

Rage, Delusion and Abolitionism: Contemporary British Society in the Eyes of Peter Hitchens

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ABSTRACT

The present article focuses on the work of contemporary British journalist and public intellectual, Peter Hitchens (b. 1951). Hitchens represents one of the most vocal voices of modern British conservatism, his works included into syllabi of British Studies at several universities. The paper starts with a discussion of his specific "anti-conversion" in the context of his generation from a Trotskyite to a Tory, then concentrates on the major issues of his critique: the slow decline of traditional British values since the 1960s, failure of British politics, problematic developments in relation to law and order, cultural revolution and, finally, his views on new atheism, so aptly represented by his recently deceased brother Christopher (1949–2011). The article concludes with a short discussion of the significance of the use of his ideas in teaching courses on British society since the 1960s.

KEYWORDS

Peter Hitchens, British society since the 1960s, conservatism, contemporary British politics, new atheism

1. Introduction

We could hardly find a sharper division within a single family than the one between Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011), former *Vanity Fair* columnist, author of books on major figures of the Enlightenment and the anti-theist pamphlet *God Is Not Great*, and his brother Peter, two years his junior, conservative journalist of *The Mail on Sunday* who turned from being a Trotskyite and revolutionary socialist to a traditional conservative patriot and active member of the Church of England.¹

This tension between the two brothers, however, should not hide one similarity: their books as well as their journalistic output have a powerful tendency to divide the public. Whereas Christopher divided America on issues of religion and the war in Iraq, Peter divides British society with his views on the progressive decline of British society and culture since the 1960s. Peter is also often invited to various debates on topical issues of British politics (e.g. *BBC Question Time*). His journalism, mainly his foreign correspondence, was awarded with the prestigious *Orwell Prize* in 2010.²

Peter Hitchens holds a rather unique view amongst mostly liberal British public intellectuals: he is a social conservative, i.e. he believes that democracy rests on a certain

1 Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man": A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006); *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005). *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007). He is also known for a fierce critique of Mother Teresa, cf. *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (New York: Verso, 1995).

2 Daniel Trilling, "Peter Hitchens wins Orwell Prize," *New Statesman* 20 May 2010, accessed 15 January, 2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/cultural-capital/2010/05/orwell-prize-hitchens>.

basis of values which cannot be generated by the system itself. In that sense, politics and political decisions cannot be understood merely in an evolutionary framework: political process necessarily involves value decisions, which can always be revived and changed.³ One can also understand his position as that of a *paleoconservative*, as in the Anglo-Saxon tradition:⁴ his views are often highly controversial not only among left-wing liberals, but also among more mainstream conservatives.⁵

The importance of Hitchens's reflections on modern Britain may also be demonstrated by the fact that his works have been included into the syllabi of various university courses on British Studies.⁶ In this article, I attempt to outline the main arguments of his works, set his ideas in the context of contemporary British history and culture, and, last but not least, shortly discuss the significance of the use of his ideas in teaching courses on British society since the 1960s.

2. Journey there and back – from a Trotskyite to a Tory

Peter Hitchens represents the peculiar anti-conversion of a modern intellectual, and this "conversion" is often referred to in his work. In one of the most compelling parts of his fourth book *The Broken Compass* (2009),⁷ he recollects his numerous encounters with "socialist realism". In a chapter called *Riding the Prague Tram* he refers to a visit he had made to the former Communist Czechoslovakia, recalling the sad reality of what was supposed to be the future of human race. In fact, his "conversion" seems to have started right there.

We pressed our noses against the windowpane as we trundled through a planet we had imagined but never seen. Look! They really do have huge red banners with slogans on them, draped across the squares. Look! The shop windows actually are inadequately furnished with wonky consumer goods in unpleasant colours or dowdy packaging. Look! They really do have stainless steel teeth. Look! Their clothes really are uniform and shabby, their faces are closed, they walk and stand differently from us, they have to loiter in long queues and

3 Peter Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion* (London: Continuum, 2010), xxxv.

4 The term was originally used for traditionally minded conservatives to distinguish from "neoconservatives" that emerged in the 1980s in the U.S.A.; cf. Samuel T. Francis, *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

5 E.g. in April 2007, David Cameron famously called Hitchens a "maniac" at a public hearing in the parish church of Chadlington, in Oxfordshire.

