

THE MISES REVIEW

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF BOOKS, BY DAVID GORDON

VOLUME 9 NUMBER 4

WINTER 2003

Why They Love Bloodshed

War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning

CHRIS HEDGES
ANCHOR BOOKS, 2002
211 PGS.

What Every Person Should Know About War

CHRIS HEDGES
FREE PRESS, 2003
XVI + 175 PGS.

Much has been made in recent years of the so-called “war on drugs.” The pursuit of ecstatic sensations through chemical means, it is alleged, threatens the social order. Stern action by the state must suppress this danger. As Thomas Szasz and others have amply shown, this danger is vastly exaggerated. In two excellent books, Chris Hedges has called attention to a genuine deadly drug, one that the state creates rather than endeavors to suppress. His diagnosis of the

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danger is outstanding, but his account leaves a key issue unresolved.

Paradoxically, the horrors of war attract many people. The pursuit of extreme situations is for many a route to meaning in life. But Hedges, a distinguished war correspondent who has himself been gripped by this attraction, warns against it. "The enduring attraction of war is this: even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent . . . war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble" (*Meaning*, p. 3).

As our author sees matters, it is very difficult to lead a meaningful life by yourself. If, by contrast, you feel yourself tightly connected with others, the task becomes much easier. This is all the more so if your connection with others aims to achieve a goal that you and your comrades deem vitally important.

As Hedges makes clear, the struggle for meaning takes very different forms on the home front and in actual combat. On the home front, the "myth of war" prevails: "The cause, sanctified by the dead, cannot be questioned without dishonoring those who gave up their lives. We become enmeshed in the imposed language. . . . There is a constant act of remembering and honoring the fallen during war. These ceremonies sanctify the cause. As Americans we speak, following the September attacks, like the Islamic radicals we fight, primarily in clichés. . . . We accept terms imposed upon us by the state—for example the 'war on terror'—and these terms set the narrow parameters by which we are able to think and discuss" (*Meaning*, pp. 145–46).

In wartime, people do not regard this narrowing of discourse as a problem to be overcome. Quite the contrary, they often suppress those who dare to dissent. During World War I, for example, the British public turned on the once-popular reformer E.D. Morel, famed for his exposure of atrocities in the Belgian Congo. Morel's exposure of British propaganda and secret treaties drew this response: "His fight against the war saw mobs break up his meetings with stink bombs and his banners ripped down. He finally could not rent a hall. . . . He was flooded with hate mail. The government finally jailed him in 1917" (*Meaning*, p. 147). Hedges aptly notes that in wartime figures such as Morel are the exception. The press does not have to

THE

MISES REVIEW

PUBLISHED BY THE LUDWIG VON MISES INSTITUTE

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be dragooned into following the government line.

Propaganda may rouse into frenzy the civilian population, but matters are very different in actual combat. The reality of fear and killing quickly ends the myths absorbed on the home front; but another form of meaning through collective endeavor now comes to the fore. The combatants feel bound to their fellow fighters: defense of their close comrades paradoxically heightens their sense of life as they are exposed to supreme danger. "The battlefield, with its ecstasy of destruction, its constant temptation of self-sacrifice, its evil bliss, is more about comradeship. The closeness of a unit, and even as a reporter one enters into that fraternity once you have been together under fire, is possible only with the wolf of death banging at the door. The feeling is genuine, but without the threat of violence and death it cannot be sustained" (*Meaning*, pp. 115–16).

War may offer meaning through action in unity; but, one might wonder, can we not attain unity in some less destructive way? Hedges does not mention William James's famous essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1906). James suggested that youth camps to carry on social work could provide the needed sense of purpose. Our author implicitly disagrees with James; and the quotation just given adumbrates the point at which Hedges would challenge him.

For Hedges, unified action is not enough. A life with meaning demands that our senses and emotions be roused from their humdrum sources of

stimulation. War's risk of sudden death, not to mention the gruesome sights and smells of the battlefield, accomplish this to a far greater extent than does chopping down trees as a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Hedges's view parallels the theory of the early twentieth-century German sociologist Georg Simmel, who likewise found war a means to attain meaning through heightened experiences. Simmel, writing during World War I,

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interpreted war as a way to overcome the meaninglessness of everyday life. Instead of the "cyclical repetition of everyday life," war offers "the deeply moving existential experience of an ecstatic feeling of security that liberates our personality from inhibitions and opens it up to social impulses once again."¹

¹Hans Joas, *War and Modernity* (Polity Press, 2003), p. 65. Joas's valuable book also calls attention to the similar views of Georges Sorel.

Unlike Simmel, though, Hedges writes not to praise war but to warn us of its dangers. He places principal emphasis on the most obvious of these ill effects: war leads to death and horrible injuries in large numbers. Hedges brings this home to us even more effectively in *What Every Person Should Know About War* than in the self-consciously literary *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. The former work is ostensibly a guidebook, intended to provide the “plain facts” about war: “The book is a manual on war. There is no rhetoric. There are very few adjectives” (*What Every Person*, p. xiii).²

A few examples of these plain facts must here suffice. In response to the question, “What are the best and worst places to get shot?” we learn: “A clean line through your arm, hand, or foot is best, though it will be painful. . . . The pressure from a bullet that enters the brain will usually rupture the skull . . . a lung wound will make it very difficult to breathe. . . . The spleen, liver, and kidney may rupture on impact” (*What Every Person*, p. 41).

