

New perspectives – what's wrong with TED talks? Benjamin Bratton at TEDxSanDiego 2013 – Re:Think

With all due respect [to Lizzie Velasquez](#), the vast majority of TED and TEDx talks are complete bullshit, and it's high time someone called them out on it.

[Benjamin Bratton](#), Associate Professor of Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego, has a huge problem with TED, and he isn't afraid to tell them so right to their face.

At a recent TEDx event in San Diego, Bratton delivered a talk called "What's Wrong with TED Talks?"

"The first reason is over-simplification," [Bratton says at the start of his speech](#). "To be clear, I have nothing against the idea of interesting people who do smart things explaining their work doing in a way that everyone can understand, but TED goes way beyond that."

Bratton then launches into a terrifying anecdote to explain what he means:

I was recently at a presentation that a friend, an astrophysicist, was making to a potential donor, and I thought this talk was lucid, and engaging, and I'm a professor of visual arts here at UC San Diego so at the end of the day, I know really nothing about astrophysics. The donor, however, said, 'you know what, I'm gonna pass. I'm just not inspired. You should be more like Malcolm Gladwell.'

Bratton was livid: "Can you imagine? A scientist who creates

real knowledge should be more like a journalist who recycles fake insights. This is not popularization. This is taking something with substance and value and coring it out so that it can be swallowed without chewing. This is not how we'll confront one of our most frightening problems – this is one of our most frightening problems.”

You should absolutely watch the entire talk, but if you're short on time, just read [the full text of Bratton's "take away"](#):

As for one simple take away ... I don't have one simple take away, one magic idea. That's kind of the point. [...]

'Innovation' defined as moving the pieces around and adding more processing power is not some Big Idea that will disrupt a broken status quo: that precisely is the broken status quo.

One TED speaker said recently, ;If you remove this boundary ... the only boundary left is our imagination.' Wrong.

If we really want transformation, we have to slog through the hard stuff (history, economics, philosophy, art, ambiguities, contradictions). Bracketing it off to the side to focus just on technology, or just on innovation, actually prevents transformation.

Instead of dumbing-down the future, we need to raise the level of general understanding to the level of complexity of the systems in which we are embedded and which are embedded in us. This is not about 'personal stories of inspiration,' it's about the difficult and uncertain work of demystification and reconceptualisation: the hard stuff that really changes how we think. More Copernicus, less Tony Robbins.

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Plutonium Circus — documentary

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A is for Atom

The Pathology of the Rich –

Chris Hedges on Reality Asserts Itself

Paul Jay, Senior Editor, TRNN: Welcome to The Real News Network. I'm Paul Jay in Baltimore. And welcome to *Reality Asserts Itself*. A few weeks ago, we did a series of interviews with Chris Hedges, and one of the things we talked about was the weakness of the left, the weakness of the people's movement, if you will. Well, we're going to continue that discussion now. And Chris joins us again in the studio.

Chris, as everyone probably knows by now, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and a senior fellow at the Nation Institute. Along with Joe Sacco he wrote the *New York Times* bestseller *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*. And he writes a weekly column for Truthdig.

Thanks for joining us.

Chris Hedges, Journalist, Senior Fellow at the Nation Institute: Thank you.

Jay: So last time we talked a lot about something you had said in 2008 and you've written more recently about: one of the greatest weaknesses of the left was not creating a viable vision of what an alternative politics and economy looks like, a viable vision of a socialism. But you've written more recently about some other weaknesses, you could say, of the people's movement, and here's one. And I'll read it back. This is a piece you wrote called "Let's Get This Class War Started", which I guess is a play on Pink's song, is it? "Let's Get This Party Started". The quote is: **"The inability to grasp the pathology of our oligarchic rulers is one of our gravest faults."** What are you talking about?

Hedges: Because we don't understand the pathology of the rich.