6 E.g. *Liberty University*, Lynchburg, Virginia (see *The Abolition of Britain, Study Guide*, accessed January 15, 2012, http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1168&context=gov_fac_pubs&sei-redir=1&referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.cz%2Furl%3Fsa%3Dt%26rct%3Dj%26q%3Dabolition%2520of%2520britain%2520british%2520studies%26source%3Dweb%26cd%3D2%26ved%3D0CCQQFjAB%26url%3Dhttp%253A%252F%252Fdigitalcommons.liberty.edu%252Fcgi%252Fviewcontent.cgi%253Farticle%253D1168%2526context%253Dgov_fac_pubs%26ei%3D9uLdTLBLarc4QT29ZzxBg%26usg%3DAFQjCNGQXRIO8NnVqfoheXdw#search=%22abolition%20britain%20british%20studies%22), and two courses in the Czech Republic: at the University of Western Bohemia in Plzeň ("*Předměty – BS – Britské reálie*," accessed 16 January, 2012, <http://www.kaj.zcu.cz/predmety/BS/>) and the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice ("*Introduction to British Studies*", accessed January 16, 2012, <http://uan.ff.jcu.cz/struktura-ustavu/introduction-to-british-studies>).

7 Peter Hitchens, *The Broken Compass: How British Politics lost its way* (London: Continuum, 2009). Later revised and published under the title *The Cameron Delusion* (London: Continuum, 2010).

ride in ancient trams – not because it is picturesque to do so but because it is the only way home.⁸

The reality of communism becomes the seed of apostasy from his former creed: the longed-for future of revolutionary Marxists in the West found such a hideous concretization in the Communist countries that one is literally forced to rethink these ideals and the whole idea of revolution.

So, in Prague, began the serious part of my education, most of it provided by what might be called the University of Fleet Street. My official university years had been spent as a full-time Trotskyite, attempting to stir the working class into revolution. I learned much from this, though I did not realise it at the time because I was trying mainly to absorb as much Marxist piffle as possible and was paying little conscious attention to the important things of life [...].⁹

Hitchens' disillusionment came slowly and in various stages. He spent years as a correspondent in both the USSR (1990–1991) and the USA (1993–1995). He experienced the waning of the former Soviet empire, saw the cruel reality of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, along with the indifference of the Left in the United Kingdom. Hitchens's conversion is all the more interesting given the context of his generation: Marxism became enormously popular amongst university students in the West in the 60s and 70s.¹⁰ His conversion was thus also a matter of personal emancipation from his generation: i.e. from an "illusion" of an entire group to a rather solitary fate of a conservative journalist.

In the 1980s Peter Hitchens also experienced a conversion to Christianity, which is covered in detail in *Rage Against God* (2010), his reaction to his brother Christopher's fierce critique of religion in *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). Again, Peter Hitchens points out the strange indifference of the West towards atrocities perpetrated by the Communists and the idea that Communist crimes are to be attributed to the pseudo-religious nature of their regimes.¹¹ Referring to a long Anglican tradition, he reflects on how his faith is closely linked to his aesthetics.¹² He supports the use of the old *Book of Common Prayer* and the *King James Bible* as well as holds to the traditional forms of the Anglican liturgy.¹³

Hitchens simply opted for a life in a more orderly world.¹⁴ He feels that his Christianity leaves him no choice but to discuss even the "hot" issues of birth control, homosexuality and sex education in schools.¹⁵ He is also convinced of the need for religious instruction in schools, since in his view the inability to understand religious

8 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 54.

9 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 55.

10 Hitchens further elaborates on this topic in his *The Rage Against God* (London: Continuum, 2010), 7–18.

11 Hitchens, *The Rage Against God*, 114–122.

12 E.g. the famous "beauty of holiness" we find in the great Anglican divines of the 16th and 17th centuries (particularly W. Laud and L. Andrewes). See also Richard William Southern et al., *The beauty of holiness: an introduction to six seventeenth-century Anglican writers; Archbishop William Laud, Lancelot Andrewes, Jeremy Taylor, Mark Frank, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan* (Oxford: S.L.G. Press, 1976).

13 In that respect, he has often criticised various forms of modern Anglican worship, for example in *The Alternative Service Book* of 1980 (ASB) and *The Common Worship* of 2001.

14 Peter Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain* (London: Continuum, 2008), 126.

15 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 190–247.

symbols weakens the capacity of British society to face the challenges of other cultures and religions.

