RECONSIDERATION

On Christopher Lasch

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HAD NATURE TAKEN a more typical course, Christopher Lasch would still be with us. Only sixty-one years old when on Valentine's Day, 1994, he succumbed to cancer in his Pittsford, New York, home, Lasch died while still in his intellectual prime. The book for which he may be remembered longest, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics,* had appeared just three years earlier. And he had just finished, with the aid of his daughter Elisabeth, the manuscript of *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy,* a book in which he attempted to bring into focus the problems posed for authentic democracy—the health of which, as we shall see, was always Lasch's overriding concern—by the detachment of the new privileged classes, both physically and ideologically, from common men and women.

In *The Revolt of the Elites* Lasch foretold the political divide that would preoccupy political commentators a decade later. "The new elites are in revolt against 'Middle America,'" he warned, "imagined by them to be technologically backward, politically reactionary, repressive in its sexual morality, middlebrow in its tastes, smug and complacent, dull and dowdy."[1] This would seem to be the lament of a cultural conservative, and in fact, by the end of his life Lasch wore that label fairly comfortably. But he had once been closely associated with the political Left, and part of what made, and continues to make, Lasch's analysis so arresting is that he never entirely disavowed such influences as progressivism, Marx, Freud, and the Frankfurt School. Unlike the Left's other postwar exiles, he never underwent a Damascene ideological conversion, but rather gradually and reluctantly came to shed certain leftist presuppositions and preoccupations. Lasch never became a Cold Warrior, in contrast to those of his peers who migrated from *Partisan Review* to some form or other of neoconservatism. Nor did he ever blunt his critique of economic and political centralization and the technological rationality that sustained them: unlike Irving Kristol, he was not prepared to muster even one cheer for capitalism. It might be said that Lasch did not so much repudiate his mentors on the Left as combine their insights with those of others—including, to name just a few, Orestes Brownson, Henry George, Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, Reinhold Neibuhr, and Philip Rieff—to create a very original and potent critical brew. It might also be said that his work confirms the truth of T. J. Jackson Lears's observation that "the most profound radicalism is

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often the most profound conservatism."[2]

That is one reason, perhaps, that it seems Lasch's popularity is now on the rise, especially among those for whom the partisan narratives of the culture wars have lost much of their credibility.[3] Certainly, to turn to Lasch's *oeuvre* today is to be struck forcefully by its refreshing independence. Lasch managed to be at once both democratic and antiliberal. Negatively, his criticism was founded on a theoretically rich, psychologically informed understanding of the interrelated histories and effects of class, consumer capitalism, therapeutic culture, and technology. Positively, it was based on a respect for—and an ardent wish to defend—the unenlightened, traditional values and preferences of the petit bourgeois: family, hard work, loyalty, craftsmanship, voluntary association, ethnicity, sport, moral clarity, and faith. It all added up to, in his words, a thoroughly "unclassifiable political equation."[4]

II

Robert and Zora (Schaupp) Lasch, both born in Nebraska, were impeccably progressive intellectuals. Robert, some nine years younger than Zora, attended Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar from 1928 to 1930 and went on to work for most of his life as an editorialist at Midwestern newspapers, including the *Chicago Sun* and *Sun-Times* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.[5] Zora took her doctorate in philosophy from Bryn Mawr College in 1925. She spent most of her career as a social worker but later taught logic at Washington University and a couple of other schools. Good logician that she was, Zora, as her son recalled, "had a no-nonsense approach to ideas, which it took me some time to learn to appreciate."[6]

Robert and Zora's first child, Robert Christopher Lasch, was born on June 1, 1932. The Omaha, Nebraska, household into which he arrived was not only highly political and intellectual but, in his own recollection, militantly secular. Young Christopher used to enjoy unsettling the sons and daughters of his Republican neighbors by poking fun at their religious beliefs and "flaunting" his atheism.

Christopher enrolled at Harvard (where he roomed for at least two years with John Updike) in the fall of 1950 and emerged four years later with an A.B. in history and the Bowdoin Prize for his honors senior thesis. Columbia, with its renowned history department, was the next stop. Lasch entered in the fall of 1954 and finished his dissertation in 1961 under the direction of William Leuchtenburg. Richard Hofstadter, however, emerged as the faculty member who would exert the largest influence on Lasch, even though Lasch's only formal association with him was as a research assistant one summer. As different as Lasch's own version of American history and culture would become, Hofstadter remained one of those figures with whose ideas Lasch felt he had to grapple for the rest of his life.

While at Columbia, Lasch married Nell Commager, daughter of historian Henry Steele Commager. Before finishing his dissertation Lasch taught history at Williams College and Roosevelt University. After taking his doctorate, he secured an appointment as assistant professor of history at the University of Iowa. Just two years later, in 1963, he was made associate professor.

