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# Wages of Rebellion

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## Book Review

### Wages of Rebellion

Chris Hedges

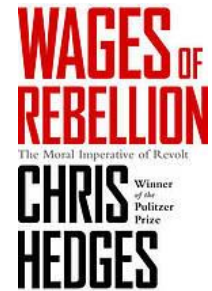
New York: Nation Books, 2015.

For many Canadians, the word rebellion may bring to mind an 8<sup>th</sup> grade history textbook and a few pages about someone named Louis Riel, which may or may not have had something to do with the black and white image of an overturned Winnipeg streetcar. If we have indeed witnessed rebellion firsthand, it was likely in a cold hockey arena with referees, coaches, and parents as the central protagonists.

In *Wages of Rebellion*, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and recently ordained Presbyterian minister Chris Hedges, who in earlier books has written about a sick society in fatal moral decline, describes the factors that cause rebellion and revolution. His premise is that the antecedents of the rebellions and revolutions contained in our history books are now set in place to cause uprisings and rebellions around the world. And while the polarization of wealth and power is a common theme throughout the centuries, new to the current scene is wanton environmental destruction. In over 200 pages, Hedges is clear about his message: throughout the United States – and by extension the rest of the world – popular uprisings are inevitable.

According to Hedges, the precursors to rebellion are all around us, although we may not have recognized them as such. For example, the response to the destruction of Hurricane Sandy highlighted our inability “to cope with the looming environmental disasters that the climate crisis will cause to grow in intensity and frequency...[and] illustrated the depraved mentality of an oligarchic and corporate elite that, as conditions worsen, retreats into self-contained gated communities, guts basic services, and abandons the wider population.” Extreme weather events, chronic unemployment, and wealth disparity are some of the warning signs of more seismic events to come, with a forecast of battles for dwindling resources and mass migrations generated by climate change.

Hedges retells the stories of *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby* to highlight the underlying hollowness of consumerism and capitalism, and depicts a society where armed wealthy citizens blockade themselves within their gated communities in survivalist mode. And yet he also includes stories about rebels – “abolitionists, African Americans, suffragists, workers, and antiwar and civil rights activists” – that serve to offer his readers hope. In our current world, it is the rebel that will make the difference, and Hedges uses the term “sublime madness” coined by the 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and



political commentator Reinhold Niebuhr to describe the flame that motivates these rebels. “Sublime madness” is the state of passion that propels the rebel to participate in seemingly futile fights against overwhelmingly authoritative and oppressive forces. “Those with sublime madness accept the possibility of their own death as the price paid for defending life.” Death, of course, is not something Hedges is wishing for. Indeed, he strongly advocates nonviolence and respect for private property. The Occupy protest movements, for example, are “about our right to peaceful protest.”

Hedges uses his words sparingly and is direct: “A tiny global oligarchy has amassed obscene wealth, while the engine of unfettered corporate capitalism plunders resources; exploits cheap, unorganized labor; and creates pliable, corrupt governments that abandon the common good to serve corporate profit.” For Canadians, images of the global Occupy movement played out in our larger cities, or of the heavy-handed response to the protests at the 2010 G-20 Toronto summit come quickly to mind. Hedges’ words are certainly emotionally persuasive, but that does not mean they are rational. His arguments seem to speak to the parts of our brains more in tune with conspiracy theory arguments than methodical, evidence-based research. Hedges does not use persuasive arguments to win over his readers, but rather seems to try and cow his readers through clever literary references (*Moby Dick*), and his saintly descriptions of Mumia Abu-Jamal, Jeremy Hammond, Cecily McMillan, and Julian Assange.

Louis Riel does not make it into Hedges’ pantheon of rebellions and activists, but Dutch-Canadian Wiebo Ludwig does. Riel’s historical reputation teeters between descriptions of terrorist and hero: Ludwig, according to Hedges, was responding to the “moral decadence of the consumer society” when he turned to violent actions against the oil and gas companies. Hedges does not support the violence, but he does imply that Ludwig – along with Assange and Snowden – is part of the courageous vanguard presaging a new era of rebellion: fighting for equality and social justice.

The book’s subtitle, “The Moral Imperative for Revolt,” suggests that Hedges will offer a vision for what a revolution or post-revolutionary world would look like. Beyond referencing a world where “communitarian structures” replace the religion of capitalism, readers looking for a coherent explanation of the forthcoming revolt – or how to avoid it – may be disappointed. For those who already share Hedges’ view that corporate greed, endemic poverty, and climate change necessitate a radical change, then *Wages of Rebellion* may only serve to confirm their views while offering additional literary, philosophical, and cultural perspectives to sustain their stance.

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