This has inevitably led, however, to a number of conflicts within liberal post 1960s Britain.¹⁶ Hitchens seems to be one of the most powerful journalistic voices for traditional “British” values, alongside with *Simon Heffer* (b. 1960),¹⁷ *Peter Osborne* (b. 1957),¹⁸ *Peregrine Worsthorne* (b. 1923)¹⁹ and *Melanie Phillips* (b. 1951)²⁰ to name just the most vocal personalities. Most of these present rather frustrated accounts of contemporary British society, which seems to be suffering from a variety of modern myths and “pseudo-scientific” beliefs (e.g. political correctness, the ideology of multiculturalism, “European frenzy,” global warming, etc.). What are the main arguments that British society in decline?

3. Britain abolishing itself?

The Abolition of Britain (first publ. 1999), starts with a hypothetical walk around London in the early 1960s. For a Briton of the time, the places that then “visualized” today’s Britain – life in “black and white” just like the TV of the time, decrepit houses, men in bowler hats and various other aspects of “old” Britishness – would seem hardly recognizable.²¹ This “un-cool” Britannia would be defined by old-fashioned visuals and the typically British sense of taste in fashion and architecture. The defining, symbolic event of the 1960s marking the turn of the era was the funeral of *Sir Winston Churchill* in 1965: the whole of Britain joined in celebrating the great hero of the 20th century, courageous politician and patriotic Englishman. The alienation felt by the visitor from the end of the 1990s would, however, be boosted by the lofty media coverage over another personality of Britain celebrated across the world, *Diana, Princess of Wales* (1961–1997).²² The visual image stresses the point: Britain changed dramatically, but one cannot avoid asking the question whether the change was for the better or for the worse. In fact, do we still possess the capacity to ask such a question at all? Has not the myth of the 1960s marked a new era that is supposed to be so different from what the Britons of the 1960s would recognize as being British? As Hitchens seems to argue, the sense of discontinuity with

16 Here I refer to the fierce criticism of such distinguished commentators as Polly Toynbee from *The Guardian* (see note 83) and Peter Wilby from *The Observer* (“The fiery practitioner of polemical warfare” 24 May 2009, accessed 16 January, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/24/politics-books-review-peter-hitchens>).

17 Author of e.g. *Nor Shall My Sword: The Reinvention of England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999); or *Strictly English: The correct way to write ... and why it matters* (London: Rh Books, 2010).

18 His position is close to that of Hitchens in relation to the New Labour establishment under Blair and Brown, see his *Triumph of the Political Class* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2007) and *The Rise of Political Lying* (London: The Free Press, 2005).

19 Author of *In Defence of Aristocracy* (London: Harper Collins, 2004).

20 Author of *Londonistan: How Britain is creating a terror state within* (London: Encounter Books, 2006), a series of interviews on the danger of Islamist terror and *The World Turned Upside Down: The Global Battle Over God, Truth and Power* (New York: Encounter Books, 2010), in which Phillips argues that the explosion of irrationality in our world is not related to religious faith but rather to its gradual marginalization. The mass market of dubious cults in modern western society (e.g. parapsychology, celebrity endorsed cults, séances, witchcraft, paganism, etc.) can be seen as an alarming indicator thereof.

21 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 18–22.

22 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 23.

the old days is prevalent in modern Britain often to such a degree that it has become virtually impossible to rethink the myth.²³

Hitchens's sense of "abolitionism" penetrates a significant part of his work.²⁴ He seems to hold the firm conviction that British society is undergoing a major decline that could potentially end up in the complete dissolution of the culture that once dominated the world. This may be demonstrated in five main areas: the de-valuation of the British political process, the problematic developments as regards law and order, the revolutionary agenda of the 1960s, the decline of British education, and the decline of Britain as a Christian country.

These themes have also become the main subjects of his five books, two of which have been substantially updated since their first publication. His first tome was *The Abolition of Britain* in 1999, followed by a collection of articles published in the *Daily Express* called *Monday Morning Blues*²⁵ in 2000, *A Brief History of Crime*,²⁶ *The Broken Compass: How British Politics lost its way*²⁷ and in 2010 *The Rage Against God*,²⁸ a response to his brother's attack on religion.