Until arriving at Iowa, Lasch had thought of himself as working within the liberal tradition. Besides Hofstadter, he was attracted to thinkers like Lionel Trilling, George Kennan, and Walter Lippmann. But the deepening freeze of the Cold War and Lasch's Midwestern populist-progressive instincts ultimately made it impossible for him to accept what he saw as the hard-edged and seemingly hard-hearted anti-democratic elitism of the anticommunists' "realist" foreign policy. It seems to have been while at Iowa that Lasch's

growing disillusionment with the liberal Cold Warriors led him to become interested in the burgeoning "Madison school" of diplomatic history then enjoying popularity in radical circles. The University of Wisconsin historian William Appleman Williams was especially influential on Lasch, not least because Williams led him to Marx.[7]

In 1966, Lasch moved to Northwestern University, where he was made full professor just five years after completing his doctorate. But his stay was brief. Eugene Genovese had just been tapped to turn around the aging and fractious history department at the University of Rochester. Deemed virtually unhireable by American universities because he had very publicly espoused the cause of the Vietcong, Genovese had been serving out his exile in Montreal. Now he was back, and he wanted, in Lasch's words, "to shape a department that would be fairly explicitly committed to the enterprise of historically informed social criticism and at the same time not committed to any specific form of it." Marxian critics were certainly welcome. Genovese soon convinced Lasch to come on board, and he arrived in the fall of 1970.[8]

Although already an accomplished scholar who was well known in leftist circles by the time he arrived at Rochester,[9] it was while there that Lasch published his best-known work. *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged,* which appeared in 1977, was widely noticed and marked the beginning of a more serious cleavage between the direction of Lasch's work and what had become Left orthodoxy. The first of Lasch's books to draw heavily on Freud and the Frankfurt School (Herbert Marcuse, T. W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and followers), it also attracted particularly stinging criticism from Lasch's audience on the Left. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations,* brought out two years later, further demonstrated Lasch's heterodox inclinations. A bestseller, it is the book with which his name has been most closely associated ever since.

Three other books—and numerous articles, reviews, lectures, panel discussions, and the rest of the trappings of academic fame—followed. *The Minimal Self* (1984), *The True and Only Heaven* (1991), and *The Revolt of the Elites* (1994) all failed to achieve the popular success of *The Culture of Narcissism,* but each continued to reflect important changes in Lasch's thought.[10] By the early 1990s, Lasch viewed himself as hewing to a culturally conservative populism that emphasized the need to nurture the institutions and practices associated with traditional communities and, especially, the need to acknowledge human limits. He realized that it was against such an acknowledgment that the entire modern project had set its face, "that the normal rebellion against dependence" which our religious tradition teaches is common to all men had been "sanctioned by our scientific control over nature." The irony was that while "[t]hose wonderful machines that science has enabled us to construct have not eliminated drudgery, ...they have made it possible to imagine ourselves as masters of our fate. In an age that fancies itself as disillusioned, this is the one illusion—the illusion of mastery—that remains as tenacious as ever," especially among those cosmopolitan, hypermobile, liberated elites who were consolidating their control over politics, economics, and culture.[11]

III

Before he became a radical historian, Christopher Lasch (or Kit, as he was known by his friends, family, and colleagues) was an insightful historian of radicalism—and also liberalism and progressivism. Lasch's first book, a revised version of his dissertation, appeared in 1962 as *The*

American Liberals and the Russian Revolution. By that time he had published over twenty pieces, but most of these were reviews that had appeared in his father's *St. Louis Post-Dispatch.*[12] It was with this book that he began to make his academic reputation.

The specific subject of this book—the crisis caused by the Russian revolution and its consequences for liberals' belief in progress and the natural goodness of man—was not one to which Lasch was often to return. But even here, though he was not ready to take seriously either the Marxist or conservative alternatives,[13] Lasch had identified fundamental flaws in liberalism, especially its complacent optimism and messianism. In many ways, *American Liberals* marked the beginning of the end of his identification with liberalism. Now at Iowa, he was becoming increasingly attracted to the Marxism he had so recently dismissed. In 1962, Lasch published a short but portentous review in the school newspaper, the *Daily Iowan.* The book under consideration was *Eros and Civilization,* by Herbert Marcuse. In Marcuse, Lasch encountered both Freud and Marx through the lens of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research's most famous expositor. Over the next twenty years, at least, no two thinkers were more important to Lasch's intellectual development.

Lasch's next book was *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (1965). Although Lasch was becoming increasingly familiar with the work of Freud and Marx and their epigones, Freudian and Marxian categories did not yet figure prominently in his analysis. For this reason, and because it engages the same themes, this book can be viewed as a counterpart to *The Revolt of the Elites,* which would appear nearly thirty years later. Indeed, in *The New Radicalism* Lasch foretold the detached class of elites that he would target for blistering condemnation in *Revolt.*

Through biographical studies of Jane Addams, Randolph Bourne, Mable Dodge Luhan, Lincoln Steffens, and other early-twentieth-century figures of the Left, Lasch contended in *The New Radicalism* that the appearance of the "intellectual" in America had coincided with the development of radicalism, and therefore that "modern radicalism or liberalism" is a phase in the "social history of the intellectuals."[14] For Lasch, the rise of an intellectual class was problematic because it reflected—was in fact a consequence of—"that cultural fragmentation that seems to characterize industrial and postindustrial societies."[15] The radical intellectuals saw themselves as a distinct class standing against the bourgeoisie, whose educational practices, culture, and sexual relations it intended to reform. By contrast, the progressive tradition had been more populist and middle-class in origin and style; it was interested in generating greater political and economic equality, not cultural transformation.