We've been saturated with cultural images and a kind of cultural deification of wealth and those who have wealth. We are being—you know, they present people of immense wealth as somehow leaders—oracles, even. And we don't grasp internally what it is an oligarchic class is finally about or how venal and morally bankrupt they are. We need to recover the language of class warfare and grasp what is happening to us, and we need to shatter this self-delusion that somehow if, as Obama says, we work hard enough and study hard enough, we can be one of them. The fact is, the people who created the economic mess that we're in were the best-educated people in the country—Larry Summers, a former president of Harvard, and others. The issue is not education. The issue is greed. And I, unfortunately, had the experience of being shipped off to a private boarding school at the age of ten as a scholarship student and live—I was one of 16 kids on scholarship, and I lived among the super-rich and I watched them. And I think much of my hatred of authority and my repugnance for the ruling elite comes from having been among them for so long.

Jay: Yeah. People don't understand the elite schools, even at the high school level, that they get—the kids get excellent educations, but they learn the whole culture of hundreds or thousands of years of how to rule.

Hedges: Right.

Jay: And a deep, rich understanding of it.

Hedges: Not only that, but they—you know, and George Bush is a perfect example of that.

Jay: Well, not so much an example of deep, rich understanding, but—.

Hedges: No, but of how—you know, affirmative action for the rich. And I came—certainly my mother's side of the family—from, you know, lower working class. I mean, people—one of my uncles lived in a trailer in Maine, and certainly people

with no means. And I would juxtapose the world I was in with that world. And it was very clear that it wasn't about intelligence or aptitude. The fact is, if you're poor, you only get one chance. If you're wealthy like Bush, you get chance after chance after chance after chance. So you're a C student at Andover, and you go to Yale, and you go to Harvard Business School, and you're AWOL from your National Guard unit, and you're a cokehead, and it doesn't really matter. You don't even really have a job till you're 40 and you become president of the United States. So that was what was particularly insidious, how those small, tight elite oligarchic circles perpetuated themselves and promoted mediocrity (because many of these people like Bush are very mediocre human beings) at the expense of the rest of us, and how with money they game the system. And, of course, now we live in an oligarchic state where we've been rendered utterly powerless, and the judiciary, the legislative, the executive branches all subservient to an oligarchic corporate elite. And the press is owned by an oligarchic corporate elite, which makes sure that any critique of them is never broadcast over the airwaves.

Jay: And it's not some, like, inherent evilness or something, but you are brought up as a super-rich or very rich in a culture, in a school, in a milieu where everyone's there to serve you. It's your right to be served.

Hedges: Yeah. It's very distasteful to see, because, you know, I would go to the homes of friends of mine and watch—and let's remember they're children, 11, 12 years old, ordering around adults—their servants, their nannies. And I begin that piece by talking about Fitzgerald, who came from the Midwest to Princeton and went through much of the experience that I went through, and that apocryphal exchange—which didn't take place, but it does represent the difference between Hemingway and Fitzgerald—where Fitzgerald at one point had written—the story is that he said the rich aren't like you and I, and Hemingway

is supposed to have quipped, yes, they have more money. Well, Hemingway, like on many things, was wrong. **The rich are different, because when you have that much money, then human beings become disposable.** Even friends and family become disposable and are replaced. And when the rich take absolute power, then the citizens become disposable, which is in essence what's happened. There is a very callous indifference. I mean, these people—and C. Wrights Mills wrote about this in *The Power Elite*—they're utterly cut off. I mean, the only people they ever meet who are members of the working class are people who work for them—they're gardeners or they're chauffeurs. They live in self-encased bubbles. They have no real contact with reality. I mean, they don't even fly on commercial airlines. And yet they have absolute power. Now, that becomes very dangerous politically because they're so out of touch and they are able to retreat into their enclaves in the same way that you saw in France under Louis XVI, people retreating to Versailles, or the end of the Chinese dynasty when everybody went to the Forbidden City.

Jay: He said "*Après moi, le déluge,*" does he not?