4. Has British politics lost its way?

One of the most pervasive themes in Hitchens's writing about British politics is his conviction that the essential difference between the Right and Left – the defining principle of British adversarial political system – is fading away. British political parties, while theoretically remaining on one of the two sides of the political compass, have gradually adopted a vague centre position which makes it more and more difficult to distinguish one from the other. His updated version of *The Broken Compass* (2009), *The Cameron Delusion* (published 2010 prior to the general election), ridicules the belief that in 2010 a real change was to take place with David Cameron after long years of Labour rule. In fact, the sad topsy-turvyness of the whole situation, i.e. the Conservatives adopting a great deal of the Labour agenda, makes the change doubtful:

It may even be the case that the more far-sighted Labour strategists privately accept that a period of Conservative government, under a leadership such as Mr Cameron's, which would not reverse New Labour's measures is actually desirable.²⁹

Neither the Conservatives nor Labour want to be associated directly with only side of the political spectrum. For the "new" Conservatives, this may also be an attempt to brush off their rather public image of being old-fashioned, meaning that those that represent traditional values should be excluded from their mainstream:

23 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 16.

24 Here I refer to another book with a similar title: *The Abolition of Liberty: The Decline of Law and Order in England* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), a revised version of his earlier work *A Brief History of Crime* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).

25 Peter Hitchens, *Monday Morning Blues* (London: Quartet Books, 2000).

26 See note 22 above.

27 See note 5 above.

28 See note 8 above.

29 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 40.

[T]he exaggerated verbiage of ‘far-right’, ‘xenophobic’ and ‘nationalist’ is the sort of language which political figures of the self-described centre feel free to use about those outside their consensus. It is merely the jargon that such people in all the three main parties use to categorise those who want to leave European Union, those who oppose mass immigration and those who think that criminals should be punished rather than managed.³⁰

The story of the gradual decline of the system is long. Hitchens calls it the “actual acquiescence of the Conservative Party in the main features of Labour’s programme”³¹ and locates its beginnings into the 1930s with the administrations of Stanley Baldwin (1935–1937) and Neville Chamberlain (1937–1940). By 1936 Harold Macmillan had in fact called for the creation of a centrist party,³² a proposal which was later put forth in his famous book *Middle Way*,³³ a declaration of Tory centrism. World War II understandably strengthened the sense of state intervention into people’s lives and moved the general consensus more towards a centrist “Social Democratic” form of government.³⁴ Even without the famous triumph of Attlee’s Labour in 1945, the consensus had already been given by then. The later development – with the sweeping changes of the late 1940s (NHS, nationalised industries etc.) – could hardly strengthen what Hitchens sees as the fundamental differences of values between the Tories and the Labour. Even the economic troubles of the “revolutionary” government of *Harold Wilson* (1964–1966 and 1966–1970) did not provide a strong incentive to “revive” traditional Conservatism based on values and not on the slack hunger for power. Indeed, the Tories won in 1970 but both *Edward Heath* (1970–1974) and *Margaret Thatcher* (1979–1990) lacked the “substance” to get back to the traditional agenda. Heath, who accomplished Britain’s entry into the EU in 1973, was much more interested in the Common Market than in other aspects of the quickly changing society (i.e. the Conservative response to the cultural and sexual revolution of the 60s). Thatcher used Conservative rhetoric, but hardly ever managed to substantiate any real reforms. Some of her programmes may be seen as “dismal” from the Conservative point of view, e.g. the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988.³⁵

Hitchens concentrates mainly on the decline of the Right, but the point he wants to make is a more general one: the so-called consensus blurs the political process and the two parties only into two amalgamations of power ambitions bound to different lobby groups. In this context, the New Labour of Tony Blair also represents a vital digression from the political line of the Labour in the 1980s and early 1990s, i.e. the Labour of Michael Foot, Neil Kinnock and John Smith. The new political orientation of the Labour party since the emergence of Anthony Blair moved the party further to the centre, where all political parties progressively lose their very substance, their specific basis of their values.³⁶

The sweeping changes of the 1960s (education reforms, major changes in the transport system, the sexual revolution, etc.) can be traced back to this consensus, which according to Hitchens blurs the sense of value struggle in the society. When many British citizens now feel alienated in their own country, these issues must be questioned and

30 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 41.

31 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 33.

32 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 34. No specific source is given.

33 See Harold MacMillan, *The Middle Way* (London: Macmillan, 1938).

34 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 35.

35 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 37.

36 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 8.

problematized again. Democratic institutions tend to be further and further detached from the public. The agent of this alienation is, however, not just Europeanization and globalization, but also the changing allegiances of political journalists.

Hitchens's points out to the power of "lunches" and other forms of dubious friendships between politicians and the media.³⁷ In fact, such discussions often completely omit any serious political issues, basically being characterized by the leaking of popular gossip aimed at helping a given politician to pursue his agenda. The meaning of journalism is turned upside down: "What matters is how useful the journalist can be to the politician."³⁸ Indeed, the concept of change in such a system is related to the mass psychology of the consumer. Faces and styles need to change, but that does not necessarily include a major change in policies.

