Christopher Lasch vs. the elites

by Roger Kimball

On Mr. Lasch’s book The Revolt of the Elites.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Christopher Lasch
The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy
W. W. Norton & Company, 276 pages, $21.00
A characteristic of our times is the predominance, even in groups traditionally selective, of the mass and the vulgar. Thus, in intellectual life, which of its essence requires and presupposes qualification, one can note the progressive triumph of the pseudo-intellectual, unqualified, unqualifiable …
—Ortega y Gasset, The Revolt of the Masses

… the bad news goes on and on.
—Christopher Lasch

With the untimely death of Christopher Lasch last year at the age of sixty-one, we were deprived of one of our most articulate and earnestly plangent social critics. By training, Lasch was a historian of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American culture. Early books like The New Radicalism in America: 1889–1963 (1965) and The Agony of the American Left (1969) chronicled the manifold ambitions and disappointments of American radicalism—ambitions and disappointments, incidentally, that were very close to Lasch’s own heart. But he aspired to be more than a chronicler. By the mid-1970s, having learned to blend the seductive techniques of Freudian social analysis with crisply written, up-to-the-minute diagnoses of contemporary cultural pathologies, Lasch had emerged as the bad conscience of the American Left. His focus became broader, his rhetoric more apocalyptic. His most famous book, The Culture of Narcissism (1979), was a stinging indictment of American society for being greedy, flaccidly self-centered, and politically frivolous. Subtitled “American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations,” the book was the perfect intellectual corollary to the dour presidency of Jimmy Carter—indeed, Carter’s adoption of Lasch’s theme in one of his televised sermons to the nation helped to make the book a best seller.
Although its language was sometimes overblown—one section is entitled “The Banality of Pseudo-Self-Awareness: Theatrics of Politics and Everyday Existence”—there was a lot to admire in *The Culture of Narcissism*. What one witnessed in its pages was the spectacle of an intelligent, politically committed man of the Left struggling to make sense of a culture in the grip of a radicalism that had turned out to be almost entirely bogus. Lasch was especially caustic about the hedonistic antics of the so-called New Left. He understood that what presented itself in the lineaments of radical consciousness-raising in the 1960s and 1970s was mostly a blind for moralistic self-indulgence. Promises of liberation and transcendence, he saw, often concealed new forms of tyranny and irresponsibility. Lasch considered himself a radical, but his criticism of contemporary America—parts of it, anyway—sounded a distinctly conservative note. In a section on “Schooling and the New Illiteracy,” for example, he had this to say about the Left’s effort to “democratize” education:

> It has neither improved popular understanding of modern society, raised the quality of popular culture, nor reduced the gap between wealth and poverty, which remains as wide as ever. On the other hand, it has contributed to the decline of critical thought and the erosion of intellectual standards, forcing us to consider the possibility that mass education, as conservatives have argued all along, is intrinsically incompatible with the maintenance of educational standards.

Reading such passages—and they occur frequently in Lasch’s later work—it is sometimes easy to forget that his attack on our cultural “malaise” (a favored Laschian epithet) issued from an unwavering commitment to radical populism. However devastating was his exposure of the fatuities of the New Left, the real villains, in his view, were “capitalism,” “mass communications,” and “the corporations”—the usual suspects put forward by the Left. Hence he attacks “welfare liberalism, which absolves individuals of moral responsibility and treats them as victims of social circumstance.” But he places the blame for the shambles not on the questionable policies of the New Deal and the Great Society but on “capitalism” and its “new modes of social control.”

Such themes are a constant in Lasch’s work. In a postscript to *The Agony of the American Left*, written in the aftermath of the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, he concluded that “it is clearer than ever that radicalism is the only long-term hope for America.” Only a “radicalized liberalism,” embodied in “a leader like Ted Kennedy or John Lindsay” (remember John Lindsay?), could provide a bulwark against “the right-wing assault [on] civil liberties” and “postpone the collapse of liberal capitalism.” Note well: according to Lasch, even a paragon like Kennedy or Lindsay could only retard capitalism’s day of reckoning: “In the long run, … liberalism cannot eliminate the contradictions of that system”—a system, he insisted, that rests on “imperialism, elitism, racism, and inhuman acts of technological destruction.” Who was to blame? There were many candidates;
but high on Lasch’s list were “the oil industry, the auto industry, the insurance companies, the makers of armaments.” “If America is to become a democracy,” Lasch concluded, “the only question is whether the power of these corporations can be destroyed piecemeal … or whether it will be destroyed by some ultimate confrontation in the future.”