Hedges: Yeah. And that's, I think, you know, so that they will extract more and more and more, because they have no self-imposed limits, without understanding the economic, political, and social consequences of what they're doing. So we have a popular uprising through the Occupy movement where people pour into public spaces to express legitimate grievances—student debt, the next bubble to go down, \$1 trillion in debt, which we now saw, courtesy of our Congress, debt rates, you know, interest rates will actually go up in a couple of years, I mean, more than if they'd just taken it from a bank. It's insane. And meanwhile the Federal Reserve is buying \$85 billion a month worth of junk bonds and giving money at virtually zero percent interest to Goldman Sachs. I mean, it's insane. The failure to address the mortgage and foreclosure crisis, the failure to address the chronic unemployment,

underemployment, which—I mean, half of the country now lives in poverty, including the working poor, or near poverty. And what is the response? The response is to physically shut down the encampments, suspend unemployment benefits, cut food stamps, close things like Head Start. It's crazy. And that's what happens when you have an elite that is that unplugged, and which our elite is. So they will push and push and push myopically out of ignorance until something erupts. And that's exactly where we're headed.

Jay: It's interesting. There are some children of the some of the super-rich—and I think Occupy had something to do with it—who kind of woken up a bit to the situation and don't want to repeat the pattern of their parents, get some of the insanity of it.

Hedges: I don't know if they're children of the super-rich. I think that Occupy had a lot of children of the middle class.

Jay: No, no, I don't mean the majority of Occupy.

Hedges: Oh.

Jay: But they're actually know who some of these people are. And it's interesting. They're children of very, very wealthy people, and they have decided that, you know, there needs to be more to life than repeating this, living in this bubble.

Hedges: Well, they may be out there, but I don't think they're a majority.

Jay: They're a very tiny minority.

Hedges: Most of them get sucked right into that cult of the self, which the super-rich managed to perpetuate at a rather nauseating level.

Jay: We were talking off-camera just before we started how we both knew Gore Vidal, and Vidal used to go on about the total amorality of the super-rich.

Hedges: Oh, he would know.

Jay: Well, he would know for a lot of reasons, one in terms of his own life, but also in terms of he knew many of these people.

Hedges: Well, so did I. I mean, and I think that's what I'm getting at, exactly. I mean, you know, I wrote in that column about, you know, being at this boarding school and watching these fathers pull up in their limousines, fathers who had very little contact with their sons, with their personal photographers. And these were famous, wealthy men. And that picture of them playing with their son, which was total—you know, a fiction, would be disseminated through the press. Yeah, amorality, hedonism, selfishness, callousness.

Jay: And part of it is the total willingness to accept, for example, that ordinary people's families should send their kids off to war to defend the American way of life, which means essentially their way of life, can die for these things. It's almost a kind of racism. I mean, when the British enslaved the Irish—you don't have to be black and of color to be thought of as less than human. And that seems to be what the super-rich think about most other people.

Hedges: Well, and not just the working class, I mean, the kind of disdain for the working class and also the middle class—I mean, in some way the way that they would speak about the middle class. And, you know, in essence, coming out of the middle class, this was something that struck home to me. Yeah, they inhabit another world, and they have very sophisticated mechanisms of public relations and well-publicized acts of philanthropy to hide their private faces. But how they act when the doors close and how they act in public is very different. And having, as Vidal was, as Fitzgerald was, having been behind those closed doors and seen the decadence of the ruling elite, it certainly marked me for the rest of my life and it defined for me at a very early age who my enemies were.

Jay: You quote in your article Karl Marx writing, “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships,” Marx wrote, “the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.” Why did that hit you?

Hedges: Well, because the whole notion of the free market–laissez-faire capitalism, globalization–is a very thin rationale for unmitigated greed by a tiny oligarchic elite. And they have made sure that that ideology is taught in universities across the country. And people, especially economists, who deviate from that ideology have been pushed aside, have become pariahs. And yet the driving ethos of that ideology is really to justify the hoarding of immense amounts of wealth by a very tiny percentage of, you know, the upper ruling class. That’s what it is. I mean, the whole lie of globalization, perpetuated by people who popularize it, like Tom Friedman, has already been exposed. I mean, the idea that it’s going to lift all of us up and create middle-class and, you know, well-compensated working-class families in the Third World, I mean, all of it’s been exposed.