Hitchens argues that the number of moral scandals in modern British politics indicates the progressive decline. The beginning of this phenomenon is often traced to the famous *Profumo Affair* of 1963, when the then Secretary of State for War was caught with a call girl. This finally led to the resignation of Harold Macmillan and the fall of his government. The issue of maintaining moral standards has become one of the most problematic in modern British society – the most obvious example being, of course, cases involving the royal family. The story of Diana, Princess of Wales, together with the spurious images of royalty she came to represent, destabilized the standards of moral decency and shifted the popular attention from "real" national values to the slack culture of popular modern icons.³⁹

The "newspeak" of British politics can be related according to Hitchens to three modern word coinages: "racism", "sexism" and "homophobia". During the 1960s the predominant expression used in Britain in relation to racial bigotry was "racialism", i.e. the term was specifically related to a certain conviction. The new word racism is "vague enough to suggest all kinds of things without actually needing to make specific, deniable accusations".⁴⁰

To put it simply, such a word can be used to cover all sorts of beliefs and ideas and "allows easy smears".⁴¹ Criticizing the political ambitions of Muslims or Jews is thus often classified as "racist", although it clearly has nothing to do with any form of "racialist" theory whatsoever. This also applies to the words "homophobia" and "sexism" – critical views of the sexual revolution, theories of gender, and particular forms of sexual behaviour or representations thereof seem to earn these derisory epithets.⁴² It is, however, erroneous to associate such critical views with offensive acts against sexually unconventional.⁴³

The centre position of all major political parties in Britain (including Liberal Democrats) thus defines the "new permanent government of Britain."⁴⁴ Such a state of things substantially redefines the landscape of politics by limiting its capacity to influence things and implement necessary changes. Hitchens understands it as a paradoxical vicious circle: the new "liberalism" of the post-1968 generation limits the freedom of individuals

37 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 9–23.

38 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 19.

39 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 160–161.

40 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 92.

41 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 93.

42 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 103.

43 Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 119.

44 This is the title of Part I. in *The Broken Compass/The Cameron Delusion*. See Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 1.

to exercise their own liberty.⁴⁵ Politics thus fails in keeping Britain free from both internal and external turmoil and abolishes the very core of its role in the society.

Nowhere, says Hitchens, can this be seen more clearly than in the case of law and order.⁴⁶ "The abolition of liberty" is obviously also related to the sense of insecurity the British feel in their homes, streets and other public places.

5. Beyond law and order

Since the 1960s British governments have proposed or introduced a variety of measures that have influenced the contemporary perception of what is right and wrong in dealing with public security, criminality and justice. Hitchens is deeply suspicious of the efficiency of a number of these, which include the introduction of the identity card, the restructuring police patrolling of British streets, the abandonment of the necessity of a unanimous verdict in jury trials, a pedagogic rather than punitive attitude to criminals and a "soft" way of dealing with the drug problem.

Hitchens bases his criticisms of most of these issues on what he understands as the traditional English sense of justice which rests on the long tradition of British Common Law and the British justice system. His prime subject is the concept of "liberty," with law and order being basic prerequisites of liberty being enjoyed by everyone. The traditional justice system was designed to grant freedoms rather than to limit them by momentous decisions:

In the English common law tradition, quite distinct from those of our Continental neighbours, it is the state that is answerable to us. We are presumed innocent in the widest sense of the word. We can walk down the any street without being challenged to prove who we are or explain what we are doing. We are in short, sovereigns over ourselves, left alone to live our private lives as we wish provided we obey a law we have made ourselves. Or rather, this is what we were until our elite state began its great reforms fifty years ago.⁴⁷

Identity cards can be seen as a specific form of infringement on these liberties traditionally enjoyed by the British. The problem of the identity card is that it is an all-purpose card (compared to various other types of cards – bank cards, driving licences, etc.) and contains important information that can easily be misused or abused. Hitchens calls it a "slave badge,"⁴⁸ since it marks the triumph of the state over the individual.⁴⁹

The traditional English constable has become a sort of folklore figure. Nevertheless, for Hitchens he used to represent an important link between the state and its people. His presence in the street was a powerful sign of his role: he was an equal amongst equals. Moreover, he was also indispensable for keeping an ordinary sense of peace and order. The new measures introduced since the 1960s have slowly removed the "bobby" from the street, thus establishing a sense of detachment, but most of all the change has

⁴⁵ Hitchens, *The Cameron Delusion*, 198–199.

