

## ***Review Essay***

# **Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Critic: Christopher Lasch's Struggle with Progressive America**

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HAVEN IN A HEARTLESS WORLD: The Family Besieged. By Christopher Lasch. New York: Basic Books. 1977.

THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations. By Christopher Lasch. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 1978.

THE MINIMAL SELF: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times. By Christopher Lasch. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 1984.

THE TRUE AND ONLY HEAVEN: Progress and its Critics. By Christopher Lasch. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 1991

In the volatile cultural politics of late twentieth-century America, the only thing worse than an opponent is a traitor. In many ways, Christopher Lasch has acquired precisely that image. He began his career as a radical historian in the 1960s—one of his essays, for instance, appeared alongside those of Eugene Genovese and Staughton Lynd in the 1969 dissenting manifesto *Towards a New Past*—and his trenchant analysis of modern liberal and radical ideology made him a darling of the New Left.<sup>1</sup> Within a few years, however, the young critic began heading off in a direction quite alarming to many of his admirers. The transforming nature of his view of American life brought growing controversy in its wake.

Beginning in the mid-1970s and continuing over the next decade and a half, Lasch would publish four highly contentious books. They examined a number of crucial issues in modern America: the disintegration of the family as part of a larger crisis of culture, the corrosive psychological effects accruing to modern consumer capitalism, the powerful but insidious impact of the notion of “progress” upon American ideology. In all of these texts there emerged a critique that ran across the grain of his earlier radicalism. As Lasch has explained in a long biographical section of his most recent work, his intellectual odyssey began with a growing sense that the exhaustion of 1960s dissent had been richly deserved. Self-criticism produced disillusionment with the doctrines of Marxism and the New Left, but it did not culminate in a neo-conservative reaction. Instead, it produced a unique body of radical writing notable for two things. First, Lasch’s work since 1975 has abandoned academic scholarship almost entirely to enter the realm of social criticism. He has become more a public intellectual than a professional historian. Second, and more importantly, Lasch’s commentary has defied confident ideological categorization. His social criticism has consistently raised as many angry rebuttals from ostensible allies on the Left as from evident targets on the Right. This flows from the depressingly deceptive state of contemporary political culture, where, on one side, the Reactionary Right offers a marriage of untethered corporate greed and a highly sentimentalized vision of bourgeois domestic life, while on the other side the Liberationist Left presents a companionate relationship of socioeconomic quietism and pietistic identity politics. Lasch’s challenging analysis at least gets beyond all that. His central message, along with the curiously tangled reaction it has provoked, tell us much about the massive problems besetting American life in the late twentieth century.

Lasch’s recent criticism has gone through three topical stages that overlap in terms of analysis. *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (1977), his initial effort in this genre, explored the plight of the American family under modern capitalist culture. It combined a critique of the “second industrial revolution” in twentieth-century America with a critique of the sociological formulation of family life offered by social scientists. It also offered a blistering attack on the “helping professions”—therapists, counselors, bureaucratic agencies, child-rearing and family “experts”—as a therapeutic arm of the corporate liberal state. The intervention of these groups, Lasch argued, promoted a subtle form of social regulation that undermined family efficacy and authority. But this state of affairs with the modern family, he carefully noted, was tied to a larger crisis of authority in modern capitalism: a massive quest for therapeutic self-fulfillment in consumer society that made *any* authority that questioned gratification suspect. And in the most controversial part of the book, he attacked feminism for its ironic reinforcement of the dominant culture. This movement, he argued, had gone beyond the notion of equal rights to offer up the family as a sacrifice on the altar of individualist gratification.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Lasch wrote two books that burrowed deeper into modern capitalist culture to illuminate its dominant personality type.

The picture was not a pretty one. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979) exposed the debilitating psychological effects of modern consumer society. This scathing attack pictured the dominance of a “therapeutic culture of narcissism” full of childlike dependence and grandiose agendas for self-fulfillment. In particular, Lasch focused on a “new paternalism” where therapeutic discourse and institutions manufactured “fantasies of total gratification.” Advertising, success ideology, the helping professions and an obsession with “health” all fed this leviathan. Such developments dangerously eroded people’s capacity for self-reliance, competence and moral responsibility. In advanced capitalist society where the producer had become the consumer, and where the citizen had become the client, Lasch argued, the individual was encouraged to embrace “a narcissistic preoccupation with self.”

