in this country where anything is debated, and even if there *were* a majority in favor of a conservative position it could be made to feel a minority by the fact that the broadcasters never give it air time. The outrageous partiality of broadcasting isolates opposition. If your opinion is never reflected in the only public place where you ever see issues debated, you begin to think that it's been discredited and defeated.

TAE: When Americans think of British television, they think of "quality" news and tony entertainment shows.

HITCHENS: I don't watch much television; I find that my eyes slide away from it and turn to books. But most British TV is on a level with

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the lower-grade schlock on American TV: semi-literate, full of foul language, soft porn.

But my objections go deeper than that. If it were all highly cultured, I still wouldn't like it. Television begins by plundering the culture. The best television generally plunders from books and plays and the arts that existed before. Once it has sucked all that dry, it has created a generation which only sees these things secondhand; it has to start plundering itself. It goes deeper and deeper into the cheapest forms of entertainment and the most superficial forms of documentary and news, because it has created people who don't have an attention span for anything better. It goes on and on until in the end it's MTV.

TAE: What is television's role in enforcing the "repressive conformism" which you say is sweeping England?

HITCHENS: Television is, like almost every cultural activity in this country, dominated by post-Christian liberal opinions. Almost all of the people who commission programs are elite liberals who despise conservative thought and morality. Even soap operas are used as a form of propaganda. Leading producers of these programs believe it is their moral duty to enlighten the world, particularly in sexual morality. You simply will not find conservative characters portrayed sympathetically in any of these soap operas. Take the popular radio soap *The Archers*, which is set in a rural area: The characters all talk like suburban liberals. They use metric measurements, which nobody uses. They even use Celsius temperatures, which nobody understands.

TAE: Is there popular resistance to the use of metric measurements?

HITCHENS: No. Once again, there is feeble resignation. In the city of Oxford, the butcher will still sell me meat by the pound—but he looks around when doing so.

TAE: You can buy porn magazines but it's illegal to sell steak by the pound?

HITCHENS: People don't care about it enough. The metric system and the imperial system symbolize beautifully the conflict between the European and the Anglo-Saxon method of thought. But for most people, metric is just an irritation which they overcome.

TAE: Is there any vitality in the Anglican church?

HITCHENS: No. The congregations are often

elderly and dwindling, except in the evangelical congregations, which use modern liturgy and modern Bibles. They're quite successful. Good for them, but it doesn't look like the Christian religion that I was brought up with. It seems to me that there are some things which simply can't be expressed in twenty-first-century English, which need to be expressed in the timeless language of the King James Bible.

TAE: Should the Church be disestablished?

HITCHENS: At this point it would serve as an anti-Christian act. If you'd asked me the same question 200 years ago, I might have had a different answer. A lot of my forebears were very stern non-conformists who got into a lot of trouble for being non-Anglicans. They would have thought disestablishment was a good idea. But it's not an issue of liberty anymore. It's a question of whether we're a Christian country. I'd probably stand quite hard against disestablishment, which I think is coming.

TAE: To republican Americans, the monarchy is inexplicable. You argue that it can be a bulwark of liberty.

HITCHENS: The separation of headship of state from the headship of government is a very important part of maintaining liberty. Here, it's possible to be both loyal to the country and the head of state while being critical of the political government. In our system, which gives enormous (and growing) power to the executive, this is an essential protection. Parliament is actually now the creature of the executive, and seems to lack all independence. The existence of a monarch provides a rallying point for those who are against this.

What we saw with the celebration of the Queen's Jubilee this summer was a demonstration that part of the country isn't enamored with the current structure of government. I wouldn't want to see it go unless someone came up with something very good to replace it.

Americans overcome this problem in other ways, like the right of common citizens to bear arms. You guys were lucky in the drafters of your Constitution.

TAE: Should Americans be concerned about the development of a European defense force?

HITCHENS: This is designed to remove American control and influence over military decisions in Europe. They're not really trying to create a European force; they're trying to supplant what remains of the command structures of NATO, which of course provide for American supreme command.

The importance of a European defense force will probably not be major for the United States. Though it certainly is possible to imagine serious conflicts between the interests of a socialistic, centralized, not-very-free European superstate and the United States.