⁴⁶ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 16–18.

⁴⁷ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 29.

⁴⁸ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 29.

⁴⁹ At the time Hitchens wrote the text, the identity card had not yet been passed. The decision came with The Identity Cards Act 2006, which, however, has recently been scrapped by the Conservative-LibDem coalition (21 January 2011).

proved inefficient in preventing minor crime and rows in the streets.⁵⁰ Hitchens argues that the sheer number of policeman and policewomen cannot substitute for the absence and direct contact with ordinary people; this is also aggravated by the fact that traditional foot beat patrol has slowly been overtaken by unit beat patrolling in cars, which proves far less efficient than the traditional forms.⁵¹

The disappearance of the constable from the streets can also be seen as a symbol of a whole new redefinition of crime and criminality. Hitchens spends a lot of time arguing that the inefficiency of the police force is clearly linked to the “serious mistake made by modern democracies,”⁵² i.e. understanding crime as a consequence of social deprivation and a “symptom of a social and economic disease.”⁵³ Criminals are thus more or less exonerated from the wrong they did to individual people and to the society in general. Such theories have, Hitchens argues, drastic consequences for the methods of policing and the justice system in general, because they weaken the consensus about the dangers of particular crimes:

Rather than seeking to frighten, punish and deter those who would prey on the “victim,” the socialist state seeks to educate the ‘victim’ in how he must fortify his house or alarm his car, how he must not walk in certain areas or leave valuables where a criminal might observe them.⁵⁴

The abolition of the necessity of a unanimous jury verdict at trials, and the substitution with majority decisions that has not merely “altered” the old system, Hitchens argues. In fact, juries represent the British sense of justice which is not bound to state power (e.g. prevention of political cases).⁵⁵ However imperfect they may be, they still make the British system of justice fairer and more free in the traditional sense. The unanimity is an important tool to make sure that best possible decisions are taken.⁵⁶ If it is scrapped, it is far more likely that it will fall prey to fashionable stereotypes or political and cultural preferences of the majority of jurors.⁵⁷ The other problem is, of course, the process of choosing the suitable candidates for jurors. The old principle of selection on the basis of property was understandably dropped, but new fashions (youth culture and the anti-authoritarianism of the 1960s) abolished “any selection at all”.⁵⁸ The future of the jury system is unclear:

[I]t is likely that the government will shortly resort to more populist measures designed to give the impression of resolution and action. The limiting of liberty can always be made to seem attractive in such times. Such crude crowd-pleasing will undoubtedly be used to undermine the principle of jury trial.⁵⁹

50 For an interesting discussion of this problem, see Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 71. The author quotes reports about the town of Kirkby on the outskirts of Liverpool, 71ff..

51 This also applies to the shift in the emphasis on personnel doing all sorts of paperwork, taking millions of phone calls and other such activities. See Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 110.

52 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 31.

53 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 9.

54 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 37.

55 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 184.

56 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 193.

57 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 199.

58 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 189.

59 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 206.

According to Hitchens, drug abuse has become so widespread in modern Britain that it has progressively led to important changes in the legislation dealing with drug keeping and drug abuse. He focuses specifically on the famous case of The Rolling Stones members arrested and tried for drug abuse in 1967. The cultural war to release K. Richards and M. Jagger was fought on many platforms; it took place, however, predominantly in the media, not in the courtroom. The pressure of the “new culture”⁶⁰ finally managed to succeed: Hitchens understands this as an act of “institutional defeatism”.⁶¹ Moreover, the “soft” attitude towards drugs and the dangers of their abuse came full circle in 2000, when Mick Jagger was granted knighthood at the wish of Mr Blair.⁶²

“Has justice been denied?” asks Hitchens at the end of his book on crime in England. Again he moves to a broader attack on the nature of contemporary (i.e. Blairian) Britain. The core of the problem is to be sought in the cultural revolution of the 1960s, in the “religion of the educated elite”, who longs to establish their idea of liberty:

I have sought to explain in this book, what appears to be the driving force of the new law. It is based, like the other changes that have overturned English life since 1960, on the new secular religion of the educated elite. Socialist and collectivist in origin, it worships the welfare state. It believes neither in absolute truth, nor in absolute right and wrong. It demands special protection for cultures and lifestyles that consciously and deliberately undermine the morality and beliefs of the older generation. It uses the grievances of activists within racial and sexual minorities as the pretext for general change.⁶³

6. Cultural revolution

Peter Hitchens is not the only one to see the 1960s as a revolutionary period that opened a problematic future for Britain.⁶⁴ His vision is a gloomy one: since the 1960s Britain has been scourged by a brutal form of “secular religion” with its education reforms, youth culture and consumerist trash culture, sexual revolution and institutional defeatism. Hitchens does not seem to be deterred by apocalyptically melodramatic language: the cultural revolution in the 1960 in Britain is similar to the (in)famous Cultural Revolution in China under Mao Zedong between 1966 and 1976, and its aims are no less far-reaching and destructive.

