* [The Guardian](http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian), Friday 9 November 2001

**Letters to a young contrarian**

The spirit of 1968 may be a distant memory, but a new generation of radicals live in hope of making the world a better place. Christopher Hitchens offers them the wisdom of a seasoned campaigner



My dear X,  It is a strange thing, but it remains true that our language contains no proper word for your aspiration. The noble title of "dissident" must be earned rather than claimed; it connotes sacrifice and risk rather than mere disagreement, and it has been consecrated by many exemplary men and women. "Radical" is a useful and honourable term, but it comes with various health warnings. Our remaining expressions - "maverick", "loose cannon", "rebel", "angry young man", "gadfly" - are all slightly affectionate and diminutive and are, perhaps for that reason, somewhat condescending. It can be understood from them that society, like a benign family, tolerates and even admires eccentricity. Even the term "iconoclast" is seldom used negatively, but rather to suggest that the breaking of images is a harmless discharge of energy.

There even exist official phrases of approbation for this tendency, of which the latest is the supposedly praiseworthy ability to "think outside the box". I myself hope to live long enough to graduate from being a "bad boy" - which I once was - to becoming "a curmudgeon". Go too far outside "the box", of course, and you will encounter a vernacular that is much less "tolerant". Here, the key words are "fanatic", "troublemaker", "misfit" or "malcontent".

Meanwhile, the ceaseless requirements of the entertainment industry also threaten to deprive us of other forms of critical style, and of the means of appreciating them. To be called "satirical" or "ironic" is now to be patronised in a different way; the satirist is the fast-talking cynic and the ironist merely sarcastic or self-conscious and wised up. When such a precious and irreplaceable word as "irony" has become a lazy synonym for anomie, there is scant room for originality.

However, let us not repine. It is too much to expect to live in an age that is propitious for dissent. And most people, most of the time, prefer to seek approval or security. None the less, there are in all periods people who feel themselves in some fashion to be apart. And it is not too much to say that humanity is very much in debt to such people, whether it chooses to acknowledge the debt or not. (Don't expect to be thanked, by the way. The life of an oppositionist is supposed to be difficult.)

I nearly hit upon the word "dissenter" just now, which might do as a definition if it were not for certain religious and sectarian connotations. The same problem arises with "freethinker". But the latter term is probably the superior one, since it makes an essential point about thinking for oneself. The essence of the independent mind lies not in what it thinks, but in how it thinks.

The term "intellectual" was coined by those in France who believed in the guilt of Captain Alfred Dreyfus. They thought that they were defending an organic, harmonious and ordered society against nihilism, and they deployed this contemptuous word against those they regarded as the diseased, the introspective, the disloyal and the unsound. The word hasn't completely lost this association even now, though it is less frequently used as an insult. (One feels something of the same sense of embarrassment in claiming to be an "intellectual" as one does in purporting to be a dissident, but the figure of Emile Zola offers encouragement, and his singular campaign for justice for Dreyfus is one of the imperishable examples of what may be accomplished by an individual.)

There is a saying from Roman antiquity: "Fiat justitia - ruat caelum"; "Do justice, and let the skies fall." In every epoch, there have been those to argue that "greater" goods, such as tribal solidarity or social cohesion, take precedence over justice. It is supposed to be an axiom of "western" civilisation that the individual, or the truth, may not be sacrificed to hypothetical benefits such as "order". But such immolations have in fact been common. Zola could be the pattern for any serious and humanistic radical, because he not only asserted the inalienable rights of the individual, but generalised his assault to encompass the vile roles played by clericalism, racial hatred, militarism and the fetishisation of "the nation". His caustic and brilliant epistolary campaign of 1897-8 may be read as a curtain-raiser for most of the great contests that roiled the coming 20th century . . .

I think often of my late friend Ron Ridenhour, who became briefly famous when, as a service-man in Vietnam, he exposed the evidence of the hideous massacre of the villagers at My Lai in March 1968. One of the hardest things for anyone to face is the conclusion that his or her "own" side is in the wrong when engaged in a war. The pressure to keep silent and be a "team player" is reinforceable by the accusations of cowardice or treachery that will swiftly be made against dissenters. Sinister phrases of coercion, such as "stabbing in the back" or "giving ammunition to the enemy" have their origin in this dilemma and are always available to help compel unanimity.

