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How Hitchens Can Save the Left

*Rediscovering Fearless Liberalism in an Age
of Counter-Enlightenment*

by Matt Johnson

“Not a day goes by that I don’t ask myself, ‘what would Christopher say about this?’ Matthew Johnson’s brilliant reappraisal of the Hitchens corpus illuminates how Hitchens can save not just the left, but our entire, impoverished political discourse.”

—James Kirchick, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Secret City: The Hidden History of Gay Washington* and *The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age*

Christopher Hitchens was among the most formidable and eloquent essayists and journalists of his generation. In the early days of his career, he was a pugnacious left-wing polemicist and one of the most acerbic critics of American political culture and foreign policy. But in the years after the Cold War, Hitchens moved away from socialism and toward a more fundamental set of principles: support for universal human rights, liberal democracy, and the values of the Enlightenment.

In *How Hitchens Can Save the Left: Rediscovering Fearless Liberalism in an Age of Counter-Enlightenment* (Pitchstone, February 2023, paperback, \$17.95), Matt Johnson reassesses Hitchens’s legacy in the context of the threats to liberal democracy that exist

today: resurgent nationalism and authoritarianism, the spread of identity politics on the left and right, hostility to free speech in open societies, and the reemergence of great power competition with Russia and China. “Hitchens has never been more relevant,” says Johnson. “His immovable commitment to free expression matters in an era of mobbing, deplatforming, and self-censorship. His contempt for tribalism is becoming more salient all the time with nationalism and identity politics on the rise. And his case for the United States as a defender of democratic values has never been more urgent as Ukraine resists Russian tyranny with crucial support from the West.”

Hitchens wasn’t immediately prepared to admit it after the Cold War, but his commitment to international socialism began to seem anachronistic throughout the 1990s. His comrades continued to make the same old arguments about the American empire, even as the United States led NATO in resisting genocide and conquest in the Balkans. The possibility of a post-Cold War resuscitation of international socialism was dimming by the day. Then came September 11 and what many view as Hitchens’s formal departure from the left. As the title of *How Hitchens Can Save the Left* implies, Johnson argues that this perception is wrong: “You don’t have to be a supporter of the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq to see that Hitchens defended them for reasons that should be perfectly intelligible to the left: his hatred of theocracy and totalitarianism, his solidarity with Iraq’s Kurds and the women of Afghanistan, and his belief that the international community shouldn’t allow dictatorships to massacre and torture civilians.”

Hitchens was always a heterodox thinker, and despite his original socialist commitments, he ultimately went to great lengths to assert his independence from any political party or movement. This is another reason for his relevance today—our civil

society and public discourse have become so factionalized and acrimonious that independent thought is increasingly rare. However, this raises a question: why publish a book about how Hitchens can save *the left*? Johnson explains: “Because that was Hitchens’s political tradition. Although it’s true that he was deeply hostile to, say, Reaganomics or Bill Clinton’s appeasement of the GOP or the Christian right, the nature of these debates is generally well understood. But the greatest argument of Hitchens’s life—his argument with the left—is constantly misrepresented. It isn’t true to say he became a neoconservative or a warmonger or an imperialist. When right-wing critics accuse Hitchens of being a godless, globalist liberal, on the other hand, they’re right.”

Johnson addresses potential misconceptions about the book: “Does the right need saving? Absolutely. At a time when Trumpism remains a major force in American politics and the nationalist right is winning elections in Europe, it would be a huge mistake to focus exclusively on the deformations of the left. This is a central theme of the book: left-wing illiberalism—the obsession with identity politics, efforts to squelch free speech on campuses and in the media, and apologies for despotic governments and movements (as long as they oppose the U.S.)—is a poor way to resist right-wing authoritarianism.”

How Hitchens Can Save the Left explores its subject’s prescient warnings about populism and authoritarianism on the right, from the xenophobic undercurrents of the Tea Party movement to the demagogic anti-elitism of Sarah Palin. Hitchens saw similar political dynamics at work on both sides of the Atlantic: the spread of populism and nativism in response to economic displacement, globalization, and demographic change. Then there were Hitchens’s warnings about what was perhaps the most dangerous form of right-wing authoritarianism: Russian nationalism, fueled by a powerful sense of historical and cultural

grievance. It can be difficult to recall these arguments amid the clamor of condemnation over Hitchens's best-known and most controversial positions in the final decade of his life, and this has led to an impoverished and skewed understanding of his overall body of work.

As Russia attempts to extinguish Ukrainian democracy by force and China presents itself as the great totalitarian exception to the triumph of democracy after the Cold War, now is the time for a recommitment to democratic principles in the United States and Europe. "But what have we seen instead?" Johnson asks. "A poisonous form of populist nationalism in the United States which seeks to override elections that don't produce the desired results. A similar phenomenon in Europe: parties and rulers who use democracy as a means to an authoritarian end. And an insistence on much of the American and European left that the history of Western democracy is really just a long sequence of horrors: slavery, imperialism, racism, and so on. Hitchens never ignored these horrors, but he recognized the difference between self-criticism and self-flagellation. He understood that we can't take democratic laws, norms, and institutions for granted."

After many years as a Marxist who campaigned for an international socialist revolution, Hitchens came to believe that the most radical political project was the defense of liberal democracy around the world—as well as the Enlightenment values that underpin it. *How Hitchens Can Save the Left* invites readers to join this fight at a time when it has never been more urgent.

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About the author

Matt Johnson is a writer and editor. You'll find his work in *Haaretz*, *The Bulwark*, *Quillette*, *American Purpose*, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, *South China Morning Post*, *New Eastern Europe*, *RealClearDefense*, *Arc Digital*, *Areo Magazine*, *The Kansas City Star*, and

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