Jay: And I think part of it, his point, is that this isn’t just some innate ideas that everyone is essentially greedy, these people just happen to be rich, and you’re not as lucky you’re as smart as they are; it’s that it comes from what he calls the material conditions, about, like, how stuff is owned, who has power as a result of concentration of ownership, how things are distributed. It’s not that–you know, it doesn’t have to be this way. It’s a product of how the society is organized.

Hedges: Right. And so in that sense the ideology serves the system, the intellectual class serves the system. Those economists whose voices are heard, who get tenure, serve the system; and those who don’t serve the system don’t have a job. And that’s what Marx was getting at. And I think that’s extremely true. I mean, we don’t live in a free-market

society. We live in a society where corporations at will loot the U.S. Treasury and the Federal Reserve and are bailed out by the taxpayer. And yet that fact of kind of corporate socialism for corporations is ignored. And yet it is—and that's dangerous, because **there is an utter disconnect from the language that we use to describe our economic system and the reality of our economic system, which is essentially a system where corporations have become predators on government and taxpayer money.** And we're all going to pay for it, because most of this stuff, these bonds that they're buying up, is garbage. You know, it is things like foreclosed homes that on the books are worth \$600,000 but in reality, because the electricity has been turned off, the basement's flooded, you'd have to spend money to raise it to put up anything of any kind of value. And that is going to blow right up in our face.

Jay: And this idea that you're expressing, that the majority of professional paid intellectuals, professors and writers and pundits, the idea that the free market is the fundamental assumption and starting point, to suggest anything else might work is sacrilegious, and then some people say, well, that's 'cause America's always been like this. America's this center-right country. But it's not true. And, you know, pre-World War II in the 1930s and right after World War II there was a big public debate about what kind of economy, what kind of politics, and there was a real campaign waged to get rid of public intellectuals, get rid of union militants, get rid of actors and directors. Anyone that wanted to have this public discourse was hounded out of office

Hedges: Well, I write death of the liberal class is really that story, how all of these people were silenced, pushed to the margins, stripped of employment, including, like, even high school teachers. I mean, Ellen Schrecker, the historian, has done a good job on this.

Jay: Just quickly, for people who don't know what we're talking about, we're talk about the House Un-American

Activities, McCarthyism, and a real campaign to try to move anyone with a kind of progressive socialist idea out of anything.

Hedges: Right. And they were effective, I mean, in a way, far more effective than in Europe. I mean, in Europe, you'll still have a residue. We've been robbed of language by which we can express the reality of what we're undergoing. And that's because, you know, our radical populist dissident movements, those who offered a critique of the power elite, have been banished or silenced.

Jay: Now, you write something here which, you know, if you—you would not be allowed to say on mainstream news anywhere. You write: "Class struggle defines most of human history. Marx got this right. The sooner we realize that we are locked in deadly warfare with our ruling, corporate elite, the sooner we will realize that these elites must be overthrown." There's a massive campaign not even to use the words class warfare. In fact, if you talk class, people accuse you of being essentially anti-American.

Hedges: I don't think you can understand the nature of capitalism if you don't understand the nature of class warfare. You know, if I was running a Wall Street firm, I'd only hire Marxian economists, because they understand that capitalism is about exploitation. Marx got that right. And that gets back to the nature of the ruling elite. I mean, we are the most illusioned society on the planet. The airwaves are awash in lies. You know, they very skillfully know how to humanize figures, I mean, even idiots like Donald Trump, to mask what it is they're actually doing to the rest of us. And I think we have to begin to puncture the very effective mirages that have been created—and corporations, of course, spend billions of dollars to create these mirages—to understand our reality. I mean, look at BP. You'd think BP was Greenpeace, given the amount of commercials that they're running about how much they care about the Gulf, when in fact

they turned the waters of the Gulf into a dead zone and poisoned the shrimp and all the other which they're selling us to eat. And yet we don't have mechanisms by which—or certainly within the mainstream. What major network is going to go do a serious documentary on BP? You're not going to confront those interests, because at this point, these interests, you know, they own or control the systems of information, as well as the systems of education.

Jay: So your article ends with: "The only route left to us, as Aristotle knew, is revolt."

