

# The Radical Lasch

The Marxian social historian saw past the limits of liberalism to a true middle-class populism.

By Jeremy Beer

HAD NATURE TAKEN a more typical course, Christopher Lasch would still be with us. Only 61 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*, in which he attempted to bring into focus the problems posed for authentic democracy 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 red-blue 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"—as precise a summation of the average coffeehouse intellectual's grievance against flyover country as one is likely to find.

Lasch's lament would seem to be that of a cultural conservative, and by the end of his life Lasch wore that label fairly comfortably, hewing to a 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 just such an acknowledgment that our cosmopolitan, hypermobile, liberated elites had rejected, even as they consolidated their control over politics, economics, and culture.

But Lasch had once been closely associated with the political Left, and part of what made, and continues to make, his analysis so arresting is that he never entirely disavowed such influences as progressivism, Marx, and Freud. Unlike the Left's other postwar exiles, he never underwent a Damascus ideological conversion but gradually and reluctantly came to shed certain leftist presuppositions. 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. And unlike Irving Kristol, he was not prepared to muster even one cheer for capitalism. Instead, his work confirms the truth of historian T.J. Jackson Lears's observation that "the most profound radicalism is often the most profound conservatism."

To turn to Lasch's *oeuvre* today is to be struck forcefully by its refreshing independence. Lasch managed to be at once democratic and antiliberal. Negatively, his criticism was founded on a theoretically rich, psychologically informed understanding 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 bour-*

*geois*: 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."

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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. His first major work, and one that still repays reading, was *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963*, wherein he foretold the rise of the detached class of elites that he would target for blistering condemnation in *The Revolt of the Elites*.

Lasch contended in *The New Radicalism* that the creation of an intellectual class in the first half of the 20th century was problematic because it reflected—was in fact a consequence of—the "cultural fragmentation that seems to characterize industrial and postindustrial societies." The radical intellectuals he profiled saw themselves as standing against the bourgeoisie, whose educational practices, culture, and sexual relations they intended to reform.

The bigoted elitism of these "new radicals," argued Lasch, consigned them to political ineffectuality. 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," he con-

cluded. 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.

In the decade following the publication of *The New Radicalism in America*, Lasch wrote as a Marxian social critic. But even so, his distrust of alienated intellectuals and his commitment to defending the virtues and habits of common men and women usually

Note that 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. 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 explained that larger social institutions had expropriated activities

nonetheless very much a book of its time—especially in its despairing, pessimistic tone. 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. Borrowing a term from sociologist Philip Rieff, Lasch argued that “psychological man” had become the characteristic human type of the new therapeutic age. Psychological man 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.

The defining characteristic of psychological man was his anxious narcissism. The diagnostic 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 and reflected the rise of the narcissistic personality.

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.” To Lasch, 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.” To struggle against the narcissistic dependence associated with the new therapeutic

## WITH THE 1977 PUBLICATION OF *HAVEN IN A HEARTLESS WORLD*, THERE BEGAN A LOOSENING OF LASCH’S ALREADY TENUOUS TIES WITH LEFT-WING ORTHODOXY.

allowed him to keep a certain distance from the least plausible aspects of Marxist ideology. With the 1977 publication of *Haven in a Heartless World*, there began a substantial loosening of Lasch’s already tenuous ties with left-wing orthodoxy. Taken together with *The Culture of Narcissism* and *The Minimal Self*, it represents the first entry in Lasch’s trilogy of psychological critiques of late 20th-century culture.

In *Haven*, Lasch confronted his growing “doubts about the desirability or even the feasibility of an open-ended experimental approach to sexuality, marriage, and childrearing.” *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 democracy than others. Thus, wrote Lasch, those economic, cultural, and political forces that have weakened the bourgeois, nuclear family have had profound consequences because they have also altered the personality development of the rising generation.

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.”

*The Culture of Narcissism* built on the argument offered in *Haven* by applying its insights to American culture’s “malaise,” 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

bureaucracy would mean to resist also the dependence created by corporate capitalism. Lasch therefore concluded his book by exhorting his readers to look to the “traditions of localism, self-help, and community action”—in other words, to resist the forces of narcissism by seeking “to create their own ‘communities of competence.’”

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The timing—and title—of *The Culture of Narcissism* could not have been better. Jimmy Carter’s pollster Patrick Caddell was greatly impressed by it and recommended it to the attention of the president, who allegedly speed-read it and had it in mind when he delivered his famously catastrophic “malaise speech” in July 1979. Lasch had achieved national stature as a culture critic—and had inadvertently helped to wreck a presidency.

If anything, Lasch’s next book, *The Minimal Self*, 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. Furthermore, he criticizes the social movements of the Left—the environmental, women’s, and peace movements—for, among other things, advocating the abandonment of the concept of the individual self and its fusion with nature or the social whole. 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.” 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.”

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.”

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 cul-

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.” Industrialism and genuine democracy, therefore, are anything but mutually reinforcing.

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After *The Minimal Self*, Lasch’s break with the cultural Left became more thorough and more obvious. In the 1960s and ’70s, 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 12 and 45 articles respectively. But his last article for *The Nation* appeared in 1980, and after 1984 he wrote only one article (on Reagan) for the *NYRB*. The post-modern Left irritated him, and the feeling was mutual.

In the late ’80s, Lasch began to explore systematically his instinct that the best way to transcend the Left-Right impasse in American life was through the reinvig-

### **BOTH THE CONTEMPORARY LEFT AND RIGHT HAVE CONTEMPT FOR THE IDEA THAT THERE CAN BE ANY IMMOVABLE CONSTRAINTS ON HUMAN ENDEAVOR.**

ture, 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

oration 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 have contempt for the idea of limits of any kind, since the idea that there can be any immovable constraints on human endeavor threaten the underlying belief in “progress” to which both subscribe. Even conservatives, he observes, have all but abandoned whatever residual “skepticism about progress” they may once have harbored.