I have had the privilege of meeting a number of brave dissidents in many and various societies. Frequently, they can trace their careers to an incident in early life where they felt obliged to take a stand. Sometimes, too, a precept is offered and takes root. Bertrand Russell records in his autobiography that his Puritan grandmother "gave me a Bible with her favourite texts written on the fly-leaf. Among these was 'Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil.' Her emphasis upon this text led me in later life to be not afraid of belonging to small minorities." It's affecting to find the future hammer of the Christians being "confirmed" in this way.

There is good reason to think that such reactions arise from something innate rather than something inculcated: Nickleby doesn't know until the moment of the crisis that he is going to stick up for poor Smike. Noam Chomsky recalls hearing of the obliteration of Hiroshima as a young man, and experiencing a need for solitude because there was nobody he felt he could talk to. It may be that you, my dear X, recognise something of yourself in these instances; a disposition to resistance, however slight, against arbitrary authority or witless mass opinion, or a thrill of recognition when you encounter some well-wrought phrase from a free intelligence.

Do bear in mind that the cynics have a point, of a sort, when they speak of the "professional nay-sayer". To be in opposition is not to be a nihilist. And there is no decent or charted way of making a living at it. It is something you are, and not something you do.

My dear X,  Your last letter reached me just as I was reading the essays of Aldous Huxley, creator of our notion of a "Brave New World". Allow me to give you a paragraph that I marked as I went along:

"Homer was wrong," wrote Heracleitus of Ephesus, "Homer was wrong in saying: 'Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!' He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away."

These are words on which the superhumanists should meditate. Aspiring toward a consistent perfection, they are aspiring toward annihilation. The Hindus had the wit to see and the courage to proclaim the fact; Nirvana, the goal of their striving, is nothingness. Wherever life exists, there also is inconsistency, division, strife.

You seem to have grasped the point that there is something idiotic about those who believe that consensus (to give the hydra-headed beast just one of its names) is the highest good. Why do I use the offensive word "idiotic"? For two reasons that seem good to me; the first being my conviction that human beings do not, in fact, desire to live in some Disneyland of the mind, where there is an end to striving and a general feeling of contentment and bliss.

My second reason is less intuitive. Even if we did really harbour this desire, it would fortunately be unattainable. As a species, we may by all means think ruefully about the waste and horror produced by war and other forms of rivalry and jealousy. However, this can't alter the fact that in life we make progress by conflict and in mental life by argument and disputation.

If you care about the points of agreement and civility, then, you had better be well equipped with points of argument and combativity, because if you are not then the "centre" will be occupied and defined without your having helped to decide it. That is unless you trust the transcendent sapience of the Dalai Lama, whose work I was reading in parallel with Huxley's. Here is what the enlightened one told his interlocutor, at the opening of The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living, an extensive and bestselling transcription of his own words:

"I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. That is clear. Whether one believes in religion or not, whether one believes in this religion or that religion, we all are seeking something better in life. So, I think, the very motion of our life is towards happiness."

This is how the Dalai Lama began his address "to a large audience in Arizona". The very best that can be said is that he uttered a string of fatuous non-sequiturs. There is not even a strand of chewing gum to connect the premise to the conclusion; the speaker simply assumes what he has to prove.

I once spent some time in an ashram in Poona, outside Bombay. I was posing as an acolyte in order to make a documentary about the guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, who had built himself a large and lucrative practice among well-off westerners. The whole thing was a racket, of course - the divine purveyor of disco philosophy had the world's largest private collection of Rolls-Royces - but what I remember best was the morning darshan with the all-wise. On the way into the assembly one had to be sniffed from head to toe by two agonisingly beautiful California girls dressed in flame-ochre kimonos. The lovely sniffers were supposed to detect any traces of alcohol or tobacco. Every morning, I passed their exacting test. But what made me personally allergic, each roseate dawn, was the large sign posted at the point where footwear had to be discarded. "Shoes and minds," said this sign, "must be left at the gate." Laughable, of course, but evil if it could be enforced, as it often was under Loyola's Jesuitical injunction, "Dei sacrificium intellectus"; an immodest and hysterical desire to annihilate the intellect at the feet of an idol.

