

Memorial for Christopher Hitchens in New York City: A gathering of the unprincipled and politically clueless

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Vanity Fair magazine hosted a memorial in New York City April 20 for the late journalist Christopher Hitchens, who died of cancer in December. According to the *Guardian*, the event, at Cooper Union, a private college in lower Manhattan, paid tribute to Hitchens' "wit and warmth."

The memorial brought together a diverse group of personalities, including novelists Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and Ian McEwan, playwright Tom Stoppard, literary critic James Wood, historian Douglas Brinkley, journalist Carl Bernstein, actors Sean Penn and Stephen Fry, former *Nation* editor Victor Navasky and numerous others.

What would prompt anyone to celebrate such a despicable figure?

Hitchens began his public life vaguely on the British left, around the state capitalist International Socialists group, wrote for the liberal-left *Nation* magazine in the US (1982-2002) and ended up in the camp of imperialist reaction, a supporter of the Bush administration's bloody invasion of Iraq, the "global war on terror" and the racist-chauvinist campaign to stigmatize Muslims.

Along the way Hitchens shook hands with Argentine dictator General Jorge Rafael Videla and enjoyed a flirtatious exchange with Conservative Party leader and future British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. He enthusiastically participated in the Republican right's campaign in 1998-99 to oust Bill Clinton from the White House in a manufactured sex scandal. In 2001, Hitchens told an interviewer that he now recognized globalized capitalism was a revolutionary economic system.

Much of the last decade or so of his life Hitchens spent as a favorite of the ultra-right in the US. Not accidentally, the *New York Post*, one of Rupert Murdoch's gutter publications, covered the April 20 celebration in the friendliest terms ("Hitch remembered with wit" in a "moving ceremony").

Pathologically vain and cynical, a thoroughgoing careerist, a mediocre snob without a memorable thought or insight to his credit, Hitchens had significance solely as the embodiment of the shift of a portion of the "protest generation" into staunch defenders (and beneficiaries) of the profit system.

The *Washington Post's* description of Hitchens and his crowd in the late 1990s remains useful. The British-born journalist, the newspaper explained, belonged to "an elite subset of Washington society—the crowd of journalists, intellectuals, authors and policymakers, mostly in their thirties and forties, who regularly dine together and dine out on each other." Another *Post* article at the time described "a rarefied world where the top pols and bureaucrats sup with the media and literary elite at exclusive dinner parties. It's a cozy little club of confidential sources and off-the-record confidences."

Hitchens was a man who believed in nothing and was capable of any act of political depravity.

Again, why would anyone celebrate such a scoundrel?

At Cooper Union, Graydon Carter, editor-in-chief of *Vanity Fair*, characterized Hitchens as "a brilliant journalist," "a bit of a scallywag" and "the *beau idéal* [someone representing the highest possible standard] of the public intellectual." Here speaks the voice of New York media corruption and wholesale integration into

great wealth.

Amis, the ferocious anti-communist, suggested that the “most striking thing about Christopher was how widely he was loved.” Recalling one of Hitchens’ favorite expressions, “What could be more agreeable,” Amis continued, “He would say it while he, I and others settled down for 16 or 17 hours for food, drink, tobacco ... And I just want to ask, who could be more agreeable than Hitch?”

Really, it’s impossible to go on. Common decency forbids it.

It must be said that the participants in the April 20 event, disparate as they may be, share this much in common: a fundamental lack of principle, or even a notion of *what it would mean* to hold a principled position. Substantial people would have broken with Hitchens forever over his support for the Iraq war and the Bush administration. (Many in the hall April 20 were probably Obama supporters, but their opposition to Bush was always a matter of superficial, mostly cultural distaste.)

Public figures once did such things! Writer Mary McCarthy quite rightly never forgave Lillian Hellman for her defense of Stalinism and the Moscow Trials. Blacklist victims such as Abe Polonsky and Walter Bernstein, and numerous more recent Hollywood figures, never offered a pardon to director Elia Kazan for his vile capitulation to the anti-communist witch-hunters.

But no one in the crowd April 20, even if he or she happened to disagree with Hitchens about his backing the US-led drive to recolonize the Middle East, cares terribly much. “What was all that fuss about in 2003?” is no doubt the general attitude. As we noted at the time of Hitchens’ death, “Why should disagreements about matters involving the deaths and oppression of tens of thousands, or more, come between pals?”

Everything is forgiven, sooner rather than later, over a drink or two. Everyone in these well-heeled and complacent circles offers an amnesty to everyone else. War crimes, lies, perfidy ... none of this bothers anyone in the end. They’re all friends, comrades in arms, fellow partygoers, connected in myriad ways.

Certainly connected by an obsession with celebrity. Being out of the limelight for such people is a kind of death. Did anyone consider turning down an invitation to the Hitchens’ memorial? It is not likely. Anyone

publicly refusing to attend would be ostracized, labeled a sanctimonious “spoilsport” and considered dangerously serious-minded. Unhappily, the organizers did not run much of a risk in this regard.

What a miserable bunch! Second-raters for the most part, or those who had a moment once and have little or nothing left. Not every one of the Cooper Union participants is stupid or untalented, but they are all politically and morally obtuse. There are certain names one encounters with a degree of regret. To a Sean Penn, for example, one can only say: what on earth were you thinking?

Some who attended the memorial may have deceived themselves into thinking that Hitchens was anti-establishment because of his professed atheism. But his arguments against belief in God were cheap and trite, and he was entirely blind to Marx’s understanding of religion as the “sigh of the oppressed.” Indeed, Hitchens’ anti-religion became largely yet another means of expressing his contempt for the general population and asserting his own supposed superiority. There was nothing progressive about his attitude.

If some of the April 20 celebrants fall for Hitchens’ “radical” image, all the worse for them. Cluelessness and wishful thinking are no excuse. Some people are habitually and professionally clueless. In any event, one can be certain that this crowd is wealthier overall than it was in 2008. Indifference to the suffering of the working class goes hand in hand with willful ignorance.

The Cooper Union gathering was intended to legitimize and uphold political baseness, to portray Hitchens, who gave his support to the most important global plans of the ruling elite, as a “contrarian.” These miserable efforts will ultimately come to nothing. To the extent that Christopher Hitchens is remembered at all it will be as a despicable figure who set a despicable example.

The author also recommends:

Journalist, scoundrel Christopher Hitchens dies at 62 [17 December 2011]



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