The bigoted elitism of the new radicals, argued Lasch, in words not very different from those he would use three decades later, consigned them to political ineffectuality. "In the people as a whole—'the people,' in whose interests the new radicals so often professed to speak—they aroused indifference at best and resentment at worst...." And their obsession with overcoming the intangible repression that they believed characterized the bourgeois family made them nearly incomprehensible to laymen. "The revolt of the intellectuals had no echoes in the rest of society."[16]

On the contrary, far from being too powerful, for Lasch it was the very weakening of the traditional family brought about by the growth of the state and the industrial economy that generated the revolt of the intellectuals and their free-floating anxiety. His basic thesis, which he would seek to refine for the rest of his life, was the following:

> When government was centralized and politics became national in scope, as they had to be to cope with the energies let loose by industrialism, and when public life became faceless and anonymous and society an amorphous democratic mass, the old system of paternalism (in the home and out of it) collapsed, even when its semblance survived intact. The patriarch, though he might still preside in splendor at the head of his board, had come to resemble an emissary from a government which had been silently overthrown. The mere theoretical recognition of his authority by his family could not alter the fact that the government which was the source of all his ambassadorial powers had ceased to exist.[17]

IV

The Agony of the American Left (1969) and *The World of Nations* (1973), both primarily composed of reworked articles, essays, and reviews, marked the high point of Lasch's Marxist phase. In the former book, Lasch lamented that the radical Left had no realistic "program for change" because its intellectuals had been coopted by the government and the corporations and had accepted the premises of the Cold War. He saw hope in the revival of prematurely abandoned mass-based radical movements of the earlier twentieth century, such as populism and socialism, especially if these were infused with a Marxist understanding of class interests. In the latter volume he dealt again with the inherent flaws of liberal reform movements and liberalism itself. Even here, where Lasch continues to employ Marxian social analysis, it is easy to see how unorthodox his Marxism was in his very un-Marx-like view of history. For Lasch admitted to a "long-standing antipathy to Whiggish or progressive interpretations of history. I have never found very convincing those explanations of history in which our present enlightenment is contrasted with the benighted conditions of the past; in which history is regarded as 'marching,' with occasional setbacks and minor reverses, toward a better world."[18] Of course, Lasch's skepticism toward Whig historiography would culminate in *The True and Only Heaven,* published eighteen years later.

The publication of *Haven in a Heartless World*, however, marked a new phase in Lasch's work. With *The Culture of Narcissism* and *The Minimal Self,* it represents the first entry in Lasch's trilogy of psychological critiques of late-twentieth-century culture. Intended as a "theoretical introduction to a historical study of the family," *Haven* also represented a substantial loosening of Lasch's always somewhat tenuous ties with left-wing orthodoxy. Ironically, as Lasch later recalled, he was steeled in his break by reading some of the essays of the Frankfurt School social philosopher Max Horkheimer, one of the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality.* Horkheimer, in Lasch's account, had had the courage to change his mind about the patriarchal family after he emigrated to America "and encountered a type of family that seemed to produce individuals lacking a sense of purpose or direction, unable to commit themselves to anything or to take an interest in anything beyond their immediate pleasure, driven by ill-formed and contradictory desires, and lacking any attachment to the past or future or to the world around them." Lasch's own growing "doubts about the desirability or even the feasibility of an open-ended experimental approach to sexuality, marriage, and childrearing" were confirmed in Horkheimer's analysis. More importantly, Horkheimer's "willingness to modify his theoretical and ideological preconceptions in the light of empirical evidence" provided Lasch with "a model of intellectual integrity and courage, at a time when such models were in short supply." Even so, Lasch still considered *Haven* to be the work of a radical. It was the Left, he argued in the preface to

the paperback edition, that had undergone a "major reorientation" in the 1970s, not him.

Haven attempted to defend the family on the basis of two premises: the first was that the family has a crucially important role in the shaping of personality; the second was that certain personality traits are more compatible with different kinds of sociopolitical arrangements than others. Thus, wrote Lasch, embedding his argument within an elaborate apparatus of psychological theory, those economic, cultural, and political forces which have weakened the bourgeois, nuclear family have had profound consequences because they have also altered the personality development of the rising generation. Lasch emphatically did not believe that the family was a "haven in a heartless world," as is often thought (a misreading, or rather non-reading, of his book that he lamented), but rather that this had been the conventional myth of the family since the American industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century. Lasch believed precisely the opposite: that the conditions of modern life—its wars, commerce, politics, social decay—were such that the family was less able than ever to serve as a refuge from the outside world, even as that role was more necessary than ever.

Lasch believed that the family had been in a state of decline for a hundred years or so. This decline, one of the primary characteristics of modern society, was the result of the expropriation by larger social institutions of activities once undertaken by families. Industrial capitalism took production out of the household. Capitalism then appropriated workers' skills and knowledge, replacing them with scientific management and an efficiently structured, bureaucratic, hierarchical work environment. At the same time, workers' private lives came increasingly under the control of medical, social, and governmental authorities. The result was that people had become highly dependent on corporations and the centralized state in nearly all matters, which reduced them to a degree of servitude incompatible with the ideals of democracy. The most important of such changes, for Lasch's purposes in *Haven,* was "the expropriation of child rearing by the state and by the health and welfare professions." But he insisted that the socialization of *reproduction* was intrinsically related to the socialization of *production*.