A few years later Lasch extended this line of argument in *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (1984). Here he developed a full-scale diagnosis of the pathology of capitalist culture to explain how the old “imperial self” of the nineteenth century had steadily atrophied into a “minimal self” by the late twentieth. A survival mentality, he contended, now comprised the parameters of personal endeavor. Life was defined as a series of crises, the self was seen as a victim of outside forces, and psychological identities had become mere masks to use and discard according to the needs of survival. Even public life had retracted into cultural disputes over a “politics of the psyche” between conservative defenders of the superego, liberal advocates of the ego, and radical enthusiasts for the libido. With democracy degenerating into an “exercise of consumer preference,” and selfhood becoming “the ability to play a variety of roles and to assume an endless variety of freely chosen identities,” the desperate condition of bureaucratic, consumer society had become obvious. The degradation of labor was now matched by the attenuation of civic life and the constriction of private endeavor.

Lasch has reached the latest stage of his cultural criticism with the recent publication of *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (1991). Stepping back for a broader look at the vicissitudes of contemporary America, he focuses on the notion of progress that lay at the heart of modern Western development for nearly three centuries. This examination, one might also note, fleshes out the historical context for many of his earlier arguments. Progress, as Lasch sees it, has deep roots both in Western ideas and institutions since the 1600s. Adam Smith’s “rehabilitation of desire,” an Enlightenment ethos of instrumental reason, and commercializing trends that accompanied market development all combined to produce a steadily growing emphasis on gratification, consumption and material abundance that seems to have culminated in modern America. The resulting progressive ideology has carved out a wide mainstream of modern sociopolitical thought—it includes figures like Thomas Spencer and Thomas Macauley, Progressives, Keynesian welfare statistics, liberals and conservatives of many stripes, even most Marxists—that converges around ideals of economic growth, bureaucratic organization and centralized

planning. This tradition uses the comforting notion of “progress” much as the drunk uses the lamppost: more for support than illumination. But alongside this ideological juggernaut, Lasch insists, has developed a minor tradition of criticism. A populist, or petty bourgeois, sensibility has expressed skepticism about the progressive platitudes of the dominant culture. Opposing the division of labor, unrestrained desire, and compulsive consumption, this camp has included Thomas Paine and William Cobbett, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle, the Populists and the Syndicalists. In Lasch’s view, this coalition has defended producerism, craft, property ownership and personal independence as a precondition for citizenship. It has opposed the “new class” of bureaucratic experts, corporate managers and elitist technocrats from the multiversity in the name of community integrity and individual competence. It has battled the invasion of consumer capitalism and its ironically destructive logic of progress.

Throughout his writings Lasch has supplemented his critical analysis with a carefully developed corrective ideology. It is based on a number of broad principles. At the most basic level, he has called for social reorganization to sustain a “small producer” ethic. This is crucial to challenging the bureaucratic organizations and scientific management of modern capitalism, he insists, since its schemes replaced the dignity of labor with the imperatives of production in the mid-nineteenth century and those of consumption in the twentieth. Work, Lasch contends, mediates the human relationship to nature, and its moral value and creativity are abandoned only at enormous cost. The “moral discipline” of a “calling,” the “competence” conferred by craft, and the community cohesion of “democratic proprietorship” cannot be easily replaced by the drudgery of industrial labor or the gaudy attractions of consumption. Consumerism, Lasch has passionately insisted, has become the ideological twin of degraded labor, and only a restructuring of work can return that activity to its rightful place at the center of human existence.

At another level in his books, Lasch has encouraged the rooting and cultivation of several ideological principles. First, he suggests that a grasp of human limitation—as opposed to fantasies of self-fulfillment—must be the watchword of a genuinely reformist ideology. A more “modest assessment of the economic aspirations appropriate to human beings,” a “humbler set of expectations than . . . access to a proliferating supply of goods,” as Lasch has put it in *The True and Only Heaven* is essential to stalling the exploitive momentum of consumer capitalism. Second, the principle of “hope”—as opposed to the flaccid progressive optimism that too easily degenerates into despair—must regain renewed loyalty. Hope, in the words of this critic, “trusts life without denying its tragic character.” It demands a strenuous definition of the good life, and the disciplined pursuit of justice in facing the future, but assumes neither of those are inevitable or entitlements. Third, Lasch asserts that “authority”—as opposed to the power to compel obedience—must find a new legitimacy in a just society. This authority would be based not only upon loyalty to the moral consensus of a community, but also upon the self-restraints of character to which it is linked. It

would articulate the difference between right and wrong rather than sinking into the swamp of moral relativism. By posing respect for legitimate authority as the antidote to the search for private gratification, a reformed society would thus avoid the present dilemma of the modern capitalist order: a twisted situation where therapeutic manipulation and police power must desperately work in tandem to control the very self-indulgent behavior it has created.