In his later work, Lasch was more sophisticated. There are, for example, no paeans to the likes of Ted Kennedy or John Lindsay. But he never abandoned his deep anti-capitalist animus. “Corporations,” especially “multi-national corporations,” were always suspect. Lasch’s hostility to capitalism went beyond the usual litany of complaints: that capitalism exploited the working class, that it tended to act as a solvent on social and moral traditions, that it pandered to the lowest common denominator in its never-ending search for new markets. To be sure, Lasch vigorously affirmed such criticisms; but for him they were only part of the story. In his view, the fundamental problem with capitalism was its addiction to increase. That is to say, what admirers of capitalism have cited as its greatest strength—its seemingly unlimited productive capacity—Lasch identified as its most culpable weakness. In many ways, this is the theme of his magnum opus, The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics (1991). In this long, erudite, somewhat sprawling work, Lasch mounted an attack on the “ideology” of progress, which he saw as a natural coefficient of capitalism. The title of his concluding section, “Populism against Progress,” sums up his position. He believed that the commitment to progress, fueled by unfettered capitalism, denies “limits” and transforms people into insatiable consumers. (“Consumer” is perhaps his most withering term of abuse.) Remnants of the populist tradition that he extolled as an alternative to elite consumer culture lived on, he argued, in the working-class sensibility of the petty-bourgeois, “its moral realism, its understanding that everything has its price, its respect for limits, its skepticism about progress.”

By the time Lasch got around to writing The True and Only Heaven, his suite of concerns had taken on a metaphysical, even a theological cast. The “sense of limits” that he identified as the “unifying thread” of his book was more than a matter of prudence: it became a kind of existential dogma. Capitalism was still an enemy, but so was the “sense of unlimited power conferred by science—the intoxicating prospect of man’s conquest of the natural world.” Lasch’s social-political criticism melded with a moral repugnance toward the Promethean ambitions of modernity.

There is a lot of moral repugnance and condemnation in Lasch’s last book, a posthumously published collection of thirteen essays that constitute an unsystematic coda to his criticism of American society. Entitled The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy, the book revisits most of the classic Laschian themes. It is not a cheery tale. After an introduction describing “The Democratic Malaise,” there are three sections: “The Intensification of Social Divisions,” “Democratic Discourse in Decline,” and—what else?—“The Dark Night of the Soul.” There are essays with such titles as “Does Democracy Deserve to Survive?” (the answer is “yes,” but not as it’s currently practiced in the U.S. of A.), “The Lost Art of Argument,” “The Abolition of Shame,” and “Academic Pseudo-radicalism: The Charade of ‘Subversion’”—this last being, in part, a criticism of my book Tenured Radicals.
Lasch was never what one would call an upbeat critic. Words like “optimism,” “progress,” “affluence,” even “happiness” were anathema to him. (At the end of his concluding essay, waxing biblical, he tells his readers that “the secret of happiness lies in renouncing the right to be happy.”) But in this final statement Christopher Lasch seems gloomier than ever. Of course, that might simply be because the realities he describes are more gloomy now than in the past. But there is more to it than that. Nor is it enough to observe that Lasch was a dying man when he was completing this book. The pall is more than merely personal. To a large extent, I believe, the unremitting gloominess of Lasch’s late work proceeds from his disappointment that contemporary America was clearly not developing into the rigorous populist society he had always dreamed about. Unaccountably, many people still cared about making money and “getting ahead,” even after he had pointed out the folly of materialism. They were selfish, ill-informed, duped by politicians and “the corporations.” Lasch spoke of “America in an Age of Diminishing Expectations”; one senses that his own expectations became so diminished that he regarded buoyancy in others as a sign of weakness or hypocrisy.

This makes reading Lasch an odd experience. The whole seems less than the sum of its parts. One cannot but agree with many of Lasch’s observations and criticisms. He was, after all, an astute critic of society, and anyone not smitten with the radical pieties of the 1960s will again and again find himself endorsing this or that piece of cultural anatomization. For example, this statement, taken from his introduction, ought to be recited daily by all politicians and civil servants: “Democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of their friends and neighbors, instead of depending on the state.” Extra credit would be allotted for reciting this as well: “A misplaced compassion degrades both the victims, who are reduced to objects of pity, and their would-be benefactors, who find it easier to pity their fellow citizens than to hold them up to impersonal standards, attainment of which would entitle them to respect.” Unfortunately, such statements do not tell the whole story. Taken together, the essays in this book paint a picture that tends to ring false, as if some trick of lighting or perspective had rendered the scene untrue even though the objects depicted in it remain recognizable.