The Culture of Narcissism built on the psychological argument offered in *Haven* by applying its insights to American culture's "current malaise," the latter a word that would attach itself with merciless persistence to the Carter years. A true virtuoso performance, one of those rare books that manages to sustain real originality for several hundred pages, *The Culture of Narcissism* was nonetheless very much a book of its time—not only in the cultural subjects to which Lasch paid critical attention, but also in its despairing, pessimistic tone. Though he tried to muster some reasons for hope, things did not seem to be going well in American society—or, as the second sentence of Lasch's preface put it, "Those who recently dreamed of world power now despair of governing the city of New York."[19] Liberal culture, which seemed "in its decadence to have carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all," seemed to be on the verge of suicide. Furthermore, the liberationist critiques of both radicals and Marxists had become irrelevant, speaking as they did to the conditions that pertained under the reign of "economic man" but not "psychological man," the characteristic human type of the new therapeutic age who had been effectively liberated from the allegedly repressive, authoritarian bourgeois order only to find himself enslaved by his own seeming ethereality and the paternalistic state.[20]

The defining characteristic of psychological man, the apotheosis of advanced

capitalism, was his anxious *narcissism.* Lasch used the psychoanalytic understanding of this term to describe a new, socially pervasive (if often sub-pathological) personality structure that was the consequence of "quite specific changes in our society and culture—from bureaucracy, the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, the rationalization of the inner life, the cult of consumption, and in the last analysis from changes in family life and from changing patterns of socialization."[21] Characterologically, narcissism manifested itself in "profusion in the everyday life of our age," wrote Lasch. Individually, its symptoms included "dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others, combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings," not to mention, less directly, "pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-deprecatory humor." So much was understood by a number of psychoanalytic theorists. Lasch's contribution was to reveal the extent to which contemporary social conditions both helped create (*e.g.,* by undermining and dispersing parental authority, which made it "almost impossible for the young to grow up")[22]—and reflected (*e.g.,* in "the intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time, fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play spirit, deteriorating relations between men and women") the rise of the narcissistic personality.

In essence, Lasch contended, given current social conditions—"lawless, violent, and unpredictable"[23]—the feelings of helplessness and dependence associated with narcissism were rational. More than ever, the individual found himself entirely exposed to the power of the state, distant corporations, and their seemingly unaccountable bureaucracies. Lasch's goal was to show that the therapeutic response to this situation is self-defeating. "Arising out of a pervasive dissatisfaction with the quality of personal relations, it advises people not to make too large an investment in love and friendship, to avoid excessive dependence on others, and to live for the moment,"—in other words, it tends to reinforce the very sort of narcissistic traits "that had created the crisis of personal relations in the first place."

In the final pages of this rich and densely argued book, Lasch distinguishes his critique from that of conservatives, whom he faults for refusing to connect the social and personality changes described by Lasch with "the rise of monopoly capitalism."[24] Libertarian conservatives like Ludwig von Mises exaggerated the personal autonomy made possible by the free market in the same way that they exaggerated the extent to with the state was fundamentally at odds with capitalist enterprise. In fact, therapeutic and consumer culture are intrinsically—and historically—related via their connection to the rise of corporate capitalism. "The same historical development that turned the citizen into a client transformed the worker from a producer into a consumer." The result, to which conservatives' pro-capitalist ideology blinds them, is that to struggle against the narcissistic dependence associated with the new therapeutic bureaucracy will mean to resist also the dependence created by capitalism itself. Lasch concludes by exhorting his readers to look to the "traditions of localism, self-help, and community action," or, in other words, to resist the forces of narcissism by seeking "to create their own 'communities of competence.'"[25]

V

The timing—and title—of *The Culture of Narcissism* could not have been better. Not only did it become a bestseller; it also caught the attention of Patrick Caddell, Jimmy Carter's pollster and trusted advi-

sor (Carter himself had supposedly speed-read the book). Thus did it happen that in May 1979, Christopher Lasch arrived at the White House for a private dinner with the president. He had been summoned, along with a half-dozen or so other academics, activists, and journalists (including Daniel Bell, Jesse Jackson, and Bill Moyers), to discuss the state of the nation with President Carter. The early summer of 1979 was a difficult one for the president. The energy crisis was at its peak, and after four televised addresses and a number of failed legislative initiatives, Carter had decided to regroup by inviting a stream of "prominent citizens"—journalists, politicians, intellectuals, and religious, business, and civic leaders—to give their two cents on how he ought now to address the issue. To Carter's mind, these prominent citizens confirmed what Caddell had argued in a long memo, namely, that a spiritual "malaise" lay at the root of the nation's many practical difficulties. It was this condition that the nation's leader needed to address.

On July 15, 1979, Carter delivered the televised address that would come to be known as the "malaise" speech. In fact, Carter—unlike Lasch—never did use the word "malaise." But what he did say was unusually severe for a modern president. The nation, he warned, was undergoing a "crisis of confidence" that was "threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric" of the country. Specifically, "too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns." The flourishing of consumerist materialism coincided with the decline of civic involvement and civility itself. "Two-thirds of our people do not even vote. The productivity of American workers is actually dropping, and the willingness of Americans to save for the future has fallen below that of all other people in the Western world.... [T]here is a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions." Carter was as sober and stern as a Puritan divine: "This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and a warning." The nation was at a "turning point." It must not go down "the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others." Rather, the country must embrace "the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values."