Finally, for the psychological lifeblood of social regeneration, Lasch has urged a transfusion of what he terms "genuine selfhood." This notion neither elevates the self to narcissistic heights according to the therapeutic logic of self-fulfillment, nor envelops the self in nature according to the airy demands of New Age consciousness. Instead, genuine selfhood would be based on, in the words of this critic, "a critical awareness of man's divided nature. . . . [and] the painful awareness between human aspirations and human limitations." It would recognize the simultaneous dependence and separation of human beings, and ground selfhood on the very struggle of psychological division, emotional tension, and moral conflict. According to Lasch, this individualism stems from the best in the Judaeo-Christian tradition rather than the capitalist acquisitive individualism which twists and parodies it. Its modern possibilities, as this critic contends in a wonderfully unfashionable phrase from *The Minimal Self*, constitute "the case for a guilty conscience."

Predictably, Lasch's provocative and wide-ranging social critique has brought heated reactions more noted for their passion than their insight. Misunderstood more than any other contemporary critic, he has been both praised and condemned for all of the wrong reasons. Many figures on the Right, for example, have endorsed his writings for upholding traditional values (family, work, self-restraint, moral responsibility), while conveniently overlooking the radical condemnation of modern consumer capitalism that provides the ideological basis for his position. The reaction of the Left has been even less restrained, and even more confused. All four of Lasch's books have prompted howls of outrage from the self-proclaimed forces of liberation, as the sense of betrayal mentioned earlier has surfaced with a vengeance. It is as if Tom Hayden, by virtue of some high-tech ideological special effects, had melted and transformed into William Bennett. From this direction Lasch has been condemned, rather than acclaimed, for upholding traditional values. Without bothering to grasp his argument about the link between consumerism and self-gratification, many Leftists have pictured him as an authoritarian opposing human liberation and particularly female liberation. They have termed him a reactionary who romanticizes the bourgeois family, patriarchal power, and bourgeois character of self-control. They have waxed indignant about this intellectual killjoy who wants to dampen choice and freedom, and yearns to replace the free-flowing identity of modern life with conformity and repression.

One might note that Lasch's acerbic comments about the greed and stupidity of the Right and the tantrums of the "infantile left" have not exactly helped matters. If conservatives have been relatively straightforward in their incompre-

hension of the consequences of endless abundance, he suggests scornfully, both cultural radicals and corporate liberals have appeared even worse in their penchant for self-delusion. These groups share a smug and elitist “politics of the civilized minority,” in Lasch’s assessment, and he describes the sheltered position of “new class” managers, experts, university professors, professionals and technocrats in *The True and Only Heaven*:

Their educated jargon had lost touch with everyday spoken language and no longer served as a repository of the community’s common sense. Academic discourse had achieved a certain analytical precision . . . at the expense of vividness and evocative power; while in fields like psychiatry, sociology, and social work, it merely distinguished insiders from outsiders. . . . The bureaucratization of language indicated what was happening to intellectual culture as a whole. . . . The people who stood at the forefront of the “communications age” had lost the ability to communicate with anyone but themselves . . . . The cosmopolitanism of educated specialists overcame the old barriers of local, regional, and even national identity but insulated them from ordinary people and ordinary human experience.

With an abundance of such passages, it is a wonder that Lasch has any friends at all.

Ultimately, the attacks on Lasch from so many directions reinforce the explanatory power of his central argument, namely that *both* the Left and Right in modern America are mirror images of one another in their common devotion to progress, abundance and self-gratification. The great strength of Lasch’s critique lies in several profound insights that flow from this contention. First, by showing that the conventional categories of American political life are simplistic and superficial, Lasch has illuminated the hegemony of modern consumer capitalism and its therapeutic creed of self-fulfillment. Second—and here the argument parallels those of many critics both from the 1960s New Left and the 1980s Neoconservative movement—he has argued persuasively that the dominant ideology of modern America has been shaped by a “new class” of managers and experts in the corporate welfare state. These technocrats have shaped a consensus within the larger confines of progressive discourse. Debating only the *means* to growth and gratification rather than their fundamental validity, bureaucratic experts from the Left and Right have basically converged. Significantly, Lasch also reveals how even so-called “radical” solutions from the agenda of the contemporary Left—“the personal is political,” private liberation and self-discovery, therapeutic identity, “narrative” conversion experiences—are cast in the very language and assumptions of the dominant culture. In other words, his criticism has revealed much about the public malaise that has gripped the

American republic at the end of the twentieth century and produced a pervasive despair and disgust with our common life.