Part of the problem is rhetorical. Lasch can be a very effective writer, but he specializes in lists like this one:

The mounting evidence of widespread inefficiency and corruption, the decline of American productivity, the pursuit of speculative profits at the expense of manufacturing, the deterioration of our country’s material infrastructure, the squalid conditions in our crime-ridden cities, the alarming and disgraceful growth of poverty, and the widening disparity between poverty and wealth …

Etcetera, etcetera. It’s not so much that he is wrong in his observations as that he is numbingly relentless. Or consider his use of the adjective “growing,” invariable whenever there is bad news to be conveyed. In Japan, a 1987 poll revealed “a growing belief that the country could no longer be described as middle-class”; in America today, we find a “growing contempt for manual labor”; as far back as 1890 there was a “growing gulf between wealth and poverty”; then there is
“the growing insularity of the elites,” not to mention the “growing impatience with the constraints imposed by long-term responsibilities and commitments.”

On the positive side, consider “Does Democracy Deserve to Survive?,” which contains some of the best passages and aperçus in the book. Although the name of Matthew Arnold is never mentioned in The Revolt of the Elites, Lasch’s understanding of the relation between culture and democracy is, at least in one crucial respect, distinctly Arnoldian—and hence distinctly at odds with current political dogma. Like Arnold, Lasch insists that true democracy does not entail a debasement of standards. As Arnold observed in Culture and Anarchy, “culture” in his sense “does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; … It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere.” Hence it is that “the men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time.” Today, of course, the contention that some ideas are better than others—let alone that some deserve to be called “the best”—is rejected as an elitist crime against “diversity.”

But Lasch is at his Arnoldian best when he observes that tolerance for diversity does not require a lowering or selective application of standards. “The latest variation on this familiar theme,” he writes, “its reductio ad absurdum, is that a respect for cultural diversity forbids us to impose the standards of privileged groups on the victims of oppression.” What this amounts to is “a recipe for universal incompetence.” It is also a prescription for spiritual anemia. Partisans of “cultural diversity” reject the idea that there are “impersonal virtues like fortitude, workmanship, moral courage, honesty, and respect for adversaries.” But Lasch is right that if we believe in these things, we must be prepared to recommend them to everyone. “Unless we are prepared to make demands on one another, we can enjoy only the most rudimentary kind of common life.” Like Arnold, he argues that common standards “are absolutely indispensable to a democratic society,” not least because “double standards mean second-class citizenship.”

Arnold is not the only ghost haunting these pages. The shade of Allan Bloom also makes a few cameo appearances. Readers of The Closing of the American Mind will remember Bloom’s blistering attack on how the liberal virtue of “openness” had been trivialized in contemporary American society. “Openness,” Bloom wrote, “used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason’s power. The unrestrained and thoughtless pursuit of openness … has rendered openness meaningless.” Similarly, Lasch, expatiating on the “moral paralysis of those who value ‘openness’ above all,” observes that democracy means something more than “‘openness’ and toleration.” “In the absence of common standards,” he writes, “tolerance becomes indifference” and the ideal of an open mind degenerates into that of an “empty mind.”

We have become too proficient in making excuses for ourselves—worse, in making excuses for the “disadvantaged.” We are so busy defending our rights (rights conferred, for the most part, by judicial decree) that we give little thought to our responsibilities. We seldom say what we think, for fear of giving offense. We are determined to respect everyone, but we have forgotten that respect has to be earned. Respect is not another word for tolerance or the
appreciation of “alternative lifestyles and communities.” This is a tourist’s approach to morality. Respect is what we experience in the presence of admirable achievements, admirably formed characters, natural gifts put to good use. It entails the exercise of discriminating judgment, not indiscriminate acceptance.