Needless to say, Carter's speech did not prove especially popular with a public that wanted "answers," not a sermon, and certainly not a sermon that scolded them for their selfishness while adverting that a more austere future lay ahead. Lasch was not terribly impressed himself, subsequently writing Caddell to urge the president to "temper his appeal for national sacrifice with some kind of assurance that those most vulnerable—the poor and disadvantaged—wouldn't be asked to carry a disproportionate burden."[26] He lamented that his psychoanalytically sophisticated use of the concept of "narcissism" had been understood to mean simply that Americans were "selfish" or "egoistic" when he had meant to convey something very different, that the contemporary self is so contracted that it is "uncertain of its own outlines" and hence tends either to "remake the world in its own image"—the Promethean error that is reflected in the cult of unlimited technological development—or else "to merge into its environment in blissful union," which requires a radical or absolute denial of selfhood.[27] To attack the problem of consumerism required not the moralism reflected in Carter's speech but rather seeing it as a consequence of the degradation of work. Mass production and mass consumption, Lasch contended, depend on social arrangements that "tend to discourage initiative and

self-reliance and to promote dependence, passivity, and a spectatorial state of mind both at work and at play."[28] In other words, these arrangements, fundamentally anti-democratic in their implications, are the source of our contemporary malaise.

Whether or not Carter or Caddell or anyone else interpreted it correctly, with *The Culture of Narcissism* Lasch achieved national stature as a culture critic—even, arguably, contributing indirectly to the election of Ronald Reagan, who unlike Carter (and the dour intellectuals who had influenced him) understood the electoral advantages of unrelieved, even implausible optimism. (Reagan "told the voters it was morning in America, even though it was more like 9:30 at night," in the words of James Howard Kunstler.)[29] *The Culture of Narcissism* was comparable in its popular penetration to later works like Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* or Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone.* Almost everyone had heard of it; many bought it; few bothered to read it; and even fewer understood it.

If anything, *The Minimal Self,* perhaps Lasch's most underrated book, is more fulfilling than its two predecessors. In this book Lasch links his critique of therapeutic culture with the problems of environmental exploitation, industrialism, and technology. Lasch criticizes the social movements of the Left—the environmental, women's, and peace movements—for, among other things, misunderstanding the teachings of psychoanalysis, which teaches that human happiness, or at least "ordinary unhappiness," lies in achieving a balance between "separation and union, individuation and dependence."[30] Psychoanalysis "refuses to dissolve the tension between instinct and culture."[31] Its beauty, in a way, is that it does not "work." In making self-knowledge its goal, it rejects the technological approach to the self inherent in other therapeutic approaches. Psychoanalysis is a most inefficient technology—perhaps its chief recommendation.

Freud attempted to strengthen the self, typically by bringing subconscious impulses and desires into consciousness, where they can be dealt with more constructively. In contrast, many among the environmental, feminist, and peace movements advocated the abandonment of the concept of the individual self and its fusion with nature or the social whole, an approach that to Lasch vitiated their otherwise useful critiques of instrumental reason. Authentic selfhood, argued Lasch, lies in the awareness of one's divided nature, in the "awareness of man's contradictory place in the natural order of things."[32] Indeed, the echoes of a newfound respect for the West's religious tradition are clearly present in Lasch's argument that "[s]elfhood is the painful awareness of the tension between our unlimited aspirations and our limited understanding, between our original intimations of immortality and our fallen state, between oneness and separation."[33]

However, in Lasch's account selfhood is not threatened so much by these social movements as it is by the therapeutic ideology promoted by mass industrial culture. In frustrating individual initiative and accountability, this ideology teaches individuals not to trust their own judgment, indeed to see the self as an object, while paradoxically seeing external objects as extensions or projections of the self. Though "self-liberation" is the ostensible goal of therapeutic ideology, the liberation of the self from a stable public or common world has revealed more clearly than ever that the self only takes shape in the presence of external constraints; or at least that absent such constraints, the imagination is exposed "more directly than before to the tyranny of inner compulsions and anxieties."[34]

The defenders of mass, consumer culture claim that whatever is lost in its rise is more than made up for by the spread of comforts and wealth throughout all

classes, especially the lower, notes Lasch. In other words, the wide array of choices once available only to the rich are available to all in a consumer culture, and so to deplore consumerism is to unwittingly reveal one's aristocratic snobbery. Lasch rebuts this argument by noting that the choices open to the weakened, dependent selves that pervade consumer culture are trivial, having to do with "lifestyles" rather than matters of moral import. The only choices a consumer society will accept are those that are nonbinding and hence relatively meaningless. "A society of consumers defines choice not as the freedom to choose one course of action over another but as the freedom to choose everything at once. 'Freedom of choice' means 'keeping your options open.' ... [S]uch is the open-ended, experimental conception of the good life upheld by the propaganda of commodities, which surrounds the consumer with images of unlimited possibility."[35] Industrialism and genuine democracy, therefore, are anything but mutually reinforcing.

VI

After *The Minimal Self,* Lasch drifted away from Freud, Marx, and their Frankfurt School interpreters. His break with the cultural Left also became more thorough and more obvious. In the 1960s and 1970s he had been a frequent contributor to organs of Left opinion like the *Nation* and the *New York Review of Books,* publishing in those periodicals twelve and forty-five articles, respectively. But his last article for the *Nation* appeared in 1980, and after 1984 he wrote only one article (on Reagan) for the *New York Review.* The postmodern Left irritated him, and the feeling was mutual.