All of this does not imply, however, that Lasch's social criticism is without weakness. Several difficulties mar his efforts. Lasch is a marvelous polemicist with a gift for the biting turn of phrase or the deflating jibe, and an inspiration to those of us with a weakness for such activity. But at the same time, a lack of humor in his writing and a frequent tone of self-righteousness prove annoying while undermining the real moral strength of his argument. Occasionally, he seems to be in danger of becoming the "Church Lady" of the American Left. In addition, the intellectualist tendencies of Lasch's analysis appear occasionally unsettling. He is incredibly well-read and erudite, but sometimes to the point of suspicion. His criticism tends to inhabit a world of books that is several steps removed from actual people and their historical experience. In *The True and Only Heaven*, for instance, Lasch consistently examines not so much socioeconomic change itself as the great ideas and books *about* such change. Social experience and the thought of common people—in other words, their reaction to historical development—tend to fall into the background as broad theory and elite thinkers bear the brunt of analysis. Thus while Lasch ranges widely and deeply into an amazing array of texts from the last three centuries of Western experience, one often gets an unsettling sense of disembodied intellectual history at work. Viewing history from the top down, one suspects, provides a curious basis for a populist sensibility.

The issue of gender also gnaws at Lasch's criticism. While his accusation that much of the feminist movement has been caught up in the dominant-culture discourse of self-fulfillment and gratification may be on target—a position that is not that different from certain "second wave" feminist theorists—this does little to address the deeper, legitimate concerns about the meaning of feminine in our culture and the place of women in our society. Lasch's confusion about gender politics and their powerful resonance in modern life continuously crops up, most notably in his recent suggestion that the Constitution be amended to prohibit divorce between couples with children under the age of twenty-one.<sup>2</sup> This eye-rubbing comment goes beyond authoritarianism. It is hallucinatory. In an age where traditional sex roles have changed irrevocably and for very complicated reasons, a critic of Lasch's shrewdness owes us more. To put the issue succinctly, his insistence about what feminism should not be tells us too little about what it *should* be.

Finally, Lasch appears frustratingly vague about the creation, or recreation, of a society of small producers in the context of a national and international economy that seems to be galloping hard in the direction of expanding global markets and proliferating consumer goods. Lasch's critique, powerful and hard-nosed as it may be, betrays a faint scent of romanticism. While the indictment of modern bureaucracy and growth may be intellectually compelling and emotionally satisfying, it may also appear irrelevant if left in the realm of theory. In practical terms, how exactly can an America of small-producers coalesce and

survive in a world of international corporations, European economic consolidation, and global statist support for large-scale economic development? To be fully persuasive, an agenda for social, economic and cultural downsizing requires specifics, although the landslide of recent revolutionary events in the former Soviet bloc should give pause for reflection about the seeming imperviousness of bureaucratic power to radical reform.

In the final analysis, however, Lasch's critical writings constitute an impressive achievement. If nothing else, he has forced us to reconsider the possibilities of civic life in an age where a shallow narcissism reigns supreme. His linking of traditional cultural values—a commitment to family, community, tradition, moral struggle, human limitation—with a radical attack on the bureaucratic forms of consumer capitalism has shaped a position that strikes at the heart of a modern America in disarray. The fact that he has mystified and infuriated so many only supports the suspicion that he must be on to something. Lasch's populist sensibility has unmasked the complacency and convergence of both the mainstream Left and Right in contemporary America. He has revealed, simultaneously, the cynical evasiveness of a corporate "thousand points of light" and the self-indulgent solipsism of a liberationist "thousand points of spite."

Cutting through the therapeutic fog of modern identity politics, the disingenuous babble of bureaucratic expertise, the adolescent whine of victimization, and the trivial promises of consumerism, Christopher Lasch has recalled us to larger and nobler goals: a sense of place, the joys of purposeful work, moral struggle which alone produces justice, and an individualism that accepts the limitations of the human condition. His agenda of "populism for the twenty-first century" holds out the possibility of commitments beyond the self, of a regenerated public life, and of a planet saved from the ravages of progress. It also suggests an enormously provocative idea for those struggling with the dominations and degradations of modern American life: a convergence of cultural conservatism and political radicalism may indicate the clearest road to real reform.

## Notes

1. Barton J. Bernstein, ed.; *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York, 1969).
2. *Harpers*, February 1991, 48