TAE: Why has anti-Americanism become more prominent in Europe just as we're becoming less present in the continent's affairs?

HITCHENS: You're not taking into account the disappearance

of the Soviet threat. People aren't grateful to their protectors and saviors. Look at the French. They'll never forgive us for having helped to liberate them in 1944. It will be several hundred years before they get over it.

TAE: You had a very poignant section in your book about the strains that resulted within Britain when American GIs poured in amidst World War II, and how unpleasant it was to be occupied in order to be saved. With this in mind, if America were to pull back further from Europe and leave Europeans more to their own devices, wouldn't there be some good results from your point of view?

HITCHENS: Well, I'm not entirely sure what American troops are here for now, so troop withdrawals I could live with. I think NATO should have been wound up when the Soviet Union collapsed.

The withdrawal I fear would be the withdrawal of American influence from continental politics. If everything were left to float freely and there were no external influence at all, the power of Germany would become enormous.

TAE: But isn't it possible that the American backstop has enervated Europeans?

HITCHENS: I don't think the absence of America would suddenly stimulate a great stand-on-your-own-feet movement. On the contrary, it would just speed the process of sinking. You underestimate the desire of a lot of continental Europeans to slump into a centralized autocracy.

TAE: So a kind of imperial burden is being pressed upon America by many European conservatives. We're being told that if we don't stay in Europe the Europeans themselves won't have the sense to guard their own liberties.

HITCHENS: I live in a country which has a different history and different traditions and different interests than continental Europe. And I am angry that America has used so much of its diplomatic force to create a European Union and push Britain into it. Those who have done so will one day have cause to regret it.

TAE: Of course in the beginning, when America rather liked the idea of European integration, it was not a political—much less a socialist—project. It was a capitalist effort to open markets across borders and *reduce* state manipulations of economies.

HITCHENS: Capitalism and socialism are quite capable of coexisting. The only thing you have to sacrifice is liberty.

The Soviet Union taught intelligent socialists that you don't need state ownership to have state control of the economy. That's the great discovery on the basis of which left-wing governments now proceed. They seek to control the economy through taxation and regulation rather than through ownership. But the threat to economic and political liberty is exactly the same.



THE EUROPEAN DISEASE

Irrational anti-Americanism takes root across the Atlantic

By Joshua Muravchik

In response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, German chancellor Gerhard Schröder promised “unlimited solidarity” with the United States. A year later, he won a second term by pledging to German voters his unconditional refusal to cooperate with America’s war against terrorism.

When the World Trade towers crumbled, France’s *Le Monde* proclaimed in a banner headline, “We are all Americans.” On the anniversary, the author of those words—French commentator Jean-Marie Colombani—offered a revision: “We have all become anti-Americans.”

The moment at which Europe’s solidarity with the United States evaporated came just four months after September 11, when the Pentagon released photos of al-Qaeda prisoners handcuffed and blindfolded as they arrived at a makeshift U.S. prison in Guantanamo. “Tortured,” screamed the headline of the *London Mail*. America was slaking its “thirst for revenge,” intoned Germany’s *Der Spiegel*. Spain’s *El Mundo* said Guantanamo reminded it “of the torture centers in Eastern Europe during the Cold War.” And former Anglican envoy Terry Waite, invoking his five years of mistreatment at the hands of Islamic fundamentalists in Lebanon, declaimed: “I can recognize the conditions that prisoners are being kept in at Guantanamo Bay because I have been there.”

London *Evening Standard* columnist A. N. Wilson argued that, “These stories and pictures horrify us, but they should not surprise us.” After all, “the Bush administration...are the most merciless exponents of world capitalism, with the determination to have a McDonald’s and a Starbucks...in every country on earth.” (And how better to spread restaurant franchises than by torturing Arabs in Cuba?) The Guantanamo photos, in short, inspired Europe to revert to the hostility toward America that had prevailed for a decade. The outpouring of empathy inspired by the collapse of New York’s Twin Towers had only *seemed* to change all that.

AEI resident scholar Joshua Muravchik is author of *Heaven on Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism and other books*.

is burned in
ie’s Olympic Stadium, 1999.

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