In the late 1980s, Lasch began to explore systematically his instinct that the best way to transcend the Left-Right impasse in American life was through the reinvigoration of the populist tradition. This was the thesis of *The True and Only Heaven*, which begins by noting that both the contemporary Left and Right had contempt for the idea of "limits" of any kind, since the idea that there could be any immovable constraints on human endeavor threatened the underlying progressivist ideology to which both subscribed. Even conservatives, he observes (citing Paul Gottfried's and Thomas Fleming's history of the conservative movement) had all but abandoned whatever residual "skepticism about progress" they may once have harbored.[36] The rhetoric of their most recent political hero, Ronald Reagan, was infused with the rhetoric of shallow optimism, claimed Lasch. Reagan was a true believer in Progress. He spoke of "traditional values," but the values he wished to promote

> had very little to do with tradition. They summed up the code of the cowboy, the man in flight from his ancestors, from his immediate family, and from everything that tied him down and limited his freedom of movement. Reagan played on the desire for order, continuity, responsibility, and discipline, but his program contained nothing that would satisfy that desire. On the contrary, his program aimed to promote economic growth and unregulated business enterprise, the very forces that have undermined tradition. A movement calling itself conservative might have been expected to associate itself with the demand for limits not only on economic growth but on the conquest of space, the technological conquest of the environment, and the ungodly ambition to acquire godlike powers over nature. Reaganites, however, condemned the demand for limits as another counsel of doom.[37]

Still, the idea of progress retained appeal because it envisioned a future of unlimited economic growth, a vision for which the experience of the previous two or three centuries admittedly provided ample support. (Lasch assumed, without arguing the matter, that this expectation

was no longer rationally tenable.) But it also retained appeal because it had been finally detached from utopianism. The most viable progressive ideology—the only one to emerge intact from the rise and fall of the modern era's revolutionary and totalitarian regimes—was the one created by the new science of political economy in the eighteenth century. It was not to "those second-rate thinkers more conventionally associated with the idea of progress—Fontenelle, Condorcet, Godwin, Comte, Spencer," but rather to the moralists associated with this new science—Bernard Mandeville, David Hume, Adam Smith, and others—"that we should look for the inner meaning of progressive ideology."[38] For Smith *et al.* promised not utopia but the indefinite expansion of prosperity, a lower but seemingly more achievable goal.

However, even this more modest project required the dramatic alteration of traditional moral valuations. For one thing, unlike the classical, Christian, and republican traditions, "the modern conception of progress depends on a positive assessment of the proliferation of wants."[39] Austerity and self-denial have no place in the modern, progressive conception of the good life. For "thrift and self-denial" mean nothing less, ultimately, than "economic stagnation."[40] Desire and appetite, on the other hand, must now carry a positive valence. Formerly condemned as potentially insatiable and therefore subject to a panoply of private, public, and religious constraints, for there to be progress desire and appetite had now to be continually stimulated. Furthermore, this progressive ideology, by proposing a world continually improving and without end, necessarily entails the institutionalization of a sense of impermanence, the sense "that nothing is certain except the imminent obsolescence of all our certainties."[41]

Lasch's book attempts to highlight the most important critics of this new idea of progress while showing that the most effective criticism can be traced to the populist tradition and its preference for a rooted life centered on family, neighborhood, and church. In this sense, *The True and Only Heaven* may be regarded as Lasch's attempt to provide a pedigree for a more radical, more democratic—and more consistent—brand of cultural conservatism.

VII

There is nothing farfetched about this interpretation. By the time *True and Only Heaven* was published in 1991, Lasch clearly thought of himself as a cultural conservative. Indeed, in a revealing 1990 *First Things* article titled "Conservatism against Itself," he referred to the populist tradition he hoped to rejuvenate as the natural home of cultural conservatives, so long as they truly wished to be associated with "a respect for limits, localism, a work ethic as opposed to a consumerist ethic, a rejection of unlimited economic growth, and a certain skepticism about the ideology of progress."[42] By the same token, however, Lasch had little interest in movement conservatism and what he saw as its illogical embrace of consumer capitalism. As early as 1987, in a *New Oxford Review* symposium on "humane socialism and traditional conservatism," he had called on cultural conservatives "to take cultural conservatism back from the capitalists," a call he repeated elsewhere.[43]

Lasch denied, furthermore, that conservatism necessarily implied a defense of social hierarchy and existing distributions of power. Economically, he was a leveler, convinced that cultural conservatism was "quite compatible...with a commitment to radical democracy."[44] This may be one reason why he had little use for traditionalist thinkers, including the Southern Agrarians. In *The New Radicalism,* in one of his few published mentions

of conservatives of the first half of the twentieth century, Lasch argues that the Southern Agrarians and their "kindred spirits" Irving Babbitt and T. S. Eliot had essentially adopted the line that artists should retreat from the political arena and focus on the cultural arena, that they should not attempt "to influence the struggle for power." The Agrarians, for instance, in *I'll Take My Stand,* besides attacking industrialism and capital-P Progress, had also "implicitly" attacked "politics itself," in Lasch's judgment, "since it was unlikely that political action founded on such a program had much chance of success in the twentieth century." In fact, for Lasch, only "some of the agrarians" had even "argued rather half-heartedly" for an agrarian political program; they "seem to have been saying that writers and artists should 'take their stand' on an issue which was cultural, not political."[45]