One wishes one could say “Amen” and have done with it. But Lasch never makes it easy. “Does Democracy Deserve to Survive?” is one of the best essays in The Revolt of the Elites because it focuses on the depredations of what has come to be called political correctness and, although written with great moral seriousness, it does not descend to moralistic sermonizing. The same cannot be said for many of the other essays. “The Democratic Malaise,” his introduction, is a case in point. This essay is a kind of annotated précis or preview of the book’s contents. In his peroration, Lasch, drawing on such left-wing gurus as Mickey Kaus and Michael Walzer, tells us that before we can properly inhabit a democracy we must learn to “devalue money” and the importance of “the market.” This of course is an age-old theme—lamentations about the evils of money have been around as long as money itself. But Lasch, characteristically, turns up the volume of this complaint. “Luxury,” he intones, “is morally repugnant.” Moreover, “the difficulty of limiting the influence of wealth suggests that wealth itself needs to be limited.” In his view, “a democratic society cannot allow unlimited accumulation.” Hence he calls for “a moral condemnation of great wealth … backed up with effective political action” in order to bring about “at least a rough approximation of economic equality.” Furthermore, hankering after his populist paradise of yore, he tells us that “in the old days” Americans agreed that individuals should not claim entitlement to wealth “far in excess of their needs.

How many things are wrong with this little tableau? Let us confine ourselves to the two most obvious problems. First of all, Lasch seems entirely oblivious of the fact that the great democracies grew up in periods of vigorous economic expansion. Think of fifth-century Athens, of eighteenth-century Britain, of nineteenth-century America. Far from eschewing “great wealth,” these societies depended on it. It helped constitute their glory. And when we come to “the old days” when Americans were supposedly averse to great wealth, what can this mean? (And who is to decide how much wealth is “far in excess” of one’s needs? One’s needs according to whom? According to Christopher Lasch?) Most people would consider that Alexis de Tocqueville was writing about “the old days” in Democracy in America (first published in 1835). “I know of no country,” Tocqueville wrote in his first volume of that work, “where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men and where a profounder contempt is expressed for the theory of the permanent equality of property.” Later on, he returned to this theme: “the passions that agitate the Americans most deeply are not their political but their commercial passions; … They prefer the good sense which amasses large fortunes to that enterprising genius which

Lasch’s attack on the elites is part of his continuing effort to extol the virtues of the lower-middle class, whose “political instincts” are “demonstrably more conservative than those of their self-appointed spokesmen and would-be liberators.”
frequently dissipates them.” So much the worse for our early-nineteenth-century forebears, perhaps; but then when were the good-old-days to which Lasch would have us revert?

The title of Lasch’s book and of its lead essay is a play on Ortega y Gasset’s famous book The Revolt of the Masses. Written in the early 1930s, when the masses really were revolting, Ortega’s book warned of the emergence of “a hyperdemocracy in which the mass acts directly, outside the law,” to impose its will on the rest of society. Arrogating to himself “unlimited rights,” the mass man felt himself “exempt from all submission to superiors.” He was, in Ortega’s arresting phrase, the “spoiled child of human history.” Lasch’s contention is that just about everything that Ortega said about the masses back in 1932 now applies more to the elites. Lasch was particularly impressed with what Ortega said about the grandiose sense of entitlement and “limitless possibility”—were not these precisely the qualities exhibited by today’s affluent elites, “those who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production and thus set the terms of public debate”? Lasch believed so.

In one sense, Lasch’s attack on the elites is part of his continuing effort to extol the virtues of the lower-middle class, whose “political instincts” are “demonstrably more conservative than those of their self-appointed spokesmen and would-be liberators.” It is they, he writes, who have developed a “sense of limits,” “favor limits on abortion, cling to the two-parent family as a source of stability in a turbulent world, resist experiments with ‘alternative lifestyles,’ and harbor deep reservations about affirmative action and other ventures in large-scale social engineering.” Well, maybe. But the curious thing about Lasch’s attack on “the elites” is that it applies almost entirely to the liberal elite. As usual, Lasch paints a dismal picture of psychological ineptitude and self-centeredness. But whom is he talking about? And why does he limit bestowing the virtues he admires—from the “sense of limits” to “deep reservations about affirmative action”—to the inarticulate “common man” he claims to be championing? Are not many of the items on his menu of approved attitudes part and parcel of a conservative tradition that, while hardly confined to the lower-middle class, is certainly alive and well in American society today? Lasch seems to feel that unless one subscribes to his ascetic populism one is a sorry exemplar of Nietzsche’s Last Man, feeble, narcissistic, at once obsessed with health and terrified of death. Lasch writes about “the revolt of the elites,” but he never really addresses the question of the proper role of elites in a complex modern democracy. In this context, it is significant that he draws elaborate parallels between Ortega’s description of the masses and today’s elites, but never even mentions such classic reflections on the role of the elites in democratic society as Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy and T. S. Eliot’s Notes Towards the Definition of Culture.