The idea of progress appealed to so many because it envisioned a future of unlimited economic growth. But it was

also attractive because it had been finally detached from utopianism. Lasch saw that 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. Its prophets were Bernard Mandeville, David Hume, Adam Smith—the heroes of classical liberalism, not Marxian radicalism. For Smith *et al.* promised not utopia but the indefinite expansion of prosperity, a lower but seemingly much more achievable goal.

Lasch’s great contribution is to show that even this more modest project requires 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.” 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.” 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.”

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. Indeed, as he argued in a revealing 1990 article titled “Conservatism Against Itself,” for Lasch the populist tradition he hoped to rejuvenate was 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.”

By the same token, Lasch had little interest in movement conservatism and what he saw as its illogical embrace of consumer capitalism. As early as 1987, in a 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. And with regard to foreign policy, Lasch was surely right when he noted that “when the adversary” is cast as embodying “total evil,” the “imperfections’ of democracy naturally fade ... from sight,” leading to the rise of an uncritical, ultimately unpatriotic American nationalism. Surely we see the same process repeated today, with Islamism conveniently substituted for communism.

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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.

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 tentative, attraction to the Christian intellectual tradition. His social thought 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 the work of Eric Voegelin, he published a series of articles in the early ’90s arguing that Gnosticism, the perennial heresy, was not manifested so much in utopian totalitarianism as it was the assumptions and implicit goals of liberal modernity.

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!” ■

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*Jeremy Beer is co-editor of American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia, just released from ISI Books. A version of this piece appeared in Modern Age.*

# Suburban Commandos

The militarization of local police puts innocents at risk.

By William Norman Grigg

LOCAL POLICE in Fairfax, Virginia suspected that Salvatore Culosi Jr., a 37-year-old optometrist, was running an illegal gambling operation. On Jan. 24, after a three-month undercover investigation, police sent a tactical squad to Culosi's home to execute a search warrant. For reasons yet to be explained, the unarmed Culosi was shot and killed by a TAC squad member—an outcome tantamount to summary execution for allegedly taking sports bets in a state that has a government-run lottery.

The officer who fired the lethal shot was identified by Fairfax Police Chief David M. Rohrer as a seven-year veteran of the tactical unit. In a Jan. 25 press conference, Chief Rohrer expressed “condolences and sincere sympathy to Mr. Culosi’s family and friends” and promised “to conduct a comprehensive, balanced and fair investigation” of the shooting. But he also expressed “my support for the officer involved. He is a 17-year veteran of our department and he is a valued member. My support goes out to him and his family.”

Had the roles been reversed—with the officer being mistakenly shot and killed by Culosi—it’s impossible to believe that Chief Rohrer would have displayed similar evenhandedness between the shooter and the victim. It’s doubtful that criminal charges will be filed against the officer for needlessly killing Culosi, who was accused of a nonviolent offense. Nor is there any indication that the Fairfax County Police will re-evaluate the wisdom of its current policy requiring that all warrants be served by a heavily armed TAC squad.

In recent years, commented policy analyst Radley Balko in a Feb. 7 *Washington Post* op-ed, paramilitary tactics “once reserved for rare, volatile situations such as hostage takings, bank robberies, and terrorist incidents increasingly are being used for routine police work,” such as gambling raids, including an April 2005 raid on a poker game in a Denver suburb. What we are seeing, according to Peter Kraska of Eastern Kentucky University, is the “normalization” of militarized police work. Where SWAT teams and similar outfits were once “peripherally part of a police organization,” they have now been integrated seamlessly into standard police operations, “such as serving search warrants, doing patrol work, serving arrest warrants.”

The militarization of local police has resulted, in large measure, from the war on drugs, in which no-knock raids and armed seizure of forfeited properties have become very common—as have incidents in which innocent people have been injured and killed as a result of those raids, which are often carried out on the word of anonymous informants.

Ismael Mena, a 45-year-old father of nine from Denver, was killed by a SWAT team in 1999 after a tip from an anonymous informant resulted in a no-knock raid on the wrong address. Wisconsin resident Scott Bryant was gunned down by a SWAT team under nearly identical circumstances. And 70-year-old Boston resident Accelyne Williams, a drug counselor, died from a heart attack after masked men broke into his home, thrust him to the floor, and shoved guns into his

face while screaming at him. The masked assailants, predictably, were from a paramilitary counter-drug unit acting on a tip from an informant who was not only anonymous but also intoxicated.

When innocent civilians perish at the hands of police paramilitaries, criminal charges very rarely result. But the case of Cory Maye of Prentiss, Mississippi illustrates that civilians who use lethal force to defend themselves enjoy no such immunity.

Late in the evening of Dec. 26, 2001, Maye was startled awake by the sound of intruders in his duplex. Fearing for his 18-month-old daughter, Maye grabbed his handgun and went to confront the eight armed men who had broken into his home, lethally shooting one of them in the abdomen. The mortally wounded prowler was Ron Jones, a 29-year-old Jefferson County police officer who was part of a SWAT team conducting a no-knock armed raid on the basis of an anonymous tip.

Maye, who had no criminal record apart from a few trivial traffic citations, was not the target of the raid; the warrant was for the other half of the duplex. The officers attempted to enter that home by what they believed was a side door but was actually an entrance to Maye’s side of the duplex. Maye claims that the officers never identified themselves as police. His reaction is entirely predictable: he was a young father of an infant daughter, living in a bad section of town, facing a party of armed intruders. Yet he was arrested and convicted on a felony murder charge, and is now on Mississippi’s death row.