Lasch's gloss on the Agrarians—published, one must remember, in 1965—is not only tendentious but also somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, they had put forth an unrealistic political program; on the other, they were not really interested in politics at all but in culture. More interesting, however, is that Lasch's own proposals put forth later in his life have much in common with those of the Agrarians. He advocated, for instance, a return to a "producerist" rather than a consumer economy. Heavily influenced by Ivan Illich, Wendell Berry, and other ecological writers, he accepted as a foundational premise that the rapid exhaustion of natural resources was at hand; and of course the critique of progress, so central to agrarian thought, was the central theme of *The True and Only Heaven.* Tellingly, that book contains no discussion of the Agrarians whatsoever, an especially curious omission given that Lasch included some of their writings in one of his graduate seminars.

Finally, Lasch also kept the postwar conservative movement at arm's length because of its hard-line anticommunism. Something of an anti-anticommunist, Lasch not only rejected the notion that the Cold War demanded a final choice between one of two cultures; he also contended that even were American society "the most brilliant and virtuous in recorded history and Soviet Russia the most perfect tyranny," one could "still choose accommodation over 'victory' or even 'containment.'"[46] Plausible enough; but like so many on the Left, Lasch still underrated, at least in the 1960s, the horror of Soviet society, holding, for example, that the Soviet Union was not inflexibly totalitarian, that Stalin was the real problem, and that "the world of the twentieth century—the Soviet Union in particular—has not turned out to be quite so grim as it looked in the late forties and early fifties."[47] One cringes to read such judgments today, but at the same time Lasch was surely right when, in a discussion of Sidney Hook, he noted that "when the adversary was 'total evil,' the 'imperfections' of democracy naturally faded from sight," and that Hook's "'critical' support of American culture was hard to distinguish from unconditional acceptance," a process we see repeated among Hook's successors today, with Islamism conveniently substituted for communism.[48]

VIII

When, in a 1991 interview, Lasch was asked where he saw signs of "hope" or "moral vision," he responded that while there was "not much" present in organized religion, "one finds flashes of it in the Catholic tradition.... One might even say that the Pope has some of the best insights into social questions"—a rather surprising answer for a former Marxist imbued with radically secularist ideals from childhood.[49] But Lasch's self-identification with the project of cultural conservatism in the final decade or so of his life had been accompanied by an increasing, if still ten-

tative, attraction to the Christian intellectual tradition. His social thought consequently began to incorporate a consideration of religion and theological insights in highly suggestive ways. For example, turning Freud on his head, Lasch used psychoanalysis to argue that the man or woman of genuine faith actually possessed a higher degree of psychological maturity than did the religiously indifferent. And, putting a twist on Voegelin, he published a series of articles in the early 1990s arguing that gnosticism, the perennial heresy, was not manifested so much in utopian totalitarianism as it was in the assumptions and implicit goals of liberal modernity.[50]

Much more might be written about the theological affinities present in Lasch's later cultural criticism. Readers of *The True and Only Heaven* will note their existence in his treatment of the virtue of hope, in his championing of religious thinkers such as Jonathan Edwards and Orestes Brownson and activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and in his critique of abortion rights. The spiritual depth and sincerity of Lasch's writing is impossible to miss.

For all that, Lasch never claimed publicly to be a believer. Privately, however, things may have been different. After Lasch's death, one friend recalled that Lasch had once been asked by a participant at an evangelical conference, "Are you or are you not a believer?" Lasch was said to have replied, "Oh, not really." His wife, however, having heard the question, quickly interjected, "Oh, yes he is!"[51] And so, perhaps, he was.

1. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York, 1995), 5-6. **2.** T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920,* 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1994), xx. **3.** See*, e.g.,* Patrick J. Deneen, "Christopher Lasch and the Limits of Hope," *First Things* (December 2004), 26-30. In addition, at least two book-length studies of Lasch are currently in preparation, one by historian Eric Miller, who wrote his dissertation on Lasch, and another by sociologist Alan Woolfolk, who is writing a volume on Lasch for ISI Books' Library of Modern Thinkers series. **4.** This is the phrase with which Lasch ended his contribution to an October 1991 *New Oxford Review* symposium on "Transcending Ideological Conformity: Beyond 'Political Correctness,' Left or Right," 20-22. For Lasch's argument that the contemporary ideological division between Left and Right is obsolete, see his to *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York, 1991). **5.** For this and other chronological and biographical information, I am indebted to the chronology posted at www.library.rochester.edu/rbk/LASCH.stm by the Rush Rhees Library at the University of Rochester, where Lasch's papers are housed. **6.** This quotation is from Casey Blake and Christopher Phelps, "History as Social Criticism: Conversations with Christopher Lasch," *Journal of American History* (March 1994), 1310-32. This informative interview—the best ever conducted with Lasch—is another source of many of the biographical details reported here. **7.** For an appreciative but critical account of the importance of Williams from a contemporary thinker, one who proceeds from a perspective not unlike Lasch's, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 23-31. (Historian John Lukacs, with whom Lasch shared a podium on at least one occasion, was much less enamored of Williams, to say the least: see his "William Appleman Williams," included in *Remembered Past: John Lukacs on History, Historians, and Historical Knowledge—A Reader* [Wilmington, Del., 2005].) Another writer that apparently led Lasch to Marx was Dwight Macdonald (and, to complete the circle, Macdonald was a good friend of Lukacs's). **8.** Before 1970, Genovese and Lasch were friends, even coauthoring an article on the modern university in the *New York Review of Books* in 1969. But for primarily personal reasons, at least in Lasch's mind, the relationship soon soured. In the Blake-Phelps interview, Lasch claims, "By the time I arrived in the fall of 1970, ...[Genovese] had already alienated most of his colleagues, and the department was hopelessly divided." Lasch's own difficulties with Genovese "began immediately." It wasn't long before Genovese and Lasch were no longer speaking, and Genovese was becoming increasingly isolated in the department. The situation is described as quite ugly (Interview with Mark Malvasi, March 2003). However, in the Blake-Phelps interview, Lasch says that by the late 1970s he and Genovese had "arrived at a kind of precarious