Even if a soldier in battle manages to escape being wounded, he will still face a difficult situation: “You will most likely be subject to loud noise and vibration as well as a lack of oxygen,

choking fumes, chemicals, skin irritants, bright lights, and haze” (*What Every Person*, p. 81).

Hedges gives similar graphic descriptions of imprisonments, torture, and rape, among many other topics. To my mind, though, the most unnerving image occurred during the response to “What does it feel like to die?” “According to people who have been clinically dead and then resuscitated,

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you will feel your consciousness swiftly wind down. It will not flip from on to off, like a light, but rather will gradually disappear, like a match burning out” (*What Every Person*, p. 100).

Given the facts that Hedges has so assiduously amassed about combat, combined with his earlier description of the effects of war on truth and free inquiry, is not the conclusion obvious? The emotional ecstasies of war are bought at too high a price. Unfortunately, matters are not so simple.

²Hedges has taken as a model a question-and-answer book written by the American lawyer Harold Shapiro in 1937, *What Every Young Man Should Know About War*. Shapiro had been greatly affected by the deaths and injuries of World War I.

Hedges has left himself open to a counterargument. An advocate of war might respond to him in this way: "I readily grant that war has horrendous effects. But these effects are worth enduring, because war gives our life meaning in a way that nothing else can match. We can be pacifists and shun war, if we wish; but then we will lose our chance to experience life at its fullest."

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I do not think that Hedges has a satisfactory reply to this objection. To portray the bad effects of a practice does not suffice to determine how we should evaluate it. To do this requires philosophical principles to guide us. (The battle between Eros and Thanatos, one of Freud's most implausible speculations that Hedges has unfortunately taken over, is not an example of what I mean by philosophical principles.) Absent guidance by the appropriate moral standards, someone can find the bad effects of war additional sources of fascination and seek

war all the more. Hedges himself is aware of the point. He speaks of the "seductiveness of violence, the fascination with the grotesque. . . . Killing unleashes within us dark undercurrents that see us desecrate and whip ourselves into greater orgies of destruction" (*Meaning*, p. 100).

I cannot here hope to supply these principles, but to my mind an acceptable response requires us to reject a view that Hedges does not question. He accepts without argument that meaning in life depends on experiencing extreme sensations. Why believe this? Why not instead try to find meaning in the ordinary business of life?

Hedges tells us: "All great works of art find their full force in those moments when the conventions of the world are stripped away and confront our weakness, vulnerability, and mortality" (*Meaning*, p. 91). I think that our author has here eaten an unbalanced diet. The novels of Jane Austen, not to mention Dante's *Paradiso*, hardly support Hedges's thesis. He would have been helped in his reflections on meaning in life had he consulted Ronald Knox's *Enthusiasm* (much esteemed, incidentally, by Murray Rothbard) and remembered Talleyrand's counsel: "*Pas trop de zèle*" [Avoid excess enthusiasm].

But if Hedges has not solved the difficult philosophical problems connected with his topic, he has nevertheless written books of great value. Surely people with normal sensibilities, when faced with Hedges's account of the realities of war, will react with aversion

rather than fascination; and that is all to the good. ■ MR

Insurance Fraud

Social Security: False Consciousness and Crisis

JOHN ATTARIAN
TRANSACTION PUBLISHERS, 2002
XVII + 393 PGS.

Nearly everyone knows that the Social Security system faces eventual collapse, but John Attarian remarkably claims that semantics lies at the root of the crisis. He follows the great literary scholar Richard Weaver in emphasis on calling things by their proper names: "Definitions, Weaver insisted, must be scrupulously accurate; he attributed much of humanity's confusion of thought to 'failure to insist on no compromise in definition'" (p. 226, quoting Weaver).

Even if Weaver is right, how can Attarian's radical claim be justified? Surely the crisis stems from matters of finance, and even definitions that satisfy the most careful grammarian will not suffice to replenish the depleted trust funds of Social Security.

Attarian does not deny the obvious. He is no linguistic idealist, who makes reality the creature of vocabulary. Quite the contrary, he analyzes the

financial crisis in careful detail. But, he maintains, a widely held illusion makes virtually impossible any attempt to confront the crisis effectively. To meet impending disaster, benefits to current beneficiaries of Social Security must be drastically cut. Unfortunately, owing to an unrelenting propaganda campaign by the government, most people believe that their Social Security benefits are insurance payments to which they have a legal right. They accordingly reject all proposals for severe cuts. Attarian's principal aim is to trace the origins and progress of this illusion.

In his presentation of the financial issues, Attarian relies on the work of A. Haeworth Robertson, a former chief actuary of Social Security. (Robertson, by the way, has weighed in with a strong endorsement of Attarian's book.) Even the Board of Trustees of Social Security acknowledges that when the post-World War II "baby boomers" retire, the system will be strained to the utmost. Benefits, contrary to popular belief, must be paid for

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