The core of any culture, Hitchens seems to suggest, is its sense of identity, which is exposed in shared narratives, values and historical consciousness.⁶⁵ The 1960s establishment wanted to redefine this sense of tradition – i.e. *traditio* in its original sense, handing on

60 Hitchens reports Richards’s declaration at the court: “We are not old men. We are not concerned with petty morals.” Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 167.

61 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 208–232.

62 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 166. Hitchens has recently finished the manuscript of his new book focused on the problem of drug abuse: *The War We Never Fought: The British Establishment’s Surrender to Drugs*. It is to be published in November 2012.

63 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Liberty*, 241.

64 Others include Peter Osborne, Simon Heffer, Cristina Odone, Mike Phillips and, interestingly enough, also left-wing author and columnist for *The Times* David Aaronovitch (b. 1954). Apart from their books, they expressed their views in a sweeping BBC documentary: *Why I Hate the Sixties: The Decade That Was Too Good To Be True* (2000). See “Summer in the Sixties,” accessed 18 January 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2004/05_may/13/sixties_progs.shtml.

65 See Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 178.

the received lore of wisdom and slowly evolved institutions – and move towards a bleak future of “global identity” where real values disappear under tons of supposedly modern ideas:

A people who spoke the tongue, and held the faith, of Shakespeare and Milton could never have submitted to the hamburger and soap opera culture which now has the British working class in its greasy grip, nor to the anti-British “Europeanism” which has so beguiled much of the educated élite. Before these things could happen, the British people had to be separated from their roots.⁶⁶

Pop culture is a potent form of creating primitive emotional sensations, the prime agent of this being, of course, TV culture. Hitchens quotes a famous article by T.S. Eliot, who warned against the vicissitudes of this type of entertainment by pointing to the American experience.⁶⁷ Celebrity culture, however, seems to have overshadowed the older sense of self-regulation and self-gratification. Churches, instead of fighting to defend British culture, have expressed serious doubts about Christian doctrine and tradition.⁶⁸

The Chatterley Trial of 1960 wanted to revive the tradition of what Hitchens sees as “public decency”.⁶⁹ Obscenity was no longer attributed to the content, but could easily be mitigated by “literary merit,” a precedent which could basically prevent any such trials in the future. Pornographic themes, vulgar language and the like have since then invaded the culture on such a scale that an English gentleman of the pre-1960s period would not recognize the country. Quite unconventionally, Hitchens sees the acclaimed introduction of the contraception pill as the epitome of understanding the female body primarily as a sexual object,⁷⁰ an understanding which has shifted the conception of sexual relations towards sheer hedonism.

The blurred sense of right and wrong (just like the blurred sense of Right and Left in politics) makes it possible to welcome any kind of novelty or any kind of culture without careful consideration of the possible pros and cons. Multiculturalist ideology makes Britain potentially vulnerable to dangerous influences. This is true of the presence of Islam in British culture, but also of the scathing influence of American culture on British culture and the English language. Nothing is certain anymore, no absolute truths, no real stands. In a gloomy vision of destruction, Britain is seen as slowly disappearing under the centre leftist culture that seeks to dominate the world.⁷¹

The element of belief and confidence (or a lack thereof) in culture and values represents a serious challenge to the very nature of British culture. A wave of “new atheism” (C. Hitchens, R. Dawkins, S. Harris, D. Dennett) was one response to the horrendous attacks of 9/11. The problem of religion and its absolute truths and the “absolute” sense of confidence has since then become one of the topics most discussed, and not just in the English-speaking world.⁷² In fact, in the current late postmodern view, anything goes,

66 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 177.

67 The letter was published in *The Times*, December 20, 1950.

68 Here Hitchens refers primarily to the famous book criticising traditional Christian theology by the Bishop of Woolwich J.A.T. Robinson *Honest to God*. See John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

69 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 207–220.

70 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 232–247.

71 Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, 16.