truce. Even though I often found myself at odds with him, I continued to admire his work. We agreed, moreover, in our opposition to the kind of cultural radicalism that was becoming more and more prevalent on the Left. Our differences were personal more than political." **9.** Lasch had published four books before 1970: *American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1962), *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York, 1965), *The Social Thought of Jane Addams,* which he edited (Indianapolis, 1965), and *The Agony of the American Left* (New York, 1969). A collection of essays, *The World of Nations; Reflections on American History, Politics, and Culture,* appeared in 1973 (New York). **10.** Two Lasch books have appeared posthumously. Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn edited a collection titled *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage, and Feminism* (New York, 1997), a collection Lasch had himself been working on for years but was unable to finish. Most recently, the University of Pennsylvania Press has brought out *Plain Style: A Guide to Written English* (2002), which Lasch wrote for departmental use at the University of Rochester as a guide for his haplessly undereducated graduate students. **11.** *Revolt of the Elites,* 246. **12.** For a bibliography of Lasch's writings, see Robert Cummings, "The Writings of Christopher Lasch: A Bibliography-in-Progress," at www.lib.rochester.edu/rbk/LaschBib.HTM. **13.** In the book's foreword, Lasch writes that he does not deal with conservative arguments "because I am convinced that most Americans who thought about these matters at all were unable, in the end, to accept such a position" (xii). This posture of dismissiveness toward the conservative tradition would finally dissipate in the 1980s. **14.** *New Radicalism in America,* ix. **15.** *Ibid.,* xi. **16.** Both quotes in this paragraph are from *New Radicalism in America,* 147. **17.** *Ibid.,* 111. **18.** *World of Nations,* xii. **19.** Both quotes in this paragraph are from *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1979), xiii. **20.** Lasch took these terms from Philip Rieff. See Rieff's "Reflections on Psychological Man in America," first published in 1960 and collected in *The Feeling Intellect,* edited by Jonathan B. Imber (Chicago, 1990), 3-10. **21.** *Culture of Narcissism,* 32. **22.** *Ibid.,* 141. **23.** *Ibid.,* 53. **24.** *Ibid.,* 232. **25.** *Ibid.,* 235. **26.** See the interview with Lasch titled "His Critical Mind 'Ranges Freely'" in the Rochester, New York, *Democrat and Chronicle* (July 14, 1991), 1B, 6B, 7B. **27.** *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York, 1984), 19. **28.** *Ibid.,* 27. **29.** See Kunstler's June 7, 2004, entry in his blog at http://www.kunstler.com/mags_diary10.html. **30.** *Minimal Self,* 177. **31.** *Ibid.,* 240. **32.** *Ibid.,* 257. **33.** *Ibid.,* 20. **34.** *Ibid.,* 32-33. **35.** *Ibid.,* 38. **36.** *True and Only Heaven,* 22. **37.** *Ibid.,* 39. **38.** *Ibid.,* 54. **39.** *Ibid.,* 45. **40.** *Ibid.,* 53. **41.** *Ibid.,* 48. **42.** Lasch, "Conservatism against Itself," *First Things* (April 1990), 22. **43.** Lasch, untitled contribution to symposium, *New Oxford Review* (October 1987), 25-26. See also Lasch, "What's Wrong with the Right," Tikkun 1, no. 1 (1986), 23-29; Lasch, "Hillary Clinton, Child Saver," *Harper's* (October 1992), 74-82. **44.** This quotation is taken from Lasch's contribution to a *New Oxford Review* symposium titled "Transcending Ideological Conformity: Beyond 'Political Correctness,' Left or Right" (October 1991), 21. **45.** *New Radicalism in America,* 297. **46.** *Ibid.,* 332. **47.** *Ibid.,* 330. **48.** *Ibid.,* 306, 307. **49.** "On the Moral Vision of Democracy: A Conversation with Christopher Lasch," *Civic Arts Review* 4 (Fall 1991). **50.** These arguments are included in Lasch's remarkable "Notes on Gnosticism" series of articles, published in *New Oxford Review* in five parts: October 1986, 14-18; December 1990, 4-10; January–February 1991, 10-15; March 1991, 20-26; April 1991, 8-13. **51.** The friend is Dale Vree, who tells the story in his moving "Christopher Lasch: A Memoir," *New Oxford Review* (April 1994), 2-5.