Hedges: Well, because the mechanisms of incremental and piecemeal reform don't work. And you talked about the New Deal. The New Deal was the classic example of that kind of safety valve. And as Roosevelt said, I mean, his greatest achievement was that he saved capitalism. And in the stupidity of the corporate oligarchic elite, they destroyed the liberal class. I mean, we still have a self-identified liberal class, but they no longer do anything to defend the interests of those they claim to represent, whether that's the working class, the middle class, labor, or anyone else. And by destroying that safety valve, by destroying that liberal class, those mechanisms that made piecemeal and incremental reform possible, you no longer can adjust the system. So you can't ameliorate the suffering or the grievances of the underclass. And now we're talking about half the country. Now, that means that if you want to resist, if you want to create change, you can't do it through political parties, you can't do it through the courts, you can't do it through a corporatized media. You have to step outside the system and create popular mechanisms, mass movements that will begin to put pressure in a cruder way on the centers of power. That is the only hope we have left.

Jay: You say you can't do incremental reform. The elite can't even pass regulations that would serve their own interests, in terms of controlling financial speculation, for example, a

simple change in terms of position limits at the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, that anyone that wants some kind of functioning capitalist system would want to have this so that you don't have another financial collapse as 2008. They can't even pass that.

Hedges: But they don't—the people who are running Wall Street don't give a damn about—they know it's going to collapse. And what they're doing is stealing as fast, as much as they can on the way out the door. There's a very deep cynicism

Jay: Well, they make money—they make money after the collapse as well, 'cause they know the state's there to bail them out.

Hedges: Right. But, you know, this time around it's going to be a little harder to pilfer state funds. I mean, they'll certainly attempt to do that. But, you know, the goal is so self-centered. You have—I think the head of United Healthcare made \$1 billion—I mean, it's insane—last year. I think I have that right. But certainly hundreds of millions of dollars [incompr.] And it's all about amassing little monuments to themselves, little empires to themselves. You know, I have relatives who work on Wall Street, and their critique is not any different from mine. The difference is **they're just grabbing is much as they can on the way out the door. And I think that is always symptomatic of a kind of dying civilization.**

Jay: Yeah. Marx was asked once to describe the psychology of a capitalist, and it was what we talked about a little earlier: *après moi, le déluge*, after me, come the floods. I'll get what I can today, and if the society is toast later, too bad.

Hedges: And I think they know it's going to be toast. And I think they think that they're going to retreat into their, you know, gated compounds and survive it. And they may survive it longer than the rest of us, but in the end, climate change

alone is going to get us.

Jay: So it's up to us. Don't expect anything from the oligarchs.

Hedges: No. And not only that, they are creating systems in terms of exploitation not only of us but of the ecosystem that, if left unchecked, will ensure the extinction of the human species. It may already be too late, of course. But, you know, allowing the fossil fuel industry or these corporations to determine our relationship to the environment is a form of collective insanity at this point.

Jay: Thanks for joining us

Hedges: Thank you.

Jay: And thank you for joining us on *Reality Asserts Itself* on The Real News Network.

Chris Hedges, whose column is published Mondays on [Truthdig](#), spent nearly two decades as a foreign correspondent in Central America, the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. He has reported from more than 50 countries and has worked for The Christian Science Monitor, National Public Radio, The Dallas Morning News and The New York Times, for which he was a foreign correspondent for 15 years. He has written nine books, including Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle (2009), I Don't Believe in Atheists (2008) and the best-selling American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America (2008). His book War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning (2003) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction.

We Are Legion – The Story of the Hacktivists

We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists is a 2012 documentary film about the workings and beliefs of the self-described “hacktivist” collective, [Anonymous](#).

Could We Survive a Mega-Tsunami BBC Two

Further Reading: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Megatsunami>

Seconds From Disaster : Meltdown at Chernobyl

Seconds From Disaster –

Fukushima

The Men Who Killed Kennedy

Zeitgeist

Part 1

Part 2

Part 3

Inside the Riches of the Saudi Kingdom (2012)

The Century of the Self

Further

Reading: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Century_of_the_Self