Lasch tells us that our equation of the American Dream with “social mobility” is “sadly impoverished.” But one comes away from this book—as from his other recent work—feeling that the alternatives that he allowed himself to contemplate were impoverished, too—sometimes sadly so. One of his main criticisms of Tenured Radicals was that in my attack on relativism I was guilty of “foundationalism,” that is, of believing that knowledge must be grounded in “propositions
unassailable by doubt.” Conservatives generally, he complained, think that “either knowledge rests on immutable foundations or men and women are free to think whatever they please.” Actually, both “unassailable by doubt” and “immutable” are Lasch’s interpolations. The real question is whether we believe there is such a thing as truth that is more than a pragmatic convenience. I would agree that “the impossibility of certainty does not preclude the possibility of reasoned discourse—of assertions that command provisional assent even though they lack unimpeachable foundations and are therefore subject to revision.” But “subject to revision” does not mean “entirely up for grabs.” When Lasch turned to relativists like John Dewey and, even more, Clifford Geertz for an alternative to “foundationalism,” he embraced an alternative that not only denies certainty but also denies the possibility of truth. Seeking to avoid one sort of absolutism, he unwittingly adopted another: the absolutism of the confirmed relativist.

Lasch presented himself as a stern critic of nostalgia, and in some ways he was. But the truth is that a powerful current of nostalgia pulses through his work. It is a nostalgia not only for a simpler time when “local and regional loyalties” were alive and well, but also for a species of mankind that was nobler, more responsible, less materialistic than any found outside the generous imaginings of populists and other utopians. As Lasch himself was quick to point out, one of the liabilities of nostalgia—which might be defined as a kind of metaphysical homesickness—is that it tends to blind its sufferers to various realities. Lasch never tired of railing against “careerism” and the cult of “specialized expertise,” which he described as “the antithesis of democracy.” I thought of this when I read his poignant acknowledgment thanking his wife for teaching him how to use a word processor: “without this helpful machine, which would have remained inaccessible to me without her guidance, this book could not have been completed in the allotted time.” Did he ever consider how much “careerism” and “specialized expertise” went into that little bundle of microchips and software?

A book that I suspect Lasch would have admired had he lived to see it is *The Tory View of Landscape*, written by an expatriate Brit named Nigel Everett and published last fall by Yale. “Toryism,” as Everett conceived it, was informed “by a strong sense of responsibility in the management and distribution of scarce resources, [it was] attentive to its own ideas of social cohesion, and … continuing obligations to the past and the future. Among its obvious weaknesses was a limited interest in many of the processes by which material wealth is created and may be expanded.” One can see Lasch nodding with eager agreement until the last sentence: “the processes by which material wealth is created and may be expanded,” in other words, free-market capitalism. Lasch was all for fostering self-reliance and responsibility among “ordinary men and women,” but it is not at all clear that he appreciated the extent to which genuine self-reliance often goes hand in hand with material well-being.

A final word about religion. Religion—or the idea of religion—played an increasingly large role in Lasch’s later thinking. He was, I think, one of those secular intellectuals who feel that religion is a “good thing” without being able to bring themselves to subscribe to its teachings. He recognized that “it is impossible to revive religious belief simply because it serves a useful social purpose” but
nonetheless felt that the liberal elites he so despised were missing something in their wholesale animus toward traditional religious belief. In “The Soul of Man under Secularism,” the last essay in the book, Lasch considers various ways in which modern man has dealt with what Friedrich Schiller called the “disenchantment of the world.” He is correct, I think, that adamant disillusionment is the peculiar form of hubris that secular modernity has bred: the Nietzschean stance of being “disillusioned but undaunted,” as if the extent of one’s disillusionment were an index of one’s wisdom—or at least one’s courage. But what is perhaps most noteworthy is the way Lasch attempts to salvage some margin of religious commitment. Traditionally, of course, religion has functioned in part as a source of existential consolation. Lasch would have us downplay that aspect of religious teaching, eager, as always, to combat the tendency to “make people feel good about themselves.” For Lasch “the spiritual discipline against self-righteousness is the very essence of religion.” A person with “a proper understanding of religion,” he says, would see it not as “a source of intellectual and emotional security,” but as “a challenge to complacency and pride.” There is of course something to this. For pride is assuredly the enemy of religious life. But how touching, how sad, really, that even here, even when it was a matter of life’s ultimate mysteries, we find Lasch arguing against the possibility of consolation or solace.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 13 Number 8, on page 9
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