My dear X,  The irritating term or tag "Angry Young Man", with which awkward types are put in their place as callow young rebels going through a "phase", was given currency in Look Back in Anger, the mediocre play by John Osborne. The protagonist Jimmy Porter is going through one of his self-regarding soliloquies when he exclaims, rather tellingly for once, that there are "no more good, brave causes left". This utterance struck home in the consciousness of the mid-1950s, at a time when existential anomie was trading at an inflated price.

Within a few years, millions of young people had forsaken the absurd in order to engage with such causes as civil rights, the struggle against thermonuclear statism, and the ending of an unjust war in Indochina. I was myself "of" this period, and have witnessed some truly marvellous moments at first hand.

Nobody in the supposedly affluent and disillusioned 50s had seen any of this coming; I am quite certain that there will be future opportunities for people of high ideals, or of any ideals at all. However, in the interval between 1968 and 1989 - in other words, in that period where many of the revolutionaries against consumer capitalism metamorphosed into "civil society" human-rights activists - there were considerable interludes of stasis. And it was in order to survive those years of stalemate and realpolitik that a number of important dissidents evolved a strategy for survival. In a phrase, they decided to live "as if".

Vaclav Havel, then working as a marginal playwright and poet in a society and state that truly merited the title of Absurd, realised that "resistance" in its original insurgent and militant sense was impossible in the central Europe of the day. He therefore proposed living "as if" he were a citizen of a free society, "as if" lying and cowardice were not mandatory patriotic duties, "as if" his government had signed (which it actually had) the various treaties and agreements that enshrine universal human rights. He called this tactic the "power of the powerless" because, even when disagreement is almost forbidden, a state that insists on actually compelling assent can be relatively easily made to look stupid. At around the same time, and alarmed in a different way by many of the same things (the morbid relationship of the cold war to the nuclear arms race), Professor EP Thompson proposed that we live "as if" a free and independent Europe already existed.

The "People Power" moment of 1989, when whole populations brought down their absurd rulers by an exercise of arm-folding and sarcasm, had its origins partly in the Philippines in 1985, when the dictator Marcos called a "snap election" and the voters decided to take him seriously. They acted "as if" the vote were free and fair, and they made it so. In the late Victorian period, Oscar Wilde - master of the pose but not a mere poseur - decided to live and act "as if" moral hypocrisy were not regnant. In the deep south in the early 1960s, Rosa Parks decided to act "as if" a hardworking black woman could sit down on a bus at the end of the day's labour. In Moscow in the 1970s, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn resolved to write "as if" an individual scholar could investigate the history of his own country and publish his findings. They all, by behaving literally, acted ironically. In each case, as we know now, the authorities were forced first to act crassly and then to look crass, and eventually to fall victim to stern verdicts from posterity. However, this was by no means the guaranteed outcome, and there must have been days when the "as if" style was exceedingly hard to keep up.

All I can recommend, therefore (apart from the study of these and other good examples), is that you try to cultivate some of this attitude. You may well be confronted with some species of bullying or bigotry, or some ill-phrased appeal to the general will, or some petty abuse of authority. If you have a political loyalty, you may be offered a shady reason for agreeing to a lie or half-truth that serves some short-term purpose. Everybody devises tactics for getting through such moments; try behaving "as if" they need not be tolerated and are not inevitable.

My dear X,  Beware the irrational, however seductive. Shun the "transcendent" and all who invite you to subordinate or annihilate yourself. Distrust compassion; prefer dignity for yourself and others. Don't be afraid to be thought arrogant or selfish. Picture all experts as if they were mammals. Never be a spectator of unfairness or stupidity. Seek out argument and disputation for their own sake; the grave will supply plenty of time for silence. Suspect your own motives, and all excuses. Do not live for others any more than you would expect others to live for you.

The above are extracts from Christopher Hitchens' new book, Letters to a Young Contrarian, published this month by the Perseus Press, price £16.99.

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