72 In this I refer primarily to the enormous success of Dawkins’s book *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Books, 2006) and its American counterpart *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. See note 2 above.

but not religion.⁷³ In his latest book, *Rage Against God* (publ. 2010), Hitchens points to the fact that the religious question is in fact at the heart of this debate.

7. (Beyond) Belief – God Today?

The Rage Against God describes Peter Hitchens's personal journey to faith, from the burning of the Bible in his teenage years to his disillusionment by revolutionary socialism and dramatic conversion in front of a famous painting of the Last Judgment by Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400–1464), which Hitchens saw as a potent symbol of the moral code. This theme is developed in relation to the topics raised by his brother Christopher in *God Is Not Great*. Peter argues against the notion that totalitarian regimes, mainly Communist dictatorships, were pseudo-religious systems. The core of their belief systems was, in fact, the absence of any real objective moral code, and the absence of God calls for the worship of power.⁷⁴ The three supposedly "failed" arguments of the atheists (i.e.: *Conflicts fought in the name of religion conflicts are about religion; It is possible to determine what is right and what is wrong without God; Atheist states are not actually atheist.*)⁷⁵ are then related to Hitchens's analysis of the nature of Communist regimes, in which he finds striking similarities between the famous Soviet "League of the Militant Godless"⁷⁶ and the agenda of the new atheists. If religious education is seen as a "form of abuse," as does Dawkins,⁷⁷ one may be moved to argue that "such language prepares the way for intolerance,"⁷⁸ i.e. the tactics employed by the League of the Militant Godless in the U.S.S.R. The morality problem describes the afore mentioned circle: the absence of God strengthens the power of the state and potentially limits human responsibility and freedom.⁷⁹ Hitchens concludes with an interesting point: the atheist "rage" against God is basically nonsensical, since if there is no God, there is also no need to get infuriated by him.⁸⁰

8. Hitchens as a social critic and commentator – conclusion and evaluation

Although Hitchens' views deviate considerably from the liberal consensus he so aptly describes, his works have received a number of favourable reviews on both sides of the

73 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 354.

74 "[I]n all my experience in life, I have seldom seen a more powerful argument for the fallen nature of man, and his inability to achieve perfection, than those countries in which man sets himself up to replace God with the State." Hitchens, *The Rage Against God*, 111.

75 Hitchens uses these as titles of Chapters 9–11.

76 I refer to the Soviet organization in operation 1925–1947 aimed at eradicating religion. More on the topic may be found in Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1998).

77 "Religion's Real Child Abuse," The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, accessed 16 January, 2012, <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/118-religion-39-s-real-child-abuse>.

78 Hitchens, *The Rage Against God*, 150.

79 Hitchens, *The Rage Against God*, 143ff.

80 Hitchens, *The Rage Against God*, 159ff.

Atlantic⁸¹ and his work continues to draw attention. The main reason for this can be seen in the very stand he takes on the issues facing contemporary Britain. Being “modern” does not absolve anybody from thinking and re-thinking the very basis of post-1960s British culture. Certain critics⁸² oppose Hitchens in almost every single point, but they seem to agree that he has delineated well the battlefield between revolutionaries and conservatives; the cultural change is a reality, and one has to face the consequences of it.

Indeed, this is also the benefit of Hitchens’ works to the discussion of contemporary British society and the issues it faces. The books are well researched and rich in detail as well as written in a fine and highly readable style. Readers are provided with a wide range of information about the problems of contemporary Britain. This quality makes Hitchens’s books valuable for any courses in British society since the 1960s. The works help students focus on the subjects discussed and they provoke a reaction. Indeed, they pose the most fundamental question of cultural studies, the definition of identity for a given culture and the construction thereof.

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81 E.g. John Redwood in *The Spectator* (“Presenting the past as another place,” *The Spectator*, 11 September 1999) and A. Cowell in *The New York Times* (“Will There Always Be One?” *The New York Times*, 17 December 2000)

82 The fiercest one is perhaps Polly Toynbee of *The Guardian*: “Peter Hitchens’s *The Abolition of Britain: From Lady Chatterley to Tony Blair* [...] is a compendium of the strange, irrational emotional spasms that pass for political policy in the *Mail/Telegraph/Spectator* view of the world. Here, in this great mishmash of moral and cultural panic about the present and longing for an imaginary golden past, is a bizarrely paranoid vision of a great conspiracy to demolish all that is best about Britain [...] “How Hague loses the plot – and the battle over Europe,” *The Guardian*, 25 August 1999, accessed 5 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/1999/aug/25/labour.labour1997to992>.

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